

## Aging in America: The Link Between Productivity and Resources in the Third Age

Dawn Carr

Published online: 26 November 2009  
© Springer Science+Business Media, LLC 2009

**Abstract** The United States, like most industrialized nations, has experienced rapid population aging in the last few decades. The social changes associated with population aging resulted in the emergence of a period in later life called the third age, a period which occurs after retirement and prior to the onset of disability. The depiction of third agers as healthy, retired, and resource-rich has led to a growing expectation that they the capacity to remain productive in society through volunteerism. This study examined the extent to which the characteristics associated with the third age shape whether and how much older adults volunteer in the United States. Results from logistic regression models indicate that third age characteristics, including having adequate economic, human, health, and temporal capital, are associated with volunteer behaviors, and that having access to a social network also increases the likeliness of volunteering. These characteristics suggest that possession of and access to these resources is important to having the ability to “choose” to engage in voluntary activities. Furthermore, if the United States seeks to increase participation of older adults in such activities, it is important to facilitate opportunities for elders to obtain access to the resources needed to volunteer and support opportunities for older adults and society to mutually benefit from such engagement.

**Keywords** Third age · Volunteerism · Productive aging · Social resources

The United States has a long history that values choice and supports the ideology that people have the opportunity (and obligation) to pull themselves up by their “boot straps” and rise up to be successful despite the potentially challenging circumstances from which they may have begun their lives. Older adults have generally been excluded from these expectations, and were depicted as a universally needy and deserving population until fairly recently (Binstock 2005). The introduction of social

---

D. Carr (✉)

Scripps Gerontology Center, Miami University, 396 Upham Hall, Oxford, OH 45056-1879, USA  
e-mail: carrdc@muohio.edu

policies to offset the problems faced by older adults, especially with regard to health and wellbeing (i.e., Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security, and the Older American's Act), successfully increased the available resources older adults had to maintain a good quality of life and remain independent well into old age. Although many of these positive changes have been celebrated, the growing cost of population aging has led to the questioning of the status of older adults as non-productive and the age-based social policies targeting their needs (Hendricks 2001); a major debate among social gerontologists and policy makers regarding issues related to the choice, opportunities, and expectations to engage in particular ways during later life is underway (e.g., Minkler and Holstein 2008).

One of the more visible discussions occurring among gerontologists in the United States in which the implications of both positive changes related to aging and concerns about the costs associated with population aging are involved, is about engagement in meaningful activities that also contribute to the social good (i.e., through participation in unpaid productive activities like formal volunteerism). The rationale for inclusion of older adults in conversations about productivity of this nature, for which they were traditionally excluded in the past, is twofold. First, with retirement revered as a sacred institution in the United States, interest in volunteerism, or "civic engagement" as it is sometimes referred, has taken center stage as a potential mechanism by which the problems associated with population aging can be addressed while still allowing people to depart from the labor force in later life. In other words, older adults are viewed as being capable of off-setting lower labor force participation rates through engagement in economically valuable, voluntary activities. As an added bonus, a growing expanse of research describes the benefits older adults reap individually from engaging in such activities, especially with regard to health outcomes, well-being, and meaningful fulfillment (e.g., Bukov et al. 2002; Burr et al. 2005; Greenfield and Marks 2004; Morrow-Howell et al. 2003; Van Willigen 2000).

Second, the growing capability of the older population in remaining productive in later life is often described as possible because of the emergence of the third age. The relatively recent recognition that the average citizen can expect to experience a third age, typically distinguished as a period after retirement but prior to the onset of disability (Weiss and Bass 2002), is referenced as the reason why productive aging is not only possible, but increasingly expected (Bass 2000; Holstein 2009). Specifically, third agers' available discretionary time and the fact that they are not plagued by health problems, issues that prevented older adults from remaining actively engaged in society in the past (Herzog and Morgan 1993; Freedman 1999), are cited as reasons these older adults have the unique capacity and obligation to volunteer. The resources they possess that allow them to remain active and retired also give them the means to not only live independently, but also give back to society. As a result, a growing majority of writings about volunteerism in later life reference the potential of third agers (see Henretta 2008; Weiss and Bass 2002).

The hope that continued productivity in later life might help maintain retirement as an expected transition in later life despite the demographic imperative and, as a growing literature suggests (e.g., Musick et al. 1999; Van Willigen 2000), improve health outcomes (and therefore, potentially increase the average length of the third age), provides a strong motivation for promoting volunteer activities in later life in

the United States. With third agers in center stage as those presumed to take on voluntary roles, it is problematic that they are often distinguished by chronological age (e.g., Henretta 2008; James and Wink 2006), not by their apparently unique characteristics (i.e., time and available resources), despite the fact that possession of these characteristics serve as the central argument as to why this group is so well positioned to make such economically and socially valuable contributions to society. Especially during a period when population aging threatens to create a shortage of workers, it is worthwhile to identify what factors function to increase the likeliness of continued productivity during post-retirement years. Do the characteristics typically associated with the third age actually increase the likelihood of volunteering? Recognizing the problems related to the implication that all older adults should (choose to) engage in volunteer activities or otherwise face being labeled as a drain on society or as “unsuccessful” (e.g., Minkler and Holstein 2008), these more preliminary questions are directed at identifying whether having the (presumed) necessary characteristics and thus, the capacity to engage in such activities, influences actual volunteer participation.

In the United States, initiatives to increase productivity and engagement in volunteerism during later life are now, more than ever, a high priority. Third-agers are often depicted as those who are best positioned to volunteer extensively because they have the resources to engage in such activities. However, no research has examined how third age characteristics actually influence whether people volunteer and how much they volunteer in later life. To address these gaps in our understanding of volunteerism, this research is guided by two major questions:

1. How do third age characteristics shape the likeliness of volunteering during later life?
2. For those who do volunteer, how do third age characteristics shape the likeliness of volunteering a substantial amount during later life?

Based on the answers to these questions, the paper reflects on a third, broader question related to the ways in which the findings of this research are linked with the relationship between third agers and social policy:

3. What does the relationship between third age characteristics and volunteerism behavior imply for policy initiatives seeking to increase the social engagement of older adults?

*Volunteering and Later Life* Although age has been identified as an important predictor of volunteerism, the context of the factors shaping volunteerism in later life has been scarcely examined. In fact, the research specifically focused on volunteerism in later life tends to be vaguely negative regarding the contributions of older adults. In 2005, the Corporation for National and Community Service noted that middle-aged adults ages 45–64 volunteer at the highest rates (30%), followed by young adults ages 16–19 (28.4%), with the lowest rates among those 65 and older (23.5%) (Corporation for National and Community Service 2006a). Some research sought to make sense of the lower rates of volunteerism among older adults by exploring the way in which expectations, opportunities, and capabilities that shape whether and how much people engage in such activities change as people age.

Hendricks and Cutler (2004) suggested that volunteerism trends may be explained by socio-emotional selectivity, and that volunteerism in later life appears to be related to changing needs, values, and capabilities as one ages.

Similar research has recognized that the timing of life events (e.g., Musick et al. 1999), and movement through life course transitions (e.g., Rotolo 2000) shape the forms and rates of voluntary participation because individuals have different incentives for volunteering during different periods of life. For example, adult women who have children are more likely to volunteer than those who do not have children (see Corporation for National and Community Service 2006b), indicating that the period during which child-bearing occurs is a time in which women have greater opportunities or incentives to participate. Other research suggests that particular cohorts, like baby boomer cohorts, may be a more important than age group in determining whether people volunteer (see Rosenberg and Letrero 2006). This research supports the idea that older people who volunteer are merely “volunteers who have aged” rather than individuals who were recruited to volunteer in later life (Chambre 1984). However, the ability to differentiate age from other factors like life course transitions, period effects, or cohort effects on volunteerism in the United States is restricted by a limited amount of longitudinal data about volunteerism. Only a handful of research articles on volunteering in later life use this kind of data (Mutchler et al. 2003; Wilson and Musick 1997), which was collected in the mid-1980s through the mid-1990s (the American Changing Lives Surveys). Findings from these studies suggest that age is not predictive of volunteering, and rather, other life course transitions (e.g., departure from the work force) may be more telling of whether or how much people volunteer in later life.

*The Influence of Social Networks and Resources on Volunteering in Later Life* Social networks, or social ties, have been shown to be important to whether an individual volunteers (see Wilson and Musick 1997; Freeman 1997). However, many factors are involved in facilitating stronger social networks. Classic writings on the relevance of social networks (Blau 1977; Granovetter 1973) provide a rationale for the relationship between the opportunity to interact with other people and volunteerism in general; however, there is much less known about how social networks influence volunteerism in later life. For example, women typically have a larger and more complex social network than men, which is thought to contribute to the reason that they volunteer at higher rates than men (Wilson 2000); however, there appears to be no gender differences with regard to volunteering in later life (Herzog et al. 1989), suggesting that gender does not increase social network connections necessary for later life volunteering. Among the few researchers that have sought to examine the role of social network in volunteering in later life, Choi (2003) noted that among those ages 70 or older, those who were employed were more likely to volunteer than those who were not. The interpretation of this finding was that by being employed, people have greater access to social networks and thus, have more people to interact with who may connect them to volunteer activities in later life. This implies that access or possession of certain resources (i.e., those associated with being employed or not) is assumed to be relevant to volunteerism because of how it shapes or provides opportunities to interact with others in later life. In this way, social resources are assumed to be important because of how they

influence ‘who you know.’ Wilson and Musick (1998: pg 812) note, however, that “without individual resources to exploit it, social capital will lie idle,” indicating that possession of other resources is necessary because it shapes ‘what you have to give.’

Social resources apparently function on a broader level to improve one’s capability of volunteering. This is especially clear with regard to economic capital (those with a higher income volunteer at higher rates) and human capital (those with higher educational attainment volunteer at higher rates) (Wilson 2000). However, in addition to these known resources, other factors strongly influence whether and how much people engage in volunteer activities in the United States. Although not typically viewed as a resource, race and citizenship are thought to influence peoples’ investment in formal volunteer activities (e.g., Wilson 2000). This may be explained by the fact that in order for an individual to be “productive” in society, his/her qualities/skills must be socially valued and that individual must also have the capability and the opportunity to be involved, all of which are strongly shaped by race (Wilson and Musick 1998). In other words, because social capital is only created when there is a mutual benefit; individual contributions are utilized based on what a society values, and what the individuals who provide the valued resources receive, such as greater status, resources, or power within/from that society (Carr 2005). This may explain why social networks in combination with human capital have been shown to influence odds of volunteering (Freeman 1997; Wilson and Musick 1998).

One resource that has been only marginally examined as it relates to later life volunteering is the extent to which discretionary time (defined as the time not engaged in paid work) provides an important resource relevant to volunteerism in later life. Wilson (2000) notes that discretionary time is assumed to be important because of the fact that volunteer hours have the potential to replace employment hours. However, his research, and research subsequent to his, indicates that individuals who work, volunteer at higher rates than those who do not work (see Choi 2003; Corporation for Public and Community Service 2006a). As a result, discretionary time was initially described as virtually irrelevant to whether people volunteer in later life, and in fact, was suggested to potentially inhibit volunteerism. However, one study that examined the relationship between departure from the work force and volunteering in later life (for individuals between 55 and 74), noted that discretionary time did function as a resource in later life and that part-time workers (those working on average, 30 h a week or less) and those not working at all were more likely to volunteer and spent more time volunteering (Mutchler et al. 2003). These findings suggest that during later life, when full or partial retirement is expected and young children are less likely to be in the household, the relationship between discretionary time and volunteerism functions in a different way than during earlier periods in life. Additionally, the value of work in creating social network connections may be less important in later life. However, in addition to its relationship to social network connections and discretionary time, employment also is influenced by the capability to work, or health issues that may create barriers to both volunteerism and work. All three factors may influence whether and how much third-agers engage in civic activities like volunteerism, and its relative influence in later life volunteerism needs to be examined much more carefully.

## Methods

### Data

Data for this investigation were drawn from a supplement to the Current Population Survey (CPS) for 2007. The CPS is a monthly survey of about 50,000 households, and has been conducted by the United States Census Bureau for the Bureau of Labor Statistics for more than 50 years. The sample used for this study was derived from the September Volunteer supplement which is based on the United States Census. The volunteer supplement was fielded in September 16–23 in 2007. The purpose of the volunteer supplement was to obtain information on the frequency of volunteering and the characteristics of volunteers in the United States.

### Sample Size

The September 2007 CPS is a nationally representative data set and includes data on a total of 151,968 people residing in approximately 56,000 households. With the focus on volunteering in later life, only those who were age 50 or older and answered questions about volunteering were examined, which includes 39,609 individuals.

### Measures

This study examines how characteristics associated with the third age influence whether and how much people volunteer during later life. The first research question is addressed using a binary logistic regression model, and the second, a multinomial regression model. The dependent variables for each model are described first, followed by the additional variables in the remainder of the models. The following characteristics are examined to measure presence and/or amount of resources typically associated with the third age: human capital, economic capital, and social network, available time, and health. In addition, several relevant demographic characteristics are also included in the models. The distribution of the variables is provided in Table 1.

### *Dependent Variables*

*Volunteerism* The CPS Volunteer Supplement examines volunteerism based on formal volunteer participation with education, health, religious, civic, community, cultural, and political organizations. The first model, a binary logistic regression, addresses the first research question: What factors increase likeliness of volunteering during later life? The dependent variable for this model is a dichotomous variable that identifies volunteers.

*Time Spent Volunteering* The second model, a multinomial logistic regression, addresses the second research question: For those who do volunteer, how do third age characteristics shape the likeliness of volunteering a substantial amount during later

**Table 1** Means table

	Overall	Volunteers <sup>a</sup>
Volunteer?		
Yes	28.8	–
Time commitment to volunteering		
Low volunteers (less than 1 hr/week)	–	42.3
Medium volunteers (1–4.99 h/week)	–	40.3
High volunteers (5 h or more/week)	–	17.4
<i>Demographic characteristics</i>		
Age		
50–54	22.4	25
55–59	20.2	21.6
60–64	16.2	16.9
65–69	12.5	12.5
70–74	9.8	9.8
75–79	8.2	7.4
80+	10.8	6.9
Race		
White	80.4	88.3
Black	8.1	5.2
Hispanic	6	2.9
Other	5.4	3.6
Female		
Yes	53.8	56.8
Foreign born		
Yes	9.6	4.6
<i>Resources</i>		
Time, health, social network: Employment		
Employed, working more than 20 h/week	38.6	43.5
Employed, working 20 h or less/week	4.1	6.5
Employed, hours are variable	5.2	7.0
Disabled, unable to work	7.6	2.7
Not employed	44.5	40.4
Social network: Reason volunteering		
Individually initiated	–	40.6
Was asked	–	45.6
Other reason	–	13.8
Human capital: Education		
Less than high school	14.8	5.3
High school diploma	33.8	24.7
Some college	24.6	27.7
Bachelor's degree	15.9	23.0
Post-bachelor's education	10.9	19.3

**Table 1** (continued)

	Overall	Volunteers <sup>a</sup>
Economic capital: Family income		
Non-response	21.2	14.7
\$24,999 and under	19.5	12.6
\$25,000–\$49,999	21.9	21.3
\$50,000–\$74,999	15.2	18.6
\$75,000 and over	22.2	32.9
<i>N</i>	39609	10877

<sup>a</sup>These individuals only include those who provided information about the amount of time they spent volunteering.

life? The dependent variable for this model is based on the number of hours spent volunteering. These groupings were chosen to substantively capture to what degree a volunteer commitment is regular (and substantial), or more sporadic. Individuals who volunteer less than an hour a week, are likely to volunteer intermittently rather than on a regular basis. On the other end of the spectrum, individuals providing 5 h a week or more are a fairly select group of individuals who likely contribute a substantial amount of regular, weekly, unpaid work to one or more organizations. Those who lie in between these two groups may contribute a substantial amount here and there, or a smaller amount on a regular basis. For those 28.8% of people over 50 who do volunteer, 10,877 (about 95%) provided information about the amount of time that they spent volunteering. A variable was created by adding together all hours spent volunteering for all organizations, which was divided by 52 to calculate the average amount of time spent volunteering weekly, making it easier to equate with hours employed. Individuals who volunteered less than one hour a week are coded as “low volunteers,” those volunteering 1–4.99 h a week are coded “medium volunteers,” and those volunteering 5 h or more are coded “high volunteers.”

### *Demographic Variables*

A primary control variable is age because volunteerism in later life is the focus of the research. For the purposes of this study, age is coded into five-year age groupings: 50–54, 55–59, 60–64, 65–69, 70–74, 75–79, and 80 and older (age is top-coded at 80). The lowest age grouping is used as the comparison group (age 50–54). Race is coded into four variables: White, Black, Hispanic, and other race. If respondents identified themselves as “Hispanic” regardless of other race categories, they are coded as “Hispanic.” The remaining respondents are coded if they were (only) white or (only) black. All other responses were categorized other race. Whites serve as the comparison group. If respondents were not awarded U.S. citizenship at birth, they are coded as foreign born. Respondents self-reported their sex, which was coded into a dichotomous variable; females serve as the comparison group.



### *Third Age Characteristics*

*Economic Capital* In this study, family income is used to measure economic capital. The CPS codes family income by income range rather than as a continuous variable. These categories are coded into four categories \$24,999 or less, \$25,000–\$49,999, \$50,000–\$74,999, and \$75,000 and above. However, 21.2% of respondents of the volunteer supplement did not respond to the income question in 2007. In order to include these individuals in the study without the risk of inappropriately imputing values, a non-response variable was added as a separate income category, resulting in five categories. The median income category was the second income category (\$25,000–\$49,999) which was used as the comparison group.

*Human Capital* In this study, education is used to measure level of human capital. In the CPS, respondents were asked to describe their “highest level of school completed or degree received.” This variable is coded as five categories: less than high school, high school diploma, some college, Bachelor’s Degree, and Post-Bachelor’s education. For individuals age 50 and older, the median educational attainment is a high school education, which was used as the comparison group.

*Time, Health, and Social Network* Employment status for individuals 50 and older is used to obtain information about social network, available time outside of the work force (discretionary time), and ability to work. To best capture all three of these issues, employment status is coded as five categories: employed more than 20 h per week; employed 20 h or less per week; employed, hours vary; not employed; and disabled and unable to work. A number of variables were used to create these variables. First, employed individuals were identified according to their response to the following question: “last month did you do any work for (either) pay (or profit)?” If an individual responded positively to this question, they were asked a follow up question about the number of hours they work. A variable describing the total number of hours an individual works weekly (regardless of the number of jobs they have) is provided, but some individuals described their work hours as being variable, which is assumed to mean there is greater flexibility in their work hours. For those who answered negatively to the question regarding whether they worked for pay or profit, they were asked why they did not work. Those who indicated that a health problem inhibited them from being able to work were coded as disabled, and all others were coded as non-workers. The comparison group is those who work more than 20 h a week.

In addressing the second research question related to how third age characteristics shape the amount of time spent volunteering, an additional variable related to the role of social network in volunteering was included in a multinomial logistic regression model. Individuals were asked, with regard to how they first became a volunteer for the organization in which they volunteer the majority of their time, “Did you approach the organization yourself, were you asked by someone, or did you become involved in some other way?” Responses were coded into three categories—individually initiated (for those who indicated that they “approached the organization”), asked by someone (for those who indicated that they were approached by someone else), and other. As the largest group, those who were asked by someone, is the comparison group.

## Results

### Descriptive Characteristics

Table 1 describes the characteristics of the overall sample of individuals ages 50 and older who answered questions about their volunteer behavior and those who actually volunteered. This table shows that 28.8% of people over 50 volunteer. The distribution of age among those who volunteer is very similar to the overall population, though volunteers are slightly younger, which is especially evident by the proportion of volunteers over age 80. Volunteers also include a higher proportion of whites, a slightly higher proportion of females, and a much lower proportion of foreign born individuals than the overall population. Labor force participation rates indicate that volunteers have a higher proportion in the work force, and a very small proportion that identifies as disabled and unable to work. Individuals over 50 who volunteer are much more highly educated than the overall population, and a higher proportion have an annual household income of \$25,000 and higher. Among volunteers, a fairly low percentage volunteers 5 h or more (17.4%), and more than half volunteer less than 1 h per week (42.3%). In examining how people came to volunteer, 45.6% were asked and 40.6% indicated that they initiated their volunteer experience. The logistic regression models that follow examine how these characteristics influence whether and how much people volunteer.

### Third Age Characteristics and Likelihood of Volunteering in Later Life

Table 2 shows the logistic regression coefficients and odds ratios, predicting the likelihood of volunteerism. The results address the first research question, How do third age characteristics shape the likelihood of volunteering in later life? The results of these data contrast other research (e.g., Herzog and Morgan 1993) that has suggested that middle-aged individuals, who are typically employed and therefore more likely to have a higher income, are also the most likely to volunteer. Controlling for all other factors, for individuals over age 50, age does not increase the likelihood of volunteering except for those in the oldest ages (age 80 and older), for whom it decreases the odds of volunteering by approximately 35%. Due to the inability to include functional health status in this model, decreased likelihood of volunteering after age 80 may be due to the increased likelihood of having impairments that limit one's ability to volunteer. With regard to other demographic characteristics, this model also indicates that blacks have 28.5% lower odds of volunteering, Hispanics have 32.5% lower odds, and people of another race have 28.6% lower odds of volunteering than whites. Those born in another country have much lower odds of volunteering (52.5%) and females have 40% higher odds of volunteering than men.

Employment status, as it is conceptualized for the purposes of this study, serves to measure social network, available time, and capability of working. This study also seeks to differentiate to the best degree possible, the dual and potentially competing resources of available time and social network related to working in later life. This model indicates that for individuals who work 20 h or fewer or have a variable work schedule (and thus, are assumed to have more flexibility over the time spent in the

**Table 2** Logistic regression model examining factors influencing volunteering in later life

	Beta	<i>p</i> -value	OR	Error
<i>Demographic characteristics</i>				
Age				
50–54	–	–	–	–
55–59	–0.06	0.092	0.942	0.035
60–64	–0.049	0.21	0.953	0.039
65–69	0.011	0.807	1.011	0.045
70–74	0.076	0.127	1.079	0.05
75–79	–0.005	0.928	0.995	0.054
80+	–0.433	<0.001	0.648	0.055
Race				
White	–	–	–	–
Black	–0.335	<0.001	0.715	0.049
Hispanic	–0.393	<0.001	0.675	0.066
Other	–0.323	<0.001	0.724	0.061
Female				
Yes	0.331	<0.001	1.393	0.024
Foreign born				
Yes	–0.745	<0.001	0.475	0.055
<i>Resources</i>				
Time, health, social network: Employment status				
Employed, working more than 20 h/week	–	–	–	–
Employed, working 20 h or less/week	0.602	<0.001	1.825	0.057
Employed, hours are variable	0.367	<0.001	1.443	0.051
Disabled, unable to work	–0.829	<0.001	0.436	0.066
Not employed	0.048	0.144	1.05	0.033
Human capital: Education				
Less than high school	–0.524	<0.001	0.592	0.049
High school diploma	–	–	–	–
some college	0.511	<0.001	1.668	0.031
Bachelor's degree	0.878	<0.001	2.405	0.035
Post-bachelor's education	1.229	<0.001	3.417	0.04
Economic capital: Family income				
Non-response	–0.392	<0.001	0.676	0.037
\$24,999 and under	–0.229	<0.001	0.796	0.04
\$25,000–\$49,999	–	–	–	–
\$50,000–\$74,999	0.139	<0.001	1.149	0.038
\$75,000 and over	0.223	<0.001	1.25	0.036
Chi-Square: 4.64E+03				
–2 Log Likelihood: 4.29E+04				
N: 39609				

work force), have higher odds of volunteering than those who work more than 20 h a week. Specifically, those who work 20 h or less have 82.5% higher odds of volunteering, and those whose hours vary have 44.3% higher odds when controlling for all other factors. Those who are not employed (which includes individuals who consider themselves to be “retired,” “homemakers,” and “unemployed”) have no different odds than those who work 20 h or more, suggesting that people are more likely to volunteer if they have time but also have a strong social network. Individuals identified as “disabled” have significantly lower odds of volunteering (56.4%) suggesting that not having the ability to work also inhibits people from volunteering. Although the Current Population Surveys do not have specific questions that describe health status, those who identify as being unable to work due to a health problem provides the closest proxy for health in this study. This is a relatively good way of examining the role of health status in volunteering during later life, especially among those older adults who are of an age that is traditionally viewed as a time in which they could or should be working—under age 65. For those in the later ages, it is speculated that this measure less accurately captures health problems because individuals may be inclined to indicate that they are retired or otherwise not employed rather than disabled, especially if the onset of physical health problems occurred after they departed from the work force.

This model indicates that for those ages 50 and older in the United States, as human capital increases, the odds of volunteering also increase. Specifically, compared to those with a high school education, individuals without a high school education have more than 40% lower odds of volunteering, whereas those with some college have 67% greater odds. For those with college degrees, the odds are even more significant. Those with a bachelor’s degree are 2.4 times as likely and those with post-bachelor’s education 3.4 times as likely to volunteer as those with a high school education.

Economic capital also influences whether people volunteer, though not quite so dramatically as human capital. It is not possible to know exactly how much income those who chose not to provide information about their income may have; however, the linearity of the findings of this model suggests that the non-response group may have the lowest income. Compared to those in the median income category (\$25,000–49,999), those who did not respond to the income question had 30.24% odds lower and those in the lowest income category 20.4% lower odds of volunteering. Those in the two highest income categories had progressively higher odds of volunteering, 14.9% higher and 25% higher odds respectively. Together, this suggests that as income increases, odds of volunteering also increases.

### The Influence of Third Age Characteristics on Time Spent Volunteering in Later Life

There is a growing amount of research that helps explain the factors that determine whether people volunteer. However, with third agers being depicted as those most likely to provide a major contribution to society, it is important to explore what factors increase the likelihood of volunteering a substantial amount in later life. To identify the characteristics that shape significant voluntary contributions, a multinomial logistic regression model was employed to examine the likeliness of individuals being low (less than 1 h per week), medium (1 to less than 5 h per week)

or high volunteers (5 h or more per week). The results shown in Table 3 address the second research question: For those who do volunteer, how do third age characteristics shape the likeliness of volunteering a substantial amount during later life? Key findings are discussed below.

The following demographic characteristics shape the likeliness of volunteering a “medium” amount compared to those volunteering a “low” amount. Age is predictive of volunteering in the following way. Individuals of older ages are more likely to be medium-level volunteers than those ages 50–54, and particularly among those ages 70 and older, who are about 23% to nearly 50% more likely to volunteer than those in their early 50 s. Medium volunteers are 25% more likely to be black (than white); being female or foreign born does not influence likeliness of volunteering a medium amount.

For medium volunteers (compared to low volunteers), discretionary time appears to outweigh the effects of social network and health by virtue of the fact that being not employed increases likeliness of volunteering a medium amount (by about 25%) but other work statuses do not influence likeliness of volunteering a medium amount. Also, human capital is an important indicator of volunteering a medium amount compared with a low amount. Specifically, those with more than a high school education have a higher chance of volunteering than those with a high school diploma (13.6% for those with some college and about 50% for those with post-bachelor’s education). In this model, economic capital is not influence the likeliness of volunteering a medium amount compared with those who volunteer a low amount, when controlling for all other factors.

In examining a second variable to capture the influence of social network, a question about how people came to volunteer was used to assess the degree to which people perceived the start of their volunteerism to be due to their own initiation or due to someone else suggesting that they participate. This model indicates that those who volunteer a moderate amount are more than 30% more likely to individually initiate their volunteer activity (as opposed to being asked) than those who volunteer a low amount. This same finding is true for high volunteers, who are more than 50% more likely to initiate the start of their volunteer activity than are low volunteers. Similarly, other factors that increase likelihood of volunteering a medium amount provide an even greater influence on volunteering a high amount. Blacks are more likely (51.5%) than whites to volunteer a high amount than a low amount, and as human capital increases likeliness of volunteering a high amount increases even more substantially than for medium volunteers (those with less than a high school education are 39.3% less likely to volunteer than those with a high school diploma, and those with a bachelor’s or post-bachelor’s education are much more likely to volunteer a high amount, 45% and 62.2% respectively).

Unlike medium volunteers, high volunteers, as compared with low volunteers, are more likely to be between ages 65 and 79 (between 25% and 49% more likely compared with those 50–54), and females are less likely (16.2%) than males to be high volunteers. Probably one of the most surprising results of this study is that those in the highest income bracket (those who have a household income of \$75,000 per year or higher) are less likely (15.6%) than those in the median income category to volunteer a high amount. The implications of this unique finding are described in the discussion section below.

**Table 3** Multinomial logistic regression model examining factors associated with time commitment to volunteerism

	Medium volunteers (approx. 1–4.99 h/week) <sup>a</sup>				High Volunteers (5 h/wk+) <sup>a</sup>			
	Beta	p-value	OR	Error	Beta	p-value	OR	Error
<b>Demographic characteristics</b>								
Age								
50–54	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
55–59	0.007	0.914	0.993	0.062	–0.091	0.292	0.913	0.086
60–64	0.141	0.04	1.151	0.068	–0.024	0.794	0.976	0.094
65–69	0.155	0.056	1.168	0.081	0.224	0.031	1.25	0.104
70–74	0.405	<0.001	1.499	0.092	0.399	0.001	1.49	0.115
75–79	0.206	0.042	1.229	0.102	0.265	0.034	1.304	0.125
80+	0.341	0.001	1.407	0.341	0.2	0.132	1.221	0.133
Race								
White	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Black	0.224	0.025	1.251	0.1	0.415	0.001	1.515	0.1
Hispanic	0.103	0.426	1.109	0.13	–0.011	0.95	0.989	0.13
Other	–0.05	0.672	0.951	0.118	–0.084	0.592	0.919	0.118
Female								
Yes	0.003	0.937	0.997	0.044	–0.177	0.002	0.838	0.057
Foreign born								
Yes	0.114	0.287	0.892	0.107	–0.181	0.208	0.834	0.144
<b>Resources</b>								
Time, health, social network: Employment status								
Employed, working more than 20 h/week	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Employed, working 20 h or less/week	0.103	0.264	1.109	0.092	0.397	0.001	1.487	0.122
Employed, hours are variable	0.062	0.476	1.064	0.087	0.379	0.001	1.461	0.114
Disabled, unable to work	–0.215	0.121	0.806	0.139	0.155	0.393	1.167	0.181
Not Employed	0.221	<0.001	1.248	0.06	0.72	<0.001	2.054	0.078
Social network: Reason volunteering								
Individually initiated	0.265	<0.001	1.303	0.046	0.408	<0.001	1.504	0.061
Was asked	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Other reason	0.247	<0.001	1.28	0.066	0.526	<0.001	1.692	0.083
Human capital: Education								
Less than high school	0.196	0.056	0.822	0.103	–0.499	<0.001	0.607	0.141
High school diploma	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Some college	0.127	0.033	1.136	0.059	0.122	0.117	1.129	0.078
Bachelor’s degree	0.317	<0.001	1.373	0.064	0.371	<0.001	1.449	0.084
Post-bachelor’s Education	0.405	<0.001	1.499	0.069	0.484	<0.001	1.622	0.089
Economic capital: Household income								
Non-response	0.019	0.79	1.02	0.073	–0.027	0.775	0.974	0.093

**Table 3** (continued)

	Medium volunteers (approx. 1–4.99 h/week) <sup>a</sup>				High Volunteers (5 h/wk+) <sup>a</sup>			
	Beta	p-value	OR	Error	Beta	p-value	OR	Error
\$24,999 and under	0.004	0.964	0.996	0.079	0.101	0.297	1.107	0.097
\$25,000–\$49,999	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
\$50,000–\$74,999	0.073	0.294	1.075	0.069	0.048	0.592	1.049	0.089
\$75,000 and over	0.045	0.483	0.956	0.064	–0.167	0.049	0.846	0.085

Chi-Square: 4.44E+02  
–2 Log Likelihood: 1.13E+04  
N: 10877

<sup>a</sup> Comparison group is low volunteers (volunteer less than an hour a week)

With regard to the influence of time, health, and social network, those who work 20 h or fewer or those who have variable work hours are more likely (48.7% and 46.1% respectively) to volunteer a high amount (as compared to a low amount) than those who work more than 20 h a week. Like medium volunteers, those who are not employed are more likely (about 2 times more) compared with those who work 20 h or more per week, and being disabled does not influence the likeliness of volunteering a high amount. In coordination with the fact that, as noted above, high volunteers are 50% more likely to individually initiate their volunteer activity (as compared with low volunteers), this model suggests that time outweighs the influence of social network with regard to likeliness of volunteering a high amount. These data indicate that having discretionary time does increase one's odds of volunteering a substantial amount.

## Discussion

Given the results of the two guiding research questions, this paper concludes by reflecting on a third, What does the relationship between third age characteristics and volunteerism behavior imply for policy initiatives seeking to increase participation during later life? If the U.S., like other industrialized nations, seeks to increase older adults' contributions to the social good, it is important to consider how to direct our attention and our resources in a way that can efficiently facilitate voluntary engagement in later life. Like others before me (e.g., Minkler and Holstein 2008), I believe it is critical to go one step further by considering the ways in which this study demonstrates how differential access to resources modifies choices about whether and how much to contribute to the social good in later life. Increasing access to resources that allows people greater choice in how to engage in later life is the central issue that I propose needs to be addressed.

Access to a third age lifestyle, similar to the rhetoric encouraging people to “pick themselves up by their bootstraps,” is often described as if it is universally accessible in the United States for those between particular chronological age boundaries. As this study demonstrates, possession of certain third age resources is more predictive

of whether an individual is likely to “choose” to volunteer than is chronological age (with the exception of those over age 80), and volunteer behaviors in later life are tempered by whether an individual has an adequate amount of the resources typically associated with being a third ager—human capital (education), economic capital (a sufficient amount of income), health capital (being not disabled or able to overcome health limitations), and time capital (having enough time to contribute) (Carr 2009). In addition to these resources, social networks play an important role in volunteerism, but appear to be most important in influencing whether people volunteer in the first place. These findings suggest that third agers are uniquely positioned to volunteer. However, without overstepping the bounds of what the results from this cross-sectional survey can provide, the findings from this study also suggest that in order to increase volunteerism in later life in the United States, it will take more than simply encouraging people to conform with a third age lifestyle. Instead, engaging in third age activities (like volunteerism) requires that an individual is resource-rich enough to have choices about whether and how much to engage in activities that contribute to the social good. Therefore, like others have proposed (Gilleard and Higgs 2002; Holstein 2009), the findings from this study suggest that being a third ager, or having the capacity to engage in a third age lifestyle, is a privileged status.

Therefore, if we seek to increase the likeliness that people will volunteer in later life in the United States, it is necessary to consider the ways that we might increase the “third age resources” that older adults have access to and/or possess. In other words, social policies should not focus on encouraging people to make better decisions about what they do in later life, but rather, should help older adults obtain necessary resources to have the capacity to choose how they would like to engage in society. For example, especially with the economy in the United States continuing to struggle, the reality that retirement may either occur at a later time or take a new form is increasingly likely. This indicates that it is worth considering the expansion of opportunities for people (of all ages) to work part-time or retain a flexible work schedule (ideally without losing the critical benefits associated with full-time work); this would allow older adults remain in the work force longer if they needed or wanted to do so. Continued employment in a part-time basis in later life can provide elders the opportunity to continue compiling economic resources later in life, retain social networks, obtain more discretionary time (than as a full-time employee), retain the opportunity to contribute intellectual capital, and facilitate more “choice” with regard to whether and how much to contribute to the social good outside the work force. Additionally, given the extent to which the findings from this study support previous research noting that social networks interact with other forms of capital (especially human capital) in increasing the odds of volunteering, it is also necessary to take into consideration what older adults have to offer, what they seek to contribute, as well as what kinds of contributions are needed. In other words, social policies should seek to facilitate reciprocity between society and older adults by providing older adults with opportunities to enhance their knowledge and skills, as well as opportunities to contribute in ways that are meaningful to them and valuable to society.

In conclusion, this study has shown that third agers, if defined as those older adults with access to adequate economic, human, health, and temporal capitals, are in fact the best prepared to contribute to society through volunteerism. On the other



hand, being a third ager should not be construed as something people can expect, but rather, appears to function as a privileged status. If we seek to enhance the contributions made by elders to society in the United States, there needs to be a greater investment in enhancing older adults' capability to make choices about how to engage in later life, not impose inappropriate expectations that all older adults between particular chronological age boundaries can or should volunteer.

**Acknowledgements** The author wishes to acknowledge the thoughtful comments of Drs. J. Scott Brown and Stephen Lippmann, and Ms. Pamela Marks on an earlier draft of this paper.

## References

- Bass, S. A. (2000). Emergence of the third age: toward a productive aging society. *Journal of Aging and Social Policy*, 11(2/3), 7–17.
- Binstock, R. H. (2005). Old-age policies, politics, and ageism. *Generations*, 26(3), 73–78.
- Blau, P. M. (1977). A macrosociological theory of social structure. *The American Journal of Sociology*, 83(1), 36–54.
- Bukov, A., Maas, I., & Lampert, T. (2002). Social participation in very old age: cross-sectional and longitudinal findings from BASE. *Journals of Gerontology: Psychological Sciences*, 57B(6), P510–B517.
- Burr, J. A., Choi, N. G., Mutchler, J. E., & Caro, F. G. (2005). Caregiving and volunteering: are private and public helping behaviors linked? *Journals of Gerontology: Psychological Sciences*, 60(5), S247–S256.
- Carr, D. C. (2005). Changing the culture of aging: a social capital framework for gerontology. *Hallym International Journal of Aging*, 7(2), 103–115.
- Carr, D. C. (2009). *Demography, Ideology, and Stratification: Exploring the Emergence and Consequences of the Third Age*. Networked Digital Library of Thesis and Dissertations: Doctoral Dissertation.
- Chambre, S. M. (1984). Is volunteering a substitute for role loss in old age? An empirical test of activity theory. *The Gerontologist*, 24, 292–298.
- Choi, L. H. (2003). Factors affecting volunteerism among older adults. *The Journal of Applied Gerontology*, 22(2), 179–196.
- Corporation for National and Community Service. (2006a). *Volunteer growth in America: A review of trends since 1974*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing office.
- Corporation for National and Community Service. (2006b). *New state, federal volunteer service study released; Nationally, women with jobs, kids lead the way*. Retrieved August 11, 2009 from [http://www.nationalservice.gov/about/newsroom/releases\\_detail.asp?tbl\\_pr\\_id=397](http://www.nationalservice.gov/about/newsroom/releases_detail.asp?tbl_pr_id=397).
- Freedman, M. (1999). *Prime Time: How baby boomers will revolutionize retirement and transform America*. New York: Public Affairs.
- Freeman, R. (1997). Working for nothing: the supply of volunteer labor. *Journal of Labor Economics*, 15, 140–167.
- Gilleard, C., & Higgs, P. (2002). The third age: class, cohort, or generation? *Ageing and Society*, 22, 369–382.
- Granovetter, M. S. (1973). Strength of weak ties. *The American Journal of Sociology*, 78(6), 1360–1380.
- Greenfield, E. A., & Marks, N. F. (2004). Formal volunteering as a protective factor for older adults' psychological well-being. *Journals of Gerontology: Social Sciences*, 59B, S258–S264.
- Hendricks, J. (2001). Productivity. In G. L. Maddox (Ed.), *The encyclopedia of aging* (pp. 825–826). New York: Springer.
- Hendricks, J., & Cutler, S. J. (2004). Volunteerism and socioemotional selectivity in later Life. *Journals of Gerontology: Social Sciences*, 59B(5), S251–S257.
- Henretta, J. C. (2008). The potential of retirement. *The Gerontologist*, 48(3), 401–404.
- Herzog, A. R. and Morgan, J. N. (1993). Formal volunteer work among older Americans. In: Bass, S. A., Caro, F. G., and Chen, Y. (eds). *Achieving a Productive Aging Society*. Auburn House. pp 119–142.
- Herzog, A., Kahn, R., & Morgan, J. (1989). Age differences in productive activity. *Journal of Gerontology*, 54, S129–S138.
- Holstein, M. (2009). "Getting older, staying busy: Civic engagement and productive aging." Unpublished manuscript acquired through personal interaction.

- James, J. B. & Wink, P. W. (eds.). (2006). The crown of life: Dynamics of the early postretirement period. In: James, J. B. & Wink, P. W. Schaie, K. W. eds. *Annual Review of gerontology and geriatrics*, vol 26. New York: Springer Publishing.
- Minkler, M., & Holstein, M. B. (2008). From civil rights to...civic engagement? Concerns of two older critical gerontologists about a “new social movement” and what it portends. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 22, 196–204.
- Morrow-Howell, N., Hinterlong, J., Rozario, P. A., & Tang, F. (2003). Effects of volunteering on the well-being of older adults. *Journals of Gerontology: Social Sciences*, 58, S137–S145.
- Musick, M. A., Herzog, R. A., & House, J. S. (1999). Volunteering and mortality among older adults: findings from a national sample. *Journals of Gerontology: Psychological and Social Sciences*, 54B, S173–S180.
- Mutchler, J. E., Burr, J. A., & Caro, F. G. (2003). From paid worker to volunteer: leaving the paid workforce and volunteering in later life. *Social Forces*, 81(4), 1267–1293.
- Rosenberg, E., & Letrero, I. L. (2006). Using age, cohort, and period to study elderly volunteerism. *Educational Gerontology*, 32(5), 313–334.
- Rotolo, T. (2000). A time to join, a time to quit: the influence of life cycle transitions on voluntary association membership. *Social Forces*, 78(33), 1133–1161.
- Van Willigen, M. (2000). Differential benefits of volunteering across the life course. *Journals of Gerontology: Social Sciences*, 55, S308–S318.
- Weiss, R. S., & Bass, S. A. (eds). (2002). *Challenges of the third age: Meaning and purpose in later life*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Wilson, J. (2000). Volunteering. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 26, 215–240.
- Wilson, J., & Musick, M. (1997). Who cares: toward an integrated theory of volunteer work. *American Sociological Review*, 62, 694–713.
- Wilson, J., & Musick, M. (1998). The contribution of social resources to volunteering. *Social Science Quarterly*, 79, 799–814.

**Dawn Carr** earned a Ph.D. in Social Gerontology in 2009 from Miami University.

Copyright of Ageing International is the property of Springer Science & Business Media B.V. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.