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Motivations of Volunteer Leaders in an Extension Exercise Program

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Motivations of Volunteer Leaders in an Extension Exercise Program

Abstract

This article describes findings from a qualitative study of volunteer leaders in the StrongWomen strength training program in Arkansas. The study explored reasons volunteers initially agreed to serve, perceptions of volunteer role, and motivations for continuing to lead strength training groups long-term. Findings suggest a combination of factors supporting volunteer engagement: personal benefit of program, desire to continue program combined with a personal invitation to volunteer extended by the agent, desire to support a co-leader, and exercise and social support needs met through volunteer service. Motivations of Extension health program volunteers are important to address to maximize program impact.

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Introduction

Volunteers are vital to Extension's mission of reaching local communities with programs to improve quality of life (Vines & Anderson, 1976). Extension has traditionally engaged volunteers to use their knowledge in service to others across a range of program areas. National trends in health promotion programs and the newly developed Cooperative Extension National Framework for Health and Wellness have prompted renewed focus of Extension Family & Consumer Sciences on community-based approaches to improve health. Volunteer engagement in health and wellness programs may help Extension accomplish the goal to increase "the number of Americans who are healthy at every

stage of life" (Extension Committee on Organization and Policy, 2014).

Motivations of traditional Extension volunteers, such as 4-H leaders and master volunteers, have been studied (Cleveland & Thompson, 2007; Schrock & Kelsey, 2013; Strong & Harder, 2010; Wilson & Newman, 2011; Wolford, Cox, & Culp, 2001). However, few, if any, studies of Extension health program volunteer motivations have been published. Volunteer leaders may increase the sustainability of community-based programs, which is important for programs to make a long-term difference in health behaviors (O'Loughlin, Renaud, Richard, Gomez, & Paradis, 1998). Understanding volunteer motivations in health-related programs can aid recruitment and retention as Extension seeks to involve volunteers in program delivery.

This article describes findings from a study of volunteer leaders in the StrongWomen strength training program in Arkansas. The study explored reasons volunteers initially agreed to serve, perceptions of the volunteer role, and motivations for continuing to lead strength training groups long-term.

Program Background

The StrongWomen program is an evidence-based strength training program for mid-life and older women developed by researchers at Tufts University. It was designed to be community-based and implemented through non-profit organizations and settings by trained StrongWomen program leaders (Seguin et al., 2008). Nationally, the program is most widely delivered through Cooperative Extension Services. Arkansas adapted the program for delivery by volunteer leaders after initial implementation by county Family & Consumer Sciences agents.

The program consists of hour-long strength training sessions held at least twice weekly over 12 weeks. Individual sessions include a warm-up, eight to 10 strengthening exercises, and a cool-down and stretch (Nelson & Seguin, 2005). Classes meet in various program sites, most commonly community centers, churches, and meeting rooms located in county Extension offices. More than 40 states have trained StrongWomen program leaders. County Extension agents lead most strength training groups in states where the program is offered through Extension. Volunteers have been used in a few states, but none to the extent of Arkansas, which has adopted volunteer delivery as a core program component. Details of the program approach have been described elsewhere (Washburn, Cornell, Phillips, Felix, & Traywick, 2014). Thirty-seven Arkansas counties had active strength training groups when data were collected. Of these, 15 counties had programs led by volunteers; six counties had a combination of agent and volunteer-led programs; and 16 counties had programs led by the agent only. The results presented here are part of a larger study seeking to identify multiple factors promoting or inhibiting initiation of volunteer-led StrongWomen programs in the state.

Methods

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 StrongWomen program volunteer leaders from six counties. Purposive homogeneous sampling was used (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). Volunteers recruited for interview served in counties where the agent agreed to be interviewed as part of the larger study. Once agents agreed to participate in the larger study, they were asked to recruit

volunteer leaders for interview from one program site in their county. All volunteers at the longest running program site were interviewed when more than one site was available in a county. Sites were led by a single volunteer in four counties; remaining counties were led by two to four volunteers. All volunteers recruited by the agent agreed to be interviewed. Interviews were arranged through county agents and were conducted at program sites. Agents were not present during the interviews. Each interview was digitally recorded and transcribed. All interviews were conducted by the primary author. The UAMS Institutional Review Board approved the study protocol.

Volunteers were asked about their experience with the StrongWomen Program, personal motivations to become a program volunteer, benefits they received from serving, challenges encountered, and what they perceived as important in the volunteer role. Interviews were conducted until saturation was reached and no new information emerged from the data.

Data were coded using open and axial coding and analyzed using thematic content analysis (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). An initial codebook was created based upon interview questions. Throughout the coding process, codes were defined and new codes added as needed to capture essential information. Codes were clustered into conceptual categories (Streubert-Speziale & Carpenter, 2003). Three independent coders coded 10% of the interview transcripts to identify thematic patterns and codes. Reliability was assessed by comparing the results of the three coders for identical transcripts. Inter-coder agreement was calculated at 79%.

Results

Volunteers participated in individual (n=4) or group (n=8) interviews, depending on the number of volunteer leaders at the StrongWomen program site identified in the county. All volunteers interviewed were white females, with ages ranging from 47 to 69 years. Length of involvement as a leader ranged from 1 year to 6 years. Seven volunteers had been involved 3 years or longer.

Reasons for Volunteering

Volunteer leaders described three main reasons for volunteering: 1) Because the county agent asked; 2) To continue the program for self and others; and 3) To provide support for a co-leader. Comments regarding these reasons are described below.

Initial Motivations: Agent Request and Benefits to Self and Others

The primary reasons volunteers initially agreed to serve as a group leader were two-fold: because the county agent asked them to lead the group and to continue the strength training program for self and others.

Volunteers uniformly described a desire to keep the program going for their own personal health. The majority of leaders said serving as a group instructor helped to ensure they continued to exercise, and this was one reason they agreed to volunteer. Some cited the agent asking and maintenance of exercise habits as joint motivations for agreeing to serve.

Volunteers described their motivations when approached by the agent to become a leader and acknowledged the limited time agents have available:

- "Well [my agent] encouraged me to. And I wanted to so it could keep going."
- "[The agent] doesn't always have the time to put into it...I wanted to keep it going because I know I needed to keep on being motivated to exercise."

A pair of volunteers sharing group leadership said they agreed to serve as leaders because they wanted the program to continue and because the agent communicated the necessity of volunteers to sustain the program. The pair described their motivation as "half and half" keeping it going for themselves and for the class participants.

- "When the 12 weeks were up [the agent] asked if we wanted to continue that somebody would have to take volunteer training, and that's [why we] volunteered. So that we could continue."

Initial Motivations: Support for Co-leader

Volunteers who shared leadership for a group said a motivator for agreeing to serve was to provide support to each other. One said, "Well I did it to be with [the co-leader] because she didn't want to do it alone." Support between co-leaders served two roles for volunteers. First, it was cited as a motivator for their agreement to serve. Second, this continuing source of social support was recognized as important to their willingness to serve as a leader long-term. One pair of volunteers shared that they rely on each other when instructing class, and when one of them has to be absent.

- "Having two leaders in the group helps... we're both responsible people, so it's nice to know I can call her and say, "I can't make it. I have to take my Dad to the doctor" or whatever happens, and she'll pick up the slack."

Shared responsibility for the group also eased some of the perceived burden associated with leading the class and made it more enjoyable.

- "If I was the only person leading I think that I would see it as a job or as something that was required and it would seem not as fun. The way we do it it seems more enjoyable."
- "I'm glad there's two of us. I know that when I'm feeling bad and don't feel like it [the co-leader] will take it."

Perceptions of the Volunteer Leader Role

Perspectives on the volunteer role varied somewhat among leaders. Some volunteer leaders identified more strongly as group members than as leaders and minimized the importance of their leader role.

- "I don't think of it as serving . . . We don't think of it as volunteering either, it's just what we do."

- "I don't really think about even being the leader. We go to class and we just happen to be at the front of the room."
- "I come and join in with the women...all I do is just keep them going on the right pace."

Most volunteers identified simply "showing up" as an important part of their volunteer role. They also felt that motivating and encouraging participants was an important part of the leader role and noted satisfaction in providing emotional support to participants. Responses to questions about the most important role of volunteers revealed a focus on others.

- "Just getting them excited about doing it I guess."
- "Sometimes you can kind of tell that they're struggling...We'll say, 'We just have two more [repetitions], you can do it.' You know, just encouraging people."
- "I like that I know them. I know them physically, mentally, where they are and I can look at them almost and tell if they're having a bad day, what can I do to help make it better for them. So there's a lot of personal satisfaction with that."

Motivations for Continued Volunteer Leadership

Evolving Motivations—"...I'm coming for them..."

Some volunteers said their motivations for serving as a leader had evolved, while others felt their motivations had remained the same. Most expressed that motivators had grown beyond personal needs.

- "I want to continue it...not only so the other women will, but so that I will. It's [for me] personally...I wanted to keep it going because I know I needed to keep on being motivated to exercise."
- "I'm not only coming for myself but I'm coming for them too. I'll tell them that I'm coming because I need this, I want to impress upon them that I need it too, but I'm coming for them too. Even if one of them showed up it'd be enough."

Social Connections

Volunteers indicated the social aspect of the program was important to the group and rewarding to them as leaders. Volunteers noted that group members felt connected to one another. This connectedness was described as being just as important to the group and its continuance as the exercise itself.

- "We keep up with what's happening in each other's lives."
- "We enjoy [the social interaction] as much as we enjoy the exercise part."

Volunteers also felt the group provided a valuable social outlet for them as leaders and participants. Friendships were cited as an asset of the program over traditional workouts at a fitness facility.

- "We thoroughly enjoy each other's company. We make each other laugh. The world is not so bad on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. We have time together."
- "I enjoy it because I enjoy the ladies. They come because they want to be here."
- "You can't have the relationships that we have. I've never been to the [fitness center] and had such a good relationship."

Volunteers cited receiving emotional and appraisal support from group members, which helped in dealing with personal health issues and physical difficulties. One said,

The more exercise I do the better I feel and it helps me stay up and keep going. And the group does too. They're almost a medicine. Either I look at them and I say "Well at least I don't have the severe things that they do" or the other way, they pat me on the back and say, "I'm sorry you're having these troubles. We're there for you."

Feeling Valued

Volunteers cited feeling valued and respected by the group, and that this "keeps me going." Positive feedback from participants helped volunteers feel valued and offered a sense of fulfillment from their work.

- "Mine thank me every day for being there. I'm saying, 'I'm the one that should be thankful.'"
- "I've had a lot of the group afterwards say, 'Thank you for the good lesson' or 'Oh that was great' and it makes you feel better when they tell you that."
- "They miss me when I'm not here, 'cause they tell me, and I miss them when they're not here...I know that they really appreciate me doing it 'cause I keep them motivated."

Discussion and Recommendations

These findings add to the literature on volunteer motivations and fill a gap in study of volunteer motivations in Extension health programs. StrongWomen volunteers agreed to serve because the agent communicated a need for volunteers and then followed up with a personal invitation. Volunteers were already benefitting from the program as participants and wanted to continue reaping benefits themselves. They also wanted others in the group to continue to have access to the strength training class. This has implications for volunteer recruitment.

First, the agent personally and directly asked the volunteer to serve. Consistent with others' findings (Farris, McKinley, Ayres, Peters, & Brady, 2009), personal invitations extended by Extension staff appear to influence volunteer involvement. Targeted efforts to recruit volunteers may be more

effective than widely broadcasting service opportunities and waiting for people to respond. Findings support the importance of personal connections of both the agent and other program volunteers in recruiting volunteers.

Second, volunteers were recruited from among the participant group. Their involvement in the program allowed them to experience private benefits (personal exercise and social support) and understand the public benefits made possible by their volunteerism, making program continuation possible. Opportunities to engage participants as volunteers should be embedded in the structure of Extension health and wellness programs, particularly as new programs are developed and implemented. Volunteers want to be involved in meaningful roles matched with their interests and skills (Culp, 2009). This invites a community-based approach to programming where participants are actively engaged as partners in the educational process, as opposed to passively receiving subject-matter content.

Third, for groups with co-leaders, providing support to the other leader motivated agreement to serve. Further, volunteers more closely identified as a group member than group leader and minimized their leadership role. The social atmosphere and support generated within the group during strength training sessions seemed to reinforce continued leadership. Shared leadership seems to promote volunteer agreement to serve and continued involvement. Findings suggest volunteers may be more easily recruited in pairs when group bonds and social support already exist. Extension program approaches that provide participants opportunity to give and receive social support may promote volunteer engagement.

Finally, altruism, while important, was not the primary reason why StrongWomen volunteers agreed to serve. Private benefit, a desire to continue their personal exercise habits, was a key motivator. Social interaction within strength training groups supported their continued service. Concern for others, or public benefit, cited as a motivational factor in other studies (Cleveland & Thompson, 2007), seems to be secondary to personal benefits of volunteer service for this volunteer group, at least initially. Consistent with others' findings, this group of volunteers seems to be motivated by both the private and public benefits of their service, referred to as "impure altruism" (Andreoni, 1990; Benabou & Tirole, 2006; Carpenter & Myers, 2010). Most volunteers report having more than one motive (Clary & Snyder, 1999). The value of personal benefits can drive volunteer service, and, provided costs do not outweigh benefits, spur support for public benefits such as access to exercise programs and a supportive social environment. In other words, targeted recruitment efforts based on personal benefits as a primary motive can yield long-term volunteers who will remain committed to the program because it helps others after their own needs are met.

Limitations

A potential limitation of the study reported here is the homogeneous nature of the volunteer sample interviewed. All interviewees were white females, which does not fully reflect the diversity of program volunteers across the state. Volunteers were recruited, in part, because the county agent agreed to be interviewed as part of the larger study. Counties were geographically representative of the state, and volunteers interviewed were representative of the volunteers in their respective counties.

Conclusion

These findings suggest a combination of factors supporting volunteer engagement: personal benefit of program, desire to continue the program combined with a personal invitation to volunteer extended by the agent, desire to support a co-leader, and exercise and social support needs met through volunteer service. Volunteers are valuable to Extension across disciplines and program areas. Addressing the motivations of Extension health and wellness program volunteers is important if we are to make the most of their involvement and maximize program impact. In general, volunteers direct their efforts toward pursuits they are personally interested in and from which they derive a sense of satisfaction. Volunteers in Extension health and wellness programs serving adult audiences may be motivated by personal benefit first. Continued service is supported when volunteer work meets volunteers' own needs and benefits others.

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