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Ethnic and Gender Differences in Community Service Participation Among Working Adults

Abstract

A ready and steady supply of volunteers is critical to Extension programs. The study described here examined the effects of gender and ethnicity in community service participation among working adults. Data obtained from the 1998 National Household Education Survey (1998) were examined and logit analysis applied. Results showed strong main effects for gender and ethnicity, with females showing higher rates of community service than males, and African-Americans showing higher rates than Whites or Hispanic Americans. No interactive effect of gender with ethnicity was apparent. On the basis of these findings, recommendations for more specific targeting of subgroups for community service participation are made.

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Introduction

Community service among citizens has long been viewed as a desired element of a democratic society. Commitment of one's time and energy in service to the common good is lauded by political, religious, and civic leaders, and viewed by psychologists as an example of behavior that reflects a high level of human development. The seventh of Erikson's (1963, 1968) eight stages of social development, for example, is characterized by a concern for guiding and caring for the next generation, while Maslow's (1956) study of "self-actualized" individuals revealed the quality of *Gemeinschaftsgefühl*, or social interest, compassion, and humanity--qualities consistent with the value of community service.

Schools, too, have recognized the value of community service among students. A recent survey ("Survey Reveals Record Numbers," 2003) indicated that, among U.S. colleges and universities, the growth of service initiatives has increased steadily, as has the integration of service-learning into the curricula. The study also found that students are participating in public service at record levels.

McKinney (2002) found that college students who participated in community service activities showed more secure attachment to close personal friends than non-participants. A study that investigated the effects of community service involvement among 9th grade students found that such service was associated with reduced levels of alienation, improved school behavior and grade point average, and greater acceptance by the adult community (Calabrese & Schumer, 1986). Community service involvement has also been correlated with growth in cognitive empathy (Pratt, 2002), spiritual fulfillment (Serow, 1990), and the success of minority females in science-based careers (Taylor, Erwin, Ghose, & Perry-Thornton, 2001). McCarthy and Tucker (1999) found that factors influencing participation in service include desire to help, self-efficacy, and the costs of time and interpersonal conflicts.

Research Objectives

Perhaps in part due to institutional emphasis on community service within secondary and post-secondary institutions, and in part due to the ready accessibility of respondents, most research has focused on the community service involvement of youth and college/university students. Very little research has examined the extent of community service participation among working adults.

Gender and ethnic differences in community service participation also have not been investigated to a great degree.

Such research is important because working adults exist as a large pool of potential volunteers who can bring valuable life experience and skills to share with their community. Identifying distinct ethnic and gender differences in community service might help to tailor and target volunteer recruitment efforts, as well as to critically examine current Extension practices and their appeal to various groups. The current study seeks to extend the scope of existing research by investigating ethnic and gender differences in community service participation among working adults in the U.S., using logit methods of data analysis.

Method

Participants

The data for this study were obtained from the 1996 National Household Education Survey (U.S. Department of Education, 1998). This survey contained responses from 6,697 adults who were 18 years or older, not enrolled in a primary or secondary school, and not on active duty in the military. Participants were selected using a random-digit telephone dialing. Responses were intended to be representative of the entire U.S. adult civilian population. As a measure of community service involvement, we considered responses to the following survey question: "Do you participate in any ongoing community service activity, for example, volunteering at a school, coaching a sports team, or working with a church or neighborhood association?" (Response options were "yes" or "no".)

For the purposes of this study, we included only those individuals ($n = 4629$) who were employed and considered to be in the work force at the time of the survey. Table 1 provides descriptive information about the sample.

Table 1.
Descriptive Characteristics of Sample

Category	Frequency	(Percent)	Median Age
Females	2472	(53.4%)	39
Males	2157	(46.6)	40
Total	4629	(100)	
White (non-Hispanic)	3359	(72.5)	41
African American	558	(12.1)	38
Hispanic American	467	(10.1)	35
All other ethnicities	245	(5.3)	37
Total	4629	(100)	

Procedures

To simultaneously examine ethnicity and gender differences in community service participation, we applied logit modeling to the data, with participation in community service serving as the binary dependent variable, and gender and ethnicity serving as categorical independent variables. Both main effects and interaction effects can be assessed by logit modeling, and the magnitude of these effects is indicated by the magnitude of obtained standardized association parameters (with larger values indicating a stronger effect on the dependent variable).

Results

Interactive Effect of Gender and Ethnicity

As a first step in the logit analysis, we fitted a full logit model specifying each of the three proposed effects (the main effects of gender and ethnicity, as well as the interaction of gender with ethnicity). Table 2 shows the obtained association parameter (τ) for each effect in this model, as well as the ratio of each to its respective standard error ($\tau/se(\tau)$).

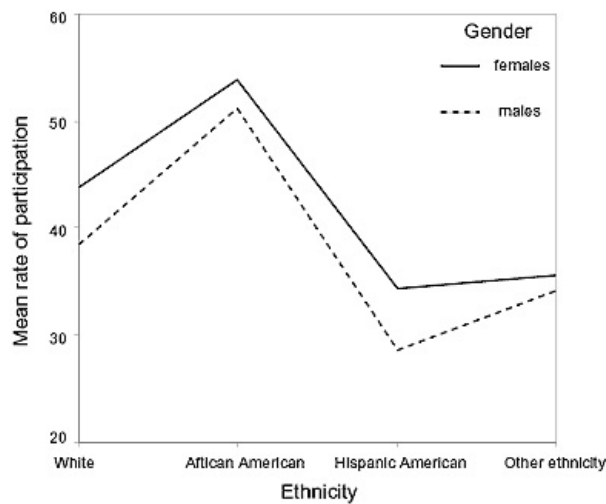
The magnitude of these latter "standardized association parameters" can be interpreted as z-scores, with values greater than 2.0 indicating strong effects for the relevant category. As can be seen in Table 2, larger standardized values of τ resulted for the main effects in the model (gender and ethnicity), suggesting that there were gender and ethnic differences in rates of participation. Smaller standardized association parameter values were evident for the interaction effect, suggesting that gender and ethnicity did not interact to differentially affect participation rates. That is, there was no apparent difference in the pattern of participation (across ethnicities) between males and females. This lack of interaction between gender and ethnicity is evident in the plot of participation rates shown in Figure 1 (note that the lines are parallel).

Table 2.
Effects for Full Model (Gender + Ethnicity + Gender \times Ethnicity)

Effect	Association Parameter (τ)	$\tau/se(\tau)$
Participation		
Yes	-0.422	-8.78*
No	0.422	8.78*
Gender		
Male	-0.076	-1.60
Female	0.076	1.60
Ethnicity		
White, non-Hispanic	0.062	1.15
African American	0.524	6.67*
Hispanic American	-0.358	-4.18*
All other ethnicities	-0.228	-2.14*
Gender-by-ethnicity		
Male & White	-0.034	-0.64
Female & White	0.034	0.64
Male & African American	0.024	0.31
Female & African American	-0.024	-0.31

Male & Hispanic American	-0.058	-0.69
Female & Hispanic American	0.058	0.69
Male & Other ethnicity	0.068	-0.65
Female & Other ethnicity	-0.068	-0.65
*Significant at $\alpha = .05$		

Figure 1.
Mean Rates of Community Service Participation



Main Effects of Gender and Ethnicity

Based on this result, we next fitted a more parsimonious model that included only the main effects (gender and ethnicity). This model provided a very good fit to the data ($G^2=1.00$, $p=.80$). Table 3 contains the obtained association parameters for this simpler model. The first set of standardized parameters (assessing rates of participation overall) show that non-participation in community service was significantly more likely than participation (with standardized association parameters of 8.89 and -8.89, respectively). Specifically, 40% of the sample reported participation in an ongoing community service activity, while 60% reported non-participation.

Table 3 also indicates the main effect of gender in this more parsimonious model. The standardized association parameters shown for the gender effect indicate that females were significantly more likely than males to participate in community service. Specifically, the participation rate for females was 44.0%, compared with 38.2% for males. This gender difference was strong and significant (with standardized association parameters of +/-3.54).

Finally, Table 3 shows the obtained association parameters for the effect of ethnicity. Strong and significant effects were also seen here. The magnitude of the standardized association parameters suggested that African American adult workers were more likely than adult workers from other ethnic groups to participate in ongoing community service. This effect was very strong and significant ($\tau=6.68$). In contrast, Hispanic American individuals and individuals categorized as "other ethnicity" were less likely to report participation. Table 4 shows participation rates overall, as well as participation rates by gender and ethnicity.

Table 3.
Effects for Main Effect Model (Gender + Ethnicity)

Effect	Association Parameter (τ)	$\tau/se(\tau)$
Participation		
Yes	-0.426	-8.89*
No	0.426	8.89*

Gender		
Male	-0.102	-3.54*
Female	0.102	3.54*
Ethnicity		
White	0.066	1.23
African American	0.514	6.68*
Hispanic American	-0.356	-4.17*
All other ethnicities	-0.224	-2.10*
*Significant at $\alpha = .05$ Note. $G^2(3)=1.00, p=.80$		

Table 4.
Community Service Participation Rates (Percentages) by Gender and Ethnicity

	Males	Females	Combined Genders
African American	51.2	53.8	52.9
Hispanic American	28.6	34.4	31.3
White	38.4	43.8	41.3
Other Ethnicity	34.1	35.5	34.3
Combined Ethnicities	38.2	44.0	40.0

Discussion and Implications

The above analyses indicated significant gender and ethnic differences in community service participation rates. Specifically, with respect to gender, adult working females show higher rates of participation than adult working males. This finding is consistent with previous studies showing gender differences among high school and college students in attitudes toward and involvement in community service participation (e.g., Trudeau & Devlin, 1996; Miller, 1994), and suggests that these attitudes and behaviors continue beyond the age of formal education and well into the working years of women. Perhaps an increased emphasis by educational and cultural institutions during the formative years of young men might serve to increase the service seen in their later years.

The findings of this study also suggest that distinct cultural expectations might exist with respect to the value of community service. Efforts to increase community service participation by Extension educators and public agencies might do well to emphasize the involvement of men, perhaps through the frequent use of males in imagery and descriptions designed to encourage such participation. Much as it has become acceptable and even desirable to see men in caretaking

roles (such as childcare), it might become equally desirable to see men in roles of community service. Extension professionals might also seek to provide volunteer opportunities that appeal to families or couples, or to create opportunities for females who currently volunteer on a regular basis to invite or involve male friends or family members.

A second finding of this study was that ethnic differences in community service participation are evident among working adults. Specifically, African American individuals show the highest rates of participation, followed by White persons, individuals of other ethnicity, and Hispanic American individuals. One factor that might be advanced for the high rates of community service among African Americans is religiosity. Several studies (e.g., Pattillo-McCoy 1999; Taylor, 1988) have indicated that African American persons attend worship services, participate in church associations, and place more value on religious practices than other ethnic groups. This religious involvement may therefore bear some relationship to community service.

Hunt and Hunt (2001), however, in their analysis of General Social Surveys from 1974 to 1994, found that this heightened sense of religiosity among African Americans (relative to White persons) was specific to the urban South. No such ethnic difference existed in the rural South, and in the urban North, African Americans actually showed lower levels of religious involvement than whites. This would suggest that religiosity or church involvement differences alone may not be enough to explain the observed differences in community service participation. Further research might shed additional light on reasons for these differences.

The relatively high rate of community service among African Americans is certainly a point that could be more strongly publicized, both by civic leaders and by individuals and organizations more closely tied to community service programs. Public recognition of persons who volunteer can do much to increase participation among other individuals and groups of individuals.

The results of this study showed relatively lower rate of community service participation by Hispanic American individuals (compared to African American and White individuals). It is the opinion of the author that community involvement among Hispanic American individuals in a broad sense may be inhibited by language issues. Some Hispanic persons may feel less comfortable engaging in community service if the predominant language of the larger "community" is one with which they are less comfortable.

It might therefore be important for individuals of other ethnicities to make a particular effort to encourage and welcome the involvement of Hispanic American individuals and to be cognizant of possible language barriers. More important, efforts to set up community service activities within the cultural context of Hispanic Americans might prove invaluable as a means of increasing participation. These efforts might include announcements of community service activities in Spanish-language publications, activities led by prominent Hispanic Americans, or activities that specifically serve Hispanic American needs.

A strong implication of this study is that Extension facilitators and Extension professionals would do well to critically examine Extension programs, both in a broad sense and at the level of individual programs, to assess what aspects of those programs might attract or deter particular groups of individuals from volunteering service. In particular, are there aspects of a program or programs that make them less appealing to men and Hispanic American individuals? Does Extension service have an "image problem" among these persons, or has the possibility of such service merely been less effectively targeted to them? Can Extension programs be modified or new programs be created that might specifically appeal to these individuals?

Such questions might lead to formal assessment of programs or to formal queries or surveys of groups under-represented in Extension. The results of such assessment might lead to changes in the types of Extension programs offered or to modification of existing programs to more broadly appeal to potential volunteers.

An additional implication is that Extension programs might strive to create a more equal balance of ethnic and gender diversity by targeting those groups of persons (in particular, men and Hispanic Americans) who are currently less likely to be involved in volunteer service. Particularly with respect to ethnic diversity, because such service provides a tremendous opportunity for establishing relationships and building social cohesion within a community, such diversity can only serve to strengthen inter-ethnic ties as well as promote a mutual appreciation of diversity and culture.

Conclusions

A ready and steady supply of volunteers is critical to the delivery and facilitation of Extension programs. The study described here sought to describe specific group differences in rates volunteer service. The results of this study indicate both gender and ethnic differences in community service participation among working adults. The effects of gender and ethnicity, however, are not interactive; that is, the difference between females and males in rate of participation is consistent across ethnicities.

The strong main effects, however, indicate a need to explore developmental, environmental, or cultural factors that may differentially affect the propensity for individuals of varying ethnicity and gender to participate in community service. It also suggests that efforts to increase community

service participation might be targeted to specific groups, and in gender- or ethnicity-specific ways.

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