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Doing Good and Feeling Well: Understanding the Relationship Between Volunteering and Mental Wellbeing in Older Adult Populations Through the Application of a Social-Cognitive Theory of Depression

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Louise Elizabeth Cooper

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Abstract

Previous research indicates that volunteering can improve positive psychological wellbeing, and protect against the onset of depressive symptoms amongst older adults. However, the mechanisms at play in the relationship remain unclear. This research project analysed two data sets in order to test the predictions of a social-cognitive theory of depression as it applies to the volunteering-psychological wellbeing relationship.

A social cognitive theory of depression (as described by Oatley and Bolton (1985)) suggests that older adults are susceptible to symptoms of depression and reduced psychological wellbeing when difficult life events limit their ability to maintain social roles that have previously facilitated investment in valued facets of their self-concept. Therefore, volunteering may compensate for such role losses by enabling older adults to continue to contribute to their sense of self through their volunteering role, and subsequently protect them from the effects that such role-loss may have on their psychological functioning.

Using longitudinal data from a New Zealand-based sample, this research illustrates that older adults who have relatively poorer physical health are more likely to be protected from experiences of depressive symptoms as a result of consistently volunteering than those who experience higher levels of health. Analyses of longitudinal data also provide some evidence that employment status may moderate the impact of volunteering consistency on protection against symptoms of depression.

In addition, analyses of cross-sectional data demonstrate a relationship between contributions to self-concept through the enactment of social roles, and better
psychological wellbeing. This research also suggests that the extent to which negative life events limit a person’s ability to invest in their sense of self is related to psychological wellbeing outcomes. Finally, it is suggested that the amount of investment in self-concept facilitated by a volunteering role is related to psychological wellbeing. However, investment in self-concept through volunteering was not shown to moderate the relationship between pertinent life stressors, and psychological wellbeing. To a large extent, these findings align with a social-cognitive theory of depression (Oatley & Bolton, 1985), but they raise questions about the way that compensatory coping through social role changes has previously been theorised.

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Table of Contents

Abstract .......................................................................................................................... iii
Acknowledgements ......................................................................................................... iv
Table of Contents .......................................................................................................... vii
List of Tables ................................................................................................................... x
List of Figures ................................................................................................................. xi
Introduction ..................................................................................................................... 1

Literature Review ............................................................................................................ 3
  How is Volunteering Defined? ............................................................................................... 4
  Characteristics of Older Volunteers - Who Volunteers and Why? ........................................ 5
    Rates of volunteering ........................................................................................................ 5
    Motivations for volunteering ............................................................................................ 7
    Motivations for volunteering in a New Zealand population ............................................. 9
    The benefits of volunteering behaviour .......................................................................... 10
    Summary of the characteristics of volunteers .................................................................. 11
  The Epidemiology and Aetiology of Depression in Older Age Groups ........................... 12
  The Role of Volunteering in Protecting Psychological Wellbeing ................................. 15
  Directionality of the Volunteering - Depression Relationship ....................................... 16
  Theoretical Understandings of the Causal Mechanisms Involved in the Volunteering-
    Depression Relationship .................................................................................................. 21
    Behavioural activation ..................................................................................................... 22
    Social interaction .............................................................................................................. 24
    Self esteem ...................................................................................................................... 25
    Altruism ........................................................................................................................... 27
    Role theories .................................................................................................................... 28
  Summary of the Literature Review Pertaining to the Direction of the Volunteering-
    Wellbeing Relationship, and the Mechanisms Involved in this Relationship .......... 30
  A Social-Cognitive Theory of Depression in Reaction to Life Events ............................ 31
    A social-cognitive theory’s predictions of the relationship between volunteering and
    depression .......................................................................................................................... 42
    Summary of research relating to Oatley and Bolton’s social-cognitive theory of depression
    (1985) ............................................................................................................................. 43
    Defining Categories of Voluntary Work in Research Settings ....................................... 45

Research Questions ....................................................................................................... 50

Hypotheses ..................................................................................................................... 51
  Hypothesis One (Investigated in Study One) .................................................................. 51
  Hypothesis Two (Investigated in Study Two) .................................................................. 52
  Hypothesis Three (Investigated in Study Two) ............................................................... 52
  Hypothesis Four (Investigated in Study Two) .................................................................. 53
  Hypothesis Five (Investigated in Study Two) .................................................................. 53
  Hypothesis Six (Investigated in Study Two) .................................................................. 53

Study One ....................................................................................................................... 54
List of Tables

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of volunteering consistency groups as a percentage of the sample .......................................................... 71
Table 2: Mean values of control variables by volunteering consistency group .......... 72
Table 3: Results of initial ANOVA to test for differences in the mean depression scores of volunteering consistency groups ................................................. 74
Table 4: Demographic characteristics as a percentage of the sample grouped by volunteering status (number of data points in parentheses) ......................... 105
Table 5: Mean and standard deviation of mental wellbeing scores by volunteering status ........................................................................................................ 107
Table 6: Hierarchical multiple regression analyses predicting mental wellbeing from demographic variables, and stressor salience and investment scores .......... 110
Table 7: Hierarchical multiple regression analyses predicting mental wellbeing from demographic variables and stressor salience scores .......................... 113
Table 8: Means, standard deviations, and confidence intervals for participants' investment scores using original data ......................................................... 115
Table 9: Hierarchical multiple regression analyses predicting mental wellbeing from demographic variables, stressor salience, investment scores, and volunteering status ................................................................. 117
Table 10: Hierarchical multiple regression analyses predicting mental wellbeing from demographic variables, stressor salience score, volunteering alignment score, and the interaction between volunteering alignment and stressor salience .......... 119
Table 11: Proportion of participants who reported engaging in each volunteering category ........................................................................................................... 122
Table 12: Number of participants engaged in more than one type of volunteering ....... 123
Table 13: Finalised configuration of volunteering types used in comparative analyses ........................................................................................................ 124
Table 14: Mean psychological wellbeing scores and standard deviations by volunteering type ........................................................................................................ 125
Table 15: Means and standard deviations of psychological wellbeing scores of volunteers working mainly individually, or as part of a team ......................... 126
Table 16: Means and standard deviations of psychological wellbeing scores of volunteers working mainly with objects, or mainly with people ................. 127
List of Figures

Figure 1: Missing value patterns for NZLSA sample imputation data..............................69