

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

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

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctorate

in

Clinical Psychology

at Massey University, Albany, New Zealand.

Louise Elizabeth Cooper

2015

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.

Acknowledgements

In completing this research project, both my perseverance and self-confidence have been tested. I am very grateful to those who have encouraged me, drawn my attention to strengths of the work carried out, and helped me to navigate my way through some difficult periods of questioning.

First, I would like to acknowledge my primary supervisor, Associate Professor Paul Merrick. Thank you for helping me to maintain a clear focus throughout the research process, for encouraging me to always explain the rationale for decisions I have made along the way, and for providing me with such timely feedback towards the end of the writing process. Thank you also for your consistent support throughout the three years, both in the preparation of my thesis, and in my clinical training.

To my secondary supervisor, Professor Fiona Alpass, thank you for allowing me to delve into the wonderfully rich data set that has developed out of waves of information

collected through the New Zealand Longitudinal Study of Ageing. It has been a privilege to work alongside you and your team in developing this research project. Thank you for your words of encouragement, and your willingness to review this work as it developed.

Thanks also to Brendan Stevenson, from the New Zealand Longitudinal Study of Ageing team, for all the time you spent explaining the intricacies of the NZLSA data set, so that I had a full understanding of what I was working with. Also, I would like to particularly thank Dr Barry McDonald, Dion Walker, and Matthew Williams for their advice relating to the methodologies, and the statistical analyses used. Thank you to also to all those who, through discussions and identification of helpful resources, enabled me to take a step back, look at all of my options, and recognise that it is okay to change my mind.

I am grateful for the financial support provided through a scholarship from the HOPE Foundation for Research on Ageing. Thank you for believing in the value of the contribution that this research can make to our understanding of positive ageing experiences. Thank you also to the Massey University Postgraduate Research Fund for funding my use of facilities and resources owned by the university, so that I could undertake the data collection required for this study.

Finally, a personal note of gratitude to my family and friends. This has been a long road of study, and I could not have done it without your support. I am grateful for the constant support (both emotional and financial) of my parents, and my husband. Many

thanks for your acceptance of my failure to participate in social activities due to academic deadlines. I look forward to joining “the real world” again.

Approval for this research was gained from the Massey University Human Ethics Committee (Northern) on the 26th of March 2013.

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

Method	54
Participant Recruitment.....	54
The New Zealand Longitudinal Study of Ageing- Changes to the Title of the Study	55
Use of NZLSA Data.....	56
Participants.....	56
Measures	57
Dependent Variables.....	57
Depressive symptomatology.....	57
Mental wellbeing.....	58
Independent Variables.....	59
Volunteering consistency.....	59
Control Variables.....	60
Physical health.....	60
Employment status.....	61
Relationship status.....	61
Education.....	62
Consideration of Statistical Analysis Methods	62
Data Screening.....	64
Missing Data Analysis.....	65
Analytic Strategy	69
Results	70
Descriptive Statistics	70
ANOVA Analysis.....	73
Simple Effects Analysis by Employment Status.....	75
Simple Effects Analysis by Physical Health Grouping	75
Summary	76
Kruskal-Wallis Analysis of Differences between Volunteering Consistency Groups in Mental Wellbeing Scores	77
Summary of Results	77
Study Two	80
Method	80
Survey Development	80
Participant Recruitment.....	81
Measures	84
Measuring investment in social roles.....	84
Measuring the importance of negative life events in the previous 12 months.....	87
Measuring the alignment of stressors with pertinent domains of identity.....	90
Measuring the contribution of volunteering to self-concept.....	92
Measuring types of volunteering.....	93
Measuring mental wellbeing.....	95
Demographic variables.....	98
Participants.....	98
Data Screening.....	99
Imputation of Missing Data.....	101
Results	103
Checking the Reliability of Scales Measuring Experiences of Negative Events in Each Domain of Self-Concept.....	103
Descriptive Statistics	104
Mental Wellbeing Amongst Volunteers and Non-Volunteers.....	107
Data Coding for Regression Analyses	108

Age.....	108
Relationship status.....	108
Education.....	108
Health status.....	109
Testing Hypothesis Two	109
Testing Hypothesis Three	110
Testing Hypothesis Four	114
Testing Hypothesis Five	118
Testing Hypothesis Six	121
Additional data screening.....	124
ANOVA results.....	124
Differences in working within teams, or individually.....	125
Working mainly with objects, or people.....	126
Discussion.....	128
Research Questions.....	130
Findings of Study One.....	131
Hypothesis one.....	131
Findings of Study Two	135
Hypothesis two.....	136
Hypothesis three.....	137
Hypothesis four.....	140
Hypothesis five.....	141
Hypothesis six.....	144
Clinical Implications	146
Limitations	149
Contributions and Strengths.....	152
Future Research	155
Conclusion.....	157
References	160
Appendix One: Student Contract for Use of NZLSA Data.....	179
Appendix Two: Information Sheet and Consent form for Study Two Participants	180
Appendix Three: Survey Developed for Study Two	183
Appendix Four: Summary of Results for Participants.....	194

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
--	----

