

SOCIAL ORGANIZATIONS & AGING: THE BENEFITS OF
VFW MEMBERSHIP

BY

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Abstract

Civic engagement in social organizations is a way to gain social capital, which benefits communities and people. By volunteering in organizations, older adults can improve well-being for themselves and their communities. The goal of this research is to understand peoples' active participation in social organizations as they get older. Twenty active participants of a Veterans of Foreign Wars Post and its Women's Auxiliary were interviewed. Analyzing the data qualitatively, several themes emerged. Members' mental health and well-being is enhanced, and people develop role models to guide them through the aging process. Being in a safe and secure environment, members develop a sense of camaraderie and purpose, and the organization provides members a source of social engagement. Finally, conflict plays a role in the history and future of the organization. Governments and existing institutions should provide incentives and resources for people to become involved through volunteering and being active in organizations.

Introduction

More than a century ago, a vast array of Americans joined various types of organizations including trade unions, farmers' associations, fraternal chapters, veterans' organizations, women's groups, and public change groups. People were active leaders who learned how to run meetings, handle money, keep records, and work as a group. Members of these groups came from all social classes, thus upward mobility was possible for all. These groups helped to determine the public agenda and shape community life (Skocpol, 2004). These social capital-creating formal organizations provide members a place to meet one another at a local chapter.

In recent years, however, there has been a decline of active memberships in traditional membership organizations (Putnam, 2000; Skocpol, 2004). Instead, professionally managed groups have arisen making it more difficult for "average" citizens to have an active civic life. For example, the AARP has increased membership in recent years, but being a member does not take much more than sending in money once a year to support a cause. People rarely attend meetings or interact with other members. Though the organization is a strong force politically, it does not provide members with additional social capital through the norms and trust that grow out of social networks (Putnam, 2000; Henkin & Zapf, 2007). Citizens used to join membership organizations for political, social, recreational, and cultural reasons or for social assistance. Today, groups are much more specialized and, often group members have a particular interest in the issue that the group stands for prior to becoming a member (Skocpol, 2004).

The Great Depression caused a drop in membership of many organizations and in civic engagement overall due to economic distress. However, World War II brought about a massive outpouring of patriotism and collective solidarity. This growth remained until the late 1960's and early 1970's when it became clear that membership growth was not keeping up with population growth. Eventually, a decline in membership rates occurred at the same time as changing family structures (more divorce, single-parent families, one-person households), but little evidence shows this caused the decline. Instead, pressures of time and money, suburbanization, television and other electronics, and generational change have been shown to cause the continuing decline (Putnam, 2000).

The rate of membership in veterans' organizations fell by about ten percent from 1980 to 1997, which makes sense since the number of living veterans decreased by nine percent. Interestingly, however, the *Encyclopedia of Associations* states that the number of veterans' organizations almost tripled during this period time (Putnam, 2000). One of the major veterans' organizations is the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the VFW.

To understand how individuals benefit from active participation in a social organization, semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with twenty members of a VFW. While a significant amount of research has been conducted on how communities and populations benefit from active participation in social groups, this research focused on how individuals, particularly older adults, benefit from membership in an organization.

In this paper, the role of social capital and civic engagement related to social organization membership among older adults will be examined, incorporating social capital, social network, and socioemotional selectivity theories, and the convoy model. This will lead into a description of the methods used for this research. Evidence will then be presented showing how members benefit from participation in the organization in the areas of mental health and well-being, social influence and comparison, safety and security, social support, and social engagement, and how conflict within the organization affects members. Finally, a discussion of current and future implications of the research will be discussed supporting the notion that organizational membership benefits individuals, integrating how conflict affects members and the organization overall.

Older Adults & Social Participation

Social Networks & Social Capital

The social capital that flows from social networks is one reason people join membership organizations. Social capital is defined as those features of social structures, such as levels of interpersonal trust and norms of reciprocity and mutual aid, which act as resources for individuals and facilitate collective action (Coleman 1990; Putnam 1993). Social capital theory states that social networks have value in that “social contacts affect the productivity of individuals and groups” because of the connections that are developed and the trustworthiness that arises. Overall, the core idea of social capital theory is that social networks have value (Putnam, 2000, pg. 18-19).

Social networks are formed from relationships beyond the family (Putnam, 2000). Social networks are defined as a set of individuals that are tied to one another by relations between them. The social network theory states that individual behaviors and attitudes are largely affected by the social structure of the group that shapes the resources available and access to opportunities (Moren-Cross & Lin, 2006). Throughout the years, social capital has been considered a benefit to communities and their members. People gain from the added trust and from the institutions that build social networks that bind people together. Communities with high social capital have lower crime rates, better health, education, and economic growth (Smith, 2001). Social capital and social networks go hand in hand, one building the other. Social networks can be measured at the individual level, and

social capital is more a feature of neighborhoods, communities or societies (Kawachi & Berkman, 2000).

Early studies of social capital highlighted the economic benefits. Bourdieu (1985), who was the first social scientist to analyze social capital, found that social networks allow individuals to claim access to resources possessed by other members, and that the amount and quality of these resources is important. Bourdieu's theories focus on the economic gains through added resources, added knowledge from talking with others, and new affiliations with other institutions. Coleman (1990), on the other hand, emphasized the creation of human capital in that people develop group norms and privileged access to information through increased social capital.

From the highly documented book, *Bowling Alone*, Putnam (2000) asserted that social capital allows people to solve problems more efficiently, to strengthen connections between people, and to be more tolerant of others. Putnam noted that political and civic engagement, informal social ties, and tolerance and trust of America and fellow Americans are on the decline, all indicative of the decrease in social capital. He also explains a generational change in social capital where baby boomers and Generation X-ers do not participate in formal social networks nearly as much as the generation prior. With that said, people are encouraged to become engaged civically in the community to gain social capital.

Civic Engagement

“Civic engagement” has been used to describe a wide variety of activities including voting, being involved in political campaigns, participating in paid and

unpaid community work, staying up to date on news and public affairs, and helping one's neighbor. The term refers to citizen action that has public consequence for communities and public life (Antonelli, 1996). Civically engaged individuals are those who are "actively participating in the life of their communities" through voting, community groups, and volunteering (Center for Health Communication, Harvard School of Public Health, 2004, pg. 3). Civic engagement includes formal and informal volunteering, participation in community planning and political activities, relationships with neighbors, involvement in organizations, lifelong learning, and work that contributes to the public good (Henkin & Zapf, 2007).

Analysts argue that baby boomers, due to increased life expectancies and increased education from the previous generation, "will enter later life with many healthy, productive years ahead" and "have the potential to become a social resource of unprecedented proportions by contributing to the civic life of communities" (Center for Health Communication, Harvard School of Public Health, 2004, pg. 8). Because research has shown a positive relationship between health and volunteerism for older adults, older adults have been encouraged to volunteer later in life for many years (Musick & Wilson, 2003; Chappell, 1999; Morrow-Howell, Hinterlong, Rozario, & Tang, 2003). New research not only promotes volunteering in older age for health reasons but also to help improve the welfare of America's citizens.

Due to government services and programs that are currently unfunded, an emphasis has been placed on encouraging older adults to help fill the needed gaps of service. Civic Ventures founder and president, Marc Freedman (2002) states that

older adults have the potential of helping American communities in the 21st century and finding great fulfillment and purpose by volunteering. The Gerontological Society of America (GSA) goes on to say that older Americans are “a growing yet largely untapped civic resource for responding to community needs through paid and unpaid work” (GSA, 2004, pg. 1). It seems that the baby boomers are an untapped population in terms of civic engagement. By highlighting the benefits of membership to potential members, studies of this nature could help the baby boomer population become more involved to better enjoy their older lives and help improve communities.

According to the socioemotional selectivity theory, advancing age is associated with purposive withdrawal to a progressively smaller number of intimate and emotionally rewarding, often family centered, supportive relationships. As a basic human requirement for healthy functioning, people need social interaction and social attachment, but older adults tend to experience a reduction in interaction stemming from a perception of limited time (Carstenson, Isaacowitz & Charles, 1999). Organizations that build social networks and foster social connectedness, leading to individuals that develop a shared responsibility for each other and their community, are likely to attract the interest of older adults (Henkin & Zapf, 2007).

Health Benefits

Hendryx, Ahern, Lovrich, and McCurdy (2002) found that active group participation enables individuals to achieve better access to health care. Through a survey study, the researchers used self-reported access to care as the dependent

variable and individual socio-demographic, community-level health sector, and social capital variables as the independent variables. Overall, their conclusion was that social capital plays a role in improving access to health care, showing consistency with the social capital role of making use of existing community resources and promoting accountability.

Social networks help people, particularly immigrants, make decisions about which health services to utilize, especially the initial contact with the service. This leads to the assertion that a person's behavior is affected by others in the social group through information and norms. Advertisements targeted in areas where health care services are not utilized would not only affect individual behavior but also has the potential to reach those in the network (Deri, 2005).

Poortinga (2005) concluded that social groups have contributed to an increase in people's self-reported health. In addition, people, especially older adults, receive physical and mental health benefits from social networks through social support. Social networks influence health promoting behaviors, but they can also influence potential health damaging behaviors such as tobacco or alcohol consumption, physical inactivity, dietary patterns, sexual practices, and illicit drug use, depending on the group's norms. Evidence shows that shared norms around negative behaviors can socially influence those in the group causing negative health consequences (Berkman & Glass, 2000). However, data from the Alameda County study shows that overall social network size is inversely related to risk-related behaviors, meaning

that health damaging behaviors are more prevalent among those who are socially disconnected (Berkman & Breslow, 1983).

Luoh and Herzog (2002) found that completing volunteer and paid work in old age is positively correlated with self-reported health and activities of daily living functions. This is consistent with the idea that staying active in old age promotes health. In addition, Cannuscio, Block, and Kawachi (2003) believe that the availability of social capital within communities will become an important aspect to successful aging. One example was a case study done in 1995 after a Chicago heat wave. Following the heat wave, those who lived alone and did not have social support had a much higher risk of death than those who were involved in clubs, churches, and/or support groups.

Social networks influence cognitive and emotional states in terms of self-esteem, social competence, self-efficacy, depression, and affect. People dealing with difficulties in life, such as depression, coping with abortion, smoking cessation and stress, if they have support, are better able to develop functional and adaptive coping styles to assist them through the difficult times. Strong evidence shows that people who are socially isolated are at increased risk of depression, particularly as they get older. A few studies, however, find that social networks can help decrease depressive symptoms, dependent on the adequacy of the social support within the social network (Berkman & Glass, 2000).

The social convoy model suggests that an individual travels through life surrounded by members of his/her cohort, who share experiences and life histories

and provide support to one another reciprocally over time. The convoy model of social relations offers a framework within which to consider how cultural or human capital influences the availability of social capital. Convoys represent an assembly of family and friends, who surround the individual and are available as resources in times of need. Convoys are thought to be dynamic and lifelong, changing in some ways, but remaining stable across time and situations. Convoys constitute a structure of social relationships yet still exist within a larger social context (Ajrouch, Blandon & Antonucci, 2005). Older adults, when experiencing stressful life transitions, rely on convoys from which they derive a basis for self-identity as well as emotional and instrumental support (Utz, Carr, Neese, & Wortman, 2002).

Large studies, as shown, have described how social groups positively affect communities and people's access to resources and overall health. By interviewing twenty members of a VFW post, this research seeks to understand individual perceptions of how organizational membership improves one's life and the lives of older adults in order to communicate how social connectedness can enhance the lives of inactive older adults.

Methods

National Veterans of Foreign Wars

The Veterans of Foreign Wars, along with its Auxiliaries, have approximately 2.4 million members in about 9,000 Posts in the United States. To be eligible for membership in the VFW, U.S. service members had to have earned an overseas campaign or expeditionary medal, are on active duty, are in the Reserves, or have been honorably discharged from the U.S. armed forces.

The organization started in 1899 when veterans of the Spanish-American War (1898) and the Philippine insurrection (1899-1902) started local organizations to help veterans returning from service who were wounded or sick, since no medical care or pensions were available at that time. The mission of the organization is to “honor the dead by helping the living.” To uphold this mission, the organization provides services for veterans, community service, and supports national security with a strong national defense. The organization prides itself on being a strong voice for veterans and a catalyst of change in improving veteran’s benefits (Veterans of Foreign Wars, 2007).

The Ladies’ Auxiliary is a subsidiary organization of the overall VFW and raises money for its own causes and events. Women, who are wives, widows, mothers, foster or stepmothers, grandmothers, daughters, granddaughters, foster and stepdaughters, sisters, half sisters, or foster and stepsisters of service members eligible for the VFW, may join the Ladies’ Auxiliary. In 2007, there were 616,439 members of the Ladies’ Auxiliary VFW. Similar to the VFW, it works to ensure that

America's veterans will be remembered and that those who need assistance get it. Members are eligible for insurance plans, cruise holidays, cancer grants, and a credit card. Some posts, including the focus for the study, are now starting Men's Auxiliaries to admit male family members of foreign war veterans and are run similar to Ladies' Auxiliaries (Ladies Auxiliary VFW, 2007).

Setting: Post 852

VFW Post 852 is located in a mid-size Midwestern city in Kansas and was chartered April 4, 1931. At that time, Post 852 was housed in a downtown location known as "The Hole," which was primarily a hang out for men. Members of Post 852 later bought land that included a cabin and a lake on the edge of town. As that was paid for, they bought other land in the area and built the building where Post 852 is currently located in 1965. The building is now where the organization is housed and is referred to as "the Post" or "upstairs." The current building is a circular, cement building with 3 doors and no windows. The organization runs a canteen or bar area for members to purchase drinks and food, which provides for socializing and fundraising. There is a unique musty odor that lingers as one walks in the door, and flags, pictures and other memorabilia adorn the walls. Upon walking into the building, there is the main office in the foyer leading to the rotunda. Off the rotunda are bathrooms, the Ladies' Auxiliary office, a door to the bar area, and a door to the ballroom. The bar area and the ballroom are connected by a game area with a pool table, shuffleboard table, side door, and a kitchen. There is a large storage closet off the ballroom and a back exit door.

Post 852 owns a large piece of land around the main building which includes a parking lot, dirt road, baseball field, caretaker's home, cabin, and pond. Part of the large field is used as a fundraising parking lot when events are held at a public park nearby. Baseball games with the American Legion are held at the baseball field, usually twice a year. The caretaker and his wife live in the caretaker's home. He is responsible for maintenance of the property, including mowing, shoveling, and security issues.

"The cabin" or "downstairs" is a small log cabin with a kitchen, fireplace, sitting area, and bar. There is a cabin committee that maintains the building, outhouse, and picnic area and is responsible for opening the cabin each Sunday. The cabin does not have running water, and members enjoy the ruggedness of the environment. Members spend Sunday mornings at the cabin enjoying breakfast, and each year the Vietnam Veteran Reunion takes place there. Other various social gatherings also take place at the cabin, usually in the summer. At the pond, members and their families can enjoy fishing off the dock. Each year geese gather at the pond, and members enjoy feeding the birds and taking pictures.

As of March 2007, there were a total of 477 members in VFW Post 852, a 15.12% decrease from the year prior. The Ladies' Auxiliary had 121 members, a 10% decrease from 2006. Members of the VFW, each year, elect numerous leadership positions including: Commander, Senior Vice, Junior Vice, Quartermaster, Adjutant, House Committee, and Trustees. The Commander oversees all committees and activities. The Senior Vice takes care of membership

activities and takes over when the Commander is unavailable. The Junior Vice is responsible for public relations. The Quartermaster handles financial issues including bookkeeping, payroll, and reporting. The Adjutant takes minutes at meetings. The House Committee manages the bar area, employees, and any issues that arise in the canteen. The Trustees ensure bookkeeping is accurate and up-to-date.

Researcher Access

Post 852 was chosen for research because of personal involvement with the organization, as an employee. Being immersed in the lives of members brought forth questions, many of which were asked in the interviews. Although casual conversation with members aided in understanding people's history with the organization, the interviews provided a time for focused discussion into the lives of organizational membership.

Since building social networks and social capital with key informants and participants is an important component of conducting qualitative studies (Blodgett, Boyer & Turk, 2005), being an employee provided a great opportunity to develop relationships with active members including those in leadership positions, allowing the researcher to identify the power hierarchy within the community and to connect with gatekeepers. This is often very time-consuming and requires a large amount of commitment by researchers to establish these types of relationships. In this instance, developing relationships with members began as a way to enjoy leisure time and

developed into a well-substantiated basis for research. These personal relationships helped elicit meaningful responses to the questions in the study.

Recruitment and Interview Process

Participants were recruited by initiating personal contact, word-of-mouth, and in a bi-monthly newsletter. Interviews were scheduled at individual homes or at the Post before opening hours or during a quiet time. Respondents signed an informed consent form, which stated there were no benefits or risks in participating. The entire interview was audio-taped with data collection taking between 9 minutes and 68 minutes (*Mean* = 27 minutes), depending on the individual's nature and interest in the topic. Once responses to questions reached saturation, the study concluded the interview process.

To complete the research, semi-structured, in-depth qualitative interviews were completed with twenty active participants in the VFW and Ladies Auxiliary. This research technique provided subjects with a mix of closed and open questions and allowed the interviewer to improvise (Knight, 2002). Table 1 outlines the interview questions used to guide the conversation. The method allowed the researcher to be flexible and establish analyses as ideas emerged and data was gathered, a principle of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2000).

Table 1. Interview Questions.

- Tell me about the VFW. (mission, goals, members)
- What made you decide to become a member?
- What made you become an active member?
- How has the organization changed over the years?
- What has helped maintain your interest in the organization?
- Throughout the years, has your reasons for being a member changed?
- What would be the reason you'd tell an interested person to join the organization?
- What do you feel membership has provided your life?
- Can you think of a time when you learned something at the VFW about community events/issues/information that you didn't know before?
- What do you think your role has been as a member of this organization?
- What activities are the most meaningful for you?
- What activities would you like to see more of?
- How would your life be different if you weren't a member here or if it were to close?
- Are you happy you became a member of the organization?
- What recommendations do you have for future generations of members in organizations?

What about getting older and being a member of an organization....

- Talk to me about getting older. Do you have any concerns?
- Does being involved in the organization alleviate any of these concerns?
- What effect has your retirement had on your ability to participate?
- Do you feel you are prepared for retirement/getting older?
- How do you think you compare to others your age?
- Would you consider yourself one who has aged "gracefully"?
- For future generations of older adults, would you recommend to them to stay active with old age?
- What do you feel you can/have contributed to the organization?
- What benefits are they for an older adult who joins the organization?
- Are there aspects of your life that have been highlighted/enhanced by being a member here?

Participant characteristics obtained: Date of Birth, Sex, Race, Years of Education, Marital Status & History, Occupational History, Spouse Occupational History, Children's Sex & Ages, Years of Membership, Years in the Service

Inclusion criteria were: being active in the organization (evidenced through being seen on a regular basis at the Post), being willing to participate, and being fifty years of age or older. Being active in the organization was an important component for the research, as all interviewees had substantial experience and insight into the subjective world at the VFW. Participants were chosen who were fifty years of age and older in order to limit the gathering of data to two cohorts, those who had seen service in World War II and those who had seen service during the Vietnam War. Since this research is primarily interested in the benefits older adults receive from group participation currently and in the near future, this was the focus for this research. Exclusion criteria was being unable to speak English, being hard of hearing, having major health concerns, or having any form of dementia.

Data Management

All records, including voice recordings, computerized and printed transcripts, and notes, were assigned a code number for each participant. Names and other personally identifying information have been stored separately from the actual data and will only be used to contact participants and distribute research summaries.

Quotes are listed without any identifying information in order to ensure anonymity of the participants, including age. Because the research was conducted with one social organization, it may be easy for people who know organization members to determine who was interviewed.

Analysis

Sessions were transcribed verbatim. A codebook was created based on initial assessment of the transcripts and the interview guide. Grounded theory methodology was used to guide research and data analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). As Charmaz (2002) states, “Researchers cannot know exactly what the most significant social and psychological processes are in particular settings, so they start with areas of interest to them and form preliminary interviewing questions to open up those areas” (pg. 675).

Initial coding organized the information into two categories, organization and aging. The qualitative software program, NVivo (Gibbs, 2002), was used to categorize information into more concrete topics, which were then individually analyzed to organize the results of the study. This program also retrieved respondents’ expressions that were repetitive throughout the interviews, allowing for more credible and trustworthy evidence of themes and patterns (Kelle, 2004).

Sample Characteristics

Twenty active participants in the VFW/Auxiliary participated in the study, with an average age of 66.5 (age range = 50-89). There were eight women, and twelve were men (two World War II veterans, six Vietnam veterans, three in smaller overseas conflicts such as Cuba, and one Saudi Arabia/Desert Storm veteran). Nineteen of the twenty participants (95%) identified themselves as White or Caucasian, and one participant was Native American. The percentage of white persons in the state of Kansas veteran population is 91% (U.S. Census Bureau,

2000). Thus, the race/ethnicity of the participants is similar to the veteran population in Kansas from which VFW membership is drawn.

The average education level for the participants was 13.4 years of education. Ten percent of the participants reported receiving an eighth grade education, over half (55%) reported having graduated high school, 10% had some college credit, and 25% graduated college. Marital status differed greatly for the participants. All of the participants had been married at some point in their life. Eleven participants had experienced a divorce at least once, and seven were widows or widowers at least once. Ninety percent of the participants had children, and the average number of children was 2.65. Most of the participants (55%) had three or four children. Twenty five percent had one or two children, 10% had no children, and 10% had five or more children. Years of membership also greatly differed. The average length of membership was 47.4 years for all twenty participants, with the range being from less than one year to over 59 years of membership. Over half the participants (55%) had been members for over twenty years, twenty five percent between one and five years, and twenty percent between five and ten years. See Table 2 for an overview of the sample characteristics.

Table 2: VFW Participant Sample Characteristics

Socio-demographic Characteristics		
% (n)		
Gender	Female	40.0% (8)
	Male	60.0% (12)
Highest Educational Degree	Bachelors or Masters Degree	25.0% (5)
	Some college credit	10.0% (2)
	High School Diploma or Equivalent	55.0% (11)
	8 th grade or less	10.0% (2)
Race/Ethnicity	White/Caucasian	95.0% (19)
	American Indian/Native American	5.0% (1)
Marital Status (#’s will not equal 100% because of overlap)	Have been married	100.0% (20)
	Have been divorced	55.0% (11)
	Have been widowed	35.0% (7)
# of Children	0	10.0% (2)
	1-2	25.0% (5)
	3-4	55.0% (11)
	5 or more	10.0% (2)
Years of Membership	1-5	25.0% (5)
	10-20	20.0% (4)
	Over 20	55.0% (11)

Results

Previous research in the areas of social capital and aging has not highlighted the individual benefits, and most of the research is quantitative in nature. This research hones in on participants' personal experiences to produce an understanding of why they actively participate in the social organization.

Members joined the organization for many reasons, and people participate in and enjoy various activities that take place at the VFW. Analysis of the interview data revealed five areas highlighting the benefits of membership: mental health and well-being, social comparison and influence, safety and security, social support, and social engagement. Finally, conflict within the Post will be discussed, as this was often discussed as a large part of what drives people to continue active participation or lose interest.

Becoming a Member

Questions were asked to understand how members first became involved in the organization. This is discussed as it presents the point of entry into the organization. Participants at the VFW first joined the organization as a result of various people and occurrences.

Twelve people (60%) mentioned that people in their lives first encouraged them to join the organization. Three women joined because their husband was involved, three because of a friend, and one each for a wife, uncle, or sister. Three joined with a group of friends. The three people who joined for their husband wanted to be with their spouse and support his desire to be around other veterans.

Joining for a friend was for social reasons or because they were simply talked into it. The man who joined for his wife wanted to be a part of a social environment she enjoyed. The man who joined because of encouragement from his uncle was a Vietnam veteran and joined at that time because he did not get harassed like many other Vietnam veterans. The woman whose sister helped her join was encouraged to go in for a free meal on a Family Day. Those who joined with a group did so with friends who were veterans because they thought it would be a good idea to be around older veterans.

Other reasons participants joined varied. Three joined at a transitional period in their lives, two as a result of a death of a spouse and one because of a divorce. The first quote came from a woman explaining her situation as a newly divorced woman, and the second quote was from a man who was recently widowed.

I wanted to join, so I had a social outlet. Because I was a single woman, and I was late '50's, and I didn't feel good going into a regular bar by myself. And I thought this was some place I could go where it would be comfortable.

Being I'm single, I need some place to go and find people my age to visit with. This and the American Legion and the Eagles too. I joined within a month. I just figured they all have different events, and you can go one place or another four or five nights a week, something going on. Better than sitting home alone.

One person joined strictly for social justice reasons. He had experienced a negative episode visiting a relative who was a veteran in the Veterans Affairs (VA) hospital and felt obligated to help protect the rights of all veterans.

And from that day forward, I decided what I got and where I was at, I was going to do what I could do to make sure our old vets were taken care of as best I could. And that's what drove me initially.

One person joined after getting out of the service in order to receive GI Bill funding to go to college. He needed a sponsor so joined the VFW. Another joined because he felt it was an organization he was proud of and found it an honor to be a member.

One person was hired as a bartender and soon discovered he was eligible for membership. He had not known what the VFW was, nor that he could become a member. Finally, a man joined in order to have a place to drink on Sundays. When he first joined, social clubs were the only places allowed to serve alcohol on a Sunday.

Activity at Post 852

VFW Post 852 opens its doors to members at 3:00pm Monday through Friday, 1:00pm on Saturday, and 2:00pm on Sunday. Though there are over 500 actual members of VFW & Auxiliary Post 852, approximately 30-40 members regularly attend functions in a given month. The first members that enter the Post, on most days usually around 3:00pm, are usually older members. These members come in to drink a soda (a few drink a beer) and talk with friends around a table. At times, people play shuffleboard, listen to music, or watch the television. A couple hours later, the older crowd heads home, avoiding driving in the dark. Monday through Thursday, there is a group of people who arrive between 6:00 and 8:00pm. These members usually sit at the bar by themselves or in small groups, drinking beer and discussing various matters. On special occasions during the week, such as a

university basketball game, a dinner, a meeting night, or holidays, more members tend to enter the building, usually having a few alcoholic beverages, enjoying the activity taking place, and talking with other members.

Weekends around the Post generate the most participation from members. Each Friday, one of the members operates the karaoke machine, starting around 7:30pm. At first, most of the participants are older members, who enjoy singing and listening to older country songs. As the night progresses, younger members straggle in often livening up the crowd and singing more contemporary rock-and-roll and country pieces. Karaoke is a big hit among most active members of the Post. Friday and Saturday evenings are also when most dinners are held, raising money for various charitable intents. There are other special events that sometimes take place on the weekends at the Post in the ballroom including wedding/anniversary/birthday receptions, district meetings, patriotic/veteran celebrations, bands/dancing, and community service, bringing in more members than on a typical evening at the Post.

When asked what activities were the most enjoyable for members, a variety of answers were given from the members who were interviewed. Five members enjoyed the dances that were once held on Sunday evenings and more often in the past. Five people especially enjoyed the dinners. Four members stated that karaoke was their favorite activity. Two people, each, enjoyed fundraisers, Memorial Day activities, Family Days with children, and simply drinking. Finally, community service activities, parties, baseball games, troops support activities, the Vietnam Veteran Reunion, and monthly meetings were mentioned, each by one person.

Overall, people value the variety of activities taking place at the Post, keeping them interested and active. The members who are active enjoy numerous benefits of membership. Five areas were highlighted in the interviews.

Benefit #1: Mental Health & Well-Being

Mortality, cardiovascular disease, stroke, and infectious diseases, all are positively influenced by increased social networks. Positive effects have also been associated with mental health concerns and social networks. Social networks are particularly important, given their observed associations in numerous studies with well-being outcomes, in general, and with morale (Berkman & Glass, 2000). This project has found that participants' well-being was affected by participating in the organization, particularly in terms of mental health outcomes.

Being that many of the active participants are veterans who have experienced war, many have difficult times when remembering the events of war. Being in a social atmosphere with other veterans allows them to share these stories that often times cause them anxiety throughout their lives, once they feel compelled to do so. One woman spoke of her husband who was in World War II.

And he never talked about it until now. Now he's talking about it a lot. A lot. (What caused the change?) Old age, I think. I think a lot of times when people get older they kinda reminisce about their younger days. When they come back, we don't talk about it.

Others deal with mental disorders such as Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), an anxiety disorder that occurs following the experience or witnessing of a traumatic event. The event is usually life-threatening, involving things like military

combat. Most survivors of these events return to normal given a little time.

However, some people will have stress reactions that do not go away on their own, or may even get worse over time. These individuals may develop PTSD (National Center for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, 2007). Being around people who understand and possibly experience the disorder helps people cope.

That's what's helped me a lot since I had all these problems, PTSD and all that. I started having nightmares and coming here and being around the veterans makes me feel I'm close to everybody and don't have to worry about nightmares and all that stuff.

People find that being around others helps keep the mind mentally sharp and focused on something. A number of people mentioned others who have had difficulties because they were not socially engaged.

I've watched people over the years retire from where I worked. The ones that had, gardening and did do work, had activities, they did good. Kept on going, most of them. The ones that didn't, went out there and sit and watch TV, maybe mowed their lawn, but didn't have any interests. A lot of them didn't last too long or they'd have mental problems and depression, different things. A lot of them didn't last that long.

I think any kind of social activity is very good for people. It keeps new ideas in their heads, and makes 'em. If you have to converse with people, then you're not gonna be within your own little world and look at your husband and just grunt cause they know what you're talking about. So it's just keeps your mind a little more mentally capable than it would be if you just crocheted and watched TV all day long.

Some members find that being a part of the organization assists in building self-esteem. They feel good about themselves and the work they do. The members

who stated as such were very active participants in the organization, having taken on extensive leadership positions.

I'd say that it's been a boost to my self-esteem to get the respect from the fellow members. But you know you just don't find that in the general public. So that's one of the biggest assets of being a member.

The organization also provides spiritual benefits to members. Being around the organization allows people to experience events or situations that positively affect their lives.

You come home feeling really good, and lots of times, I'm kinda a spiritual person, and lots of times I have an experience in an evening that I just knew it was meant to be. Just to be, and it gives you a good feeling. And these people that sit at home all the time, they don't experience that.

Others simply feel that the organization provides for them spiritually more than anything else.

Many members indicate the organization allows them to combat loneliness. People enjoy being around others, and going to the Post allows them to meet different people and get their mind thinking about something besides being home alone. Many people, who are single due to divorce or widowhood, go to the organization at least once a day or week to be around others. It is often the only place they go to socialize.

Benefit #2: Social Influence & Comparison

Social networks can influence people's attitudes and behavior. With the VFW/Auxiliary members, many of them learned from older members positive and negative behaviors associated with getting older. In many ways, the older adults

become role models for younger generations. Many saw older members who have good health and adjusted their life based on the experiences.

It basically shows me that you can live to be quite elderly if you basically take care of yourself. I've got to learn that lesson from him cause he dieted and is doing a lot better than a few years ago. And several others. As they pass on, it also reminds you of mortality. That you're not going to live forever.

You kinda see where you might be and what you might want to improve yourself to not get so pompy.

Others take note of attitudes and determine how they want to be perceived as an older adult. They are able to see how those older than themselves are perceived and the relationships they develop. As they get older, they can determine what types of behaviors will help them achieve the lifestyle they want.

But I can see from the seniors that are ahead of us in this organization an example of what to expect. I could be a grouchy old man or a happy old guy. You know, which one would you rather be around? When you're old and gray, who's gonna come and visit? Just being around older people, you notice that it kinda puts something in your mind as good or bad examples, and you adjust accordingly in your life.

Some see the financial situations of others and base personal decisions on these relations.

That's what I decided- I've got to get out of there and start saving my money cause I know people that would come in there and they didn't have hardly enough money to buy but just a couple of beers.

In general, there is a great respect for older members in the organization.

People enjoy the opportunity for intergenerational relations and benefit greatly from the interactions.

I think I've actually really enjoyed it cause I think when I joined, I was like in the middle, one of the younger ones in there. My kids used to call it the old folks home. And that's probably true. It was. Most of them was 10-20 years older than I was. Now it's the other way around, and I like that. I enjoy being with the older people and hearing their stories.

With intergenerational relationships, benefits can also go the other way.

Older adults' behavior and attitude can be influenced from being around a younger population.

And I saw them take a little of their vitality from the younger people there, and they became active. And I think it kinda helped their life just because they had something else to do other than sit at home and complain about their aches and pains.

Now the younger friends that I'm getting to know, they bring a little vitality back in my life. And they make me think, 'gosh, I remember when I was that enthusiastic and that energetic.' And it kinda helps me think, 'I'm not as old as my numbers tell me.'

Another type of social influence people experience in being around members of an organization is social comparison. Previous research shows that people in groups alter behaviors and attitudes in order to conform to group dynamics (Marsden & Friedkin, 1994). Members in the VFW/Auxiliary compare themselves to others to determine how they measure up. They either consciously or subconsciously take note of those around them. Some confirm personal behaviors by seeing others unconstructive behavior.

Well, I think I'm in a lot better shape than most of them, if you want to know the truth. I get compliments all the time. People don't think I'm old. They don't treat me as old. Some of these women go down there, and they don't comb their hair. They look old, and some of them are not. They're 10-15 years younger than I am. I try to take care of myself. I try to look nice when I go somewhere.

People mostly focus on health or finances when comparing themselves to others, often stating something they overcame to get them where they are. Instead of focusing on how a negative event made them worse off, they know that others experience similar situations. Then, they look at their lives as one who has been successful in spite of the negative event.

Oh my health is good except for my pacemaker. But as far as material things, compared to other people, I think I am way ahead of a lot of people of my age for what I've done. Everything I got is paid for. I've got enough money in savings. I've got enough for us to live on.

For a man whose had a heart attack, I don't think I'm doing too bad. I'm hanging in there.

I've done well. With what little or as much as I list in that divorce, and the rest of it.

Similar to Poortinga's (2005) study that found social group members to have higher self-reported health than others, many in the VFW/Auxiliary found their health to be above average in comparison to others.

For most people my age, I think I'm doing above average. My health right now is pretty good.

I think I'm healthier than a lot of people my age.

Some people are less healthier than I am. That's unfortunate. My health is so good.

Some see how they stick out from the crowd and find personal characteristics that portray who they are to others in the organization.

I think sometimes I'm a little bit crazier than some other people cause of some of the stuff I like to do. I'll stay up half the night, sleep an

hour and go do something. A lot of people said, 'if I did that, I'd still be sleeping and not getting anything done.'

I think I'm pretty well-focused compared to lot of people my age. I think having my children so young helped me grow up quicker kinda. But young enough to still have fun and still focus and still be able to think about what I want for the future. I don't see retirement as the end of your life. I see it as the beginning of a new one. So I think maybe I've got a different perspective than a lot of people do at that age.

Some people, when I talk to other people, say I don't act my age. That could be. I don't know. I guess maybe I'm a little more outgoing than some people my age. Let's put it that way.

Overall, being around others regularly through the social organization does socially influence people's understanding of themselves in society. They are both positively and negatively influenced by older and younger members, and norms and values do develop as a function of these connections, as communicated in the social network theory. As demonstrated in the next section, people find safety and security in many of the norms that develop by being a member in the organization.

Benefit #3: Safety & Security

Eighteen of the twenty participants in the study mentioned safety and/or security as a reason for being active in the organization. People, especially as they grow older, find comfort in going to a place knowing they are welcome and knowing what to expect.

It's a safe place.

I'm just secure being a member down there. Security, I guess. We both. I don't know how to explain it. But I'm proud to be a life member. And so is he (husband).

Women find the organization to be a place where they can enjoy themselves in a safe environment. Single women and older women are some examples of people who particularly benefit from membership in the organization. Being at the club allows women to take part in social activities without feeling threatened or as if they are out looking for a boyfriend or husband.

I started going there with her (a friend) once in awhile. I wanted an outlet as a female, as a mother. Some place to go in and have a drink and socialize. And I wasn't into bars. And here's a place you can go where you'll be welcomed, and you'll feel safe. It's not like a meat market thing.

If you want to go in and have a quiet drink, soda pop, whatever. I think women feel like they can come here and be part of a group and not be pressured or bothered by some guy. It's not just a bar.

It was a nice group of people, and it was comfortable. And they don't discriminate about a woman coming in by herself and make jokes about an older woman coming into a bar. That just make you feel welcome, make you feel comfortable, and that's important.

As people get older, their social networks tend to shrink, and people tend to seek out meaningful relationships and situations. This is the concept of socioemotional selectivity theory. Members of the VFW/Auxiliary brought up this very phenomenon, in which the organization is one of their only social outlets. They continue being a member and being active because they are comfortable and know they will enjoy themselves coming to the VFW. They do not waste their time going other places.

Cause I think about single guys or an old married couple. If they didn't have the VFW to go to, they probably wouldn't go anywhere. And if you join an organization that you've been in for years, you'll

always feel welcome there. And you'll go back and feel comfortable there. Once you join the VFW, you can be a member for life.

I'm going to tell you upfront. This is the only place I go. I haven't been in a bar for so long. I couldn't tell you. I couldn't even begin to tell you how long it's been. It's been a long time.

I don't really know (what they would do if not a member) because this organization has been my organization for a long time. It's about the only place I go really. I used to go to different bars and things, but I don't do that anymore.

Many men appreciate the organization because they do not have to worry about trouble or defending themselves. They know it's a friendly environment and know that everyone who walks through the door is either a member or is family or a friend of a member. This gives the members a sense of security knowing what to expect when they go out.

It's just a good atmosphere. You don't have trouble up here, and I think it's an excellent place, especially for older people.

It's a nice place to go to a place and get up and go to the bathroom and leave your girlfriend sitting there and not have to worry about 6 cowboys hitting on her when you come back. And that's one thing that service clubs tend to offer. They tend to take care of themselves.

These are a good bunch of people here. Watching your back? I've been to some bars when you have to put your back against the wall. You don't know who's coming in. And we know who's coming in here.

Finally, many communities continue to have VFW clubs, and being a member of one VFW permits members to enter other VFW clubs. This is important to people who travel for business or leisure and want to continue to have a social outlet in a secure environment.

During my time in the service, when I was out on duty some place, cause I was sent a lot of times on special operations, special duties, I would frequent service clubs. Whether it be an Am Vets or a VAB hall or a Legion or a VFW. I'd frequent these things. Military people just like to be around military people. For me, it's the discipline. It's the work ethic.

Basically I worked in (another town) and basically worked there for 3 years. So distance made it more difficult. So I went to the VFW there several times. You get in these little towns in the county seat, you can find the VFW. That's probably one of the reasons I kept membership too.

Benefit #4: Social Support

In terms of social support, members of the VFW/Auxiliary mentioned numerous related benefits. Social support is typically divided into subtypes, including emotional, instrumental, and informational (House, 1981). According to these standards, participants in the study most often found emotional support, and some found instrumental and informational support.

Friendship was a common theme of emotional support mentioned during the interviews. Twelve participants mentioned the friendships they have developed as a result of being a member and believe the organization provides lifelong friends or even a family away from home.

I just tell 'em (interested people) how much fun we have and what a family. It's like a family down there. It's just a great organization. We love going down there.

I've met a lot of new friends, and some of them I would call lifetime close friends.

I've made a new friend who I consider a real, good friend. He's been real good to me. Good to my family. Cause I haven't had a friend since my best friend died.

I enjoy the friendships I've made. I think a lot of them will be lifetime friends.

VFW's a close knit organization. I think they tend to be more of a family type atmosphere and help families more.

Common terms used by the participants were camaraderie or comradeship.

In fact, nine of the twenty participants used these specific terms to describe how they personally benefited from membership. Camaraderie is defined as, “a spirit of friendly good-fellowship” (Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary, 2006, np).

Comradeship comes from the word comrade, which is defined as, “an intimate friend or associate (Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary, 2006, np). This term indicates a bond beyond a normal friendship. People who feel a sense of camaraderie truly find comfort and closeness from those around them and feel empowered by being a member of a unified group. Members of the VFW used the word when answering numerous questions.

(What has helped maintain your interest in the organization?) The camaraderie.

(Speaking about how to convince current generations to join) They need to have a Membership Night, and invite the veterans that don't belong to come in and talk to 'em about what goes on and what they wanna do and the comradeship that they can have by belonging with people that have been in the service rather than going out on a Saturday night with a people that have never been in the service and don't have a clue what they've been through.

(What do you feel membership has provided your life?) Comradeship. Made new friends.

(Speaking about benefits of membership) You basically have the camaraderie with the other people that have been there, done that.

(What benefits are there for an older adult who joins?) Camaraderie. The older you get, the more you appreciate it.

(What has helped maintain your interest in the organization?) I enjoyed the people- the camaraderie.

(What might be a reason you'd tell an interested person to join?) The camaraderie first. Nobody understands a vet like a fellow vet. (How convince younger people of the benefits?) They will find the camaraderie to be better than the average place.

A number of people mentioned the importance of being around others who understand their situation and sympathize or empathize with personal situations, which is mentioned when speaking of camaraderie. In this particular organization, being it is a veterans' organization, members often utilize others members to speak about war-related experiences. This type of support is often provided by close contacts but can be more general.

It's just the vets need some place to go. They need a place to go to be with people like them. And they talk about it. They talk about this war and that war, the other war. And that's what a lot of them talk about more, the older ones.

But it's something to do. Need somebody to talk to that's related to what you went through. They're there. They're supposed to be there to help you.

I think it's provided my life with a, first of all, a place to go where people think somewhat like thoughts. I mean, it's veterans. They're all wars. People die. But all and all, I think you have, as a veteran, you've been over there and come back. And you're alive. And if you're not all maimed up and stuff, you have a certain appreciation of things that others don't.

In addition to this, some mentioned the importance of being around others in their age group. They find that there are generational commonalties that are important

when seeking social support. This concept relates to the social convoy model, where individuals support one another as they go through life surrounded by others in their cohort (Ajrouch, Blandon & Antonucci, 2005).

And I think it's the age group. It's the era of people. We were raised a little different than the modern ones are being raised. And we have a lot in common.

As stated earlier, people sometimes join the organization because they are going through a transitional period of life. In addition, people going through transitional stages as a result of divorce, death, retirement, or a new care giving role find that being a member of the organization provides them with some of the social support they need. It provides them a comfortable atmosphere where they can cope with the transition amongst others, many of whom have dealt with similar situations.

I was going through a divorce when I went over there. And I really made some good friendships when I went there.

I really wasn't too active until I retired. I had more time. When I was working, I didn't have time.

Without a wife, and I had to put my dog to sleep 6 weeks ago, I'm home alone. I'm just kinda lonely now, so I'm out looking around. You don't even need a date to go to these things. You just go there without. Just go yourself.

Because he (husband) had passed away, and I was still working at that time. I was in a grievous group, and I thought, 'this isn't...'. And I thought, 'I come to a place like this and am with a lot of other people too.'

It's hard right now because he's had so many things wrong the last couple of years that I've had to kind of take care of him. And that's hard of old people when they have to take care of one or the other. I like being involved with the organization.

Instrumentally, some members find that organizational membership is a source of support for getting tangible needs. In many circumstances, members help other members who are unable to drive get to medical appointments at the VA hospitals. There are two VA hospitals in the area, but they are not located in town and require highway driving. Two of the members specifically mentioned driving people to appointments on a regular basis. Since those interviewed were all active and able to drive themselves, some simply mentioned that they knew assistance would be available if needed.

If I was to go out of town by myself, which I gone to my daughter's by myself. Driven back there and home. If I broke down, I wouldn't hesitate the call the VFW. Somebody would come and help me. I know. That's just the way it is. Everybody helps everybody.

Others find the caring nature of members to be helpful in ensuring older adults are doing all right. When people have a regular social network, others are more apt to be concerned about their safety and well-being and willing to help out when something is out of the ordinary.

And it gives them that social network if they don't show up. Somebody might say, 'ok, I wonder how come Joe and Susy aren't here and maybe they're sick?' Especially if their kids are long distance or they don't have many close family relatives. They might call you, and you've fallen down and can't get up kind of thing. So I think there's good social contacts for that kind of thing.

Again, being a veterans' organization, many members discussed how the organization has helped them receive governmental benefits as a result of being a veteran. Many received assistance getting connected with the VA health system to get health care and prescription drugs.

VFW's a good organization. They can get you VA help.

The VFW helps you get your medicines through the VA. There's an office, and you can go in there, and a man there's supposed to help us out if you need, got problems, can't get your things straightened out.

Members also stated the importance of the VFW in ensuring veterans receive the government benefits they deserve. They appreciate the VFW's role in legislative and government affairs.

The VFW helps us in a lot of ways in our medicines. If it wasn't for the VFW, the government would cut out our medicines. They go by the membership. It's in the VFW.

(Why should people join?) Cause it's the right thing to do. It's absolutely the right thing to do. Strength in numbers. You know, every day we draw a breath, they take away another benefit from the Veterans.

Finally, members talked about informational support given and received about community events or pertinent legislative activity. A lot of people were not able to mention specific information they received, but overall, most members felt they did know what was going on in the community, and that the VFW would provide any facts they might need.

You know of what's going on in the community by coming up here because they keep posting bulletins and letting us know what's going on, like with the legislature. You know, things we need to get involved in and help the guys.

Benefit #5: Social Engagement

Social engagement is the performance of leisure or productive activities within the context of friendship, kinship, and organizational roles. Almost all people interviewed mentioned the importance of the organization being a source of activity

for them. Social networks that develop from social organizations define and reinforce meaningful social roles that provide a sense of value, belonging and attachment. Organizations provide people the opportunity to get together with friends, attend social functions, and participate in leadership or social roles. People develop a sense of meaning and belonging by taking part in activities, and social engagement and participation are linked to the maintenance of cognitive function and reductions in mortality (Berkman & Glass, 2000).

Many people simply mentioned that the VFW was a place to go and something to do. Many older adults have families who are very busy or live far away and friends who are sick or have passed away. Often times, due to health concerns, having a job or volunteer work that requires a lot of movement or time is not possible. Therefore, being a member in the organization provides them a place to go to avoid sitting home alone all day or only going out to see the doctor. Even for those with active lives, they desire a place to go where they can relax and socialize without having to worry about other obligations.

It was just nice to have something to do and spend some time where you get to know something. A place to go where you could meet people. It's some place to go. Something to do.

So it gives me a place to go.

I got tired of sitting around the house all day doing nothing or eating. To socialize. That's part of my problem- I've got to get out and socialize more. I used to be a recluse, and that's good for nobody.

I know I gotta have something to do when I get out of the bed in the morning. People need to get out. They need to have their own friends on both sides of the coin.

But we do enjoy going down there and having fun.

People value the activities that take place, both for social reasons as well as personal accomplishment. The people are what make the VFW strong, so in order for activities to be successful, someone must take charge of organizing the event and seeing it goes smoothly. There are a number of activities that take place or could take place at the VFW for people to enjoy.

And we also have fun. We have karaoke on Friday or Saturday nights, and everybody just sings and acts crazy. There's no seriousness to it. We have a Christmas party, which is real fun. And all our dinners are fun because we make it a social event and we try to have something following dinner. We have bands that come in and play for us, and we dance. You meet a lot of people.

You've got a place to advertise. You've got this place (Post) up here. You've got the cabin. You've got the lake down there. They can fish if they're a member and their kids. I mean, you've got something that they want.

As you get older, you don't want to sit around the house all the time like I do. Out there, people and the auxiliary have good things like dinners and breakfasts and they keep people involved by bringing in things to attract people's attention. And that makes it good as you get older.

The organization particularly caters to older adults. Many of the members pointed out that being involved in the organization helps older adults feel young and active. Staying active helps people avoid thinking about the negatives of growing older, and keeps them from focusing only on health detriments.

I think if you're more active as you get older with people your own age that are active, absolutely it's better. I think they give you a lot less concerns about getting older.

I've got something to do. That keeps me young. I think if you've got something to do and a place to go, it keeps you young.

I think it keeps you active. Better than being a couch potato. We're up and going more than we would be if we didn't belong down there.

Sure, in the afternoon, I get visit with the old-timers, and I come home. Instead of sit here all the time. Sure, it's a good place to go visit if you want to. It's helped me because if you sit down, then you're more or less done. If you keep going, well, I can go out there and visit around with people and do things.

And I think it kinda helped their life just because they had something to do other than sit at home and complain about their aches and pains, and that sorta thing.

Some older members have been members for over fifty years, and others become members later in life, often during or after a major life transition. Either way, members enjoy the social engagement benefits.

I think it's a great thing for older members because they can come here and just sit and visit. They can come here and play shuffleboard. They don't sit at home. They're not by their self. There's always someone here to talk to. Even a new member, if they walk in the door, people will say, 'Hi! How are you today?' And really not know 'em, but they get acquainted real quick.

One member brought up a good point about members ability to entertain in their own homes. As people grow older, many of them move into smaller living situations, thus are unable to have guests visit them comfortably, or they find the work associated with having guests overwhelming. Having the VFW available allows older members to entertain with the use of the ballroom or be entertained at a VFW function.

Especially the older members, I think they've got some place where they can all go cause they've probably moved to smaller apartments

and stuff, so they can't really entertain in their own home very easily or choose not to because it's overwhelming to do the extra things like cleaning and cooking and stuff. I think it's a good social activity for them.

Not only do members find the social activities personally rewarding, they also value the community service and charitable giving aspects of being a member. People take pride in the assistance they provide personally as well as the overall contribution of the organization, although many are concerned with the lack of participation. Members find it rewarding to put time and money into an organization that provides assistance to those in need. The Ladies' Auxiliary is especially focused on this and encourages all members to participate. In particular, they provide cancer insurance to members through fundraisers, raise money for cancer research, grant high school scholarships, assist veterans and their families who are in need, help out veteran's hospitals, and give to community organizations like shelter and food banks. The Auxiliary also assists the VFW with funds when in need.

I feel good about the organization, all the donations they've made and the good they've done for the country.

We are an organization that has fundraisers to sponsor scholarships, help veterans that are in trouble getting information, as necessary for their success after their service. We support each other as well as the community.

Numerous members also discussed supporting the troops, taking care of veterans, and overall patriotism as being an important component of membership in the organization. People are concerned with the welfare of the troops and want to avoid veterans coming home to an unsupportive environment similar to what

occurred with Vietnam veterans. Therefore, they are willing to spend their time assisting in efforts to assist troops and promote patriotism.

I think it's important we support our troops, regardless of how you feel about any particular war that's been fought. I think we owe them our gratitude and thanks and help whenever we can do that. Troops support is probably one of the most important for me.

I'm a believer in the service people that come home. They're trying to protect their freedom. I mean, that's where it's at. I'm very interested in that, and I will support them.

One member, in particular, mentioned that her life has been enhanced by being a member because she has learned to appreciate the work of the military and its service members. Others also find membership to help them feel closer to family members who were in the service and value taking part in Memorial Day activities and Flag Day to honor those who have served.

I think it made me very aware. I mean, I was aware of the service. I was aware of our guys. I didn't think about what they really do for us and how they have kept us free. And now, I take a different look at the whole aspect of the service, of the military, and what they really do and what they're up against. And how they have to fight for everything they get. And so, I think it's made me a much better person because I've understood now what goes on back there that you don't think about.

Another member had been greatly impacted by the events of being in a war. Following the interview, he communicated that he did not fully state the importance of the organization in his life while he was answering questions. He stated that he was a member of the organization because he felt he was honoring those who have died and those who have served in war with each day that he is a member. He was

willing to do anything for the organization, as his entire life had been shaken by the events of war.

Overall, membership in the organization provides members a source of activity, being as simple as “something to do” and as complex as honoring fellow soldiers. Members do benefit from being socially engaged with others on a regular basis. During the interviews, however, people did not only mention the bright side of membership in the organization. They also focused a great deal on the turmoil that occurs at the Post.

Conflict

Conflict plays a large role for those involved in the organization. Though none of the standard interview questions specifically addressed difficulties at the Post, sixteen of the twenty interviewees discussed conflict within the organization as they were answering questions. This led to numerous discussions about the types of disputes that arise and how this affects organizational membership.

The most prominent topic involving conflict dealt with leadership in the organization. It became clear that current leaders often dictate the environment at the VFW, and members respond both positively and negatively to leaders. Each year elections are held in April to determine leadership for the year. The time leading up to the elections is often quite tense, as potential leaders begin campaigning and members anticipate what changes will take place with new leadership, with the positions of Commander and Ladies Auxiliary President being the most prominent positions that affect the environment. Once leaders are established, people decide

whether or not to support the new leaders by either staying involved, becoming involved, or ceasing involvement. Some leaders take the hands-off approach and allow the Post to function, only intervening when problems arise. Other leaders look to instigate change upon taking office and lobby members to make various changes. Some leaders work extremely hard and are involved in all activities, and others rarely participate. Some leaders last the entire year, others resign, and some are forced to leave. It seems that, regardless of whom the leaders are, arguments always arise during the year related to leadership in the Post.

Another common concern noted by numerous participants dealt with the reception Vietnam veterans received when they returned from overseas. Many members explained that the VFW did not support Vietnam veterans and did not make them feel welcome in the club. When Vietnam veterans returned home from war, the VFW organization and individual posts had a difficult time accepting them as members for numerous reasons including that the Vietnam War was not officially considered a war. Not only did many in the country shun them, their fellow veterans also did in some circumstances. Therefore, many Vietnam veterans and other supporters did not join the organization and those who did have continued to be resentful of the treatment the Vietnam veterans received when they returned home.

Some of the participants noted that some of the current members who are Vietnam veterans decided to become active in the organization in order to make Iraqi veterans feel welcome in the club. They did not want the new generation of veterans

to feel alienated from their peers as they did when they returned home. Nonetheless, the unfortunate event remains on the minds of members.

A number of members discussed tension related to personal differences. People described a number of issues related to personal conflicts that caused them anxiety and stress, and it was often referred to as bickering. People explained that every club or organization experiences these types of quarrels which many believe stems from power struggles or jealousy between members.

A concern often discussed in the club had to do with money and finances, and, more specifically, theft. People often accuse other members of theft in the organization, and since reporting and bookkeeping is often difficult in the organization, it is nearly impossible to prove anyone stole money. Because there is never any resolve to these instances, members continue to discuss theft in the organization and hold resentment towards alleged thieves.

Some older members expressed their disgust at the lack of work or laziness of current members. They feel that, when they were young and vital, work was always done before play, and that many people contributed to the success of the organization. They take pride in the fact that members built the current structure the Post is housed in and always kept up with needed improvements. They now feel that current members do not work hard enough at the Post to show appreciation for the organization.

A number of participants spoke of the separation of members in various cliques, which causes conflict between groups. In this club, groups were divided

between those who enjoyed going to the cabin and those who did not. This separation has led to disagreements and purposeful avoidance of those in other groups, which has added to the overall decreased involvement in post activities.

In addition, a few members mentioned VFW/Auxiliary relations, people being “free loaders,” a loss of focus from the mission of the organization, disagreements between couples, and quarrels with employees as other sources of dissention in the organization. In some circumstances, conflict led to members discontinuing their active membership in the organization. From this group of participants, three of them mentioned such a phenomenon, whereas they find it necessary to stop going into the organization for various reasons. As stated above, a change of leadership often creates tension within the club, and this is often when active members decide whether or not to continue being active. For the three members who decided to stop being active, they did so because a change of leadership led to events that made them feel the environment was not hospitable.

On the other hand, a couple of participants discussed that being an active member has enhanced their ability to resolve conflicts. One person found that being around such a diverse group of people led to disagreements that do not occur in other groups, such as a work organization where people act and think alike, and that experiencing conflict in the organization has helped them learn to resolve disagreements in other life activities more easily. Though most participants found conflict to be a negative aspect of membership, added benefits may be present.

Discussion

Building social capital and having social support are important, and social group participation is one way to gain both. Social group participation is linked with health benefits in many ways. Utilizing existing resources, such as membership organizations, is a way to potentially reduce health care costs, increase civic engagement and improve the quality of lives for older adults. The Veterans of Foreign Wars organization describes why people should become a member by stating the importance of advocating for veterans, listing notable veterans who were members, and detailing the range of benefits and special offers available to members (Veterans of Foreign Wars, 2007). These reasons might entice some people to join; however, this research found five areas that enhance member's lives: mental health and well-being, social influence and comparison, safety and security, social support, and social engagement, which are more personal and relatable for potential members.

Members' mental health and well-being is improved by participating in the organization as they grow older in various ways. Members of the VFW and Ladies Auxiliary stated they were able to talk about difficult times in the past with other members, cope with mental disorders, remain cognitively sharp, build self-esteem, feel spiritually uplifted, and combat loneliness. These findings correspond with studies showing that social connectedness decreases people's risk for cognitive decline (Bassuk, Glass, & Berkman, 1999; Fratiglioni, Paillard-Borg, & Winblad, 2004), helps maintain self-efficacy beliefs in later life (McAvay, Seeman, & Rodin, 1996), and that social support influences people's emotions, moods, and perceived

well-being. Some evidence also suggests that social support promotes functional and adaptive coping styles (Holhan & Moos, 1987; Wolf, Balson, Morse, Simon, Gaumer, Dralle, & Williams, 1991). Adding to the literature, this study shows the variety of mental health benefits people receive as members of social organizations.

Additionally, members of the organization are socially influenced and use social comparison to help shape attitudes and behaviors as they grow older. Being a member in a social organization allows people to interact with and learn from those in their generation and in different generations for the betterment of themselves. Related to social network theory, the behaviors and attitudes that are generated within the network determine access to opportunities and constraints on behavior (Berkman & Glass, 2000). People communicate with others and see how others live, thus gaining access to helpful resources and learning ways to improve their situations.

Being in a safe and secure environment, like a social organization, is important to members, giving them a place to go and interact with others where they feel comfortable. Women in the organization enjoy the lack of relationship pressure, and men do not have to worry about trouble occurring or the need to defend themselves against others. As the socio-emotional selectivity theory communicates, this is especially important for older adults who tend to avoid situations that are unpleasant or simply devoid of meaning. Because time is perceived as “running out,” older adults participate in activities where they feel at ease, maintaining close

relationships with those around them (Carstenson, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999), and a social organization provides them the opportunity to do so.

Another benefit of organizational membership is social support, specifically mentioned by members as friendship and camaraderie. Members enjoy the support of others who understand them and experience similar situations. In addition, members gain instrumentally receiving transportation assistance in emergencies or to medical appointments. Members also are concerned about others and take notice if someone is acting out of the ordinary, assisting when needed. The organization can also assist members in getting access to governmental benefits. Some learn about community events and pertinent legislative issues. These concepts relate to the social convoy model, which states that individuals share experiences with those in their cohort and provide support to each other reciprocally over time (Antonucci & Akiyama, 1987). For older adults, social connectedness with friends, family, and colleagues provides them with a social support system that they rely on for encouragement and assistance (Berkman, Glass, Brissette, & Seeman, 2000), and being a member of a social organization is an important network for members.

The final benefit of organizational membership fits within the area of social engagement. Members benefit by having activities to participate in and feel a sense of accomplishment when completing meaningful activities. Members state they feel more young and active associating with other members. Many in the VFW and Ladies Auxiliary value charitable giving and supporting important causes such as promoting patriotism and assisting troops and their families. Some also honor

soldiers who have died through membership. This component was deemed beneficial by most members interviewed in the study and communicates the essence of how individuals personally view their membership to be an important aspect of their life. Through participation in the organization, people acquire a sense of coherence, meaningfulness, and interdependence, which has been shown to be related to the maintenance of cognitive function and reduction in mortality. People value the ties they develop with others, which give meaning to their participation in the group, and they feel more attached to the community (Berkman & Glass, 2000).

Conflict does affect membership at the VFW, and members who were interviewed discussed a variety of concerns. Most of the difficulties mentioned by members dealt with leadership, the reception Vietnam veterans received when returning home, personal differences, money and finances, lack of work, and separation into groups. A few people mentioned that they have learned to resolve conflicts and to work better with a diverse group of individuals.

Conflict can play an important role in keeping members interested and active in the organization. In fact, Louis R. Pondy (1992), in an article about organization conflict, states that “conflict is not only functional for the organization, it is essential to its very existence” (pg. 260). He finds that conflict, when it does not threaten the very basis of the relationship, moves an organization to new heights of creativity, innovation and competitive energy. Without conflict, certain people or groups would become dominant and the diversity of behaviors available to the organization would

diminish. The organization would lose the ability to adapt to environmental change and would increase the chance for failure.

Members of the VFW and Ladies Auxiliary discussed various disagreements that arose in the organization, and many were very passionate about the issues. Though many deemed disputes detrimental to the organization, disputes do seem to create an environment that causes people to resolve difficulties. People continue being active in the organization to receive many of the benefits discussed above, but also to state their opinions and experience conflict resolution. Though the present study was not focused on conflict, its influence on the members was substantial, thus it was deemed important to include in the paper. Future research on the topic is suggested.

Specific research on membership in organizations is limited, so this research sought to shed light into the experiences of members with different opinions and views, but in a similar environment. It would be beneficial to interview members of various organizations in order to make further generalized statements about the benefits of social organizations. This would increase the span of knowledge about overall organizational membership and would assist in determining which groups are most effective. Future research should gather data from various organizations in different towns and cities.

As an employee of the canteen (the bar area), one becomes more than just an employee. One becomes an integral part of the atmosphere at the club and develops relationships with many members of the club. It does not take long to meet the

active members and begin to respect and honor all of them for their dedication to the club and its' members and for lifelong achievements. Though being an active participant in the organization helped elicit meaningful responses from participants for the researcher, participants may have assumed the researcher already knew and understood certain aspects of membership, and therefore did not fully discuss items that may have been important for the research. For future research, it would be helpful to interview groups where researchers are active participants as well as groups where researchers have had little contact. This would allow for comparison of responses to determine if there are differences based on active participation of the researcher in the organization.

As one of the first studies to specifically look at membership in one organization, the present study was exploratory in nature and elicited significant information about people's experiences. To add to the current research, a quantitative study of active members of social organizations should be completed to gain a broad understanding of participation in social organizations. Demographic comparisons could be done to see which groups of people participate and how experiences vary. This type of research would help a researcher determine specific, focused questions for qualitative work on why membership in an organization is valuable. Once more generalized data is gathered, it would be useful to focus research on certain aspects of organizational membership, such as social engagement activities or conflict, possibly looking at benefits and consequences of feuds. This would allow a researcher to hone in on some of the more interesting situations and

complications that occur within social organizations and would shine light into the history of these organizations.

Evidence shows civic disengagement of America's youth over the past 30 years. In result of this, young adults have little trust in their fellow citizens, care little about politics and public affairs, feel little sense of identity, pride or obligation to being an American, are less likely to vote or participate in politics, and are less likely to become involved in community efforts to help solve problems, among others (Putnam, 2000). Current older adults, on the other hand, are much more involved. Though older adults have always been more involved than their younger counterparts, the gap at this time is far greater than it has been for previous generations. Thus, it is predicted that the civic disengagement in the current youth is an "ingrained generational characteristic" rather than something that will eventually cure itself (Carpini, 2000, pg. 343).

"People- young or old- choose to become engaged in public life when they have the motivation, opportunity, and ability to do so" (Carpini, 2000, pg. 343). For future older adults to become more active civically to obtain health benefits and to assist in the welfare of America, it is important to motivate them at this time to become active in their communities. According to Henkin & Zapf (2007), "The willingness of people to participate in civic life depends on whether they believe that their participation matters and that they are connected to their community" (pg. 72). People are also concerned with having the adequate resources (time, skills, and information) to motivate them into action and also participate in activities that appeal

to them. AARP (Kuchera, Straight, & Guterbock, 2005) reports that people's sense of community attachment through social ties and feelings about the community influence their social, psychological, and financial investments in the community and predicts organizational membership, volunteering, and political participation.

To motivate potential members to join organizations and build community social capital, federal, state, and local governments could directly subsidize local associations beyond having a nonprofit tax-exempt status, through direct or project grants, tax deductions/credits for employees and volunteers, and/or exemption from consumption tax. This could be a way to assist existing organizations in continuing to support their missions and members, as many organizations currently suffer from a lack of funds. It has the potential to be a cost-effective approach with long-lasting effects on health and well-being, trust for neighbors and communities, and overall community participation because it uses existing resources rather than beginning anew.

Another approach would be for existing institutions, such as faith communities, trade unions, charitable foundations, and companies, to invest in projects working to improve social connectedness in communities by utilizing existing services and organizations. Institutions could also encourage donors, members, and employees to stay active in their community by highlighting the benefits of volunteering and being active in organizations (Kawachi & Berkman, 2000).

The Gerontological Society of America is dedicated to increasing opportunities for civic and social engagement for older adults. In 2005, focus groups were held and recommendations were submitted to those involved in the White House Conference on Aging (WHOCOA). These recommendations included: modernize the nation's senior and civic service programs, remove barriers to community civic engagement, link adult volunteers with appropriate and rewarding civic engagement opportunities, improve public awareness of volunteering and civic service as a critical component of health aging and healthy communities, and encourage companies to support and promote volunteering by their employees and retirees. Many of the suggested solutions for the recommendations include building on existing resources, providing financial incentives for volunteers, assessing community needs, and disseminating information about the health benefits of volunteer activity to the public (O'Neill & Lindberg, 2005), all of which would benefit existing social organizations.

Continued research and work towards increasing civic engagement may help to increase numbers of members in social organizations, which would help with current struggles due to lack of participation and funding. Because participation in organizations is on the decline and research shows that these organizations benefit both individuals and communities, it is important to continue to focus on the individual benefits of organizational membership as well as population benefits when working to increase social capital and social support for older adults.

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