Volunteering as a gift of time offers important benefits to societies, local communities and vulnerable individuals. While this clearly adds value to the lives of many recipients, it also adds value to the lives of volunteers themselves. For older people, volunteering is an important dimension of new discourses of ageing, and specifically healthy, active and productive ageing. While it is sometimes viewed as a critical policy lever, to improve social inclusion in the UK, for example, or to build productive ageing in the US, volunteering offers a broad suite of potential activities and interests that can give meaning to the lives of a diverse range of people as they age. It is this capacity of volunteering to offer something for all, and to enable active and healthy involvement, that is the focus of this chapter, and which enables us to explore the broader cultural turn in ageing.

Volunteering in later life is located within theoretical models of positive or healthy ageing that highlight the psycho-social benefits to be gained from being active and involved. These include the activity theories first promoted by Havighurst in the 1950s (e.g. Havighurst and Albrecht 1953), and later supported by a body of empirical evidence that links activity and life satisfaction in older age. Over recent decades, increased longevity and improved health later in life has tended to confirm the validity of theories of active engagement. Other theorists have critiqued this approach, and suggested that activity needs to be understood within the context of structural issues and differences by gender, class or race (Katz 2000). This chapter utilises this perspective, recognising that the diversity of older people and their lives has been a key feature of social change over past decades.

In exploring the cultural dimensions of volunteering, it is similarly important to recognise how old age is socially constructed and how context is critical (Phillipson 1998). An approach firmly situated within a western cultural context of ageing has tended to scapegoat older people and defined them as a burden and cost to society (Phillipson 1998, Walker 1981). Further, retirement has been described as a ‘role-less role’ (Walker 1981). Older people have tended to be excluded from and devalued within broader societal roles, highlighting the need to build new identities in the contemporary context. As such, volunteering has the potential to offer positive role identities for older people, including those who have been denied these opportunities earlier in life. However, despite this potential, there are also risks, particularly if older people are made to feel any obligation to volunteer with normative assumptions devaluing those who
do not volunteer (Martinson and Halpern 2011). Thus, while volunteering may offer a positive experience for many older individuals, it needs to be recognised that this is not the case for all.

Thus, the aim of this chapter is to investigate approaches to volunteering in later life through a critical and cultural gerontological lens. By listening to the voices of volunteers gathered from qualitative research undertaken by the author over the past 10 years, the intent is to explore the meaning of volunteering to older people and how this impacts on the social construction of ageing. While exploring the potential benefits of volunteering in later life, the chapter also highlights some of the critical elements associated with diversity and difference.

Volunteering in later life

Volunteering has been described as ‘a soft and fuzzy notion’ leading to some conceptual confusion (Petriwskyj and Warburton 2007b: 7). Volunteering includes activities that are both formal and informal in structure, and those conducted in a group or as an individual. Further, it extends over a broad range of categories, including philanthropic service, self-help, activism, community service and environmental stewardship (Petriwskyj and Warburton 2007b). Although not universal, a well-utilised definition is that of the United Nations (2001), which emphasises three conditions: volunteering is not undertaken primarily for financial gain; it is undertaken of one’s own free will; and it benefits a third party or society at large. It is important to recognise here that in the contemporary context, all of these elements can be somewhat controversial, particularly where employment benefit is contingent on volunteering (thus not free will) or where corporate volunteers are still paid their work salary (and hence financial gain).

Definitional challenges draw attention to the homogenising effect, where volunteering is treated as one normalised category of activity (Petriwskyj and Warburton 2007a, Burr, Choi, Mutchler and Caro 2005). Yet volunteer activities can be extremely broad, and as one research participant noted, ‘people [who] don’t volunteer, they think of people with disabilities. And they may think of Meals on Wheels. Finish! They don’t realise they can be in the archives of a library doing a research project on the history of a river’ (Warburton, Paynter and Petriwskyj 2007: 346). Volunteering covers a broad mix of activities, and unless older people, as others, are aware of this diversity, they may reject volunteering out of hand (Warburton, Smith-Merry and Michaels 2013).

Volunteering also draws on various motivations, many of which offer older people the opportunity to benefit in ways meaningful to themselves. The large body of research suggests that key motivations for older people include the opportunity to help others, build or maintain social networks, do something worthwhile and provide personal satisfaction (e.g. Clary, Snyder and Stukas 1996, Okun and Schultz 2003). However, as Morrow-Howell and colleagues (2009) suggest, rather than focusing on original motivation, it is perhaps more meaningful to consider the benefits that older people feel that they gain from their volunteering. In this way, volunteering can provide volunteers with benefits otherwise missing from their lives, such as social involvement, personal identity or self-esteem.

Yet just as volunteering is not one generic activity, in the same way volunteers vary considerably; yet, as Petriwskyj and Warburton (2007a) note, there is a tendency to treat volunteers as the same. Problematic in this regard is that much of the research literature emanates from the United States, which has a strong volunteer tradition (Principi, Warburton, Schippers and di Rosa 2013). Yet there are important differences between countries and contexts (Warburton and Jeppsson-Grassman 2009). Many western countries have large voluntary sectors with around one-third of older people undertaking some form of volunteering. Volunteers in liberal welfare regimes, such as the UK, the USA and Australia, tend to deliver services, while volunteers in
social democratic regimes, such as Scandinavia, are more likely to volunteer within local or cultural associations (Warburton and Jeppsson-Grassman 2009).

There are thus multiple layers of diversity in the volunteer experience, and differences in activities or forms of volunteering, as well as diverse needs and motivations across individual volunteers. There is a need to recognise this level of diversity and difference if we are to understand the concept of volunteering in the contemporary world. The following sections draw on a cultural gerontological lens better to understand contemporary perspectives of volunteering by older people, beginning with the relationship between volunteering and productive ageing.

Volunteering and productive ageing

A focus on older people as volunteers is important as it focuses attention on (socially) productive ageing and tends to counter negative stereotypes of older people. The term productive ageing was first coined in the United States to draw attention away from a rather narrow bio-medical approach to ageing that focused on later life as a period of loss and decline (e.g. Morrow-Howell, Hinterlong and Sherraden 2001). Productive ageing enables attention to be paid to the positive contributions made by older adults, and is based on the implicit assumption that the skills, expertise and experience of older people are currently under-employed (Morrow-Howell et al. 2001). This is of course highly likely given the societal trend towards retirement from paid work, and our cultural assumptions of ageing.

Productive ageing thus focuses on a more positive construct of ageing. However, it is a concept highly focused on economic production and paid work activities in line with a neo-liberal agenda (Morrow-Howell et al. 2001). It thus tends to ignore the diversity of the older population, particularly in terms of socioeconomic status and ethnicity, as well as widening gaps in health and wealth (Morrow-Howell and Greenfield 2012).

Rather than using an economic concept, we argue that it is preferable to focus on the social and ‘value adding’ capacity of volunteering in later life (Warburton and McLaughlin 2005). As recipients of volunteer services note, a volunteer comes because they want to, and this differentiates them from paid workers. This value is core to volunteering, and described in one study as ‘lots of little kindnesses’ (Warburton and McLaughlin 2005). Participants describe these kindnesses as a broad array of formal and informal assistance, which all make a difference to people’s lives. They also contribute to social stability, neighbourliness and secure and safe environments (Warburton and McLaughlin 2005).

In addition to these generalised contributions, there are other broader contributions made by specific groups of older volunteers that can be highlighted as value adding activities. Thus, for example, Australia is a highly culturally diverse nation as a country of migrants, as well as a local Indigenous population, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. There is almost no acknowledgement of how specifically each of these groups ages productively and contributes to society. Unlike that of its neighbour, New Zealand, Australian national data does not include specific cultural contributions. Yet one exploratory Australian study highlighted these benefits and showed that volunteers from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds contribute to activities such as maintaining their culture (Warburton and McLaughlin 2007). As one migrant noted, ‘we the older people are the fountain of information that we pass on to the younger generation’ and another said, ‘it’s an educational thing more than anything. […] they learn what the culture has to offer from us’ (Warburton and McLaughlin 2007: 52). Indigenous participants also noted the key role older people played in supporting troubled young people by talking to them in school or in prison, or ensuring they get home safely after they have had a night drinking (Warburton and McLaughlin 2007: 56). All of these activities are highly socially productive and
demonstrate the contributions made by many older people. However, in recent years, attention to volunteering has tended to move away from a focus on productivity because of its economic connotations towards one on healthy ageing.

**Volunteering and healthy ageing**

There is very strong evidence, particularly from the US with its culture of volunteerism and availability of large databases, that older volunteers have better psychological and physical health and live longer, more satisfied lives than non-volunteers (Principi, Chiatti, Lamura and Frerichs 2012). This large body of research from the early 2000s focused on volunteering as an avenue to maintain health in later life (Lum and Lightfoot 2005). Measures of difference include reduced mortality (Oman, Thoresen and McMahon 1999); higher life satisfaction (Thoits and Hewitt 2001); improved psychological health and less depression (Lum and Lightfoot 2005; Musick and Wilson 2003); and even improved functioning levels (Shmotkin, Blumstein and Modan 2003). As a result of this strong evidence, volunteering has begun to be viewed as a health promotion activity in later life. Thus, at the same time as benefitting communities, volunteering offers health benefits to older volunteers as well, perhaps the ultimate in a win–win approach. However, although there is some truth in these conjectures, the reality is much more complex.

This body of research is based on secondary analyses of large datasets, but further exploration has shown that while volunteering may have beneficial health effects, it may be primarily for those with existing social and economic advantages. Or, as Oman and colleagues (1999) identified, it is those with higher socioeconomic status who are more likely to volunteer. Australian research also highlights this critical point (Warburton 2012). Older volunteers are more likely to have higher education levels, higher incomes, as well as other ‘resources,’ such as good health. Structural barriers can deter those with fewer social and economic resources (Warburton and Stirling 2007). These are critical considerations to ensure that volunteering itself does not marginalise those less fortunate, and as with paid work, disadvantage those with fewer skills, experience and assets (Morrow-Howell and Greenfield 2012). Similarly, to ensure positive health outcomes, it is important that individual volunteer activities be matched with motivations (Young and Glasgow 1998, Morrow-Howell et al. 2003). This all suggests that it is important to recognise how the socio-cultural context impacts on older people’s experience.

A common rationale for the association between volunteering and health in later life is that volunteering offers a role replacement as we age, and can hence assist individuals in meeting some of the challenges associated with ageing. Volunteering can provide a role and a sense of purpose in life, or as one volunteer described it, ‘It was something I was put on this earth to do, and I don’t care whoever asks me, I say, this is what I love doing and to help other people in need’ (Warburton 2006: 7). Others describe volunteering as a worthwhile activity that gives life meaning. In this way, volunteering can become a substitute for the work sphere when people retire from paid work (Greenfield and Marks 2004).

Thus we argue in some of our previous work that role identity offered by volunteering may be particularly important for those at risk of marginalisation. This includes older people from diverse cultural backgrounds, as we discuss above. It also includes older women many of whom have not had much involvement in paid work or opportunities to have positive societal roles or status (Warburton and McLaughlin 2006). In this way, volunteering can offer important cultural roles in ways not otherwise available to them. As one woman noted, ‘It gives you a real thrill to do something, […] you feel so good about yourself later’ (Warburton and McLaughlin 2006: 66). In addition, volunteering can offer new role identities for groups such as older Asian migrants.
in an era where cultural erosion is challenging their traditional roles within the family (Warburton and Winterton 2010). Across the ageing population more generally, volunteering offers an important opportunity to build and promote the status of older people, and to challenge cultural assumptions about later life. In particular, volunteering can be seen as an activity that can counter negative stereotypes of later life as a time of disengagement.

Volunteering has capacity to build self-esteem and confidence in later life. As one research participant noted, ‘We’re meant to think that as we get older we forget things more. Everybody forgets things. But as you get older, you say to yourself, it’s because of my age. I can’t do things’ (Warburton et al. 2007: 346). This signals the challenge associated with our cultural approach to ageing as a role-less phase of life, which volunteering has the capacity to redress. It can also provide an external and social focus, is based on personal agency and sense of control and is associated with positive human development (Warburton 2006).

These are all advantages, and help counter some of the challenges of ageing—lack of clear roles, the perils of social isolation, and threat of life transitions. However, large studies in Australia as elsewhere highlight that there is a tendency for older volunteers to be well resourced—to be well educated and have good health and good income (Warburton 2012). This suggests a need to explore in more depth how volunteering can support more marginalised groups of older people who stand to gain the most from the role identity and health advantages offered by volunteering.

Volunteering and social inclusion

Volunteering has enormous potential for an ageing society. As discussed, it fits within constructs of healthy, active and productive ageing. However, of increasing importance in the contemporary context is the notion of social inclusion, and how volunteering fits within a social inclusion discourse.

As noted earlier, in the UK, volunteering has been proposed as a means to develop a more socially inclusive and participatory society (Warburton, Ng and Shardlow 2013a). Social inclusion can be defined as a process to ensure that everyone, regardless of their life experiences or circumstances, can achieve their potential in life (Burchardt, Grand and Piachaud 2002). This definition highlights important concepts such as equality, rights and social cohesion, and draws attention to inequalities that prevent individuals or groups from taking up their rightful position in society (Byrne 2005).

There is increasing recognition that older people are at risk of social exclusion due to life-course factors, life transitions, such as retirement or widowhood, and ageism (Victor, Scrambler and Bond 2008, Warburton et al. 2013a). In this way, volunteering can counter some of these risks by providing older people with positive social roles, or by offering social support through times of transition. In one study, for example, a participant talked of her shared experience: ‘last year, I helped a lady whose husband was in hospital when my husband was in hospital [. . .]. We’re [now] basically helping each other through their deaths’ (Warburton and McLaughlin 2005: 725.)

Volunteering has the capacity to include a broad group of people due to the sheer diversity of potential activities. However, research is beginning to identify how volunteer practices in the contemporary context may become exclusionary. First, there is a move towards a more regulated volunteer environment, which has been noted as a significant challenge for many older volunteers in two Australian studies. In one, a volunteer noted, ‘it’s just becoming chaotic because of all the rules and regulations’ (Warburton et al. 2007: 346); and in another study, volunteers told of how regulation ‘gets in the way’ of volunteering (Warburton, Smith-Merry and Michaels 2013b: 6).
Second, volunteer organisations need to be alert to exclusion, and pursue a more critical agenda to seek out ageist, or even racist or sexist, exclusionary behaviours. In particular, participants in a number of studies suggested that ageist assumptions can act as a barrier to involvement in volunteering (Warburton et al. 2007). Of particular concern here is that those who might benefit the most from involvement in volunteering may feel excluded. This includes those who are long-term unemployed, who have been made redundant or recently retired, or who have disabilities or mental health issues. A participant in a study of volunteering for community services, for example, said that her psychiatrist had encouraged her to volunteer (Warburton et al. 2013b). However, within this context, much depends on often over-stretched volunteer coordinators to support the special needs of volunteers. This can be a serious challenge for cash-strapped non-profit organisations to manage without adequate government funding.

**Volunteering: A critical perspective**

Volunteer studies utilising the voices of volunteers thus highlight some of the benefits, but also the challenges, associated with volunteering in later life. There are some key implications that emerge from this and the preceding discussion. First, it needs to be recognised that volunteering is essentially about choice and personal agency. As one older woman suggested, ‘none of us do it under sufferance’, and another noted, ‘you know, you can’t force anyone to do volunteer work. You are doing it from your heart or don’t do it at all’ (Warburton and McLaughlin 2006: 64).

In this context, American authors, Minkler and Martinson are strident in their critique of any notion of obligation, suggesting that volunteering is one of a suite of positive late-life activities and is not for everyone (Martinson and Minkler 2006, Martinson and Halpern 2011). In discussing the ethical implications of promoting volunteering to older people, Martinson and Halpern (2011: 428) highlight ongoing concerns that this ‘can foster a broader stigma of old age, including an internalised ageism among already marginalized older adults that leaves them feeling obligated, burdened, or “not good enough”’. It is important to counter the notion of obligation; and it is more just and respectful to explore the diversity of ways by which people live positive and fulfilling lives (Katz 2000, Martinson and Halpern 2011).

For those who do choose to volunteer, it is important to explore barriers to their volunteering, particularly those related to any implications of ageism or age discrimination, including assumptions about the types of volunteer activities older people should undertake. Good management is important, and emerging evidence suggests that to ensure volunteering is inclusive of more marginalised individuals, there is a need for good coordinators and suitable funding (Warburton et al. 2013b).

Third, it is essential that volunteer opportunities be available for all older people regardless of income, education, gender, abilities/disabilities or linguistic or cultural background. We need to recognise and celebrate difference, and volunteering offers a breadth of opportunities to ensure that all volunteers, whatever they choose to do, experience the maximum benefits from their gift of time.

**Conclusion**

The life situation of older people has ensured real progress over the past 25 years, when the realities of an ageing population began to be recognised. Longevity and healthy ageing are positive outcomes for western societies, and increasingly for developing countries. As the proportion of older people within society increases, there are additional opportunities to push back the boundaries of age and to reverse ageism. Volunteering is highly advantageous in these
circumstances. It offers older people a way to remain healthy, active and involved, as well as an opportunity to challenge negative cultural stereotypes of later life as being unproductive or role-less. Volunteering is also highly diverse, and offers opportunities across sectors, interests, capabilities. However, we cannot afford to take our eye off the ball. Critical gerontologists warn us to be wary. We are all individuals, and as such can fulfill our ideals for a meaningful old age through a myriad of potential options. Our challenge is to ensure that all those options remain choices, and the door stays open for older people to make the choices they really want to make.

References


