

# Social ties, volunteering and civic life

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## Abstract

In this study a mixed methods approach was used to investigate the relationship between the social ties of elderly people and their decision to volunteer or not (yet). Survey data were used from the Belgian Ageing Studies. This project collected information from 59.977 older people living in 127 different municipalities in Belgium. On the basis of these data, 4 municipalities were selected with extreme (low and high) scores on indicators of volunteering. In these 4 municipalities, semi-structured interviews were conducted with local policy-makers, as well as with people working in local organizations and associations, and older people themselves. The paper highlights the role of social ties for volunteering in later life, with a particular focus on understanding the barriers that people face in deciding to volunteer. The research findings indicate that people need to be embedded into their community before being able to participate and that membership in an association appeared to be the key determinant for volunteering among elderly people.

**Keywords:** older volunteers, older potential volunteers, social ties and context.

## Introduction

The benefits of volunteerism in later life have recently received growing attention among researchers and policymakers. Volunteering is believed to have a positive impact on individuals, the community, and the wider society (Greenfield & Marks, 2004; Lum & Lightfoot, 2005; Ironmonger, 2000; Soupourmas & Ironmonger, 2002). Volunteering is also considered to be beneficial for sustaining civil society and democracy (Putnam, 2000), and has been identified as a key source of satisfaction, engagement in meaningful activities, and self-validation over the life course (Morrow-Howell, Kinnevy & Mann, 1999; Pillemer, Moen, Wethington & Glasgow, 2000; Ray, 2002; Rowe & Kahn, 1998).

Morrow-Howell and colleagues (2001:289) find that stereotypes concerning older adults on the one hand being frail and dependent, on the other hand affluently seeking leisure are incorrect. Through the fact that older people enjoy prolonged longevity and improved health, retirement has become a life stage that encloses an extended period of being active (Warburton, Le Brocque & Rosenman, 1998; Wilson & Musick, 2008; Gottlieb, 2002). Many older adults attach also more importance to volunteering than younger adults (Wilson & Musick, 2008). Hence, today's emerging 'busy ethic' affects adults to stay active and involved during retirement (Ekerdt, 1986). Moreover, older

individuals have accumulated a substantial potential of skills and knowledge (O'reilly & Caro, 1994; Morrow-Howell et al., 2001; Wilson & Musick, 2008). Nevertheless, older adults are often found to volunteer less frequently than younger individuals (Martinson & Minkler, 2006; Morrow-Howell, 2010). For example, in the Netherlands people aged between 55 and 74 volunteer less than their fellow citizens who are between 35 and 54 years (De Hart & Dekker, 1999: 86). The peak ages for volunteering in the United Kingdom are between 16 to 19 years and 35 to 49 years (Citizenship Survey, 2005).

This leads to the recruitment potential. A number of scholars have highlighted the importance of taking into account the 'recruitment potential', i.e. the number of older individuals that do not volunteer but are willing to do so. There is still an untapped potential in the older population, for every two older adults who volunteer there is another willing and able to volunteer (Caro & Bass, 1995: 73-78).

Aging must be understood within the context of the social environment (Phillipson & Baars, 2007), and voluntary participation is related to a person's environment (Choi, 2003). The likelihood of volunteering depends on the kind of social relations one has (Musick & Wilson, 2008). Ties to other people and organizations are important determinants of volunteering (Smith, 1994). Moreover, these ties act as resources for collective action (Mc Adam, 1989; Oberschall, 1993) and personal contact has been shown to reduce the perceived social risk that deterred some from volunteering (Brady et al., 1999:162; Riecken, Babakus & Yavas, 1994; Wood, 1997: 601). Wilson (2000) suggests that the idea of social ties should be incorporated into a theory of volunteering.

In examining social ties and volunteering, it is important to consider variability in definitions and measurement. Social ties are defined as characteristics of an individual's embeddedness in one's life (Ross & Jang, 2000). These ties include two types of contacts: informal and formal ties (Wilson, 2000). Informal ties comprehend the frequency and quality of contacts elderly people have with family, neighbors and friends. It contains informal interactions, connections and alliances with each other (Gerson, Stueve & Fischer, 1977; Campbell & Lee, 1992). Formal ties are bonds that elderly people have due to formal participation, like membership in an organization (Cornwell & Harrison, 2004).

Against this background, this paper aims to reveal a number of relevant factors relating to volunteering at an older age. The article contributes to a broader conceptual framework containing multidimensional factors that impact upon the decision of older adults to volunteer or not. We first explore quantitative comparative data on social ties and volunteering among older people, and then

extend our findings through collecting in-depth qualitative data. This study is divided into three research questions. First, do ties predict volunteering among older persons? Second, are formal ties or informal ties important for volunteering among older persons? Third, can ties act as barriers for volunteering among older persons?

### **Literature review**

The literature on social ties contains a body of work and is ineluctably linked with the concept social capital. Woolcock (1998: 153) refers to the most commonly used definition of social capital as 'information, trust, and norms of reciprocity into one's social network'. According to Portes (1998), the concept has been used in so many different contingencies and contexts that it loses any specific significance. Moreover, Furstenberg and Kaplan (2004: 219) suggest that the term may have lost its purpose within empirical research because it has been used so promiscuously and has become so all-embracing. Yet, no agreement has been achieved whether the concept is best applied at the community level or at the individual level (Poortinga, 2005). Given the focus of this study, we utilize the term social ties and focus on how different kinds of ties shape volunteer behavior.

In studying social ties and volunteering among elderly people it is important to acknowledge different conceptualizations. First, social ties can be operationalized through the convoy model of social relations (Antonucci, Birditt and Akiyma, 2009). A second conceptualization is Granovetter's theory on the strength of ties. Third, Wilson's model focuses on formal and informal ties. Finally, we discuss the downside of social ties. Although these scholars all use the same term, social ties have very different meanings.

The first conceptualization regards the convoy model. The term convoy encompasses attachment and different, close social ties (Antonucci, Birditt and Akiyma, 2009). The latter make a distinction between several components of social relations. The first two components are social networks and social support. Social networks refer to structural characteristics, such as the number of people in one's network, the relationship with the individual and the contact frequency. For example, having children increases the likelihood that older adults volunteer (Wilson & Musick, 1997). The second component, social support, involves people in the social network who might provide support in terms of helping someone, providing emotional support or even by giving affirmation. Older people's decision to volunteer appears to be affected by the social support for volunteering and the broader social context (Warburton et al., 2001).

A second conceptualization is the 'strength' of the social relationship. Granovetter (1973) emphasizes the difference between strong and weak ties. He considers the strength of a dyadic relationship as a

combination of the time people spend together, the emotional intensity of the relation, the intimacy and reciprocity. Granovetter (1973) indicates that strong and weak ties fulfill very different functions. Strong, durable and profound ties are important for the social well-being and emotional support. Weak ties, on the other hand, are less profound relationships that can be activated if necessary. They have the ability to bring more people in contact with each other because they often operate as a bridge between different networks. Moreover, weak ties form the only connection between individuals and groups who do not really know each other. In his work - *The strength of weak ties* - Granovetter (1973) emphasizes the importance of weak ties in a personal network as a key to social success. People with many weak ties can reach people across different groups and circles. The bridging function of weak ties is not only an important source of social mobility of individuals but also important for the social structure of society. When a community shares values and interests, strong bonds and a high level of trust can be developed among individuals (Bergstrom et al., 1995), these formal and informal social networks perform as the basis of the social infrastructure (Flora et al., 1997). Rochon (1998: 97) states that people evaluate their environments and make decisions based on actions that take place within their formal and informal ties.

Third, Wilson (2000) examines social ties from a different perspective and subdivides social ties into informal and formal social ties. Elderly people who maintain wide-ranging informal ties will have an increased likelihood of volunteering (e.g. Fischer & Schaffer, 1993; Jackson et al., 1995:75, Karp, Paillard-Borg, Wang, Silverstein, Windblad & Fratigliani, 2006; Marwell & Oliver 1993; Smith, 1994:255). Formal social ties, such as ties to organizations, are forms of social integration that are crucial within the community (Cornwell & Harrison, 2004). Likewise, they are also important given the fact that members of an organization are more likely to volunteer (Harootyan, 1996), and help define the role of volunteering and make it easier to join such activities (Wuthnow, 1991:201). Moreover, group membership, especially in later life, proves to be important when the primary networks of paid work and family withdraw (Warburton & Stirling, 2007).

Notwithstanding that one's social embeddedness can be developed and sustained through interactions with others, informally as well as formally (Mancini & Blieszner, 1989), social ties may be experienced positive as well as negative (Antonucci, Akiyama & Takahashi, 2004; McClenaghan, 2000). Different scholars point out to the downside of social capital (Aldridge et al., 2002; Field, 2003; Fukuyama, 2001; Portes, 1998; Putnam, 2000). Putnam (2000) refers to a 'dark side of social capital', meaning that some people's social capital contain negative consequences for others. Groups who have a low level of trust accomplish, at the expense of outsiders, internal cohesion (Fukuyama, 2001).

Portes (1998) elucidates these negative consequences by means of four different forms: exclusion of outsiders, excess claims on group members, restrictions on individual freedom, and downward leveling norms. First, strong ties do not always include people, but can also exclude people. These ties can be of very closed nature, whereby new individuals are not always accepted. Closely related is, the second, that closed networks can prevent the success of individual group members. When the group gives priority to other interests, group members may be restricted in their personal initiative. Third, strong social ties of a group can also restrict individual freedom. Social control within such networks ensures that members do not transgress bounds. The pressure to conform can be so major that it not only reduces one's individual liberty but it also leads to exclusion within the peer group. Fourth, internal group solidarity can be developed based on a common aversion and opposition to mainstream society. It creates us versus they relationship towards other groups in society. These groups can become very isolated. Moreover, individual success stories undermine group cohesion because of the fact that group cohesion is based on the alleged impossibility of such success.

A substantial literature between social ties and recruitment in late-life volunteering establishes a positive relationship (e.g., Hodgkinson & Weitzman, 1992, 1996; Warburton et al., 2001; Musick & Wilson, 2008). Both, formal and informal social ties, increase chances of being asked to volunteer (e.g., Brady et al., 1999:158; Hodgkinson & Weitzman, 1996; Independent Sector, 1994) because they have more social ties to expose them to being asked (Freeman, 1997:162). Volunteers are more likely to include other volunteers in their social circle (Warburton, 2001).

Word-of-mouth appears to be one of the most effective recruit campaign compared to impersonal appeals (Midlarsky & Kahana, 1994:219), especially if they come from a volunteer who knows something about the work (McAdam & Paulsen, 1993:644). Fischer and Schaffer (1993) argue that 80 to 85 per cent of the volunteers have been recruited through other volunteers. Likewise, having a friend or family member in the organization increases the likelihood of being asked (Gallup, ....). Recruiting personally is most often by neighbors telling neighbors (Freeman, 1997; Hodgkinson & Weitzman, 1996), and friends recruiting friends (Hodgkinson & Weizman, 1992, 1996; Musick & Wilson, 2008). Given that many volunteers have been recruited through friends and acquaintances (Hodgkinson & Weitzman, 1992; Wilson & Musick, 1997), it is important that the relations extend outside the family and immediate neighborhood (Musick & Wilson, 2008).

Due to a scarcity of data that contains information on the content or quality of the ties that people have with their network. Gathering information about the quality and depth of those connections is crucial to understand the link between ties and volunteering (Musick & Wilson, 2008).

## **Methods**

In this study we use a mixed methods approach to examine both quantitative and qualitative aspects of older people's social ties and their decision whether or not to volunteer. The design emphasizes the quantitative data collection, analysis, and interpretation; and secondary emphasis is given to the explanatory qualitative inquiry (see Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). We select this type of design because it is ideally suited to capture both the strengths of quantitative (i.e., large sample size, prediction, and generalizability), and qualitative approaches (i.e., description, depth, and contextualized findings) (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

This study contains two phases. The first phase entails a collection of quantitative survey data of 59.977 respondents in 127 municipalities in Belgium. The survey, 'Belgian Ageing Studies' (BAS), observed that the number of participants that volunteer differs significantly from municipality to municipality. The second phase involves qualitative data collection in order to be able to provide explanations for the quantitative findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Twelve focus groups in four selected municipalities from the BAS survey were conducted between March and April 2011.

### **Quantitative study**

#### ***Data collection: Survey questionnaire***

The research project 'Belgian Ageing Studies' (BAS) assesses quality of life and living conditions of older people (e.g. neighborhood features, physical health, wellbeing, civic participation, volunteering). The BAS-project was developed by researchers at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel and University College Gent and was conducted in cooperation with the provincial government, local authorities and members of local senior organizations. Between 2004 and 2009, the research collected information from 59.977 home-dwelling older adults (aged sixty and over) living in 127 municipalities in Belgium. The local government of every city and town drew a random sample from the population register of the inhabitants, applying stratified quota where the proportion of features as gender and age (60 to 69, 70 to 79 and 80 years and over) are identical as in the underlying population. To obtain the intended sample size, replacement addresses in the same quota category were used to exchange respondents who refused or were hampered filling in the questionnaire. Consequently, every sample was representative for each city and town.

The main BAS research methodology was a participatory methodology consisting of a prescribed action plan. This particular method, named peer-research, embraced older people not only as the research group, but also as an essential partner of the project. The assignment of each interviewer consisted of delivering and collecting questionnaires. These volunteers were trained and monitored by a supervisor, who was also an elder volunteer. Respondents were free to complete the

questionnaire and their anonymity was guaranteed. At the end of the project volunteers received feedback on the results. Working with a peer-research system enriched the research-design and had the advantages of face-to-face research (higher response rate), while minimizing the disadvantages (social desirability).

## ***Measures***

### **Dependent variable**

In order to categorize the volunteers, potential volunteers and non-volunteers two items were computed and recoded into one variable that subdivided the respondents in three classes. The first item asked respondents to identify the types of voluntary work they do, using a list of ten different categories of activities if they volunteer. Respondents received the following options: recreational, manual labor, keeping company, domestic, educational, caring, socio-cultural, administratively, social and managerial<sup>1</sup>. Thereupon, the ten categories were summed and recoded into volunteer and non-volunteer. The second item enquires of non-volunteers if they are willing to volunteer in the near future. This item has been recoded into potential volunteers and non-volunteers. Finally, both items were computed and recoded into one item and subdivided in three classes (volunteers, potential volunteers and non-volunteers).

### **Independent variables**

Several items related to social ties were taken into account: quantity, quality, and potential social support from the social contacts. To measure the *quantity of social ties*, respondents were asked how often they had contact (paying a visit, receiving a visit or calling over the telephone) with a number of personal members: children or children in-law, grandchildren, brothers and sisters, other relatives, friends or acquaintances and neighbors. The six groups were recoded into three groups: 1= family [children or children in-law and grandchildren, brothers and sisters and other relatives], 2= neighbors, and 3= friends or acquaintances. For each group they could answer whether this contact happened never (1), less than once a month (2), monthly (3), 1 to 2 times per week (4) or on a (almost) daily basis (5). This variable was recoded in: 0= never to monthly, 1= weekly to on a (almost) daily basis.

The *quality of social ties* was measured through the question 'To what extent are you satisfied with your contacts with the following persons?' Possible persons were: partner, daughter (in-law), son (in-law), grandchildren, sister or brother (in-law), other relatives, neighbors, and friends or

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<sup>1</sup> Notice, every category was explained through examples.

acquaintance. The variable was recoded in: 1= family [partner, children or children in-law and grandchildren, brothers and sisters and other relatives], 2= neighbors, and 3= friends or acquaintances. For each group they could answer whether this contact was completely dissatisfied (1), rather dissatisfied (2), neither dissatisfied, nor satisfied (3), rather satisfied (4) or completely satisfied (5). This variable was recoded in: 0= Dissatisfied, 1= Satisfied.

To assess the *potential social support from the social ties*, respondents were asked 'Imagine you cannot do the activities you usually do in the housekeeping anymore for a certain while, to whom could you call on for help? Possible persons were: partner, daughter, son, daughter-in-law, son-in-law, sister of brother (in-law), grandchild(ren), other relative, neighbor, and friend or acquaintance. The variable was recoded in: 1= family [partner, daughter, son, daughter-in-law, son-in-law and grandchildren, brothers and sisters and other relatives], 2= neighbors, and 3= friends or acquaintances. Answer categories were yes (1) or no (2).

In order to measure *membership of associations* participants scored several items related to a broad range of formal activities: social associations, cultural participation, voluntary work and political participation. Twenty-one possible social associations or clubs were presented to the respondents, varying from hobby clubs to associations for amateur practice of art, from anti-pollution organizations to fan clubs, from peace-associations to sports clubs ... Respondents could indicate whether they had never been a member (1), used to be a member (2), were currently a member (3) or whether they were in the board of the association (4). All items were summed and two continuous variables were created: 'number of memberships in associations' and 'number of board memberships in associations'.

### **Control variables**

The degree of urbanization is categorized according to the method of clustering municipalities developed by Lenders, Lauwers, Vervloet, and Selaers (2005). According to the degree of urbanization four categories were conducted: Urban (1), semi-urban (2), rural (3), and semi-rural municipalities (4). Next, age in years was a continuous variable and gender was coded 0= male, 1= female. The level of education of an older individual was dichotomized [0= low educated (secondary low or below), 1= high educated (secondary high or above)]. Marital status includes five answer possibilities [married, never married, divorced, cohabitation, and widow(er)]. The number of children respondents have is a continuous variable ranged from 0 to 11 children.



### Statistical analysis

Bivariate analyses were conducted to compare socio-demographic and social ties characteristics of volunteers, potential volunteers and non-volunteers. Statistical significance was tested with  $\chi^2$  – test. When the criterion of normality was not met, a non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis Test was used. Finally, a multinomial logistic regression was used to assess the relationship between several predictors' variables and a dependent, categorical variable with three (or more) categories (Field 2006). Both Wald Statistics and Odds Ratio's will be reported. Statistical analyses were carried out using the SPSS 19.0 software.

### Descriptive statistics

Table 1 illustrates that within the sample 13.8 per cent were volunteers and 14.1 per cent potential volunteers. Respondents ranged in age from 60 to 99 years with an average age of 71.5 years, 45.3 per cent of the respondents were men and seven in ten elderly people had a low level of education. Respondents who volunteered reported to have more contacts weekly to daily with their neighbors and friends (57.8% & 53.5%) in comparison to those who did not volunteer (47% & 41%). Moreover, the satisfaction with these contacts was also much larger than the dissatisfaction among volunteers (82.7% & 90.1%) and potential volunteers (78.3% & 86.6%). A higher percentage of those not volunteering (38.7%) reported to expect less support from their neighbors in comparison to those who did volunteer (49.3%). Finally, older persons who were volunteers had the most memberships (3), followed by the potential volunteers (1.8) and non-volunteers (1.2). The same tendency was discovered among older persons who were board members; volunteers were most often board members (1.0) compared to potential volunteers (0.2) and non-volunteers (0.1).

**Table 1. Descriptives (n= 59.977)**

			Volunteers	Potential volunteers	N
			13.8	14.1	
<b>Socio-demographic determinants</b>					
Age	<i>M (sd)</i>	71.5(7.9)	69.1(6.7)*	66.9(5.8)*	
Gender	Male (%)	45.3	47.0*	52.5*	
Level of education	Low (%)	71.0	50.8*	58.1*	
Marital status	Married (%)	69.6	74.0*	79.5*	
	Never married (%)	3.7	4.8*	2.6*	
	Divorced (%)	3.3	3.5*	4.9*	
	Cohabiting (%)	1.7	1.5*	2.1*	
	Widow(er) (%)	21.7	16.2*	10.9*	
Number of children	<i>M (sd)</i>	2.3(1.6)	2.4(1.5)*	2.2(1.3)*	
<b>Social ties</b>					

Quantity: weekly to daily	Family (%)	86.8	90.6*	88.6*
	Neighbors (%)	49.4	57.8*	51.9*
	Friends (%)	43.6	53.5*	45.4*
Quality: satisfaction	Family (%)	59.3	61.6*	59.6*
	Neighbors (%)	78.6	82.7*	78.3*
	Friends (%)	85.2	90.1*	86.6*
Quality: potential support	Family (%)	87.8	89.5*	91.2*
	Neighbors (%)	40.5	49.3*	45.5*
	Friends (%)	37.5	52.1*	46.6*
Membership	Members M (sd)	1.5(1.7)	3.0(2.2)*	1.8(1.8)*
	Board members M (sd)	.25(.8)	1.0(1.4)*	0.2(0.6)*

\* $p < .001$

## Logistic regression

### Volunteer versus non-volunteer

In this regression model, the highest standardized regression coefficient was observed for membership and board membership in associations and expecting support from friends.

The quantity of contacts on a weekly to daily bases with family members was positively related to the chance of being a volunteer. A predicted odd ratio of 1.182 implies that members are 18% more likely to volunteer than their peers who never to monthly have contacts with their family. In other words, the chance of being a volunteer increases when older adults have more contact with their family. Elderly people that have weekly to daily contact with their neighbors and friends have greater chances to volunteer their services than older adults who have contact never to monthly. In contrast, the quality of contacts older adults have was not significantly related to volunteering. Respondents who reported that they expect support from family were less likely to engaged in voluntary work. Elderly people that expect support from friends, on the other hand, are more likely to volunteer than their peers who do not expect support from their friends.

Finally, the membership and board membership of an association was positively related to the chance of being a volunteer. The chance of being a volunteer increases when older adults are member or board member of an association. However, board members of an organization are more likely to volunteer than their peers who are members.

Results of the control variables indicate that the chance of being a non-volunteer increases with the age and men are more likely to be non-volunteers. Older individuals with a low level of education have more chance of being a non-volunteer than older individuals with a high level of education.

Furthermore, being a volunteer was significantly higher for respondents without a partner (never married and divorcees). As for having children, the more children older individuals have, the more likely to be a volunteer.

### **Potential volunteer versus non-volunteer**

The highest standardized regression coefficients were found for membership and board membership in associations and the potential support from friends. Significantly higher levels of being a potential volunteer were observed for having contacts on a weekly to daily basis with their neighbors. In contrast with the volunteers having contacts with friends was not significantly related to being a potential volunteer. The quality of contacts was only significant for family. Older adults who have contacts with their family on a weekly to daily bases are less likely to be potential volunteers. Being satisfied with contacts with family increases chances of the willingness to volunteer their services.

Finally and in line with the findings of the volunteers, age was negatively associated with volunteering and men were more likely to be a willing to volunteer; whereas higher levels of education and elderly married and divorced people are more likely to be a potential volunteer.

**Table 2: Multinomial logistic regression (n=59.977)**

		Volunteer vs. Non-volunteer		Potential volunteer vs. Non-volunteer	
		Wald	Exp(B)	Wald	Exp(B)
<b>Social ties</b>					
Quantity of contacts	Family: Weekly to daily	6.055	1.182*	4.541	.883*
	Never to monthly	--	--	--	--
	Neighbors: Weekly to daily	10.557	1.143***	9.404	1.120**
	Never to monthly	--	--	--	--
	Friends: Weekly to daily	19.084	1.192***	NS	NS
	Never to monthly	--	--	--	--
Quality of contacts	Family: satisfied	NS	NS	8.862	1.112**
	Neighbors: satisfied	NS	NS	NS	NS
	Friends: satisfied	NS	NS	NS	NS
Quality: potential support	Family: Yes	6.221	.836*	NS	NS
	Neighbors: Yes	NS	NS	NS	NS
	Friends: Yes	19.841	1.203***	39.165	1.266***
Membership	Member	2295.492	1.578***	481.655	1.235***
	Board member	2603.363	3.453***	97.605	1.348***
<b>Control variables</b>					
Age		435.624	.943***	1396.216	.901***
Gender	Men	68.978	.733***	15.473	1.140***
	Women (ref.)	--	--	--	--
Level of education	Low	310.844	.524***	176.369	.643***
	High (ref.)	--	--	--	--
	Renter (ref.)	--	--	--	--
Marital status	Married	NS	NS	13.495	1.216***
	Never married	12.071	1.505***	NS	NS
	Divorced	5.805	1.300*	30.540	1.671**
	Cohabiting	NS	NS	NS	NS
	Widow(er) (ref.)	--	--	--	--
Number of children		19.522	1.058***	NS	NS

\* $p < .05$  \*\* $p < .01$  \*\*\* $p < .001$

## **Qualitative study**

### ***Qualitative data: Focus group***

Focus groups were conducted to obtain in-depth information about how people think about issues related to volunteering (Christensen, Johnson & Turner, 2011) and how ideas develop and operate within a given cultural context (Kitzinger, 2005). Participants were able to express opinions and ideas in a natural setting; participants were able to query one another and explain their answers to each other (Christensen, Johnson & Turner, 2011; Neumann, 2011). Semi-structured interview scheme was designed on the research questions and results from the quantitative survey.

Four municipalities were selected from the data collected in the BAS-project. The data gave us the opportunity to compare the 127 municipalities in terms of volunteering. To investigate a diverse group of settings two criteria were implemented: the rate of volunteering and degree of urbanization. Two municipalities with the highest percentage of volunteers and two municipalities with the lowest percentage of older volunteers were selected. A distinction was made between urban and non-urban municipalities. Both selection criteria are illustrated in the sampling grid. In the four municipalities twelve focus groups were conducted. In each municipality three focus groups were organized: the first with policy-makers, the second with people working in local organizations and associations, and the third with older people. The focus groups with policy-makers and focus groups with people working in local organizations and associations contained each seven to twelve participants. The four focus groups with older adults contained each seven to twelve volunteers and non-volunteers aged sixty and over.

In addition, we present the scores of different indicators regarding volunteering highlight differences among the municipalities.

### ***Analysis***

First of all, the focus groups were audiotaped, entirety transcribed and provide a verbatim account of the interview (McLellan, MacQueen & Neidig, 2003). All interviews were coded and analyzed using MAXqda 2007. The program employs a query tool that was used to retrieve quotations, based on the codes they were associated with during the coding process. The data have been coded using codes from the topic list of the semi-structured interview, as well as new codes that have been identified during the analyses of the focus groups, rather than decided a priori (Charmaz, 2006). Thereupon, codes have been clustered and defined into categories of similar themes to identify how these

themes were interrelated to one another (Neumann, 2011; Silverman 2001). The interview data were then re-read to refine and verify the key themes to achieve validity in the findings.

**Table 3: Descriptives 4 municipalities (n= 1663)**

		High rate of volunteers		Low rate of volunteers	
		Heusden-Zolder	Hove	Ternat	Wellen
Volunteers		20.5	25.7	7.3	6.8
Potential volunteers		14.6	13.4	11.2	15.6
Non-volunteers		64.9	60.9	81.6	77.6
Degree of urbanization		Non-urban	Urban	Urban	Non-urban
Age	<i>M (sd)</i>	71(7.8)	71.5(7.8)	72.1(8.2)	70.3(7.6)
Gender	Male (%)	46.4	46.7	44.3	47.4
Level of education	Low (%)	72	46.6	71.2	75.6
Marital status	Married (%)	70.1	73.9	70.1	75.0
	Never married (%)	3.1	2.0	2.9	3.2
	Divorced (%)	2.5	3.7	3.1	2.0
	Cohabiting (%)	0.2	0.2	2.4	1.2
	Widow(er) (%)	24.0	20.1	21.5	18.6
Number of children	<i>M (sd)</i>	2.6(1.7)	2.6(1.4)	2.2(1.8)	2.1(1.4)
Quantity: weekly to daily	Family (%)	90.1	84.6	86.0	89.0
	Neighbors (%)	57.5	42.2	47.9	55.6
	Friends (%)	47.9	42.0	38.5	52.6
Quality: satisfaction	Family (%)	97.1	97.2	93.9	94.4
	Neighbors (%)	77.3	81.5	80.5	79.6
	Friends (%)	85.3	90.2	84.0	86.1
Quality: potential support	Family (%)	87.3	88.2	86.2	83.5
	Neighbors (%)	38.9	32.3	33.4	37.6
	Friends (%)	37.6	31.0	33.2	35.2
Membership	Members <i>M (sd)</i>	*	*	*	*
	Board members <i>M (sd)</i>	*	*	*	*

\*footnote that  $\chi^2$  shows difference within the municipalities

## Findings

The literature on social ties suggests that having contacts with friends and neighbors, the quality of them, and membership in associations are important determinants for volunteering (see Smith, 1994; Musick & Wilson, 2008). The quantitative data as well as the interviews confirm these findings. During the interviews many respondents stressed the importance of having friends and neighbors who are active in organizations and in the community. The fact that they had their friends and/or neighbors who participated persuaded them to join. This was the same for numerous respondents who were not volunteering but gave out that if someone from the neighborhood or friends had asked them they would already have joined. Our findings partially support the findings of Musick and Wilson (2008) that relations must extend outside the family and immediate neighborhood. A possible explanation may be that people age in their environment and their spatial action radius decreases and that neighbors consequently act as a source of social activity and participation.

The qualitative findings point to two main themes: first, the cultural context influences the embeddedness of people in their municipality; second, the policy context influences the social life of a municipality.

## 1. Cultural context

### *New arrivals*

In Belgium there used to be no custom to move, new arrivals in a municipality used to be scarce in Belgium, but nowadays this phenomenon progressively increases. Nearly all respondents reported about the changes and influences new arrivals had brought into the social life of their municipality. Our findings reflect this tension through the four different municipalities, but in particular in Wellen. The residents of Wellen distinguished between people who are born and live all their life in the same municipality and people who entered the municipality at a later stage in their life. Problems related to social ties were linked to the closeness of a community. Different scholars in that respect argue about the reverse side of the medal of social capital (Aldridge et al., 2002; Field, 2003; Fukuyama, 2001; Portes, 1998; Putnam, 2000). Portes (1998) points out to the exclusion of outsiders, where strong ties exclude new individuals because of their very closed nature. In every focus group in Wellen people commented on the changing composition of their locality they had experienced regarding new arrivals and how it had affected the social life of their community.

People in Wellen have a closed outlook. Their social life is closed against new arrivals

(Older man/woman? In Wellen).

There is a difference between people who are new arrivals and people who

already live all their life in Wellen (Older woman in Wellen).

'New arrivals' is a phenomenon that occurs in every municipality. Besides Wellen, that makes a distinction between born Wellens and new arrivals, other municipalities also have difficulties dealing with new arrivals. People whose level of trust is limited can rule out outsiders (Fukuyama, 2001). Among respondents, this was illustrated by the following comments from an older man in Hove and older ... in Ternat:

There are a lot of newcomers in Hove, the majority of the people are not born in Hove. People find their own friends and they are not village-bound. Of course you know your neighbors, but when new people arrive I don't have the tendency anymore to get to know them. I'll always be friendly but no more than that anymore. These new people have another mentality, they don't want to integrate, be pulled in (Older man in Hove).

Wambeek (formerly independent municipality, now amalgamated with Ternat) is a closed community, everyone knows each other, they are more bound. But it is also not easy to enter the closed group in Wambeek (Old women/men in Ternat).

The impact of being a new arrival on the experience of exclusion from relationships was reflected in the comments of a 60 year-old woman in Wellen:

I already live here from 1971, but before retiring I didn't had a lot of contacts with the neighbors, people of the village. You work all day long, raise children, have a household to run, you never meet people. It's difficult to find your way to organizations as a newcomer, because you're not part of that social network. You don't have social ties within the municipality (Older woman, Wellen).

However, despite the adverse comments cited above, respondents would often express a desire to include new arrivals into their community. Many respondents expressed their affirmation regarding including new arrivals:

A lot of people leave the municipality and a lot of new arrivals arrive in our municipality. That makes it difficult to learn to know these people on a social level and to invite them to join volunteer activities. We lose these people (Frans, Ternat).

Every month we send a free copy of the 'Hovenaar' [monthly journal where all activities are announced and past activities are discussed in articles] to the new arrivals with a letter to welcome them and inviting them to subscribe (President of an organization, Hove).

### *Membership*

Formal social ties, such as ties to organizations, have been identified as a key factor for social integration within the community (Cornwell and Harrison 2004), and affecting the likelihood of volunteering (Harootyan, 1996). Previous studies have shown that especially older adults attach a lot of importance to membership of an organization because of their lost roles of being a parent and colleague (Warburton & Stirling, 2007). The importance of formal ties is illustrated through an older woman in Wellen and a board member in Ternat:

Since I'm retired I want to meet people and I've thrown myself between people, I joined an organization. I know a lot of people by their face, but not by their name, I don't know them personally. To get to know them I joined an organization (Older woman, Wellen).



I'm a new arrival and I think that organizations are very important. We don't have family here, so what do you do then? You seek for contact and I joined an organization (Board member, Ternat).

## **2. Policy context**

Besides formal participation in organizations there was an overall view in every municipality that municipalities nowadays also need to elaborate policy plans to enhance social life on a municipality level. Organizations and elderly people made clear that seen the demographic changes of a growing rate new arrivals and people leaving their municipality, policymakers should anticipate on that level. From this perspective Granovetter (1973) suggests that weak ties connect people and groups of people that do not really know each other and have the ability to bring more people in contact with each other. In line with Granovetter's perspective policy projects of a municipality can act as a bridging function of weak ties. The bridging function makes it possible to mobilize individuals socially, but also to establish the social structure of society. A policymaker of Heusden-Zolder points out that seen their history and demographic transformations they anticipate through a grant scheme for neighborhood barbecues.

'In every neighborhood we organize annually a barbecue, so that neighbors get to know each other. We want to cooperate on these ties by helping with organizing informal activities at a community level.'

Even though these barbecues take place in every municipality, they take place on a different level. Many respondents reported on these barbecues and the policy involvement along with it, how they had experienced it and how this had affected the social life in their community. The following extracts demonstrate the importance of policy actions:

There are a lot of new arrivals, but through our activities like barbecues, sports, etc. we have reached a lot of new people to volunteer in these activities (Woman, Hove).

Every year we organize neighborhood barbecues. I do know that it strengthens the social ties. It does increase the quality of it (Wellen).

Respondents also emphasized the consequences of organizing such activities on a local level. This was demonstrated by the following comments from:

These barbecues are a real good activity to get to know people from the neighborhood. These are good to invite new arrivals to activities. Asking is free (Wellen).

You need to approach these people [new arrivals]. Barbecues are perfect for that. These people don't dare to approach you (Wellen).

Whilst, some respondents reported positive outcomes, others expect more assistance from the policymakers and perceive these barbecues rather septic:

With these barbecues you know that you'll have 20 participants even though you've invited 100 people from the neighborhood (Older man, Heusden-Zolder).

We received subsidies of the municipality, for the first time it reassured us for doing it. If we wouldn't have that subsidy we wouldn't have done it (Older man, Heusden-Zolder).

Policymakers, people from organizations as well as elderly people indicated that barbecues are a good initiative regarding the integration of new arrivals. Besides policymakers, organizations and elderly people indicated that having barbecues is not enough; new arrivals should be guided into the new municipality.

We arrived here forty years ago, didn't know anyone, didn't know where to go. It would have been nice to have an authority/municipality that would have explained how things work. Now the municipality organizes it two times a year (Older man, Ternat).

It is important to have a staff member of the municipality that can guide people into corporate life and volunteer activities. Where people's services are needed. That person can act as an intermediate (Wellen).

*Sum up the 2 themes from the focus groups and how they give context and meaning to quantitative results.*

## **Discussion and conclusion**

This study is considered the thesis that social ties of elderly people are important predictors of volunteer behaviour. Although a great deal of work explores the relationship between elderly people and social integration with regard to volunteering, it is unclear to what extent volunteering relates to a range of measures of social ties connectedness. More specifically, the study dealt with the question of whether social ties predict volunteering among older persons and whether these social ties need to be formal or informal. Our findings indicate that for both volunteers and potential volunteers having contacts with neighbors frequently appears to be a significant predictor for volunteering and willing to volunteer. Experiencing valuable contacts with friends occurred to be essential for whether someone would volunteer their services or not. Having frequent contacts and being satisfied with these contacts may reflect that older adults are more aware of volunteer groups, activities, and actions that take place in the area and that the chances of being asked to contribute to voluntary activities increase. Besides having contacts a distinction needs to be made between the kind of contacts: formal and informal ties. The regression model demonstrates that being a member or board member of an association is the most substantial predictor for volunteering and willing to volunteer. The fact that people have contacts with people formally is crucial for gaining information on volunteer activities. Further, analyses demonstrate a difference between members and board members. Differences between both memberships can be seen from the point of view that members have ties based on quantity and that board members have qualitative ties. These ties show a distinction in the rate of people who volunteer their services. This result needs to be elaborated in future research.

Although the assumption of membership and board membership in an association turned out to act as a key predictor underlying the decision to volunteer or not, an understanding in terms of cultural and policy context must be put into perspective to gain insight into a broader framework. From this respect the third research question can be confirmed; social ties enclose barriers. Older people who volunteer or would like to volunteer do not only need to have social ties, but people need to be embedded into their community before being able to participate in community life. Findings of the qualitative research indicate that the decision to volunteer their services depends on elderly people's background. A major implication was if people were born and raised there or that they became a citizen later in life. People indicated that the fact that they were new arrivals made it difficult to enter community life, even though they have been residents for many years. New arrivals experienced the local community as closed and often felt excluded.

Many new arrivals emphasized, in turn, the importance of membership and policy activities. In light of this background formal ties, like being a member of an association, allowed people to integrate. Certainly for new arrivals formal social ties are important, these ties make it possible to develop informal social ties and to be embedded in the community. The qualitative data illustrates this clearly through the neighborhood barbecues organized in cooperation with the municipality. Nevertheless, one can join an association without having any social contacts, however, people also emphasized that joining an association without knowing a participant is very unlikely. It seems more likely to join when one knows a participant. Consequently, formal as well as informal social ties are necessary for the basis of the social infrastructure (Flora et al., 1997).

Not only are organizations significant for elderly people's engagement towards volunteering, but policy involvement also plays an influential role. New arrivals as well as residents born in the municipality expressed the need of policy involvement to integrate new arrivals on a local level. From this perspective formal ties not only include organizations but also local policy. Regarding the role of a local policy more research needs to be done to gain insight into the relation between new arrivals, participation and policy actions.

Several limitations of our study warrant further consideration. First, this research did not take socio-structural characteristics of the neighbourhood or municipality into account. Secondly, we could not research the social networks of elderly people because the survey did not ask about the number of people and how many of each type of contact their network contains. Finally, the social ties measures that were used in this study were based on self-report data and may entail the likelihood for psychological effect [the tendency to report consistently negatively or positively] (Bowling and Stafford, 2007). For example, respondents who were more optimistic may perceive their social contacts to be better.

Further research is needed in several areas within volunteering in later life. First, ageism needs to be elaborated to implement in a volunteer framework regarding elderly people. As Musick and Wilson (2008) discovered, when elderly people internalize images of older life as one of passivity and inactivity they are less likely to volunteer their services. This may be the case concerning older people who may be influenced by the negative images and discourses that surround aging (Arber & Evandrou, 1993). Research on volunteering too often targets individual determinants at the expense of environmental factors. More research needs to be continued on volunteering in later life and the relationship with place attachment. Volunteering is a local phenomenon that often takes place within a neighborhood or municipality. Are neighborhoods and or municipalities decisive for volunteering in later life? Thirdly, membership and board membership need to be investigated more thoroughly.

The study is innovative in terms of volunteering among elderly people and the relation with social ties. It does not only explain the importance of having ties but emphasizes also the importance of the context of elderly people's environment. Volunteering and social ties cannot be studied without taking consideration for the environment and context where elderly people reside. Our research suggests that policy involvement is crucial for the integration of people into the municipality. With support from the municipality and associations thresholds like a lack of social contacts on a local level and a sense of social exclusion can be reduced. Three themes may warrant when involving elderly people into volunteering and community life. Associations and elderly people put forward that municipalities should engage into social ties on a municipality level seen the demographic shift of the last decades. Moreover, policy makers could give extra value to these 'new arrivals day' through the involvement of organizations. Hence, new arrivals gain more inside into the construction of the municipality but also into the construction of the community life. Formal as well as informal contacts arise. Next, the growing group of potential volunteers should be approached more effectively. Approaching older potential volunteers should take place at a local level and a more diverse population should be addressed. Finally, the fact that people move places more frequently entails a different method for recruiting new volunteers. Not only municipalities need to organize specific activities and projects to integrate new arrivals, also organizations need to target new arrivals.

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