

# Volunteering Among Older People in Korea

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**Objectives.** Faced with aging societies, there is an immense need to better understand the nature of volunteering outside advanced Western industrial countries. As a case of a rapidly aging society, we identify robust factors associated with elderly volunteering in Korea in terms of a resource framework.

**Methods.** Data were derived from the Social Statistics Survey conducted by the Korea National Statistical Office in 1999 ( $N = 7,135$ ) and 2003 ( $N = 8,371$ ). We first determined overall and age-related volunteer rates for Korea compared to the United States. Using logistic regression, we then examined the effects of human, cultural, and social capital variables on volunteering.

**Results.** Approximately 6% of Koreans aged 65 years and older participate in volunteer programs. All human capital variables are positively related with volunteering. For cultural capital, those who identify their religion as Buddhism or Catholicism are more likely to volunteer than those who have no religion. But surprisingly, Protestantism does not consistently promote volunteering across both years. For social capital, older adults who live alone or with a spouse are more likely to volunteer than those living with both a spouse and children.

**Discussion.** In contrast to human capital, cultural and social capital on elderly volunteering appears to be contoured by social contexts.

IN 2002, the United Nations General Assembly resolved to promote volunteering to ameliorate social and economic malaise and enhance individual well-being (United Nations, 2001). Yet volunteers are still much needed in the areas of human rights, wildlife conservation, and community activism (World Volunteer Web, 2006). With increasing life expectancy, the role of older people and the policies that best promote productive aging become important issues (Cutler & Hendricks, 2001). Volunteering is not only beneficial for the well-being of the elderly volunteer (Greenfield & Marks, 2004; Lum & Lightfoot, 2005; Morrow-Howell, Hinterlong, Rozario, & Tang, 2003), but it generates public good. Given the international nature of this effort to encourage volunteerism, there is an immense need to better understand the nature of volunteering outside advanced Western industrial countries, particularly among rapidly aging societies such as Korea.

Koreans are aging as rapidly as the Korean economy grew after the Korean War (1950–1953). Experts project that Korea will have the fastest increase in the older population in the world (from 7% in 2000 to 14% in 2020; Kinsella, 2000) and one of the lowest fertility rates (1.16 in 2004). This dramatic population aging makes volunteerism a particularly timely subject for investigation. Interest in formal volunteerism in Korea has been relatively recent, if we define formal volunteering as unpaid work, arranged by organizations or conducted in organizations, that benefits others who are not neighbors, friends, or kin (Harootyan, 1996; Mutchler, Burr, & Caro, 2003; Wilson & Musick, 1997). Researchers can infer increasing support for volunteering in Korea from the proliferation of Korean newspaper articles that included the word *volunteering* in their titles between 1990 and 2003 (from 4 to 247 occurrences per year from a search of nine newspapers in

the Korean Integrated News Database System) and from the addition of volunteering requirements in middle and high schools in 1995 (Lee, 1999). However, little is known about volunteering among elders in Korea (Kim & Jung, 2003).

In the United States, there is a long tradition of volunteering; however, the combinations of the change in perceptions about older people, in growing volunteering opportunities provided by governmental and nongovernmental organizations, and in elderly cohort characteristics have elicited more favorable conditions for elderly volunteers since the 1960s (Chambre, 1993). Thus, although older people are less likely than middle-aged persons to volunteer, they volunteer more hours than any other age group (Hendricks & Cutler, 2004).

Wilson and Musick (1997) integrated factors associated with volunteering in terms of resource framework, which posits that not only facilitate individual involvement in volunteering but enhance volunteer opportunities. These resources consist of human capital (such as education, income, and health), cultural capital (such as values and attitudes), and social capital (such as group membership or family ties). Previous researchers have analyzed the following factors: higher education; income (Choi, 2003; Musick, Herzog, & House, 1999); occupational status, including part-time work; good health (Fischer & Schaffer, 1993); the importance of religion (Choi, 2003); and social association participation (Smith, 1994; Wilson, 2000).

Applying these resources to the Korean older adult population, however, may not seem entirely appropriate. First, Korean elders are not typically well equipped with human capital that would contribute to their volunteering. For instance, in our sample, 69% of men and 94% of women did not graduate from high school, and 54% rated their health as poor or very poor.

Second, religious values such as cultural capital (Wuthnow, 1991) are not well developed in Korea. Korean folk religions acknowledge many gods; people do not necessarily revere these gods, but they often invoke them as a means to solve current problems or to achieve present desires (Yim, Janelli, & Janelli, 1989). This traditional religion is the substrate upon which all successive religions in Korea have built, even though each religion dominated certain historical periods in succession (Grayson, 2002). For example, Korean folk religion was succeeded by Buddhism, and Buddhism lost its dominance to Confucianism. With the advent of the modern era, traditional Confucian values have in turn weakened, and Koreans have turned instead to Buddhism, Protestantism, and Catholicism, so that these religions now coexist with elements of folk religion in Korea. Of 54% of Koreans who say they have a religion, 47% are Buddhists, 37% Protestants, and 14% Catholics (Korea National Statistical Office, 2004).

Certainly, Buddhism or Christianity cultivates the ideas of generosity or love toward others. However, the survival and growth of these religions were contoured by Korean social and historical contexts, so that one cannot assume that the contents of these religions serve as a resource to support volunteering. For example, both Buddhism and Christianity have focused in Korea on the fulfillment of material wishes in this world under the influence of Korean traditional religion (Kim, 2002). In addition, their immense growth is related to their active borrowing of Confucian family values (Kim, 2000; Park, 2000), whereby the family is the main safety net for older people. Furthermore, religious organizations have grown immensely in number, but they have not fully functioned for “the provision of social services for the underprivileged” (Kim, 2002, p. 305).

Third, intergenerational coresidence may limit social capital or productive activities of older adults outside the family. The proportion of older people who lived in households with three or more generations was about 31%, though considerably decreased from 50% in 1990 (Korea National Statistical Office, 2005). The main support for older people has not been the welfare provision of the Korean government but the family. Older adults may therefore prefer to contribute their time and energy to the family—a natural choice, as they are accustomed to strong family ties.

In this article, we first establish a general picture of volunteering by age group in Korea for comparison with the same age groups in the United States. Next, we examine whether human, cultural, and social capital associated with volunteering among elders in the United States is equally important in Korea.

## METHODS

### Data

Korean data are from the Social Statistics Survey conducted by the Korea National Statistical Office in October 1999 and September 2003 (Korea National Statistical Office, 2000, 2004) and are independent cross-sectional samples selected to identify robust factors associated with volunteering. The survey, conducted either in person or self-administered, included 69,044 individuals aged 15 and older in 1999 and 70,489 in 2003. When comparing volunteering rates between Korea and the United States, we included data from all persons aged 16 and older.

U.S. data are from the Current Population Survey (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2005). We selected persons aged 65 and older in each survey in order to assess potential predictors of volunteering among elders. We inferred living arrangements from the interviews with each household member. When any household members were unavailable for interviews, we could not definitively assign living arrangements; we therefore deleted such cases (105 cases in 1999 and 215 cases in 2003). The samples included 7,135 persons in 1999 and 8,371 persons in 2003.

### Variables

*Dependent variable.*—Our dependent variable was a dichotomous variable of volunteering (yes = 1) in answer to the question “Have you done any volunteer activities during the past year?” There were six categories: (a) community-related activities, such as recycling or crime watching; (b) national or local formal activities, such as serving as a guide; (c) activities related to children; (d) volunteering in social welfare agencies and hospitals; (e) disaster relief; and (f) blood donation or consulting. About 90% of elderly Korean volunteers were involved in community-related activities (70%) or social welfare agencies and hospitals (20%), but only about 2% were involved in volunteering in activities related to children. Response categories differed slightly between the two surveys: There were three response levels in 1999 (yes, yes but not for the past year, no) and two (yes, no) in 2002. For consistency, we collapsed “yes but not for the past year” into “no” for 1999.

*Independent variables.*—We based our selection of variables on Wilson and Musick (1997). Human capital variables included education, house ownership within the family, work status, and self-rated health. We categorized education into five groups and treated these as a continuous variable (1 = no schooling to 5 = college graduate and more). We used dummy variables for home ownership (yes = 1) and work status during the past 7 days (employed = 1). Self-rated health status consisted of five categories (1 = very poor to 5 = very good) as a continuous variable. The cultural capital variable was religious identification and included self-identified Buddhism, Protestantism, Catholicism, and Other religion. The reference category was None.

We divided living arrangements (a social capital variable) more finely than did Wilson and Musick (1997). Our six categories were (a) single, (b) single with children, (c) single with others, (d) couple, (e) couple with children, and (f) couple with others. Single with children or couple with children could include other people. We assigned the couple with children category as our reference group because this living arrangement arguably has the most diverse connections through both spouse and children.

Age, gender, and place of residence are associated with volunteering and human, cultural, and social capital (Wilson, 2000); we included these variables as controls in the analysis. We grouped age into 5-year intervals. Gender and place of residence were dichotomous variables. We coded gender 1 for female and place of residence as 1 for not a central city.

Table 1. Elder Volunteer Rates by Age Group in Korea and in the United States

Country	Age Group						Total
	16–24	25–34	35–44	45–54	55–64	65+	
<b>Korea</b>							
1999	20.5	8.9	14.2	11.9	9.6	5.4	12.3
2003	26.9	9.2	14.1	13.5	10.2	5.6	13.6
<b>United States</b>							
2002	21.9	24.8	34.1	31.3	27.5	22.7	27.4
2003	24.1	26.5	34.7	32.7	29.2	23.7	28.8
2004	24.2	25.8	34.2	32.8	30.1	24.6	28.8

Notes: Korean data are from the Korean National Statistical Office (2000, 2004). U.S. data are from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2005).

### Data Analysis

We first determined overall and age-specific volunteer rates for Korea as compared to the United States. Using logistic regression, we then developed two models to examine (a) the effects of age on volunteering, controlling gender and place of residence; and (b) the effects of human, cultural, and social capital variables on volunteering, as well as their role on the relationship between age and volunteering. We limit our description here only to factors consistent in both years.

### RESULTS

Table 1 shows volunteer rates in Korea and in the United States. Survey questions for the two countries differed: The U.S. survey question from the Current Population Survey (“Since September 1st of last year, have you done any volunteer activities *through or for an organization?*”) was narrower in scope than the Korean question (“Have you done any volunteer activities during the past year?”). More specifically, the U.S. question only asked about formal volunteering, whereas the Korean question included both formal and informal volunteering. Because of the different classification activities of volunteering between the two countries, we limit our focus to changing patterns across age groups rather than absolute levels of volunteering for each age group (see Hayghe, 1991, p. 19 for a discussion of differences in volunteering rates).

The mean volunteer rate as of 2003 was 14% in the Korean sample and 29% in the U.S. sample for persons aged 16 and older. The data showed lower rates of volunteer participation among all age groups in Korea as compared to the United States, except among those aged 16–24. The higher rate among the 16–24 age group reflects the 1995 Korean policy requiring volunteer activities of middle and high school students. The 35–44 age group had the highest participation rate in both countries, but the rates of volunteering after age 35–44 declined more steeply in Korea than in the United States. The rate for the 65 and older age group in Korea was only 40% of the rate for those aged 35–44 in 2003, compared to 68% in the United States. In sum, Korean older adults are truly undermobilized for volunteering, even after considering low overall rates of volunteering in Korea.

Table 2 presents hierarchical logistic regression results from models of volunteering in 1999 and 2003. In each year, Model

1 included age groups controlling for gender and place of residence; Model 2 added human, cultural, and social capital variables. Overall, the volunteering rate decreased as age increased in both survey years, but the difference between those aged 65–69 and those aged 70–74 was not statistically significant. Furthermore, comparing Model 1 and Model 2 shows that introducing human, cultural, and social capital variables into Model 2 reduced age-group coefficients. This coefficient change suggests that individual resources mediated some of the age-group effects on volunteering.

All human capital variables were positively related with volunteering. More educated, healthier elders and older people residing in a home owned by any family member were more likely to volunteer. These effects were strong and robust across 1999 and 2003. With regard to cultural capital, those who identified their religion as Buddhism or Catholicism were more likely to volunteer than those who had no religion. For instance, in 2003, people who identified themselves as Catholic had 2.76 times the odds of volunteering as those who had no religion. But surprisingly, those who identified their religion as Protestantism or another religion did not show consistent behaviors in both years.

With regard to social capital, older adults who lived alone or with a spouse only were more likely to volunteer than those who lived with both a spouse and children. We reserve the interpretation of those living with others, due to their small sample sizes and compositional heterogeneity. Further analyses with alternative reference categories, although not presented here, revealed that older adults living alone were significantly more likely to volunteer than those living only with children; in comparison, the higher estimate for elders living alone than for those living with a spouse only was not statistically significant in 1999, although it was significant in 2003. Thus, it was the presence of children that reduced the likelihood of volunteering.

### DISCUSSION

Our effort in this study, although it will not solve comparability problems between the United States and Korea, attempted to promote comparative research between the United States and Korea. We first showed that about 6% of Koreans aged 65 and older participate in volunteering, which is a much lower percentage than that of Americans aged 65 and older. In Korea, older adults who are better educated, who reside in their own household, and who have better health are more likely to participate in volunteering. Also, individuals whose religious affiliation is Buddhism or Catholicism are more likely to volunteer than are individuals with no religious affiliation. However, older adults who live with both a spouse and children are less likely to volunteer compared with those who live with either a spouse or children only.

This study has several limitations. First, as with any survey based on self-report, there may have been problems with recall. Second, we could not incorporate past volunteer behaviors into our models, even though researchers have observed that such prior behaviors have an impact on intentions to donate time, money, and individual resources (Chambre, 1984; Lee, Piliavin, & Call, 1999; Mutchler et al., 2003). Third, although volunteerism is likely to be dependent on situational and contextual factors (Healy, 2000; Piliavin & Charng, 1990),

Table 2. Estimates of Binary Logit Models of Predicting Participation in Volunteering, Social Statistics Survey 1999 and 2003, Weighted

Variable	Model 1			
	1999		2003	
	OR	95% CI	OR	95% CI
Explanatory variables				
Age 65–69 (reference group)				
Age 70–74	0.799	0.632–1.011	0.808	0.651–1.002
Age 75–79	0.475***	0.345–0.655	0.600**	0.449–0.803
Age 80–84	0.059***	0.018–0.198	0.235***	0.134–0.410
Age 85+	0.115***	0.036–0.371	0.041**	0.006–0.273
Female (reference = male)	0.599***	0.487–0.739	0.438***	0.362–0.531
Not a central city (reference = central city)	1.965***	1.539–2.510	1.726***	1.400–2.127
–2LL	2832.304 (6)		3435.597 (6)	
N	7,135		8,371	
Model 2				
Explanatory variables				
Age 65–69 (reference group)				
Age 70–74	0.980	0.765–1.255	0.879	0.704–1.097
Age 75–79	0.626**	0.446–0.877	0.726*	0.535–0.986
Age 80–84	0.095***	0.028–0.318	0.325***	0.184–0.577
Age 85+	0.199**	0.061–0.653	0.059**	0.009–0.395
Female (reference = male)	0.741*	0.559–0.982	0.526***	0.408–0.677
Not a central city (reference = central city)	1.877***	1.437–2.450	1.711***	1.368–2.139
Human capital variables				
Education (1–5)	1.135*	1.026–1.257	1.165**	1.068–1.270
Self-rated health (1–5)	1.261***	1.129–1.407	1.357***	1.228–1.500
Home ownership	1.574*	1.115–2.223	1.782***	1.316–2.413
Cultural capital variables				
No religion (reference group)				
Buddhism	1.801***	1.383–2.346	1.610***	1.268–2.043
Protestantism	1.637**	1.159–2.312	1.234	0.920–1.654
Catholicism	3.469***	2.350–5.120	2.759	1.986–3.832
Other religion	3.220***	2.004–5.174	1.161***	0.647–2.082
Social capital variables				
Couple + children (reference group)				
Alone	1.929**	1.300–2.861	2.293***	1.612–3.262
Alone + living with children	1.112	0.736–1.679	1.054	0.700–1.587
Alone + living with others	0.973	0.388–2.441	1.462	0.654–3.271
Couple only	1.802***	1.328–2.445	1.624**	1.231–2.145
Couple + living with others	2.439**	1.458–4.080	1.680*	1.040–2.714
Work status (reference = not working)	1.613***	1.275–2.041	1.174	0.950–1.450
–2LL	2684.638 (19)		3285.163 (19)	
N	7,135		8,371	

Notes: OR = odds ratio; CI = confidence interval.

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

we could not incorporate contextual variables such as organizational features or community characteristics. Fourth, to the extent possible, we followed the indicators provided by Wilson and Musick (1997). However, we may have coded complex indicators such as religion or living arrangements differently. Finally, we could not incorporate important social capital factors, such as voluntary association participation, due to their autocorrelation to voluntary activity (our dependent variable) in cross-sectional data.

The effects of human capital variables, such as income or health, on volunteering appear to be consistent with findings for the United States. With regard to cultural capital, Korean religions by and large seem to broaden the helping behaviors

outside the family realm. However, it remains unclear why Protestants, as well as individuals of “other” religions, did not consistently show more volunteering than those who did not have any religion in 2003. It is also unclear why the overall religion effect was weaker in 2003. Self-identified religion may not be as good a measure of cultural capital as church attendance (Choi, 2003). For the social capital variable, the direct comparison was less certain because the studies of volunteering among elders in the United States often did not include the living arrangements of the older people. However, a greater number of household members reduced the likelihood of elders to volunteer in the United States, just as it did in Korea (results not shown).



As was found by Hendricks and Cutler (2004), who applied socioemotional selective theory (Carstensen, 1991, 1992) to volunteering, the greater involvement in volunteering among older adults living alone compared with elders living with a spouse and children may be interpreted as a search for social and emotional satisfaction. It also requires further attention to why living with children particularly suppresses volunteering among elders in Korea. In sum, our findings suggest that researchers should direct their attention to (a) the meaning of religion for elderly volunteers, and (b) the relationship between informal and formal volunteering (Burr, Choi, Mutchler, & Caro, 2005).

Although the need for volunteers is worldwide, less developed countries could especially benefit from volunteer efforts because those efforts may comprise one of the most important supplements to limited government resources in terms of supporting social integration and building civil society. But how can policy makers promote volunteering among older adults who lack human capital? Should policy makers develop ways to match volunteer opportunities to their interests or skills? Or should they ask that religious organizations assume a more active role to encourage volunteering?

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