

**Paper Number:** PA061123

**Paper Title:** Bridging the generation gap: A model of distance within volunteer organizations

**Author(s):**

Christiaan Gort, Civiq, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Utrecht, Netherlands

Linda Bridges Karr, CIVIQ, Erasmus University, Utrecht, NETHERLANDS

**Summary of Research**

This paper addresses intergenerational distance in volunteer organizations, including ways in which organizations incorporate younger and older volunteers into their operations. Specific aspects to be addressed include identification with and relative attractiveness of activities, issues, and structures of management and coordination. It elaborates a model of intergenerational distance and includes a narrative analysis of open interviews with older and younger volunteers in two organizations in the Netherlands. The paper offers insight into problems that are faced by organizations that work with volunteers from different age groups. The model may also be applicable to other dimensions of diversity in volunteer organizations.

**Description**

Research problem: Intergenerational distance in volunteer organizations. How to incorporate younger and older volunteers in the same organization. Identification with and relative attractiveness of activities or issues. Identification with management/coordinating structures.

Methods and data: Conceptual development. Narrative analysis of open interviews with older and younger volunteers in two volunteer organizations in the Netherlands.

Contribution to the field: The specific consideration of intergenerational distance in volunteer organizations can offer insight into issues that arise when organizations seek to work with volunteers from different age groups. The concepts may also be applicable to other dimensions of diversity in volunteer organizations.

**Abstract**

As the average age of their membership continues to climb, many volunteer organizations are currently facing the challenge of attracting more young people to join their ranks. In contrast to some views, however, this involves more than simply updating the organization's image and adopting fresh, new marketing approaches. The organization must prepare itself to incorporate any younger volunteers that it recruits. Organizations have essentially two options for doing so: 1) integrating younger and older volunteers in various phases of the organization's operations; 2) forming a separate "youth wing" of the organization.

This paper focuses on the first option. The integration of volunteers from different age categories can facilitate intergenerational learning and allow each category to strengthen and support the other(s). Nonetheless, intergenerational dynamics within an organization can sometimes generate and maintain conditions that are unfavorable for particular categories of participants (e.g., youth or older adults), thus impeding the (continued) participation of members of these categories. The paper addresses the concept of distance, which refers to the position of a particular group in relation to one or more other groups within an organization.

Considering age differences in light of distance allows the investigation of "bridges" that can facilitate interaction and cooperation among participants of various age groups. The focus of this paper is on distance between younger volunteers (16-24 years of age) and older volunteers (older than 55).

Distance within an organization refers to the relative positions of various parties within a particular

organization. Distance arises from differences between individuals, groups, or both. It can stem from such concrete characteristics as age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, sex, or area of expertise, as well as from such less tangible characteristics as perceived environment, values, interests, and power position. Differences do not necessarily create distance, however; on the contrary, cooperation is often based on differences, on the assumption that the other is able to contribute something new. In addition, not all differences are either noticed or relevant in a given setting.

In the classic sociological understanding, social distance refers to “the degree of intimacy and understanding” between individuals or social groups (Park, 1939). Within the context of cooperation in volunteer organizations, we define distance between categories as: the extent to which the members of one or both categories consider the members of the other category less trustworthy or competent, based on one or more relevant differences.

Various forms of distance may come into play in relationships between young and old volunteers. To appreciate the complexity of this relationship, we must consider the contexts within which these distances occur. The volunteer organization is one example of a context in which the distance between young and old people is affected by a variety of factors. For example, distance may arise between the older and younger volunteers themselves, as well as between the management of the organization and each of these groups, and even between these various parties and the content of the activities. The ways in which such distances are perceived vary by organization, and there is considerable diversity within each group. This paper focuses on general tendencies and differences, and how these aspects relate to younger and older individuals.

The first part of the paper consists of a theoretical elaboration of the concept intergenerational distance within volunteer organizations, drawing on generation theory, individualization, volunteer motivation, civil society, and current applied research on younger and older volunteers. The second part of the paper applies these theoretical concepts to a narrative analysis of open interviews with older and younger volunteers concerning their roles in two volunteer organizations in the Netherlands. Results are discussed within the context of possible ways of building bridges between categories of volunteers who are at some distance from each other.

Considering intergenerational distance within the context of volunteer organizations allows further insight into the issue of distance in volunteering and how it can affect relationships between younger and older people. In addition, aspects of management, task, and organization can be used to clarify differences between younger and older people and to build bridges between younger and older volunteers.

The concept of distance can be adapted to investigate interactions between other categories of volunteers as well, including sex, ethnic background, or lifestyle.

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