Altruism and Task Participation in the Elderly

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The purpose of this study was to investigate altruism as a factor in task participation among the elderly. The question was whether elderly persons are more likely to participate in an activity designed to help or benefit others than in an activity with no such altruistic purpose. Four groups of persons living in a home for the aged (N = 130) were invited to participate in a cookie-decorating activity. The invitations for two of the groups stated that the cookies would be a gift for a local preschool, and the invitations for the other two groups did not. Significantly more individuals (n = 25) chose to participate when the product of the activity was to be a gift for preschool children than when no altruism was involved (n = 14). Implications for occupational therapy practice and research are discussed.

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Occupation, as the word is used in occupational therapy, refers to activities and tasks that engage a person’s time, energy, and resources. Kiethofner (1980) suggested that the absence or disruption of occupation may produce a threat to health. He proposed that occupation could be an effective means for reorganizing behavior in the event of a biological or a psychological disturbance in health.

It is common for the elderly to experience disruption of occupation because of health problems or institutionalization. Winston (1981) noted a high incidence of reports of isolation, boredom, and lack of activity in institutions for the aged. She pointed out that although many institutions have activity programs, they are seldom tailored to individual physical, psychological, social, and economic needs. Reviewing studies of the elderly residing in nursing homes, Lieberman (1969) suggested that these residents share such characteristics as poor adjustment, depression and unhappiness, intellectual ineffectiveness, negative self-image, and feelings of personal insignificance. They tend to be docile and submissive, to show a small range of interests and activities, and to live in the past rather than in the future.

Numerous investigators have attempted to determine how participation in occupations is related to life satisfaction in the elderly. Havighurst, Neugarten, and Tobin (1968) noted a positive correlation between life satisfaction and activity level with increasing age. Similarly, Anantharaman (1979) found that the greater number of activities persons engaged in, the better adjustment they had in old age. A study by Graney (1975) confirmed research indicating that happiness is positively related to social participation in old age. Tobin and Neugarten (1961) conducted a study that demonstrated that social interaction is positively associated with life satisfaction in advanced age. Their findings suggested that with advancing age, engagement is more closely related to psychological well-being than is disengagement. These studies seem to indicate that continued occupational involvement is positively correlated with various measures of life satisfaction in the elderly. Kiethofner (1983) suggested that opportunities to pursue valued occupations should restore the morale of elderly persons, as well as exercise their physical capabilities.

It seems important to consider the intrinsic value a particular activity has for the individual as well as the number of activities he or she is engaged in. Gregory (1983) asserted that the meaning of the activity is of primary importance in producing satisfaction and helping individuals adapt to their environments. In a study of retirees, Gregory found a significant relationship between being occupied in purposeful activity and life satisfaction. Winston
(1981) also said that activities for the elderly must be
tailored to their interests and needs. Stafford and
Bringle (1980) suggested that engaging in activities
that are defined and acknowledged as worthwhile
should increase self-esteem in the elderly.

Of the activities having meaning or value for the
elderly, altruistic activities may have especially high
reward value. In a review of the literature related to
altruism, Krebs (1970) noted that researchers have
generally employed everyday definitions in their stud­
ies of the concept. These definitions most frequently
suggest that altruistic acts are ends in themselves (i.e.,
are not directed at gain), are emitted voluntarily, and
do good of some type.

In a survey on which activities elderly citizens feel
contribute to their general happiness and facilitate
their positive adjustment to growing older, Reid
and Ziegler (1977) found a high degree of emphasis
on the importance of helping other people in main­
taining happiness. For example, many respondents
said it made them happy to run errands for others.

A review of the recent literature revealed few
studies focusing on altruistic behavior and the elderly.
Trimakas and Nicolay (1974) investigated the altru­
ist behavior of elderly women in relation to self­
concept and social influence. They found that both
self-concept and social influence had significant im­
pacts on altruistic behavior. Subjects with high self­
concept scores were more altruistic than those with
low self-concept scores. Subjects under negative so­
cial influence were less altruistic than those under
positive or no influence. Volunteer work could often
be considered an altruistic act, and Perry (1983) noted
the existence of a significantly large group of older
persons willing to do volunteer work if asked. In a
discussion of elderly volunteerism, Hunter and Linn
(1980–1981) noted that volunteerism offers the par­
ts to the present study was to examine
whether elderly persons would be more likely to
participate in an activity if it was designed to help or
benefit other people than if it was not.

Method

Subjects. The 130 residents of a retirement home
in Kalamazoo, Michigan, served as subjects. They
ranged in age from 63 years to 104 years, with the
average age being 83.2 years. Twenty-four of the
residents were men and 106 were women. The aver­
age length of stay at the retirement home was 2.6
years. All residents were conscious, ambulatory, and
capable of independently participating in a craft activ­
ity.

Procedure. Subjects were individually invited to
participate in a holiday cookie-decorating activity.
Written invitations were distributed 2 days before the
activity date, and a verbal announcement was made
immediately before the activity time. Activity groups
were scheduled at times when few competing activi­
ties were offered.

In the altruism condition, subjects were asked to
decorate cookies that would be given to a local pre­
school. In the nonaltruism condition, subjects were
asked simply to participate in a cookie-decorating
activity. The cookie-decorating activity was selected
for its appeal and familiarity to elderly individuals
and because it required no special skills or extraor­
dinary physical exertion. The retirement home has
two wings, each made up of two floors. This physical
division was the basis for the formation of four activity
groups, two of which incorporated altruism and two
of which did not. All residents from two randomly
chosen floors were assigned to the altruism condition,
and all residents of the other two floors were assigned
to the nonaltruism condition. This method was chos­
en so that next-door neighbors would not be con­
cerned about receiving different types of invitations.
The use of four groups also enabled the two condi­
tions to be balanced for time of day. Because residents
were assigned to rooms in an essentially random
manner on initial admittance to the home, all floors
were comparable in terms of the physical and mental
status of the residents who lived there.

The following invitation was extended to each
subject in the altruism groups:

I am a graduate student in occupational therapy at Western
Michigan University. I'm doing a project which involves dec­
orating Valentine cookies. The cookies will be a surprise for
the children at a preschool in Kalamazoo. I could sure use
your help. Hope you can come.

This invitation made an appeal to altruism in two
ways. The subjects were asked to create a gift for a
group of children and were also asked to help the
researcher by agreeing to participate.

The invitations distributed to the subjects in the
nonaltruism groups read as follows:

I am a graduate student in occupational therapy at Western
Michigan University. I'm getting together a group of people
to decorate Valentine cookies. Won't you join us at the date
and time above?

Invitations for the altruism and nonaltruism
groups were identical except in wording. For each
group, the number of subjects participating was recorded.

Data Analysis. The chi-square statistic was cal­
culated to test the relationship of altruism to task
participation. Statistical significance was set at the .05
level.
Results
See Table 1 for a summary of the results. Computation of the chi-square statistic revealed a significant relationship between the altruism condition and activity participation, $\chi^2(1) = 3.96, p < .05$. Of the 39 subjects choosing to participate in the activity, 25 were in the altruism groups. No significant relationship was found between time of day and activity participation.

Discussion
This study demonstrates a significant relationship between altruism and task participation in a group of institutionalized elderly persons. The findings suggest that participation in altruistic activities is meaningful to older persons and that incorporating altruism in an activity may motivate some elderly individuals to participate. The results support previous work (Reid & Ziegler, 1977) that indicated elderly persons want the opportunity to help other people.

When working with the institutionalized elderly, occupational therapists are faced with the dual challenge of designing meaningful activities and motivating individuals to participate in them. The results of this study suggest that activity participation may be increased by incorporating altruism into the activity. The elderly desire responsible roles in society and feel the need to be depended on. It seems important, then, that these needs be considered in occupational therapy planning.

Although the majority of persons invited to participate in the activity groups in this study did not choose to participate, attendance in the altruism groups was higher than would normally be expected at the comparable activities regularly offered at this nursing home. Residents lead relatively independent lives and are busy with a wide variety of individual interests. The intent of the study was not to cause a majority to participate, but to demonstrate the existence of a factor that may serve as a motivator for activity participation.

This is the first study on altruism as a motivating factor in activity participation. It is a very short-term study of participation rates only. No consideration was made of the effect of altruism on length of participation or quality of the product of the activity. These and other factors remain to be examined. Such variables as who benefits from the altruistic act and the activity involved in the altruistic act could also be manipulated and studied. Finally, altruism should also be studied as an element of activity analysis in other populations treated by occupational therapists.

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References


