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.
(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 studies 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 maintaining 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. Trimmakas and Nicolai (1974) investigated the altruistic behavior of elderly women in relation to self-concept and social influence. They found that both self-concept and social influence had significant impacts on altruistic behavior. Subjects with high self-concept scores were more altruistic than those with low self-concept scores. Subjects under negative social 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 potential for increased life satisfaction, stronger wills to live, and fewer symptoms of depression, anxiety, and somatization than elderly persons who did not engage in volunteer work.

The purpose of 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 average length of stay at the retirement home was 2.6 years. All residents were conscious, ambulatory, and capable of independently participating in a craft activity.

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 activities were offered.

In the altruism condition, subjects were asked to decorate cookies that would be given to a local preschool. 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 extraordinary 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 chosen so that next-door neighbors would not be concerned about receiving different types of invitations. The use of four groups also enabled the two conditions 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 decorating 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 calculated 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


Table 1
Task Participation as a Function of Altruistic Quality of the Activity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>No. of Persons Participating</th>
<th>No. of Persons Not Participating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Altruism</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-altruism</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: \( \chi^2 (1) = 3.96, p < .05 \).