

# Pathways to Late-Life Volunteering: A Focus on Social Connectedness

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## Abstract

Utilizing a mixed-methods research design consisting of two consecutive phases, this study investigates older adults' perceptions and understanding of social connectedness factors influencing late-life volunteering. In the first phase, quantitative data from the Belgian Ageing Studies project ( $N = 24,508$ , from 89 municipalities) was analyzed through regression modeling. In the second, qualitative phase, focus groups with older people were conducted in each of the six research locations, to elucidate and build on the quantitative results. The research findings indicate that formal connectedness is highly influential for both the potential to volunteer and actually doing so. Membership of an association and being a new resident are key determinants for volunteering in later life. Moreover, local policy also functions as an important bridge between long-term residents and new residents in terms of the social structure of the society and the extent to which people are integrated into the community.

## Keywords

volunteering, social connectedness, mixed methods, potential volunteers, older people

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## Introduction

The 21st century faces the challenge of an aging population, a consequence of reduced fertility combined with a decline in old age mortality (Bytheway, 2011). By 2050, in Europe, the number of citizens aged 60 years or more is estimated to reach 35% of the population (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 2017b). The rising proportion of older persons in the total population has profound implications for a wide range of social, economic, and political processes (Börsch-Supan et al., 2013), with approaches such as “healthy and active aging” gaining increasing attention on the global political agenda (Beard et al., 2016). The World Health Organization redefined health and active aging in 2015 by defining healthy aging “that centers on the notion of function ability: the combination of the intrinsic capacity of the individual, relevant environmental characteristics, and the interactions between the individual and these characteristics” (Beard et al., 2016, p. 2145). This interaction can also be conceived of as participation, with volunteering a common form of it (i.e., social roles that go beyond paid employment; Scharf, Phillipson, Kingston, & Smith, 2001).

As social roles and networks both appear to be highly predictive in the decision to volunteer, and because more research is needed on the relevant social context, social roles, and social networks (Einolf & Chambré, 2011), the aim of the present study is to explore this interaction between the individual and their environment by analyzing if and how social connectedness affects the process of (potential) volunteering in later life. Prior research has established that the dynamics of decision making change over people’s life courses (Warburton & Gooch, 2007; Wilson, 2012). For instance, the desire to remain active and to help others are more prevailing motives for older adults, while instrumental goals, such as developing skills and career advancement, are more important for younger and middle-aged adults (Okun & Schultz, 2003). On the contrary, older adults are less likely to be asked to volunteer (Independent Sector, 2001).

Volunteering in later life is perceived as a pathway to an engaged lifestyle for older adults and, as such, has been emphasized in contemporary gerontological theories such as “productive aging,” “healthy aging,” “successful aging,” and “active aging” (Boudiny, 2013; Chambré & Netting, 2016). More generally, it is a universal activity within the adult population and can be defined as “donating time without payment under the auspices of nonprofit organizations and government agencies” (Chambré & Netting, 2016, p. 2). Specifically, it is an important civic activity that older adults can perform during retirement (Chambré & Netting, 2016; Morrow-Howell, 2010) and has been shown to be beneficial to the individual, the community, and the wider society (Greenfield & Marks, 2007).

Conceptualizations of volunteering also differ by political context and culture (Anheier & Salamon, 1999). Belgium is the setting for the present study and is the 25th oldest country in the world in terms of population structure. Within its population, 24.6% are 60 years old or older (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 2017b). Also, in Belgium, compared with other

European countries, a high percentage of older adults is married (Hank & Wagner, 2013): that is, 56.6% are married, 26.9% are widowed, 11.08% are divorced, and 5.46% are unmarried (Statbel, 2018). In addition, the proportion of older people living independently is also very high in Belgium, and, of these, 77.6% live independently (alone or with a partner) in a single-family house, apartment, or studio. Only a small minority lives together with their children (15.8%; United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 2017a). Another study establishes that in 2014, 8.8% older adults lived in long-term care facilities (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development [OECD], 2019).

Belgium also has a high percentage of young retirees: 61.3 and 59.7 years are the average ages for men and women to leave the labor force, respectively (OECD, 2017), while the mandatory retirement age will be 65 in 2025 and 67 years in 2030. According to Hustinx, Marée, De Keyser, Verhaeghe, and Xhaufclair (2015), 10.3% of Belgian people aged between 61 and 76 years old volunteer. A “Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe” (SHARE) compared 12 European countries with respect to volunteering, and Belgium was found to have a medium rate of older adults who volunteer (Haski-Leventhal, 2009). Furthermore, in Belgium, people perceive volunteering as an activity freely chosen, through a formal organization, and in the proximity of the beneficiaries, but accepting nonmonetary benefits is not experienced as a violation, in contrast to the experience of volunteers in other Western European countries and regions (Meijs et al., 2003).

Previous studies have predominantly focused on how individual resources affect volunteering in later life (Morrow-Howell, 2010; Musick & Wilson, 2008), with examples of such resources, including education, income, and health (Dury et al., 2015). Current research, however, overlooks the social context of individuals (Martinson & Minkler, 2006), even though it has been established that people assess their environments and make decisions regarding voluntary participation based on context (Choi, 2003). Having contact with friends, for instance, appears to be a stronger predictor for actual and potential volunteering than older adults’ individual characteristics and resources (Dury et al., 2015). Likewise, being socially integrated increases the chances of being aware of volunteer opportunities or being asked to volunteer (Neymotin, 2016; Okun & Michel, 2006; Yörük, 2008).

Social connectedness, as one theory of volunteering, has been shown to predict people’s decision to volunteer (Lim, 2008; Paik & Navarre-Jackson, 2011). Withal, it appears to have a stronger correlation compared with other theories of volunteering (such as individual characteristic theories on sociodemographic characteristics, motives, and values, and resource theories on choices, skills, and free time; Einolf & Chambré, 2011). As a concept, “social connectedness” refers to the quantity and quality of relationships in social and associational networks (Lancee & Radl, 2012). Despite the evidence for the value of social connectedness and volunteering in old age, though, two substantial gaps in the research pertaining to this age group remain.

The first concerns the types of social connectedness that influence the decision to volunteer (Musick & Wilson, 2008; Paik & Navarre-Jackson, 2011): How do informal

(i.e., social networks) and formal connectedness (i.e., associational networks) promote or hinder volunteering in later life? The current literature lacks insight on whether informal and/or formal connectedness is most influential in whether an individual is willing to volunteer (Paik & Navarre-Jackson, 2011).

The second research omission is that no prior studies, except for the study of Paik and Navarre-Jackson (2011), have examined whether social connectedness is conditional on the willingness to volunteer. The majority of the research has been on people who are already volunteering, which means that there is an insufficient understanding about people who are willing to volunteer (Dury et al., 2015). Hence, research lacks information on whether the effects of informal and formal connectedness are conditional on (not) being asked to volunteer or (not) start volunteering.

### ***Social Connectedness***

In studying social connectedness, it is important to acknowledge that definitions of the term differ from author to author, depending on the varying perspectives of their research paradigms (Kohli, Hank, & Kunemund, 2009) and their research contexts. This leads to theoretical and methodological ambiguity (Carpiano, 2006). In the social sciences, for example, many researchers refer to the concept of social capital (Granovetter, 1983; Putnam, 2000), whereas others use related concepts, such as social integration (e.g., Lee & Brudney, 2010; Paik & Navarre-Jackson, 2011) or social resources (Lin, 2001; Musick & Wilson, 2008). These terms are just a few out of many that describe concepts related to social connectedness, and most have been contested owing to the lack of definition (Jeannotte, 2008).

In the present study, social connectedness is defined as participation in social life, referring to the quantity and quality of relationships in social and associational networks (Lancee & Radl, 2012). Many aging studies distinguish between “informal connectedness” (e.g., frequency and quality of social networks—Musick & Wilson, 2008) and “formal connectedness” (e.g., membership in associations—Kohli et al., 2009; Putnam, 2000). This division is also a common practice in the wider social capital literature (Lancee & Van de Werfhorst, 2012; Musick & Wilson, 2008), and is further elucidated in the remainder of this section of the present article.

Informal connectedness comprehends the frequency and satisfaction of contact with family, neighbors, and friends. It encompasses informal interactions, connections, and alliances with others (Campbell & Lee, 1992). Research has shown that older adults who maintain wide-ranging informal ties are associated with an increased likelihood of volunteering (e.g., Dury et al., 2015; Lee & Brudney, 2010). For instance, people who have frequent contact with their neighbors have been found to be more likely to volunteer (Wilson & Son, 2018). Yet, contact such as simply saying “hello” is rather superficial, and no relationship has been found for neighbor engagement such as having a conversation or social get-togethers (Wilson & Son, 2018). Relatedly, volunteers are also more likely to have other volunteers in their social circle (Nesbit, 2013; Warburton, Terry, Rosenman, & Shapiro, 2001). Befriended volunteers are powerful recruiters and provide information that manages the expectations of potential

volunteers (McNamee & Peterson, 2016). Yet, having friends who volunteer does not appear sufficient to make people start volunteering (Musick & Wilson, 2008). On the contrary, having supportive family members increases organizational connectedness and encourages people to remain volunteering (Huyh, Xanthopoulou, & Winefield, 2013; Nesbit, 2013).

The second type of social connectedness—formal connectedness—describes bonds that older adults have because of membership in an association (Brown & Ferris, 2007; Cornwell & Harrison, 2004). Members of associations are typically demographically homogeneous (Baggetta, 2016). Through being the member of an association or organization, people develop networks of friends and acquaintances (Baggetta, 2009; Brown & Ferris, 2007; van Ingen & Kalmijn, 2010; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995) as well as develop civic skills, and consequently they are often asked to participate in other activities such as volunteering (Verba et al., 1995). These types of activities are often social, as both types of activities imply a sociable and civic nature (Brown & Ferris, 2007; Verba et al., 1995). Moreover, a U.S. study found that baby boomers who had been asked by an organization are more likely to remain volunteering (70.5%) compared with those asked by their employer (53.9%) (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2007).

It is thought that organizational membership increases the likelihood of volunteering because membership is a way to integrate into the community and to be asked to volunteer therein (Cornwell & Harrison, 2004). Adults who have strong social and communal ties tend to act out such commitments as volunteers (Jones, 2006; Sills, 1957). Likewise, norm-based social capital, such as having trust in others and civic institutions, is strongly related to increased volunteering (Brown & Ferris, 2007; Daniels, 1985). In addition, group membership proves to be important when the primary networks of paid work and family cease, which is especially the case in later life (Warburton & Stirling, 2007). For example, later life often entails role losses in partnership and parental statuses (Greenfield & Marks, 2004).

Furthermore, associations often indicate that volunteering is one of the obligations of membership (Wuthnow, 1998). However, a study on political activists revealed that formal ties generated through civic associations may not be more effective than other types of ties in terms of recruiting volunteers. In fact, the content of relationships rather than their strength would appear to be more important with regard to recruitment (Lim, 2008).

## **Research Aim**

The specific objective of this study is to identify the ways in which social connectedness can either promote or hinder volunteer participation in later life. Studies on social connectedness are often based on quantitative data, frequently leading to the impossibility of locating micro-processes of social engagement within the wider social context (Victor, Scambler, & Bond, 2008). This study, therefore, draws together both quantitative and qualitative data in a mixed-methods explanatory sequential design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007) in two consecutive phases. First, quantitative data are

used to identify which indicators of (informal and formal) social connectedness are significantly associated with volunteering in older adults. In addition, these quantitative data were used to purposefully guide the selection of six study locations (see “Data and Method” section for details). Second, a qualitative study was performed to investigate older adults’ perceptions and understanding of social connectedness factors influencing late-life volunteering. The mixed-methods explanatory design allows us to explore the following research questions.

In the first *quantitative* phase of the study, the research question is as follows:

**Research Question 1:** Does social connectedness predict (potential) volunteering among older persons and, if so, which is the most influential: informal (family, friends, or neighbors) or formal (membership in associations) connectedness?

In the second phase, the following *qualitative* research question is addressed:

**Research Question 2:** How do older adults experience their social connectedness? Does this affect their (potential) volunteering and, if so, why is this the case?

Finally, the *mixed-methods* explanatory design allows us to explore the following research question:

**Research Question 3:** In what ways do older adults’ experiences of social connectedness help to clarify the processes underlying variations in (potential) volunteering between the different research locations?

## Data and Method

We applied a mixed-methods explanatory sequential design “to obtain different but complementary data on the same topic” (Morse, 1991, p. 122), to understand the research problem as well as possible answers. Following this model, we collected and analyzed quantitative and qualitative data on the same phenomenon; subsequently, the different results were converged (by comparing and contrasting the different results) during interpretation (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). In each of the selected study locations, qualitative data were gathered to explain and build upon initial quantitative results.

### *Quantitative Data Generation and Analysis*

The analyses were performed on data originating from the Belgian Ageing Studies project, a survey that evaluated aspects of the quality of life and living conditions of home-dwelling people aged 60 years and above (e.g., social contacts, volunteering, membership of associations, potential support). The present study used cross-sectional data from 24,508 respondents in 89 municipalities in the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium (Flanders). The Belgian Ageing Studies survey data were collected

through peer research, a participatory methodology that embraces older adults not only as the researched group but also as active researchers, by involving them in every step of the project. For instance, older adults themselves were responsible for the data collection. In every municipality, 30 to 80 older volunteers were recruited and trained to facilitate and monitor the data collection process; one of their main tasks was delivering questionnaires to respondents personally and collecting them when they were completed. When collecting the questionnaire, the volunteer was trained and allowed to clarify the meaning of questions; however, the questionnaire was developed to be self-administering. Respondents were also assured of the voluntary nature of their involvement in the study and the privacy of their responses. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and no remuneration was offered. The first response rate per municipality varied between 65% and 85%. To reduce the potential bias of nonresponses, replacement addresses in the same quota category from an additional sample were used. In every municipality, the same research protocol was followed.

In each of the participating municipalities, a representative sample was randomly selected from the census records. A proportionally stratified sampling method was applied per municipality, using gender and age (60-69, 70-79, and 80 years and above) as stratification variables. The rationale, and one of the advantages of this specific sampling method, was the assurance of the proportional presence of the most vulnerable age group (80 years and above). The entire methodology of the study is described in De Donder et al. (2014).

For the present study, we used data collected between 2007 and 2011. Cases with missing responses to the main measures were excluded, leading to a sample size of 24,508 respondents from 89 different municipalities. Descriptive characteristics of the survey respondents are presented in Table 1. The mean age of respondents was 70.7 years (range = 60-99), of whom 53.6% were female. The majority of respondents (75.2%) were married, 19.5% were widowed, and 3.0% were divorced, while 86.6% owned their homes.

**Quantitative measures.** The dependent variable was based on two questions. First, respondents were asked whether they had volunteered during the previous 12-month period. If they had, they were asked which type of voluntary work they had performed, referring to a list of 10 different categories of activities with organizations. These categories were as follows: recreational, manual labor, keeping company, domestic, educational, caring in hospices, sociocultural, administrative, social, and managerial. Respondents who indicated at least one of these activities were classified as volunteers. Those who reported no volunteering were asked whether they were willing to volunteer in the near future, leading to a distinction between nonvolunteers and potential volunteers. Therefore, the categorical dependent variable comprised three values: volunteers, potential volunteers, and nonvolunteers.

Informal social connectedness and formal social connectedness were the independent variables. Two variables related to informal social connectedness were considered: frequency and satisfaction with contacts. To measure the *frequency of*

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics for Dependent and Independent Variables (N = 24,508).

Variable	Range	$\alpha$	%/M (SD)	Actual volunteers	Potential volunteers	Nonvolunteers
Dependent variable				16.0%	15.7%	68.3%
Demographics						
Age	60-99		70.7 (7.6)	68.8 (6.4)	66.7 (5.6)	72.0 (7.8)
Gender						
Male	0-1		47.4%	48.8%	53.2%	45.8%
Level of education	0-10		4.7 (2.8)	5.9 (2.8)	5.4 (2.8)	4.2 (2.7)
Physical health	1-2	.89	1.7 (0.3)	1.8 (0.3)	1.8 (0.3)	1.6 (0.4)
Marital status						
Married	0-1		75.2%	78.7%	83.1%	72.5%
Never married	0-1		0.8%	1.0%	0.8%	0.8%
Divorced	0-1		3.0%	3.3%	4.8%	2.6%
Cohabiting	0-1		1.5%	1.4%	2.1%	1.5%
Widowed	0-1		19.5%	15.6%	9.3%	22.7%
Homeownership						
Owner	0-1		86.6%	91.0%	90.3%	85.6%
Social connectedness						
Informal connectedness						
Frequency: Weekly to daily						
Nuclear family	0-1		88.6%	89.3%	89.2%	88.3%
Extended family	0-1		38.1%	39.6%	38.8%	37.6%
Neighbors	0-1		52.0%	59.4%	54.1%	49.7%
Friends	0-1		45.6%	54.4%	46.6%	43.2%
Satisfaction: Satisfied						
Nuclear family	0-1		99.7%	99.9%	99.8%	99.7%
Extended family	0-1		83.6%	86.8%	85.2%	82.5%
Neighbors	0-1		81.0%	84.9%	80.8%	80.1%
Friends	0-1		88.5%	92.7%	89.4%	87.3%
Formal connectedness						
Membership association						
Member	0-2		53.6%	42.7%	60.5%	54.6%
Board member			17.2%	51.5%	16.2%	9.4%
Nonmember			29.2%	5.8%	23.4%	36.1%

The values in parentheses refer to standard deviation (SD) values.

*informal connectedness*, respondents were asked how often—coded “0” (never to monthly) or “1” (weekly to almost daily)—they had contact (i.e., visiting someone, receiving a visit, or speaking on the telephone) with social connections, who were categorized as follows: “1” = nuclear family (children or children-in-law and grandchildren), “2” = extended family (brothers, sisters, and other relatives), “3” = neighbor, and “4” = friend or acquaintance.



The *satisfaction of informal connectedness* was measured through the question, “To what extent are you satisfied with your contacts with the following people?” with responses coded “0” for dissatisfied or “1” for satisfied in relation to the following social connections: “1” = nuclear family (children or children in-law and grandchildren), “2” = extended family (brothers, sisters, and other relatives), “3” = neighbor, and “4” = friend or acquaintance.

To measure formal connectedness—*membership and board membership of an association*—21 possible social associations or clubs were presented to the respondents, varying from hobby clubs to associations for the amateur practice of art, and from anti-pollution associations to sports clubs. Responses were categorized as “0” (nonmember), “1” (member), or “2” (board member).

As control variables, we used age, gender, level of education, physical health, marital status, and homeownership, given that these have been shown to have significance for volunteering in earlier studies (e.g., Dury et al., 2015). *Age* ranged between 60 and 99 years old, with a mean of 70.7 years. *Gender* was coded as a dummy variable: 0 = female and 1 = male. *Level of education* was measured using the highest educational qualification on a 10-item response scale ranging from “no degree” to “university degree.” A measure of *physical health* (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .89$ ) was developed in accordance with the manual of the Medical Outcome Scale Short Form General Health Survey (Kempen, Brilman, Heyink, & Ormel, 1995), the continuous scale that ranged from 1 (“worse physical health”) to 2 (“better physical health”). *Marital status* was coded as 0 = never married, 1 = divorced, 2 = cohabiting, 3 = widowed, and 4 = married. Homeownership was coded as a dummy variable: 0 = tenant and 1 = homeowner.

**Quantitative analysis.** First, a multicollinearity analysis was performed to eliminate correlated predictors (Variance Inflation Factor [VIF] > 2.0). Second, a multinomial logistic regression analysis was conducted and reported by odds ratios (ORs). Given the large sample size, a stricter significance cutoff of .001 was applied for all analyses (Pallant, 2016). Statistical analyses were carried out using SPSS 22.0 software.

### **Qualitative Data Generation and Analysis**

Qualitative data were collected through focus groups to obtain in-depth information on how people think about issues related to volunteering and social connectedness, and how ideas develop and operate within a given cultural context (Christensen, Johnson, & Turner, 2011). Despite the fact that confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus groups, they were selected to organize the six data collection points for several reasons. First, focus groups aim to interactively encourage and generate understanding in a variety of insights of participants regarding the research issues (Krueger & Casey, 2015), such as their attitudes, behavior, opinions, or perceptions (Hennink, 2007). Second, focus groups appear to eliminate the power imbalance that might occur in individual interviews due to the “authoritative voice” of the investigator. Subsequently, respondents of focus groups appear less reluctant to

discuss issues, and other topics are possibly offered that may not be discussed during an individual interview (Liamputtong, 2011).

To guarantee a variety of volunteering environments, six municipalities were selected from the quantitative data set (see Table 2): the two municipalities with the highest rate of volunteer participation, Hove (25.1%) and Heusden-Zolder (23.1%); two with a medium rate of volunteering, Beersel (13.7%) and Ieper (16.4%); and the two with the lowest rate of volunteer participation, Ternat (7.6%) and Wellen (7.7%). Frequency of contact with neighbors was the highest in Heusden-Zolder (60.5%), and the lowest percentage was in Hove (41.3%). Satisfaction of contact with friends was the highest in Hove. Membership in an association was also the highest in Hove (59.9%) and the lowest in Wellen (42.4%). The highest percentage of divorcees was in Beersel, with 4.1%, and the lowest percentage was in Wellen (1.5%).

In total, six focus groups were conducted. For each of the six research locations, one focus group (with a note-taker) was undertaken with a heterogeneous group of older, retired volunteers and older, retired nonvolunteers. Recruitment of respondents ( $n = 53$ ) was carried out through both formal and informal contacts by officials of the community council and the social service department; relevant community organizations, including social service centers and voluntary organizations; and through older adults asking acquaintances or people from their association or organization. The sample is summarized in Table 3. Every focus group had between seven and 12 participants. In every focus group, the proportions of men and women were equal. With regard to the age of the participants, the mean age for every group ranged from 65 to 70 years old. Volunteers as well as nonvolunteers were included in every group, and the latter numbered between one and five.

*Qualitative measures.* For the focus groups, we used a topic list covering participants' experiences of living in the municipality (e.g., "Do you know where you can volunteer in your municipality?"), (informal and formal) social connectedness in the municipality (e.g., "With whom do you have contact and why?"), and how this had an impact upon their volunteer participation (e.g., "How did you become a volunteer?").

*Qualitative analysis.* All focus groups were audiotaped, and these records were in turn transcribed (McLellan, MacQueen, & Neidig, 2003). We used a hybrid approach of inductive and deductive thematic analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). For the deductive analysis, we used a priori variables from the quantitative section as the main labels. To detect sublabels, inductive analysis was used. New themes that emerged from the focus groups in the analysis were allocated a sublabel. Subsequently, codes with similar themes were clustered and organized into thematic categories to identify how these themes were interrelated (Neuman, 2011). The focus group data were then re-read to refine and verify the key themes and achieve validity in the findings. To increase the credibility of the findings, the coding frames and strategies were subjected to interrater reliability. Interrater reliability was performed in which a systematic review was made by the principal investigator and then refined through a process of

**Table 2.** Characteristics of the Six Selected Municipalities.

Variable	M	Highest rate of actual volunteers		Medium rate of actual volunteers		Lowest rate of actual volunteers	
		Hove	Heusden	Beersel	Ieper	Ternat	Wellen
Volunteers	15.0%	25.1%	23.1%	13.7%	16.4%	7.6%	7.7%
Potential volunteers	13.0%	11.0%	9.8%	12.3%	12.4%	8.9%	13.0%
Nonvolunteers	72.0%	74.9%	67.1%	78.3%	71.1%	83.5%	79.3%
<b>Objective characteristics<sup>a</sup></b>							
Number of inhabitants	27,464	8,307	31,017	23,433	34,949	14,964	7,265
Population density	600	1,391	588	786	267	604	266
Population turnover	1.67	0.60	1.36	1.37	0.82	1.18	0.62
<b>Social connectedness<sup>b</sup></b>							
<b>Informal connectedness</b>							
Frequency: Weekly to daily contact							
Nuclear family	85.9%	86.1%	90.3%	83.9%	85.4%	84.2%	87.1%
Extended family	37.6%	26.4%	41.5%	33.2%	29.5%	36.6%	48.9%
Neighbors	51.0%	41.3%	60.5%	44.9%	45.8%	48.9%	54.2%
Friends	44.9%	40.4%	48.6%	42.6%	41.8%	41.1%	50.3%
Satisfaction with contacts: Satisfied							
Nuclear family	95.5%	98.6%	97.8%	97.3%	95.2%	94.0%	93.9%
Extended family	79.3%	81.3%	82.4%	74.6%	80.6%	73.9%	81.1%
Neighbors	78.9%	82.3%	82.7%	76.3%	82.6%	79.3%	79.0%
Friends	85.3%	92.2%	88.8%	86.9%	89.1%	83.9%	86.2%
<b>Formal connectedness</b>							
Membership association							
Member	53.1%	59.9%	51.1%	45.8%	54.9%	48.3%	42.4%
Board member	15.8%	17.1%	23.8%	10.2%	16.9%	11.2%	21.2%
Nonmember	31.1%	23%	25.1%	44%	28.2%	40.5%	36.4%
<b>Individual characteristics</b>							
Age	71.5	71.6	71.6	72.3	71.3	71.9	71.5
Gender							
Male	46.8%	46.4%	46.3%	48.8%	44.9%	45.6%	47.4%
Education							
High	28.5%	54.3%	22.6%	41.5%	22.3%	27.4%	20.1%
Physical health	1.68 (0.4)	1.76 (0.3)	1.67 (0.4)	1.68 (0.4)	1.65 (0.3)	1.65 (0.4)	1.62 (0.4)
Marital status							
Married	72.7%	76.5%	71.5%	74.2%	69.2%	74.9%	76.3%
Never married	3.6%	2.1%	3.1%	2.2%	4.8%	2.3%	3.6%
Divorced	2.9%	2.5%	2.4%	4.1%	2.7%	2.3%	1.5%
Cohabiting	1.6%	0.4%	0.3%	0.3%	3.0%	1.9%	1.5%
Widowed	19.2%	18.5%	22.7%	19.2%	20.4%	18.5%	17.0%
Homeownership							
Owner	84.3%	87.0%	87.2%	87.0%	76.9%	85.9%	88.7%

<sup>a</sup>The objective municipality characteristics were derived from the Study Service of the Flemish government. The mean represents the mean of all 308 municipalities (cities, towns, and villages) in the Flemish region. They include the number of inhabitants, population density (number of inhabitants per kilometer square), and population turnover (per 100 inhabitants over a period of 1 year).

<sup>b</sup>The social connectedness factors and individual characteristics were derived from the Belgian Ageing Studies. The mean represents the mean of the sample (N = 24,508) in 89 municipalities. The values in parentheses refer to standard deviation (SD) values.

**Table 3.** Characteristics of Focus Group Participants.

Municipality	Highest rate of actual volunteers		Medium rate of actual volunteers		Lowest rate of actual volunteers	
	Hove	Heusden-Zolder	Beersel	Ieper	Ternat	Wellen
N	9	12	8	7	10	7
Female	6	7	5	5	5	4
Male	3	5	3	4	5	3
M age (in years)	67	65	69	70	69	68
Volunteers	7	9	5	5	5	6
Nonvolunteers	2	3	3	2	5	1

consensus with the other researchers involved. All focus groups were analyzed using the MAXQDA 11 software package.

## Results

### Quantitative Findings

Table 4 presents the results of the multinomial logit regression analysis. *Formal connectedness* was the most influential predictor. Membership of association(s) was positively correlated with being an actual volunteer and with the probability of volunteering, compared with nonvolunteers. Members were 4.4 times more likely to volunteer and 1.6 times more likely to be a potential volunteer than older adults who were not a member of an association. Board members were almost 29 times more likely to be actual volunteers and 2.2 times more likely to be willing to volunteer, compared with older adults who were nonmembers.

*Informal connectedness* was also significantly related to (potential) volunteering in later life in some cases. The frequency of contacts with neighbors had a significant positive relation to being an actual volunteer or potential volunteer. Having weekly contact with neighbors increased the odds to 21% for being an actual volunteer and 21% for willingness to volunteer, compared with those who had less contact with their neighbors. As for frequency of contact with friends, older adults were more likely to volunteer when they had weekly to daily contact with their friends. The more frequent contact older adults had with their friends, the more likely they were to be actual volunteers (1.2 times), compared with older adults who never had monthly contact with their friends.

Furthermore, concerning *satisfaction with informal connectedness*, a significant positive gradient was detected for extended family. Respondents who reported being satisfied with their social contact with extended family were 17% more likely to be actually volunteering than not.

The control variables *age, gender, level of education, physical health, and marital status* were significantly associated with (potential) volunteering.

**Table 4.** Multinomial Logistic Regressions of Informal and Formal Social Ties on Potential, Actual, and Nonvolunteering (N = 24,508).

Variable	Actual volunteers vs. nonvolunteers OR	Potential volunteers vs. nonvolunteers OR	Actual volunteers vs. potential volunteers OR
<b>Social connectedness: Informal connectedness</b>			
Frequency of having contact: Weekly to daily			
Nuclear family	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
Extended family	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
Neighbors	1.210	1.213	<i>ns</i>
Friends	1.185	<i>ns</i>	1.151
Satisfaction			
Nuclear family	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
Extended family	1.169	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
Neighbors	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
Friends	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
<b>Formal connectedness</b>			
Membership association			
Member	4.358	1.626	2.680
Board member	28.608	2.184	13.100
Nonmember (reference)	—	—	—
<b>Individual characteristics</b>			
Age	0.964	0.914	1.052
Gender			
Female (reference)	0.627	<i>ns</i>	0.607
Level of education	1.166	1.095	1.065
Physical health	1.902	2.235	<i>ns</i>
Marital status			
Married (reference)	—	—	—
Never married	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
Divorced	<i>ns</i>	1.520	<i>ns</i>
Cohabiting	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
Widowed	<i>ns</i>	0.764	1.385
Homeownership			
Owner	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>

Note. ORs are shown. Reference outcome:  $p < .001$ . OR = odds ratio; *ns* = not significant.

### Qualitative Findings

The quantitative findings revealed significant variations between (potential) volunteering in terms of older adults’ social connectedness. The qualitative discussion extends the above-noted insights into older adults’ experiences of volunteering and their social connectedness, with a particular focus on the influence of informal and

formal connectedness, which was found to be significant in the quantitative section of our study.

*Informal connectedness.* Informal connectedness has often been cited as an important factor in volunteering. In our study, participants from all focus groups confirmed that having regular contact with their neighbors and friends is vital. More specifically, they commented that being acquainted with volunteers among their neighbors or friends reduced the threshold for volunteering. The participants explained that they were more aware of which organizations needed volunteers, and for which tasks and activities. Furthermore, the acquaintance often personally recruited these volunteers. A 60-year-old male volunteer expressed this in the following way:

A friend of mine is a board member and asked me “What do you think about . . . ?” They were looking for someone, and my friend thought of me and I joined.

Nevertheless, our findings also suggest that older adults, despite their social connectedness, consciously choose to invest time in other activities. Several nonvolunteers explained that, even though they were well aware of volunteering opportunities, they deliberately chose to perform other activities, such as taking walks with the hiking club or picking up their grandchildren from school.

*Formal connectedness.* A recurring theme across all study locations was the importance of formal connectedness for volunteering. In keeping with the results of the multinomial logit regression analysis, some respondents indicated that the relationships between informal connectedness and volunteering were important but were less prominent compared with formal connectedness.

First, membership of an association increased the chances of being recruited for volunteering. In addition, most actual volunteers indicated that they were also members of one or more associations. We infer that this membership ensured that they would be asked to volunteer. The importance of formal connectedness is illustrated through the following comment:

You are a member of an association and you get to know people. That’s also the reason why they ask you to volunteer. They already know you. (70-year-old male volunteer)

Second, some respondents—mostly nonvolunteers and less integrated people—explicitly linked their willingness to volunteer to aspects of formal connectedness and social integration. Respondents stated that formal connectedness, such as ties to associations, was a key factor for social integration within the community. Yet, it was not necessarily directly related to becoming or being a volunteer. Instead, it reflected individuals’ uncertainties about their integration within their community. This was expressed, for example, by older people who had experienced difficulties in building formal relationships or who feared joining activities. A 60-year-old female nonvolunteer articulated the issue in the following way:

Since I'm retired, I want to meet people and I've thrown myself into it, I joined an association. I know a lot of people by sight, but not by their name; I don't know them personally. To get to know them, I joined an association. But I still don't volunteer because people don't ask. I would really like to volunteer, but where?

In this example, a discrepancy between wanting to become a volunteer and not feeling sufficiently integrated to know where to be useful as a volunteer has contributed to the individual remaining a potential or a nonvolunteer.

*New arrivals.* As previously stated, feeling integrated within the community is an important determinant of volunteering. In our study's sample, social integration was thought to have been lost because of a considerable increase of new arrivals: people not born or not living for many years in the municipality in which they reside. Many long-term residents in our study reported that changes in "community spirit" could be attributed to lifestyle differences with respect to the new arrivals. For instance, greeting each other, have a chat with a neighbor, and so on were cited as important characteristics of that community spirit, yet several respondents felt that many new arrivals do not do these kinds of things, regardless of the wider municipalities having high, medium, or low rates of volunteers.

Furthermore, concerning the six municipalities, respondents commented on the changing composition of their locality and how it had affected the social life of their community. The impact of the changing composition ranged from a positive influence, such as an open community through willingness to include new arrivals, to a negative influence, represented by the development of a closed community toward new arrivals. This issue is illustrated in the following comment:

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 no longer have the tendency to get to know them. I'll always be friendly, but no more than that anymore. These new people have a different mentality, they don't want to integrate or be pulled in. (70-year-old male volunteer)

Participants made a distinction between people who were born and never moved, and people who entered the municipality at a later stage in their life. New arrivals were perceived as outsiders and the strong ties between the local residents excluded the new residents. A typical observation was as follows: "People in Wellen have a closed outlook. Their social life is closed against new arrivals" (67-year-old male volunteer). Such divisions were also reflected in the composition of associations and volunteer organizations, which consisted mainly of long-term residents and barely any newcomers. This resulted in a mixed perception. Among the long-term residents, the impression prevailed that newcomers were not interested in getting involved into community life, while newcomers had the feeling that they were not welcome. The impact of being a new arrival when it comes to exclusion from community relationships concerned thus both informal and formal connectedness.

Similarly, regardless of who makes the recruitment attempt of the potential volunteer, the type and content of the relationship are significant. Members of associations and volunteer organizations found it very difficult to get in contact with new arrivals and to get to know them. Moreover, it appeared that the long-term residents in particular experienced this barrier in trying to integrate newcomers. Equally, newcomers had the feeling that a wall had been set up for them by the locals. Being excluded from informal and formal connectedness is reflected in the following comments from a 60-year-old female nonvolunteer and new arrival:

I have lived here since 1971, but, before I retired, I didn't have a lot of contact with the neighbors, people in 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 associations as a newcomer, even when you live here more than 40 years already. Because you're not part of that social network. You don't participate within the municipality. But I would like to be part of the social life of the village.

Besides formal connectedness in associations, there was an overall view that municipalities nowadays need to extend actions to enhance social life at a municipal level: "You need to create activities to meet these new people" (67-year-old-man and volunteer). Many respondents, particularly volunteers, referred to these activities for new arrivals and the local policy involved with it. The following comment reflects how this has affected the social life of their community:

Every year, the municipality organizes a meeting for the new arrivals. The policymakers, organizations, and associations are presented. As of today, they at least know where to go. Chatting, drinking . . . and these people were accepted and felt at home. (73-year-old-male nonvolunteer)

Our findings suggest that some older adults who were already active within their community and volunteer organizations asked to involve new arrivals more consciously in strong collaboration with the municipality. For example, some commented on their shared willingness with other associations and volunteer organizations to organize accessible activities in the neighborhood together with the municipality for new arrivals and people not yet integrated in civic life. Volunteer organizations and associations experienced difficulties in organizing for themselves activities that attracted such people and were more effective in collaboration with other organizations, associations, and the municipality.

Analyses of the focus group interviews in the six municipalities also highlighted differences between volunteers and nonvolunteers in terms of (in)formal connectedness. For example, two municipalities with the lowest rate of actual volunteers also exhibited the lowest level of membership of associations. In this respect, our study points at the role of the content that is exchanged through a formal tie instead of the strength of that relationship. People who were already volunteering in those two municipalities reported that they were always seeking new volunteers and approached many people to join their volunteer organization. Some respondents,



mainly nonvolunteers, indicated that they never experienced this or knew that volunteers were being sought. In those municipalities too, formal connectedness still appears crucial for actual and potential volunteering.

## Discussion

This study considered the thesis that older adults' social connectedness is an important predictor of their volunteer behavior. It can also be seen as a response to the need for aging research to bring the micro-processes of social engagement within the macro-social context back into focus (Victor et al., 2008). Our research was distinctive because it used a mixed-methods approach, enabling the underlying dynamics of social connectedness related to volunteering to be explored. Moreover, collecting data in Belgium offers significant insight into a wider, Western European context. A key finding of this study is that social integration within the local context is key for volunteering in later life.

Regarding the first quantitative research question on which type of social connectedness is most influential for volunteering, our findings show that both informal and formal connectedness predict actual and potential volunteering among older adults. An enriched understanding of the social contextual nature of volunteer participation can be perceived in the remarkably different effects of formal and informal social connectedness we identified. In particular, formal connectedness, such as membership and board membership in an association, accounted for both actual volunteering (Musick & Wilson, 2008; Okun, Pugliese, & Rook, 2007) and potential volunteering. A plausible explanation is that new members of associations are more frequently targeted by current members (Lim, 2008). Members of associations might also have a stronger propensity toward participation, being more socially and other directed (Dury et al., 2015; Dury, De Donder, De Witte et al., 2016; Lim, 2008; Reed & Selbee, 2003), as well as being more aware of volunteering needs (McBride, Gonzales, Morrow-Howell, & McCrary, 2011; Okun & Michel, 2006). As for informal connectedness, frequent contact with neighbors and friends for actual volunteering and neighbors for potential volunteering also influences older adults' willingness to volunteer, according to our study's results.

This finding can be attributed to the likelihood that such outcomes are not only about the strength or type of the relationship but, rather, about what is exchanged in that relationship (Jasper & Paulsen, 1995; McNamee & Peterson, 2016) such as being asked to volunteer (Wilson & Son, 2018). Nor is it about the diversity of an individual's friendships, which does not necessarily bring the individual into associational networks (Brown & Ferris, 2007). It might be that members of associations have a greater tendency to speak about their activities as well as to recruit new members.

As for the second research question on experiences of social connectedness and volunteering, the study discovered that informal connectedness arises through contacts made in associations (formal connectedness). The qualitative results elucidate how formal connectedness increases people's chances of being integrated in their community as well as the likeliness to volunteer. The ties generated through formal

connectedness enable the development of informal connectedness and the opportunity to become integrated into the community (Cornwell & Harrison, 2004; Handy & Greenspan, 2009).

However, informal connectedness also appears to be important for volunteering. Social integration, which is a consequence of (in)formal connectedness, is a key factor for volunteering in later life (Dury et al., 2015). Older adults who are already socially integrated are more likely to be active formally through their informal connectedness (being recruited by friends or neighbors who already volunteered), while older adults who are not socially integrated depend on the contacts they generate through their formal connectedness. These contacts make it possible to generate informal contacts and integrate. This dynamic may be linked to the bridging function of weak ties as an important source of social mobility (new contacts and the spread of information made possible by formal connectedness; Granovetter, 1983). Members of associations might also have a stronger propensity toward participation, being more socially and other directed (Dury et al., 2015, Dury et al., 2016; Lim, 2008; Reed & Selbee, 2003), as well as being more aware of activities, such as volunteering, and understanding the role of volunteering (McBride et al., 2011; Okun & Michel, 2006).

Nevertheless, our respondents emphasized that joining an association without knowing another member is very unlikely. Older adults who are willing to volunteer not only need to be socially connected but need to be integrated into their community before being able to participate in community life, such as through volunteering. Prior research (Lim, 2008) has established that it is not the type of tie per se but the content of the relationship that is of utmost importance for becoming a volunteer. Consequently, formal as well as informal connectedness are necessary as a basis of the social infrastructure (Flora, 1998).

Our study's mixed-methods explanatory design also allowed us to explore the ways in which older adults' social connectedness helped to clarify the processes underlying variations in volunteer participation between the different research locations (i.e., our third research question). A key finding here is that, when comparing the different research locations, the variation was mainly in relation to new arrivals. The impact of the community differed from being a positive influence (i.e., an open community willing to include new arrivals) to a negative influence (i.e., the development of a closed community toward new arrivals).

In addition, an earlier study by Dury et al. (2016) found that length of residence does not play a role. Instead, it is crucial to feel connected and a part of one's neighborhood.

Our results also demonstrate the need for policy involvement in integrating new arrivals at the local level. From this perspective, formal connectedness includes not only associations but also local policy. In line with Granovetter's (1983) perspective, we posit that a municipality's policy project can serve as a bridging function for weak ties. Specifically, local policy appears crucial in establishing ties between associations, volunteer organizations, long-term residents, and new arrivals. The bridging function of the local policy together with associations, volunteer organizations, and long-term residents would make it possible to mobilize individuals socially and to establish the

social structure of society and agency among its older citizens. Here again, it is not the type of tie that prevails but the content of the exchange. Approaching older potential volunteers should take place at a local level and a more diverse population should be targeted such as people with fewer resources (Chambré & Netting, 2016; Dury et al., 2016). The participants who were new residents, especially, stressed that formal connectedness was crucial to finding the way to volunteering.

### *Limitations and Strengths of the Study*

Several limitations of our study warrant further consideration. First, we could not research the full social networks of older adults because the survey did not ask about the number of people or contacts of each type that their network contained (Cornwell, 2011). Second, the cross-sectional nature of the data prevented us from determining causality.

However, the article has its strengths, too, such as the interpretation of the quantitative findings, which became more meaningful through the qualitative phase. The results also point to other factors that need further exploration, though, such as people's attachments to their place of residence (Buffel et al., 2013), other leisure activities, and informal obligations (child care and informal care; Dury et al., 2016), as these may be relevant to volunteering as well. Further research should focus on which factors of the neighborhood and other activities/obligations may influence older adults' volunteering.

### **Conclusion**

This study adds to the growing body of literature and empirically refined existing theoretical frameworks on volunteering by highlighting that the topic cannot be studied without taking into consideration the social connectedness of older adults. Its results lead us to conclude, from the quantitative discussion, that there is a positive correlation between informal connectedness and contacts with friends and neighbors for volunteering, and with neighbors for potential volunteering. However, formal connectedness appears the most influential element for both actual and potential volunteering.

We have also established that formal connectedness prevails, owing to its bridging function. For new arrivals, as well as for long-term residents, formal connectedness generates informal connectedness. Hence, it enables people to integrate within their community. Nevertheless, it is unclear whether new arrivals have formal connectedness within their municipality, and, for that reason, local policies as well as associations and organizations have a crucial role to play. Moreover, being recruited personally prevails, both in the informal and formal networks, and it is not the type of tie that is important but the content of the relationship.

In terms of practical and policy recommendations, our research suggests that formal connectedness, including policy involvement, is crucial to integrating (new) residents. One response could be to extend neighborhood and new arrivals' activities to

enable local meeting opportunities, formal as well as informal. Consequently, new arrivals would gain more insight not only into the makeup of the municipality but also into that of community life. Finally, further research is needed on how associations, volunteer organizations, and local policy can integrate new arrivals and connect this group to the local community.

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### Author Contributions

S.D. planned the study, performed all statistical analyses, and wrote the paper. D.B, A.-S.S., and S.V.R. contributed to revising the paper. L.D.D., N.D.W., and D.V. helped to plan the study, including the instrumentation, and to revise the manuscript.


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