

Chapter 12

NEGOTIATING AGING AND AGEDNESS IN VOLUNTEER DISASTER RESPONSE TEAMS

Jacquelyn N. Chinn
Joshua B. Barbour
Texas A & M University

The negotiation of aging and agedness is an important aspect of volunteering and volunteer coordination. Volunteering is an intergenerational activity (Chambré, 1993), and older volunteers comprise a growing portion of the volunteer population in the United States (Goss, 1999). As of 2010, volunteers 65 and over spent disproportionately more time volunteering compared to all other age groups (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010). Einhorn (2009) demonstrated that Baby Boomers will volunteer in large numbers as they retire. This study explored how volunteers and those organizing volunteers made sense of aging and agedness through a situated study of multiple Community Emergency Response Teams (CERTs). It extended Trethewey's (2001) work on master narratives to explain how volunteers acquiesced to and resisted the master narrative of decline in organizing—both challenging and reifying assumptions of what aging and agedness mean in the volunteer experience. These tensions are particularly important for volunteer organizations because of the increased importance of identity and relationships to motivate volunteering in the absence of incentives typical in the workplace (e.g., pay). This research offers insight for coordinators who will increasingly be called to manage volunteer groups that span multiple generations and who should question their assumptions about the aged volunteer.

Master Narratives of Decline: Exploring Aging in Organizations

Scholars have conceptualized the role of narrative in the formation of experience in organizations and in the communicative structuring of reality (Smith & Keyton, 2001). The construction and use of narrative in our lives is a mechanism for sensemaking at the individual, organizational, and societal levels (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). As communities of citizens, we rely on narrative to guide our experiences of reality (Baskin, 2005, 2010),

including our experiences of aging. Narratives exist at multiple levels including, for example, personal, public, and meta-narrative (Smith & Sparkes, 2008). Metanarrative, or master narratives, are those narratives upon which we pull collectively as a society to explain and structure reality.

The master narrative of decline is a cluster of beliefs about who is old and what aging is that pervades society and influences how we organize (Trethewey, 2001; Yamasaki, 2009). Trethewey (2001) described how these narratives of decline influence organizing for professional women in mid-life and explored ways professional women have resisted the narrative of decline in American corporate organizing. She described the dominant cultural ideology as one that “dread[s] aging” and is constantly “on the lookout for any signs of decay and decline” (p. 186). We all reach our “peak experience” in our youths, enter middle age and spend the rest of our days “deteriorating” into “declineoldageanddeath [sic]” (Gullette, 1997, p. 8).

Master narratives of decline appear throughout Western culture, evidenced in cultural artifacts such as advertising and television programming. Elderly members of society appear rarely in advertising, showing up in a mere 15% of television ads (Lee, Carpenter, & Meyers, 2007). Older adults are featured most prominently in medications and medical services, food products, cars, and financial and legal services. These portrayals may influence and reinforce ageist stereotypes, specifically an extreme focus on “declining physical functions and financial/legal vulnerability” (Lee et al., 2007, p. 28). The portrayal of older characters in Disney films, for example, is overwhelmingly negative, with 25% of older characters portrayed as grumpy, 12% as evil or sinister, 8% as helpless, 3% as senile or crazy, and 2% as the object of ridicule (Robinson, Callister, Magoffin, & Moore, 2007). These narratives influence interactions with the elderly. Giles, Fox, and Smith (1993) found that stereotyped images of the elderly contributed to the use of patronizing speech by younger speakers with elderly interlocutors.

In Trethewey’s (2001) study, although professional women reproduced these narratives, they also resisted them by creating other avenues, such as entrepreneurship, through which they could flourish outside of corporate organizational life, and to some degree, outside the master narrative of decline. Resistance and acquiescence of the master narrative of decline represents a principal tension that guides our analysis of aging situated in communities of volunteerism and in particular, in our case study examination of CERT. The following research questions guided our exploration of these issues:

- RQ1: In what ways do organizational members make sense of the role of the older volunteer?
- RQ2: In what ways do organizational members communicate to resist and acquiesce to societal narratives of decline?
- RQ3: How does CERT organizing reflect patterns of resistance and acquiescence?

CERT as Case: An Overview and Analytical Framework

CERT is a federal volunteer program created to equip ordinary citizens to respond to disaster safely and effectively. Following the 1985 Mexico City earthquake and the subsequent 1987 Whittier Narrows earthquake in the Los Angeles area, the Los Angeles Fire Department created the CERT organization. CERT's primary purpose is training citizens "in basic disaster response skills, such as fire safety, light search and rescue, team organization, and disaster medical operations" (CERT, 2010a). CERT is an organization whereby government can equip its citizens to be able to respond and be self-sustaining in an emergency until professional responders arrive (CERT, 2010a). Once professional responders do make it on the scene of an emergency or disaster, CERT describes its role as supportive (e.g., giving critical information to professional responders concerning the site of the disaster, casualties, and information concerning structural damage). Local teams are comprised of citizen volunteers, affiliated through neighborhoods, work, or church groups that are interested in disaster preparation and assistance.

In the area where this study took place, most CERT teams were organized under local governments, with five of the seven counties under study registered as having CERT teams. The CERT website described each CERT as fairly robust and active, and they were, though not in ways we expected.

The CERT we saw on the ground differed in surprising ways with the one we expected to encounter based upon our preliminary readings of CERT materials. Search and rescue and other highly involved emergency response practices were not regular activities for CERT, and yet the teams did contribute to the community in ways not captured in the federal discourse about what CERTs should be. This was a function both of the needs of the community and of the composition of the teams.

Time was cited as the number one factor in determining the composition of CERT teams. The 20–30 hour minimum commitment to become CERT certified resulted in large portions of volunteers being older and retired, due to greater availability of time. This reflects trends in volunteer organizing