

It Takes a Village

The Village Movement as an alternative form of long-term care for the aging in the United States and a case study of its beginnings in the town of Gambier, Ohio

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Abstract

This study seeks to explain the recent popularity of the Village Movement, a social movement that helps senior citizens age at home for as long as possible. In the next 50 years, the population of adults over the age of 65 will have grown by approximately 60 million people due in part to advances in medical technology and the aging of the Baby Boom generation. As is, our current long-term care system is unprepared to deal with this sudden influx. Further, current attitudes about aging as a disease are damaging to both senior citizens and their caretakers, and have the potential to turn a majority of our population into a “wasteland.” Through examples taken from already-established villages as well as a case study of the beginnings of a Village organization in Gambier, Ohio this paper argues that a Village set-up is not only ideal in that it maintains senior citizens’ feelings of pride and independence, but also that it will be necessary when institutionalized forms of long-term care are no longer sufficient.

Introduction

The United States has become an aging society, or one in which the number of people over the age of 60 is greater than the number of people under the age of 15, and recent studies show that this trend will only pick up pace with time (Rowe 2007). The Village Movement, a grass-roots organizational movement, seeks to address both the practical and philosophical consequences of this population shift. The movement consists of “villages,” which are typically non-profit groups in which an outside coordinator helps a group of senior citizens to create a geographically convenient, reciprocal volunteer network. The movement started in 2001 with a community in Beacon Hill, Boston, and has expanded to include more than 50 similar organizations across the country, including the umbrella organization Village to Village Network. While most of these villages are located in urban areas, small-town America is not exempt from their influence. Just a few months ago, a small committee of community members in Gambier, Ohio caught wind of the movement (recently it has been highly publicized through various newspaper articles, and, most notably, a segment on National Public Radio), and are now attempting to assess whether or not there is a need for this kind of organization in the community.

My research will be presented in two parts: first, a brief historical and theoretical analysis of aging in America and an explanation of the emergence of the village movement; and second, an exploration into the need for, and implementation of a village organization in the town of Gambier. The three main questions I hope to answer are a) why are these villages cropping up in such great numbers now, b) how are these needs manifest in the Town of Gambier, and c) of what benefit are these organizations to society at large? I believe that the recent establishment of these Villages coincides with three major social conditions, the first being the beginning of what researchers call “the graying of society,” the second being a change in family structure and cultural expectations, and the third being our current economic recession. I hope that my study of Gambier may serve as an example of trends in aging occurring in the rest of the country.

Part 1: History of Aging in America and the Village Movement

Literature Review

To understand the emergence of the village movement in the past ten years, it is important to first understand the greater theoretical and historical circumstances under which it gained popularity. I will start by outlining basic theoretical models of aging, and finish with a brief overview of the history of conventional long-term care solutions in the United States.

Grand sociological theories on aging can be divided into two categories: macro-theories, which focus on how the individual fits into societal structures, and micro-theories, which focus more on personal development and choices (Marshall 1996). Accordingly, macro-theories assess how society must change in order to accommodate the aged, whereas micro-theories suggest that the emphasis should be placed on how age affects how individuals define their roles. As one of

the first theories on aging to gain prominence, disengagement/activity theory still factors prominently into the debate on how we treated the aged in our society (Marshall 1996).

Disengagement theory, which stems from a structural-functional tradition, purports that the elderly isolate themselves from society in preparation for death. In this way, society is able to adjust to a life without them, and thus evolve more seamlessly when they die (Powell 2006).

Activity theory suggests the opposite: that the elderly must be encouraged to participate in day-to-day life to enrich their personal lives. And, in turn, society continues to progress as a result of their positive contributions. Still, despite its more optimistic tone, activity theory still falls into the trap of describing aging as a “uniformly problematic and depressing state” by suggesting that “older persons’ only hope for contentment [lies] in increasing their level of social activity (Powell 2006).

On the other end of the macro-theory spectrum, aging can also be approached from a conflict theory perspective. Marx’s influence on aging theories can be seen prominently here, as most of these theorists focus on modernization and its effect on the social status of the aged (Marshall 1996). Ernest Burgess posited that modernization and all of the social ills that accompany it (industrialization, urbanization, the shift from extended to nuclear families, etc.) places elders in “role-less roles,” in which elders have little of importance to do in society (Marshall 1996). In other words, if one’s worth is defined by one’s ability to contribute to the economy, then the elderly, who are for the most part retired, are “worthless” in terms of contributing to the survival of society (Marshall 1996). Further, Marxian sociologists such as James Myles have argued that this attitude towards the elderly is so pervasive that today, the very definition of old age has come to mean an exit from the workforce (Marshall 1996).

On the micro-level, theories on aging draw primarily from symbolic interactionism, and

focus on the fact that aging determines your social role independent of who you were before you aged (Moen 1996). In other words, in our society, age seems to override all other distinguishing characteristics of an individual to become the main descriptive measure of his or her worth.

Theorists argue that this affects personal role development and sense of self as well, not just the public perception of the elderly. Robert Atchley draws on these ideas in his “continuity theory,” which speculates that we are always trying to create our concept of self (Marshall 1996). This applies to aging in that as we grow older, our sense of self is constantly threatened by our changing status in society (again, since age trumps other social categories), and that we must fight to maintain the image we have created for ourselves.

In short, all of these theoretical debates boil down to a simple question: does the status of old age result from “degenerative diseases,” or is it a natural process “devoid of any particular pathology” (Hendricks and Achenbaum 27)? From a medical standpoint, aging *is* somewhat like a chronic, degenerative disease—it includes an increased propensity for illness, decreased abilities, and in turn, a need for more medical resources. Thus, medical researchers who study aging do so from a measurement standpoint, foregoing theory for empirical research (Hendricks, Achenbaum 31). If we try to use this model sociologically though, as have many of the social theorists I have discussed, then somewhat of a disconnect appears. A medical problem requires a concrete biological solution, but the social factors that contribute to our experience of aging are not formulaic, and often do not have one specific solution (Fry 2006). Thus, describing aging as a social problem is inherently flawed, as it stems from a medical, not a social model. In what Carroll Estes calls the “biomedicalized” world of aging, it is nearly impossible to theorize about aging without explicitly or implicitly referring to it as a morbid and frightening (2003).

Framing the process of aging as a social process also seems strange, as age is an ascribed characteristic, or one we are born with and cannot change (Powell 2006). Aging is a universal part of the human experience, yet we continue to stigmatize the process and treat the elderly as “others,” or as lesser than. This mind-set is easily visible in “How to Help Older People,” a caregiving guide book from the early 1950’s which offers one of the first examples of a modern at-home care system. Julia Arthur defines a ‘homemaker’ as “a visiting housekeeper employed and supervised by a social agency,” and notes that she is likely to be a woman who has gained experience nursing her own family members (1954):

“To be able to adapt Homemaker Service for old people you must understand it is an offshoot of society’s earlier concern about children. For some years past visiting housekeepers have been sent by agencies into motherless households to serve as substitutes for the real mother during her illness or absence, but in any case the home is kept together till her return. Recently, the idea has been extended to helping the aged. But a Homemaker who comes into an old person’s home to aid him keep his independence is in a more delicate position than one who ‘mothers’ children. The National Committee on Homemaker Service, composed of representatives of welfare agencies, believes the outstanding quality of a person coming into a household of elderly people should be...[that] she can help them in a way that neither makes too heavy demands in direction or supervision from them, nor takes away their feeling of independence” (Arthur 1954).

While Arthur certainly takes caution to make sure her writing cannot be misinterpreted as describing the elderly simply as ‘older children,’ her tone is still (perhaps unintentionally) patronizing. It suggests that the main problem in dealing with the elderly is their perceived level of independence versus their actual ability; caregivers must tread lightly so as not to let the elderly on to the fact that they are assisting them. Further, she draws on tired stereotypes in her description of the elderly as a social problem as opposed to conscious agents—Estes, et. al. points out that the language of the aging discourse often strips elders of their autonomy, and even their humanity (2003).

As I will discuss later, these models, and the literature that reflects them, will not be able to maintain their relevancy in an aging society. It is becoming too apparent that they reflect

a conflict between the realities of the daily lives of the elderly and an attempt to create grand sociological theory. The challenge, then, is to create new theories that describe aging as a social fact, rather than as a social problem. This goal is central to the philosophy of the village movement, and once fully realized, will further its development.

Demographic Trends

On a most basic level, the projected increase in numbers of senior citizens in the United States is staggering. The MacArthur Foundation Research Network on an Aging Society's most recent demographic forecast study predicts that by 2050, the population of adults over 65 years old in the United States will have grown from 38.7 million to 108 million, and the population of adults over 85 years old will have grown from 5.4 million to 35 million (Olshansky et. al. 2009). Sociologists have identified two key reasons for this dramatic projected increase. First of all, advances in medical technology have ensured that people are living longer than ever. In the past century, life expectancy has increased by nearly 30 years, and the MacArthur Foundation predicts that by 2050, average life expectancy will rise from 75.4 years to 80 years for men, and from 79.9 years to 83.4 years for women (2009). Secondly, members of the Baby Boom generation, those who were born during the population explosion of the years directly following the Second World War until the mid-1960's, have begun to reach retirement age. As a group, they will represent one of the largest (if not the largest) influxes of over-65-year-olds into society in American history (Olshanky et. al. 2009). In short, scientists predict that within the next 50 years, the age distribution of our population will have shifted entirely, which means that our societal structure will have to shift as well.

So where are all of these people going? Today, there are approximately 16,100 nursing

homes in America and 1,492,200 nursing home residents (CDC 2004). However, occupancy rates for these homes averages at 86.3%, leaving a growing number of beds unoccupied (CDC 2004). Furthermore, in the National Institute on Aging's recent Health and Retirement study, only 30.1% of people over the age of 65 (out of a pool of 20,000) specified that they lived in a nursing home or retirement community (2002). And the AARP reports even lower numbers, claiming that only 7% of those over 65 years old move to a retirement community (2009). This leaves approximately 60% of the elderly at home, taken care of in some cases by professional nurses or aids, but more often by grown children. In 2002, 7 million people were providing informal care to a person aged 65 and over in a household setting (AARP 2009). Most of these people are grown women—70% of informal caregivers are wives, daughters, or other female relatives (Olson 1994). And the majority of these female caregivers have a strong desire to keep their relatives at home. Citing a 1987 study by Buckwalter and Hall, Olson explains, “adult children report the placement of a parent into a nursing home as one of the most unhappy events of their lives” (1994). It seems that even apart from the influence of the village movement, people have a strong desire to keep their aging relatives at home. Whether or not they receive the support they need is a different story.

The Village Movement Today:

The “village movement” is a grass-roots social movement that is slowly growing in scope and importance, but what exactly is a village? Its name suggests a geographical community; a unique physical space that is separate from any other neighborhood, city, or state boundaries it might happen to overlap with. In fact, a “village” is not a tangible space at all, but rather an organizational one, or a symbol of both community and autonomy. According to the Beacon

Hill Village, the first organization of its kind, a village “enables a growing and diverse group of...residents to stay in their neighborhoods as they age, by organizing and delivering programs and services that allow them to lead safe, healthy productive lives in their own homes” (Beacon Hill Village 2010). In other words, a village allows its members to remain a part of the neighborhood they already live in (or any other group they might identify with) while still receiving the services they may need as they age. Another way to conceptualize a village is to think of it as a type of “support group” in which each member helps to keep other members’ lives as normal as possible under specific circumstances. In this way, aging is not set apart from a normal neighborhood or organizational setup, but integrated into it. What sets the village movement apart from other eldercare organizations is its emphasis on the autonomy of its members, and its independence from publicly or privately run social service organizations. At its heart, a social service organization, in which the government, or some other corporation delivers services to better the quality of life of its recipients, is exactly about that—delivery of services from an *outside* source. In contrast, the philosophy behind the village movement is that it is run solely by its members, and receives little outside help apart from the occasional grant.

The village movement started in 2001 with the establishment of the Beacon Hill Village in Boston, and has since grown in size and influence (Beacon Hill Village 2010). Villages are primarily located in large urban and suburban areas, and oftentimes choose membership residency requirements based on already-existing neighborhood lines drawn by their state or city (Gleckman 2010). As far as I can tell (no official data has been collected), these villages are comprised mainly of upper-middle class residents who can afford to pay their often-hefty membership dues. While certain Villages offer subsidized memberships, it does not seem as though they are used frequently. Plentiful media coverage of this new type of small, independent

community structure has led the rapid spread of the movement throughout the United States. In 2010, the Village-to-Village Network was founded to help new communities mobilize, and to act as a central source of information about the village movement (Ludden 2010). The Village-to-Village Network is funded by NCB Capital Impact, a non-profit community development organization that has helped the Network get off its feet as an umbrella organization that provides to its members (among other things) a directory of villages, village document templates, and a wealth of scholarly sources on aging (Village to Village Network 2010). According to its website, 49 villages are members of the network, and 118 are in development (2010).

There are numerous variations on the village set-up, but for the purposes of this project I will focus on describing the basic organizational template created by Beacon Hill, which was effectively put into place by the Capitol Hill Village, an organization created in Washington, D.C. two years ago. The Capitol Hill Village has approximately 200 members who pay annual dues of \$530 for individual members and \$800 for households (Capitol Hill Village 2010). With this money, the organization employs two full-time directors who manage programs and volunteers. Besides these two employees, the organization is made up entirely of unpaid volunteers, which include the elderly members in addition to younger volunteers. They register under a specific skill set that they can offer to other members. Many younger volunteers, for example, offer to drive members to and from errands and doctors appointments, whereas older, retired volunteers can put their career specializations back to use (an ex-handyman might be able to fix a piece of furniture, for example). The Village also organizes free seminars on topics such as financial management, and offers discounts to cultural events around the city. Finally, the Village keeps a list of qualified professionals if a volunteer is unable to provide a needed service.

Oftentimes, these professionals will offer a small discount for village members in addition to “expedited services” (Capitol Hill Village 2010).

However, the village offers more than tangible services—it touts membership as a form of “peace of mind” (Capitol Hill Village 2010). In other words, the village is not just a practicality, as evidenced by Capitol Hill’s website’s “Why Should I Become a Member?” page. It is a built-in community of friends (“Your ability to find others who share your interests will be a snap”), a way to restore pride and dignity through reciprocation (“Having volunteers who want to help you is better than asking neighbors for favors”), an insurance policy (“You never know when you’ll need help”), and a watchdog for service providers (“Having Capitol Hill as your advocate when your expectations are not met will have more impact than addressing a vendor yourself”) (2010).

It is in this way that we can see that the village movement is just as much about enacting cultural change as it is about finding a solution to the lack of resources that will be available to our expanding elderly population. Village organizers are quick to point out that a village is not a nursing home, an assisted living facility, or a retirement community. Thus, the movement is not *just* about growing old at home, as many choose to do. In contrast, it is about the empowerment of the elderly and the normalization and end of stigmatization of elderly people in their own communities.

Social Roots

At the same time that fees for nursing homes and assisted living facilities began to skyrocket, the American economy began to plummet. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the average price of a nursing home room in 2009 was \$219.00 per

day (\$6,570 per month), and the average price of an apartment in a continued care/assisted living facility cost \$3,131.00 per month (2009). Medicare will pay for the first 20 days in a nursing home following a hospital stay, but reduces its contribution to a co-pay after that, and will not pay at all after 100 days. It does not cover any kind of assisted living (2009). The bottom line is that a year in a continued care facility can run someone to \$36,000 per year, and because of increasing life expectancy rates, most of these residents will stay in a facility for five years or more. The financial burden of this kind of relocation is obvious. People who pay out of pocket for their own continued care can squander away a majority of, if not all of, their life savings, leaving little behind for their family. In a worst-case scenario, these people can even be forced to enter into bankruptcy in order to pay for their continued care, leaving debt behind for their children when they die. Even in a best-case scenario, in which an elderly couple's children agree to help pay for continued care, for example, a significant financial strain is still placed on both generations of the family. On yet another financial level, it is still quite common to pass ones home down to ones child as an asset. Especially in troubled financial times, people count on their homes as a source of equity, and as an investment which can be shared with future generations. Most couples are not able to afford assisted living without selling their homes, which makes this transference of wealth impossible.

All of this is, of course, aggravated by the recent recession in the American economy. According to a 2009 study, 49% percent of participants aged 45 and older said they would prefer to forgo assisted living in favor of living at home with a part-time aide, as opposed to 42% on year earlier (AARP 2009). Despite the fact that assisted living costs have decreased slightly over the past two years, people still seem to think that they are unable to afford relocation, perhaps because of a devaluation of their pensions plans, stocks, or other investments. And government

spending on the elderly is down, too. Both the Older Americans Act and state initiatives have been unable to increase their spending in proportion to the growing elderly population in America. Even if the federal and state governments tripled their spending on the elderly, their programs would still not be sustainable in this time of rapid population growth (Burgess and Applebaum 2009).

Thus, the village movement is not just idealistic, but necessary—federal and state budget cuts in addition to personal financial troubles mean that the demand for assistance for the elderly outweighs the solutions that are currently available. Solutions that do not count on a centralized form of funding seem to be a viable option for revolutionizing the way we work with the elderly. Even privately funded residence facilities are not the answer since the cost of these facilities far surpasses the average monthly fee I reported earlier. But beyond cost, another major problem is that there are simply not enough of these residences to house the soon-to-be huge influx of elderly citizens. Even if they were somehow made affordable to everyone, the sheer number of citizens turning 65 in the next 50 years would require thousands of new buildings. It is simply no longer practical to attempt to relocate our aging population. To do so would be to sequester away a huge chunk of our population.

The picture of those who are currently aging at home is no less bleak. As I explained earlier, female family members provide the majority of care for who choose to age at home, and face major psychological and financial burdens of their own. Most are not prepared for the intensity of the task at hand in terms of the amount of time needed, the expenses of medical care, and the emotionally taxing process of watching a close family member become increasingly sufficient on others (Olson 1994). In fact, “older people are institutionalized primarily when their caretaker becomes exhausted, ill or dies” (Olson 1994). Not having built-in caretakers

further complicates this. Family structure has changed since the boomers were born, and most of the parents who are currently aging either had fewer children or were never married (Tice and Perkins 1998). Ken Dychtwald identifies yet another “social train wreck” that could occur in the next 50 years as a result of unstructured at-home living; an “elder wasteland” in which retirees use societal resources without giving back (1999). By this he means a huge proportion of the elderly population sitting inside watching TV with little communication with family, friends or the outside world as a whole. The village movement seeks to remedy this by keeping elders active, and by holding them accountable to their peers.

Finally, American society has slowly been transitioning into what Matthew E. Archibald refers to as a “culture of self-help” (2007). By this he means society’s increasing preference for organizations which promote philosophies of “mutual-aid, individual self-determination, autonomy, dignity...and a shared understanding of members’ focal problems, needs and concerns” (Archibald 2007). Archibald points to two main factors that he believes have contributed to the rise of this culture, starting with Americans’ core ideals of anti-elitism and anti-authoritarianism (2007). Since the self-help movement is also defined by members’ complete control of the group and the potential to make political statements, they are able to live out these democratic ideals in a potentially public sphere. He also makes a note of America’s “long-term penchant for self reinvention” as well as American values of hard work and self-proficiency (Archibald 2007). Perhaps even more relevant to a study of the village movement, though, is his second reason for the rise of self-help: a lack of sufficient resources from other sources to meet social welfare needs (2007). This is exactly what the village movement, a self-help organization in its own right, seeks to do.

As I have shown, the rising number of senior citizens in the United States coupled with diminishing financial resources has resulted in a frustrating lack of public assistance. In this way, the village movement may not be just an attempt for the elderly to regain their autonomy and pride in a culture that tends to treat them as chronically ill “others,” but also an attempt to obtain the resources they’re not getting elsewhere despite this stigmatization.

PART 2: The Village Movement in Gambier

The town of Gambier, Ohio (population: 1,871) is about an hour’s drive North of Columbus, and is home to Kenyon College. Although its small-town, rural character is not typical of most other communities that have chosen to create a Village (in fact, this small, rural character is exactly what some of these villages in more urban or suburban areas seek to recreate), the fact that a small group of citizens have begun to meet to attempt to form a village organization of their own shows that they feel that their community is lacking *something* in relation to resources for the aging. Throughout observations and interviews, I hope to examine why these people feel there is a need for this kind of structure in their community, and how Gambier is either a perfect case study of an application of the Village Movement, or whether it is an exception to the rule.

Methods

At the beginning of this project, my initial plan was to trace the history of, and necessity for the Village Movement using primarily secondary sources. About a week after I made this decision, however, I saw a flyer hanging on the door of the Village Market on Kenyon College’s

campus titled, “A Survey to assess the need for community services and support for older adults in Gambier and College Township.” It asked participants to denote which services they might use from such a “local nonprofit organization...to help [older adults] remain in their homes as long as possible for a nominal membership fee” from a long list of options. When I contacted the woman whose email was listed at the bottom of the survey, she promptly invited me to her home where she pulled out a folder full of the same newspaper articles I had been reading in preparation for my research; the recent barrage of journalistic explorations of Villages was what sparked my interest in the movement in the first place.

Ruth had clearly been influenced by the descriptions of other Villages in the media and by the philosophies of the movement—this was not just a run-of-the-mill initiative for neighborliness or friendly help for the elderly. She had formed a committee to help her realize her plan, which, at the time, had eight members including the mayor of Gambier, and had concrete plans to take a “field trip” to an already-established Village in Athens, Ohio (that is affiliated with the Village-to-Village Network) and create a business plan that might include applying for nonprofit status. Additionally, she had done extensive research on the services already offered to the elderly in nearby Mount Vernon and greater Knox County, and had traced the history of other efforts to start programs to help elderly residents of Gambier. Based on these criteria, I determined that Ruth’s idea was, in fact, directly influenced by the Village Movement, and while a realized organization in Gambier might not ever be big enough to necessitate membership in the Village-to-Village Network (more on this later), the philosophies behind it were the same ones driving larger and more established Village organizations.

By the end of our first meeting, Ruth and I had agreed that my role as a researcher should be that of a participant observer—she had agreed to let me sit in on all committee meetings, and

in exchange I would act as a liaison between the prospective Village's leaders and Kenyon students who might want to volunteer. I also found that by actively participating in meetings instead of observing them from afar, I was able to gain more insight into the unique character of the Village Movement as it applies to Gambier. For example, making a suggestion about the organization's set-up elicited a number of different responses (verbal and non-verbal), all of which were illustrative of the committee members' different opinions and motivations. At the beginning of the first committee meeting I attended, I introduced myself, my project, and what role I would be assuming in the committee, and was met with enthusiasm from all other committee members. As this topic is not especially sensitive, I chose to ask only for oral consent from committee members that anything they said during meetings could be recorded in my notes and used in my final paper (unless they specifically asked otherwise). All members agreed with these provisions.

Observations

The Village Movement in Gambier is still in its early stages of planning. As I write this, the committee has only met perhaps half a dozen times, and has paid one visit to an already established village in Athens, Ohio. Thus, instead of focusing on what long-term effects the village might have on its surrounding community, I will discuss the conflicts and obstacles that show up frequently in committee meetings. I hope that they will highlight the type of thinking that is central to the movement, in addition to some explanation of why this movement has become so popular in the past few years. The committee is currently comprised of eight core members, most of who are in their late 50's or early 60's, and all of who live in Gambier. Most of them have some sort of affiliation with Kenyon College, whether they currently work there,

used to work there and then retired, or sent their children there. The majority of the committee is female, although there are two husband-wife pairs in addition to the male mayor of Gambier. The committee meets intermittently at the Harcourt Parish House, a cozy, church-owned Victorian house, and sometimes stays for up to two hours discussing news and planning what their next step should be. They have also had guest speakers; in one case, a handyman from nearby Mount Vernon who tried to start a similar organization a few years ago, and later on, a lawyer to discuss the group's options in terms of creating a business plan. They based much of their discussion on the results from the surveys that had alerted me of their project in the first place. About 60 surveys were returned to the group, many with invaluable insights from community members in the open-ended comments section at the end.

The group faced a number of obstacles in attempting to set their idea in motion, many of which had to do with Gambier's small size. The main issue the committee struggled with was finding a balance between maintaining a sense of community while still recruiting enough members to logistically and financially maintain a Village. According to the Mayor, Gambier has approximately 50 households with residents age 50 and over (although he suspects this estimate is low). To put this in perspective, The Athens Village, which committee members visited to get an idea of how another small-scale Village works, has 75 members and just breaks even in terms of costs. Further, committee members agreed that given what they saw as Gambier residents' more modest lifestyles, they could not see themselves charging more than half of The Athens Village's \$400 annual membership fee. A number of suggestions were brought to the table in an attempt to remedy this issue, most notably a suggestion to extend the Village "boundaries" to the town of Mount Vernon. However, this idea was quickly shot down by the majority of the committee since, according to one member, "extending the boundaries further

than Gambier would defeat the purpose of having a small, neighborhood organization.” Another added, “Having a small organization where everyone knows each other maintains a higher level of accountability for each member.” In other words, if a community member abuses the Village’s services, it would be easier to notice. Another member suggested that the committee apply for a start-up grant from the Knox County Community Foundation, but again, this would require the organization to extend its services outside of Gambier boundaries.

Another one of the more pressing issues was how the committee could create an organization that would act as a *new* resource; one that wouldn’t duplicate, or compete with resources that already existed. To the committee, the Village Movement was not about replacing existing social services, but rather about supplementing them so that they could be used in conjunction with at-home living (as opposed to nursing-home or assisted living). As part of her initial research into the Village Movement, Ruth had compiled a preliminary list of services for the elderly that already existed in Mount Vernon and greater Knox County, and was forced to bring them up frequently as committee members suggested services that the Village could provide. For example, the Station Break, a senior citizen center in Mount Vernon, provides home meal delivery, maid service and transportation (for a fee), while the Knox County Task Force for Older Adults, an umbrella organization that oversees a number of smaller initiatives, has an affiliation with a visiting nurses’ association. Knox County’s small-town character complicated this further—many committee members were hesitant to set up specific services because they didn’t want other service providers, many of whom they were quite friendly with, to think that they were trying to “compete” for customers. In a more urban setting where competition is less personal, the Village set-up is just another option for elderly “consumers” barraged by choices.

There were two services, then, that committee members came back to time and time again as examples of programs that wouldn't interfere with already-existing initiatives. The first was a directory of members' skill sets, one of the more fundamental and idealistic aspects of the Village Movement's original philosophy. This was definitely something that didn't exist already, and that the committee saw as central to their plan in that it promoted continued activity and accountability for the elderly in the form of reciprocal volunteerism. However, survey results showed that while some people thought small, easy-to-fulfill tasks were needed in the community ("Try daily phone calls to members—I dialed a wrong number once and talked with a lonely shut-in for an hour. My 95-year-old mom loves to get phone calls."), what was more in demand were tasks that would need to be done by a professional (accounting, care management, etc.).

This leads to the second service, a list of pre-screened, local service providers (plumbers, electricians, carpenters, etc.) that would provide slightly discounted services to Village members. An eclectic plumber from the community came to one meeting to discuss his plan from a few years earlier to create a web of trusted community handymen. Unfortunately, his business plan seemed like more of a pyramid scheme than anything, and therefore his plan was never realized. When he left, the committee collectively agreed that his plan needed a little tweaking in that it was less than financially solid. In what seemed like a normal extension to me, I asked the board members if this would really be worth it to village members—how much money would they truly be saving? They were instantly appalled by this question. "Well, it's not *about* saving money," one of them said, "it's about having peace of mind." "\$400 is a lot to pay for peace of mind," said one member. Apparently I had inadvertently exposed tensions underlying the Village Movement by asking an economically practical question. The committee's initial, and

secondary reaction to this comment is demonstrative of the greater argument going on even within the village movement—how much of this is a for-profit, consumer-driven phenomenon and how much of it is idealism? No matter what, though, a practical application of this idea required a significant sum of money in order to start, regardless of how it was executed. Just registering for non-profit status, for example, costs hundreds of dollars, and requires a lawyer to help fill out all of the government forms (another few hundred dollars).

Finally, according to the surveys collected from around Gambier, residents didn't seem quite ready to admit they needed any help. Under the open-ended section of her survey, a 75-year-old woman wrote, "At some point in the future-20 or 30 years from now-I would love to take advantage of these services." The committee members had a good laugh over this, but there is more than humor behind this statement. Although the average age of survey respondents was 71, most made similar comments, explaining that it is "hard to say no" to a service that might be helpful someday. I see these responses as indicative of both demographic trends and cultural attitudes. On one level, it makes sense that some survey recipients do not currently need help to stay in their houses since some of them (mostly baby boomers) have not yet crossed into, or have *just* crossed into the over-65 age bracket. Age-related illnesses and loss of capabilities are not yet in their consciousness, and therefore it is hard for them to consider starting an organization that attempts to fill a need they cannot imagine having. On another level, though (especially in the case of those who are in their 70's and 80's), these participants' eagerness to express that they won't need these services until *much later* demonstrates the stigma that is still attached to old age, and a subsequent loss of independence in America. The reality of old age is that illness or injury often happens suddenly and without warning, so someone who is perfectly fine one day

may not be fine the next. No one wants to admit that they need help, especially those relatively healthy elders whose assistance might be necessitated by an accident.

By the end of my research, the committee had decided that instead of establishing a full-fledged village, it would pick and choose which aspects of the village set-up were the most reasonable to implement in Gambier. Based on many of the factors I discussed above, the committee decided that the aspect of the village movement most lacking in the community was a comprehensive directory of all available services for the elderly, as well as a listing of community members skills. This directory has not yet been finished, but I imagine that the peace of mind it will provide elderly community members will be invaluable in their efforts to live at home for as long as possible. The group also finally agreed on a name: A Hand at Home.

Discussion

In short, the main characteristic that makes Gambier different from other areas in which villages have been established is that it is decidedly rural, and already has the type of small-town neighborliness that residents in urban areas often wish to recreate. Despite this, I believe that the way in which Gambier differs from other, more urban villages is actually beneficial in explaining the factors *besides* a desire for heightened community that might be contributing to the Village Movement's popularity. In other words, noting that "strengthened community" is not the driving factor in creating this village isolates other impetuses which may be present in urban areas as well, but not as easy to see.

One of these factors is the unique breed of American independence that Archibald draws on time and again in his explanation of the culture of self-help. As is evidenced in the case of Gambier, there's something about helping someone yourself that softens the blow of being

helped. Survey respondents were most adamant about preserving the mutual nature of the program. This supports my idea that one of the things that is so appealing about the Village Movement is how it attempts to maintain senior citizens' value to society. By giving each village member a unique role to play in the upkeep of the organization, the movement fights against some of the traditional notions of old age, specifically that the elderly must "disengage" from society in preparation for death. Another characteristic of the boomer generation is their wariness to depend on family members for long-term care, especially in a society where grown children often move across the country from their parents. The village movement allows these elders to create new social connections so that they don't have to depend on their "default" caretakers, an empowering option that places seniors in the position of the consumer, or in active control of their own care. This might also explain why the Village Movement appealed to Gambier's older residents in the first place despite the large number of social resources available to them in neighboring Mount Vernon and greater Knox County. Although these traditional meal-delivery and transportation services are unquestionably helpful to many senior citizens, they also come at the price of giving up one's autonomy and control—ultimately, someone else is in charge of running the programs and making decisions.

Another major theme that emerged in my research was that of security. Many survey respondents who were physically capable of taking care of themselves were still worried about being duped by the complicated world of insurance, social security and other service providers. To them, the most important function of a village would be that of "watch dog," wherein they would be protected from fraud by the power of numbers. Again, this can be linked back to the desire to remain independent and active. Playing a role in protecting someone else (and knowing that they will do the same for you) is a job that requires skill and sharp thinking, two qualities

that are markers of a “sharp,” productive person. This anxiety about security has probably been heightened by the recession, as well. With stocks devaluing and retirement funds dwindling, it becomes that much more important to protect what little is left of one's assets.

It is also important to consider the role money and social class play in determining the nature of a village, or whether it is even a conceivable option. Because the traditional village set-up is so expensive for its participants, it may be prohibitive to poorer, or even more modest upper-middle class communities. This is certainly the case in Gambier, in which residents balked at the annual \$400 fees required of members of what could potentially be a “sister village” in Athens, Ohio. This, perhaps, is why a full-blown village has not emerged in Gambier (yet)—although the movement's core values would seem to support a more economically modest form of cooperative American living, the reality is that in practice it is still about providing independence and security *for those who can afford it*. This is problematic in that it lands the elderly right back where they were while pursuing more common living arrangements: unable to afford quality care. While I initially hypothesized that the economic recession in the US was pushing the elderly towards what I thought were more economically sustainable living arrangements, it turns out that since the village movement is in its infancy, it is actually a relatively expensive way to live. Still, it is less expensive than relocating to an assisted living facility or nursing home.

Of course, the limited scope of my study prevented me from obtaining a complete understanding of the motivations behind the Village Movement. After all, the committee in Gambier did not end up creating a full-fledged village organization, so while I can analyze the factors that went into that decision, I cannot fully understand what a realized village's affect on its members and surrounding community might be. This project only scratches the surface of the

complicated nature of age in America, and will become even more relevant as the baby boomers age into their 70's and 80's. Much future research is needed, including an in-depth look at the motivations of village organizers and members that are already established and financially stable (individual interviews with founding members, which I was prohibited from doing because of time constraints, would be necessary), as well as a comparison study of same-generation senior citizens who *do* end up in assisted living facilities or nursing homes. Further, a demographic overview of all villages that already exist in the United States is necessary to give us a clearer picture of who exactly is participating in this movement and why. This would allow village organizers to modify their organizational set-up to include formerly excluded groups. My study also does not take into account how different cultures treat aging. Not all cultures, for example, ever leave their multi-generational household to form nuclear family units. The participants in my study were in no way socio-economically diverse, which limits my understanding of just how successful the Village Movement could be as a widespread, American phenomenon.

Conclusion

Although my research is introductory, I believe that it is illustrative of the benefits of a village organization set-up in the United States. Not only do Villages build feelings of pride and independence in their older members, but they also change younger peoples' perceptions of their elders as capable, worthwhile members of society. As our society goes through the enormous demographic transition that is predicted to occur in the next 50 years, social institutions will have to change as well to accommodate the different needs of an older population. The Village Movement has the potential to transition us through this period of social change while allowing our citizens to age with grace and dignity.

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