

Summary of themes

- The experiences of older activists have much to contribute to social movements.
- For many older activists, age has no significant influence on their activism.
- Some activists modify their movement activities as they get older, such as concentrating on writing and research.
- Contact with other social movements could help to politicise newer activists in the Older Peoples' Advocacy Movement.



Queen Margaret University
EDINBURGH

Involving Older People Research Programme:

Older peoples' activism and older peoples' issues

E. Scandrett and S. Moffat

As the demographic makeup of western societies has increased the proportion of older people, older people have begun to mobilise and campaign on issues which affect them and policy makers have sought the views of older people. This process may be developing into to a social movement of Older Peoples' Advocacy, with potential for progressive social influence. At the same time, many activists in social movements which flourished in the 1960s or before are now older and bring a great deal of experience of social activism.

Our research studied the experiences of older activists in three social movements and compared this with newly active older people in the Older Peoples' Advocacy Movement (OPAM). We were interested in two questions:

1. In what ways do the experiences of older people in the Older Peoples' Advocacy Movement compare with older people who have been active in other social movements?
2. What contribution to older peoples' activism can be made by a dialogue between Older Peoples' Advocacy Movement activists and older activists in other social movements?

The Royal Bank of Scotland Centre for the Older Person's Agenda
Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh, Musselburgh EH21 6UU
t. 0131 474 0000 f. 0131 474 0001 e. copa@qmu.ac.uk www.qmu.ac.uk/copa

COPA IS A SPONSORED PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN
QUEEN MARGARET UNIVERSITY AND THE ROYAL BANK OF SCOTLAND

Design

Twenty five older activists (aged 60+) were interviewed from the following social movements:

- The Women's Movement
- The Peace Movement
- Marxist / Communist Movements
- Older People's Advocacy Movement

Individuals were selected who had been active in the women's, peace and communist movements for at least 15 of the last 30 years. Older Peoples' Advocacy Movement activists were selected who had not previously been active in other movements.

The method used was designed so that the older people who were interviewed were able to contribute to interpreting the interviews. The process followed was as follows:

- A pre-interview meeting or telephone call between researcher and interviewee;
- A one hour interview by the researcher, recorded on video;
- A copy of the video of the interview was given to the interviewee who was invited to watch it, reflect on it and add, comment on or amend the content of the interview;
- Interviewees were then invited to a focus group where issues arising from the interviews as a whole were presented and discussed.

Emergent themes

It has proved difficult to identify Older Peoples' Advocacy Movement activists who had not previously been active in other movements. Several people who responded to our advertisement were not interviewed because of their previous activism, and some of those who were interviewed had at least some previous activist experience.

The time that people become active can have a significant impact on their experience. Becoming newly active in the 'positive atmosphere' of the protesting 60s and 70s is different from being newly active in the 'negative atmosphere' of the Thatcherite 80s or neoliberal 00s.

For women activists in particular, caring responsibilities often have more significance than aging. Many women became more active when children become independent, irrespective of what age they are.

Poverty and lack of resources for travel, computer equipment and additional expenses is a significant problem for many older activists who are dependent on state pension, and women whose pension has been affected by periods of unpaid domestic work or their husband's pension arrangements.

Older activists from all movements have made suggestions about contributions which can be made to newly active OPAM activists.

Themes which have emerged across those interviewed have been expressed as contradictions, or tensions between competing tendencies. There were examples in the interviews of both positions, and the tensions between them discussed in the focus group.

○ Getting older has changed what kind of activism I get involved in	○ getting older has made no difference to my activism
○ It is frustrating that young people are re-inventing the wheel	○ it is time for us older activist to let young people learn for themselves
○ It is good that young people are coming up with new ideas	○ young people's ideas are distorting the original aims of our movements
○ It is very important to have support from family and friends	○ family and friends take us away from our activism
○ It is necessary to build alliances with people you don't agree with	○ It is necessary to stick to your principles and conflict with people you don't agree with
○ It is important to see small successes and a sense of progress even if it means compromising on principles	○ it is important to stick to beliefs even if that means conceding some victories
○ Older peoples' experience is valued by young people	○ older people are not valued by younger people

Reflections

In this small scale research project, the following tentative reflections are offered:

- There is no evidence that the older peoples' advocacy movement is mobilising significant numbers of people *who have not previously been active in other movements*;
- There is no evidence of significant levels of politicisation amongst people *who become newly active* in older age;
- Older activists in women's, peace and communist movements, and older peoples' advocacy movement activists who have been active in other movements, tend to understand their campaign issue in relation to many other issues. Newly active OPAM activists have a tendency to focus on their own issue.
- Older people seem to be encouraged into 'caring', self-help or 'volunteering' activities, rather than activism which can affect policy, promote social change, improve collective conditions and politicise older people.
- People working on problems which affect older people can learn from older activists from social movements.