

Does Voluntary Association Participation Boost Social Resources?*

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Objectives. Conflicting arguments exist in the literature about whether associational involvement can enhance people's social resources (operationalized as the extent to which people have nearby social networks they can rely on). We aim to test these arguments. *Methods.* We use two-wave panel data. These are needed, as a causal relationship is presumed: participation as antecedent and social resources as outcome. To test this relationship, we compared two groups: respondents who became members of an association (between the two waves) and respondents who remained uninvolved. *Results.* We found no general membership effect. However, starting volunteer work showed a small, positive effect on the growth of social resources. Furthermore, membership effects were found among groups with fewer possibilities of acquiring social resources in other contexts (the elderly, people without a partner, and ethnic minorities). *Conclusions.* In line with the more skeptical ideas about voluntary associations, the effects of voluntary association participation seem small. However, people differ in the extent to which they profit from this participation.

A paradox exists in the study of voluntary association participation. On the one hand, the effects or side effects of participation legitimize the study of the topic. It would not make much sense to examine trends in memberships, for example, if nothing would be gained or lost with a rise or fall. On the other hand, whereas inequality or trends in participation have been examined extensively, few of the presumed effects of participation have been put to a proper test. One of the main problems in previous studies is the lack of longitudinal panel data. Most previous studies are based on cross-sectional designs, and in such designs little can be said about causality issues. Because it is plausible to expect that selection effects occur in the relationship between participation and its outcomes, cross-sectional studies give us incomplete insights.

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In our view, the conclusions about the effects of voluntary association participation would improve considerably if analyses could be based on dynamic (panel) data instead of cross-sectional data. Although panel data cannot prove causality either, they are widely regarded as the most important way to examine mutual causality and to rule out selection effects. Although longitudinal designs have become increasingly common in other research areas in sociology (e.g., social stratification, social demography, health), they have so far rarely been used in the study of voluntary associations. An exception is the research with regard to well-being and mental health (Piliavin and Siegl, 2007; Musick and Wilson, 2003).

We will refer to the causal effect of associational involvement on its outcome as a *participation effect*, in contrast to *selection effects*. It is justified to draw conclusions about participation effects only if differences between members and nonmembers occur after entry into an organization, resulting from a process of growth that is brought about by associational experiences. To make sure this is the case, we will use data from a two-wave panel study and compare the group that entered at least one association between the waves with the group that remained uninvolved, and we will examine whether these groups show a different growth in our dependent variable: social resources. These are defined as the extent to which an individual has a social network of nearby contacts that can be mobilized for help and support. In other words, our first and most general research question is: Does voluntary association participation boost social resources?

This type of research is sometimes conducted under the rubric of social capital, or positive outcomes of social networks. Previous social capital research has focused both on individual-level benefits (cf. Lin, 2001; Coleman, 1990), as well as collective benefits (cf. Putnam, 2000). Our research examines to what extent *social participation* converts into *social capital*. When participation effects occur, the connections that are created and maintained in the context of voluntary associations pay off; they convert into resources.

One of the critiques on the current research is that it lacks theoretical mechanisms that link the associational experiences to the consequences (Stolle, 2001). When social resources are studied as outcome, the mechanism is straightforward and has an intuitive logic: when people enter an association, they are exposed to a set of fellow members and engage in activities that usually require interaction and cooperation. This will create bonds between members, which may increase in strength when the involvement continues. Little empirical research has been conducted on the relation between associational participation and social resources. Studies exist of the influence of social networks on participation (McPherson, Popielarz, and Drobnic, 1992; Bekkers et al., 2007; Wilson and Musick, 1998), but—apart from the fact that social *networks* do not equal social *resources*—these studies have examined only the selection (or recruitment) effect in this relationship, not the possible participation effect.

In the theoretical section of this article, we will discuss arguments for and against participation effects regarding social resources. Additionally, we suggest that it might not be a matter of merely yes or no, but that a conditional answer may be needed. Researchers increasingly recognize the limited possibilities of generalizability in the study of associations (Tschirhart, 2006), and are starting to pay attention to the circumstances under which effects emerge. One of the dimensions of that participation is the degree and type of involvement. Volunteering is often seen as a special case of associational involvement (Wilson, 2000), as a more dedicated and time-consuming activity than “ordinary membership,” which should thus produce stronger effects. Although we see no reason why ordinary membership would not bring about participation effects regarding social resources, we will additionally examine the effects of volunteering.

Finally, we will examine participation effects for specific groups. Li and Ferraro (2006) conclude that there is much life-course variation in the relation between volunteering and health. In the case of social resources and isolation, it is quite common to look at the elderly (De Jong-Gierveld and Dykstra, 2008; Dykstra, Van Tilburg, and De Jong-Gierveld, 2005), as the availability of social resources is presumably most problematic in this group. In general, it makes sense to study the groups that have something to gain from associational involvement. Since many of the outcomes can also be produced in other social contexts, it is possible that associational involvement does not cause a certain effect despite its capacity to do so. In this article, we will therefore test whether there is a participation effect of associational involvement on social resources that is conditioned by the resources people started with. That is, we examine whether people with fewer (initial) resources have more to gain from associational participation. Additionally, we pay special attention to three groups: those aged 55+, people without a partner (or, to be exact, without a partner living in the same household), and ethnic minorities. For different reasons, these groups have limited possibilities to draw social resources from other contexts and have more to gain from associational involvement.

The data we use in our analyses stem from the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (NKPS), which is a large-scale survey conducted between 2002 and 2007. Although our data are only representative for the Netherlands, we believe that our analyses have broader implications. We have no reason to expect that the creation of relationships and acquisition of social resources would not follow mechanisms that are similar across Western countries. However, the importance of voluntary association participation differs from country to country. Previous research has shown that the Netherlands belongs to a cluster of countries with high levels of participation, together with the United States, Canada, and the Scandinavian countries (Curtis, Baer, and Grabb, 2001; Pichler and Wallace, 2007). The Netherlands is therefore a good test case; if participation effects exist, one would expect them to appear most prominently in countries with high levels of voluntary association participation.

Theory and Previous Research

There are several reasons to expect a positive effect on social resources of becoming a member of a voluntary association. However, there are also arguments against it, or at least arguments that suggest that the influence of associations will be marginal. We will discuss both in this section, and subsequently discuss whether both could be true, though under different circumstances.

According to social network researchers, people generally do not make an unconstrained choice of new friends, acquaintances, or beloveds. Instead, there is a *focused choice* (Feld, 1982, 1984); people participate in certain contexts that bring certain company. People may have preferences for the kind of others they would like to become involved with, but the *foci* function as a supply side, restricting the possibilities. Acquaintances, friends, and future spouses are recruited from the contexts in which people are focused. Research has found that the (sociodemographic) composition of foci and the composition of people's immediate social circle, such as "core discussion networks," are correlated (Kalmijn and Flap, 2001; Marsden, 1990; Mollenhorst, Völker, and Flap, 2008). That is, the composition of this group of peers reflects the composition of the foci of past participation.

A voluntary association can be one of those social contexts, along with workplaces, neighborhoods, schools, and others (Fischer, 1982). When individuals participate in an association they become exposed to a limited circle of fellow members who regularly come together and engage in the association's activities. In other words, through membership, voluntary associations provide meeting opportunities, or access to the network of members who are part of it.

Apart from these supply-side arguments, researchers have found that participants in voluntary associations sometimes motivate their decision to join as a search for new social contacts (Prouteau and Wolff, 2008), which corresponds to the claim that associational involvement contributes to feelings of belongingness (Smith, 1975; Rosenblum, 1998). People may be on the lookout for new or more extensive social resources, and they see membership in voluntary associations as a potential instrument to achieve this goal.

A third argument in favor of the suitability of voluntary associations to generate social resources is that the nature of the activities is distinct from other social contexts. Involvement in voluntary associations is more freely chosen than involvement in work, neighborhoods, or education (cf. Rosenblum, 1998; Warren, 2001). According to Zmerli (2007), this induces self-categorization mechanisms: individuals opt for associations with members they resemble. In turn, this stimulates friendship formation. Moreover, the goals of the associations are often recreational, giving members "opportunities for positive experiences with others under the 'controlled' circumstances of shared interest."

It is not self-evident that associational participation brings about (extended) social resources. For instance, McPherson, Popielarz, and Drobnic (1992) have shown that people's social networks within and outside voluntary associations are interlinked in several ways, but that does not necessarily indicate a participation effect. New members may interact with people they already knew within the association before they joined. If this is true, entering an association does not boost social resources, it only reaffirms the existing relationships. In other words, the causal order is reversed.

Another argument against a prominent role of associations in the creation of social resources is that contacts and interactions may remain within the associational contexts exclusively; they may not *spill over* to other contexts. The idea of spillover—crucial in many of the arguments about associational effects (e.g., Rosenblum, 1998)—states that experiences resulting from voluntary association participation can be taken along to other parts of life, or affect general dispositions (e.g., attitudes, values), which in turn affect individuals' behavior on other occasions. In the case of social resources, participation effects will be present when fellow members are also met in other contexts and/or when the contact evolves into a friendship or acquaintanceship. However, spill-over effects of associational participation are not often shown in empirical research (Stolle, 2001). Moreover, social relationships often have a more flexible and temporary nature nowadays (Allan, 2008), and associational contacts may be among the more incidental and superficial contacts. As a result, entry into associations may create no or few social resources.

An argument related to the previous one is that the importance of voluntary associations in people's everyday lives may be limited. The amount of time that is spent on associational participation is modest; other types of social participation are generally more important (Van Ingen, 2008). Since the amount of time spent with a certain other is one of the determining factors of the strength of the tie with that person (Granovetter, 1973), this would mean that associations create *weak ties* more easily than *strong ties*. Agneessens, Waeye, and Lievens (2006) show that some forms of social support are more likely to be offered by strong ties: help during sickness or financial aid, for example, are rarely provided by acquaintances or colleagues. Thus, if social resources stem from strong ties, and contacts within associations are mainly weak ties, the relationship between associational involvement and social resources should be weak.

So far, we have presented competing claims about the effects of participation. We will first and foremost examine these claims empirically. At the same time, however, there might be a bit more to say about the relation between the arguments for and against participation effects regarding social resources. One way to make sense of the competing claims may be the idea that associational involvement results in increased social resources only if the extent of involvement is sufficient, that is, there may be a critical amount of interaction and activity needed for the contacts to convert into relationships

and resources. In the current article, we will look at volunteering as a possible factor that satisfies this criterion. Volunteering requires greater efforts and is more costly than membership (Bekkers et al., 2007), and “sociological convention distinguishes being an active participant in a voluntary association from volunteering” (Wilson, 2000). As volunteers’ involvement is greater, they should show stronger participation effects than ordinary members. Additionally, the nature of the activities that are performed may be different; members usually consume and volunteers usually produce collective goods (Wilson, 2000). The latter involves performing organizational and administrative tasks (Erickson and Nosanchuk, 1990), which may further (and be the result of) dedication to the association, its goal, and members.

Another way to make sense of the competing claims would be to differentiate according to the need for social resources. Scholars have started emphasizing the limited possibilities of generalization in voluntary association research (Fung, 2003; Stolle and Rochon, 1998; Tschirhart, 2006). They argue that questions about the circumstances of participation are important, since the existence of certain effects may be dependent on the type of association, the kind of involvement, and the kind of participants under study. Moreover, knowing more about the circumstances under which effects occur may help us track down the mechanisms that are responsible for the relationship (cf. Elster, 2007).

In the current article, we will examine participation effects within groups that can be expected to profit more from associational participation than others. People may not always be strongly integrated into every possible context. Some do not have colleagues because they do not have a job and others are unable to rely on their neighbors because they recently moved. In these circumstances, associations can become more important contexts, compensating the lack of social resources that is caused by other factors. This argument can be applied more broadly. The value of associational involvement in generating social resources may increase when the alternatives are limited. In our analyses, we will therefore first examine whether the participation effect is dependent on the amount of social resources before entering the association. Second, three groups will be examined: those with relatively limited integration in work (people aged 55+), those with limited social resources in their households (people living without a partner), and those with a below-average integration in several contexts (ethnic minorities). Moreover, the first two groups may also have more time available to spend on participation in voluntary associations.

Data and Methods

The data used in this study stem from the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (NKPS), which is a two-wave, representative panel study examining

family and kinship in the Netherlands (Dykstra et al., 2005, 2007). The survey consisted of a (CAPI) interview and a self-completion questionnaire, and has a large sample size: 6,026 respondents participated in both waves. The first wave was conducted between 2002 and 2004. The second wave was conducted between 2005 and 2007 (3.5 years later), in which 74 percent of the initial sample agreed to cooperate. Examination of panel attrition revealed a significant relationship with our dependent variable. However, its effect size was modest; the correlation (point-biserial) between participation in the second wave and social resources was 0.087 ($p = 0.000$). One of the analyses in the article is based on an additional migrant sample, in which the four largest migrant groups in the Netherlands (Turks, Moroccans, Surinamese, and Dutch Antilleans) are oversampled. Since the number of migrants in the representative sample is low, our statistical tests will be able to detect large effects only among migrant groups in this sample; the migrant sample offers more statistical power.

Voluntary Association Participation

Our measure of associational involvement consists of (at least one) membership in: “sports associations,” “religious or church associations,” “a choir, drama association, or music society,” or “a hobby, leisure-time, or youth association.” Table 1 (bottom) shows the transitions in associational participation and volunteering between the two waves. Our main focus is on the second category: the groups who entered an association (at least one) or started volunteering between the two waves. These groups will be compared to the noninvolved.

Social Resources

Our measure of social resources is based on a five-item scale.

- There is always someone I can talk to about my day-to-day problems.
- There are plenty of people I can lean on when I have problems.
- There are many people I can trust completely.
- There are enough people I feel close to.
- I can call on my friends whenever I need them.

We created a scale by calculating the mean of the scores on these items. When respondents answered less than four of the items, we assigned a missing value on the final scale variable. The reliability of the resulting scale (Cronbach's alpha) is 0.80. We transposed the scale to a 0–10 range for easier interpretation. This scale measures the extent to which people have a nearby social network they can mobilize for help and support; the items both ask about the existence of the network and about resources that can

TABLE 1
Descriptive Statistics

	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
<i>Continuous or Dummy Variables</i>					
Social resources T1	6,367	0	10	7.92	2.37
Social resources T2	6,304	0	10	7.72	2.40
Education (T1)	6,670	5	20	12.01	3.20
Women (T1)	6,744	0	1	0.59	0.49
Employed (T1)	6,744	0	1	0.64	0.48
Age (T1)	6,735	18	79	45.90	14.43
Single (single person hh or single parent; T1)	6,744	0	1	0.29	0.46
Living with parents (T1)	6,744	0	1	0.03	0.17
Has children (T1)	6,744	0	1	0.71	0.45
Health (self-rated; T1)	6,743	1	5	4.03	0.80
Church attendance (> = once a month; T1)	5,749	0	1	0.20	0.40
<i>Categorical Variables (%)</i>					
Participation transitions	I 27 (stayed uninvolved)	II 13 (entered between T1 and T2)	III 49 (stayed involved)	IV 12 (exited between T1 and T2)	
Volunteering transitions	49 (stayed uninvolved)	12 (started between T1 and T2)	27 (stayed involved)	12 (quit between T1 and T2)	
Valid N (listwise)	5,219				

mobilized (“someone I can talk to . . .,” “people I can lean on,” and “call on my friends”). Contrary to instruments that use name generators, it is a self-perceived measure of social resources.

The five items we used are part of the De Jong-Gierveld Loneliness Scale (Dykstra, Van Tilburg, and De Jong-Gierveld, 2005; De Jong-Gierveld and Kamphuis, 1985). The scale consists of 11 items and contains an emotional and a social dimension (Van Baarsen et al., 2001). The former mainly corresponds to feelings of abandonment and missed companionship; the latter—which is used here—corresponds to “social integration and embeddedness.” The social dimension is related to (actual) network size and support (Dykstra and De Jong-Gierveld, 2004). Since the items on the social dimension are all formulated positively and loneliness only captures the negative extreme, we use the term social resources instead of loneliness or isolation.

Other Variables

To control for other contexts from which respondents derive social resources, we included education, having a job, lifecycle, and religiosity in our models. Education was measured as years of schooling, ranging from 5 to 20 years. The variable *currently employed* is a dummy variable that indicates having a job versus all other possibilities. Lifecycle is a nominal variable that captures six categories: living with parents, single person, couple without children, couple with children, single parent, and other households. Additionally, gender, health, church attendance, and age were included in our models as controls. The latter consisted of a linear and a quadratic component to capture the possible rapid decline in social resources at old age. We added an interaction effect between gender and having a job to account for possible differences in the resources men and women acquire from their work.

Analytical Strategy

We opted for an analytical strategy that has been used in studies in other fields, for example, on effects of marriage (e.g., Simon, 2002; Horwitz, White, and Howell-White, 1996). We examine participation effects by comparing respondents who entered between the two waves (who were participating at T2 and not participating at T1) with respondents without any participation. In our analyses, we regress social resources (T2) on a dummy variable indicating this *entry* and on previous social resources (T1). In other words, we analyze how much the group that entered an association grew in social resources compared to the group that remained uninvolved. Changes in the number of memberships are not tested (we test the change

from 0 at T1 to 1, 2, 3, or 4 memberships at T2). Separate tests showed that the transition from no to at least one membership is by far the most important difference.

The respondents who entered an organization between the waves had been a member for 1.75 years on average by the time of the second wave. This is a relatively short period, which means that chances are low that transitions occur in between (e.g., that people exit one association and enter another, which would appear in the data as staying involved). The period in which people stay involved can obviously be longer; for example, McPherson, Popielarz, and Drobnic (1992) mention an average of six years of membership in their analyses of retrospective data. Although the exact numbers are not precisely known, it is clear that our analyses should be interpreted as mainly capturing the short-term effect of participation (ranging between 0 and 3.5 years of *exposure* to the *participation treatment*).

Results

Table 2 gives the results of the analyses that address possible participation effects as a result of membership or volunteering. As argued in the methods section, a proper examination of this effect requires controlling for prior differences in social resources (between the entry and uninvolved groups). Preliminary inspection of our data showed that these between-subject differences exist; the ones who entered a voluntary association scored 0.31 points higher on the social resources scale than the ones who remained uninvolved, corresponding to 0.13 standard deviations, which was a significant difference ($t = -2.667$; $p = 0.008$).

As can be seen in Model I of Table 2, the difference between those who entered a voluntary association and those who remained uninvolved is small and nonsignificant after controlling for selection effects. Social resources in the first wave had a significant influence on social resources in the second wave (the standardized coefficient is 0.34). Additionally, we controlled for several other factors that may disturb the entry effect. However, adding these control variables does not substantially alter the result. We thus conclude against a participation effect; people who become a member of a voluntary association do not gain more social resources than those who remain uninvolved.

Note that the coefficients of gender and employment—as a result of the interaction $\text{gender} \times \text{employed}$ —are not the main effects of gender and employment; without the interaction, women showed larger growth in social resources than men ($\beta = 0.390$; $p = 0.000$) and respondents with a job showed a (weakly significant) larger growth than those without a job ($\beta = 0.248$; $p = 0.065$). The interaction effect indicates that the growth is larger when the two conditions are combined (for employed women).

TABLE 2

Regression of Social Resources T2 on Entry in Voluntary Associations and Volunteering, Social Resources T1, and Control Variables T1 (OLS; Unstandardized Coefficients)

	Membership		Volunteering	
	Model I	Model II	Model I	Model II
Entry/start	0.107 (0.106)	0.588 (0.418)	0.193* (0.093)	0.605 (0.429)
Social resources T1	0.606** (0.023)	0.624** (0.027)	0.580** (0.019)	0.589** (0.021)
Education	0.006 (0.018)	0.007 (0.018)	0.010 (0.014)	0.010 (0.014)
Women	0.068 (0.192)	0.056 (0.192)	0.125 (0.162)	0.130 (0.162)
Employed	-0.050 (0.199)	-0.070 (0.200)	0.056 (0.165)	0.063 (0.165)
Women × Employed	0.437* (0.220)	0.449* (0.221)	0.247 (0.179)	0.239 (0.179)
Age	-0.007 (0.025)	-0.007 (0.025)	0.007 (0.021)	0.008 (0.021)
Age ²	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)
Single	-0.123 (0.114)	-0.129 (0.114)	-0.152 (0.090)	-0.151 (0.090)
Living with parents	-0.685* (0.323)	-0.684* (0.322)	0.009 (0.243)	0.016 (0.242)
Has children	-0.108 (0.116)	-0.105 (0.116)	-0.071 (0.094)	-0.071 (0.094)
Health	0.059 (0.068)	0.058 (0.068)	0.099~ (0.053)	0.101~ (0.053)
Church attendance	0.014 (0.141)	0.019 (0.141)	0.030 (0.140)	0.035 (0.140)
Entry × Social res T1	—	-0.061 (0.048)	—	-0.052 (0.048)
R ²	0.386	0.387	0.355	0.355
N	1,804	1,804	2,961	2,961

~ $p < 0.10$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

NOTE: The numbers inside parentheses are (robust) standard errors.

Furthermore, we found that respondents who were still living with their parents gained less social resources than those not living with their parents. The other variables in the model did not show significant effects.

In the second model, we examined whether participation effects are conditioned on initial levels of social resources, or whether people with few social resources have more to gain from participation than those with abundant resources, by adding an interaction term. Although the direction

of the interaction was as expected (negative), it was not significant. Therefore, we have to reject the idea that the effect of entering an association is larger when people have fewer initial social resources. In addition to this linear interaction, we examined the possibility of nonlinear interactions by running separate regressions for every decile in the distribution of social resources on T1. This confirmed our expectation that the interaction was not linear; the entry effect is considerably larger in the lower deciles, but nonexistent in the higher deciles. The participation effect in the first decile, among the ones with very few social resources, was the largest ($\beta = 0.906$; $p = 0.020$).

Table 2 also shows the results of volunteering, which is often seen as a stronger kind of participation than membership. The participation effect of volunteering turns out to be significant: those who started volunteering gained more social resources than those who remained uninvolved. We can also consider the magnitude of the effect. To do this, we calculate an effect size, that is, the dummy effect of entering (X) divided by the standard deviation of the social resources (Y). The effect size turns out to be 0.08, which is small.

Additionally, we expected that the volunteering effect would be greater than the membership effect in Hypothesis 3. There is no straightforward manner to test this formally (the membership and volunteering analyses are based on different subsamples). Nevertheless, we can compare the 95 percent confidence intervals around the two effects. They range from -0.101 to 0.314 for membership and from 0.011 to 0.375 for volunteering. In view of this large overlap, we cannot conclude that the volunteering effect is larger.

Similar to Model II, we added an interaction term to the volunteering model to see whether the effect of entry would be larger among people with low initial levels of social resources. However, the interaction effect was not significant.

In Table 3, we examined whether groups that lack social resources from other contexts show participation effects. First, we took a subsample of respondents aged 55 or older. The models we tested were similar to Model I in Table 2; they include social resources at T1 and control variables. Among the elderly, those who entered an association gained more social resources than those who remained uninvolved. However, this effect was weakly significant. The effect size is still modest for this group (0.14). The final column in Table 3 tests the difference between the effects among the two age groups. This difference was not significant ($p = 0.15$). Next, we examined the participation effect for people without a partner (in the same household). The controlled participation effect for this group is weakly significant. However, the difference in the effect for people with and without a partner was not significant ($p = 0.24$). The bottom panel of Table 3 shows the results for ethnic minorities versus the native Dutch. The former showed a significant, positive effect of associational involvement on social resources,

TABLE 3

Regression of Social Resources T2 on Entry in Voluntary Associations, Control Variables, and Social Resources T1, for Three Different Groups (OLS; Unstandardized Coefficients)

Age	18–54 Years	55+ Years	Test of Difference
Entry	0.048 (0.125)	0.331 ~ (0.197)	$\rho = 0.145$
Social resources T1	0.613** (0.027)	0.583** (0.042)	
Control variables	v	v	
R^2	0.375	0.418	
N	1,342	462	
Having a Partner	Yes	No	Test of Difference
Entry	0.040 (0.123)	0.347 ~ (0.189)	$\rho = 0.236$
Social resources T1	0.596** (0.028)	0.632** (0.039)	
Control variables	v	v	
R^2	0.357	0.458	
N	1,259	555	
Ethnicity	Native Dutch	Ethnic Minorities	Test of Difference
Entry	0.051 (0.102)	0.546* (0.255)	$\rho = 0.052$
Social resources T1	0.608** (0.020)	0.348** (0.040)	
Control variables	v	v	
R^2	0.400	0.166	
N	1,659	542	

~ $\rho < 0.10$; * $\rho < 0.05$; ** $\rho < 0.01$.

NOTE: The numbers inside parentheses are (robust) standard errors. Control variables are similar to those in Table 2, with exclusion of the life-course variables in the model with/without a partner, and exclusion of church attendance in the native Dutch/ethnic minorities model.

and the effect is relatively strong (effect size of 0.23). The difference between the native Dutch and ethnic minorities was marginally significant ($\rho = 0.05$).

Discussion and Conclusions

The results of the preceding analyses have shown that we need to be skeptical about the effects of associational involvement on social resources: once selection effects were taken into account, we did not find a general membership effect on social resources and the effect of volunteering was small. This subscribes to the more pessimistic views on voluntary associations; they may take up a part of everyday life that is too small to be

of significance or associational involvement does not have an influence on other domains. In other words, in the case of social resources, the spill-over mechanism—which is central to many ideas about participation effects—does not seem to be very strong.

To arrive at some idea about the validity of our conclusions, we can compare our results to a survey that was conducted in the Netherlands in which people were asked directly about social contacts resulting from associational involvement. Mollenhorst, Völker, and Flap (2008) examined where people got to know each other, and reported that 10 percent of the Dutch population first met his or her partner in a club or association. Furthermore, respondents reported that they first met 14 percent of their friends and 10 percent of their acquaintances in an association. In other words, when using this different method, small effects are found as well. Possibly, our analyses would have shown significant participation effects if our sample size was larger, but the magnitude of the effects would not be different. It is likely, however, that a longer period between our two measurements would have resulted in larger effects, given the fact that social resources mainly result from relatively strong ties, which need time to develop.

One of the reasons for the nonsignificant or small participation effects may be lack of multiplexity in the relationships with fellow members. As long as people rush home after the weekly game of soccer, their fellow members will not contribute, or contribute very little, to their social resources. This is in line with what was found by Crossley (2008) in analyzing the development of interpersonal relationships in a health club: friendships between members were strongly encouraged when there were additionally meetings on the street, in the nearby bar, or at an occasional dinner in a restaurant. Without this multiplexity, the ties with fellow members may be too weak to result in (additional) social resources. This does not mean that these contacts are irrelevant, however. Weak ties may provide valuable information, for example, about job opportunities (Granovetter, 1974). Furthermore, since these weak ties are more often bridging (i.e., consisting of relationships with dissimilar others), they may enhance people's abilities to interact with others from different backgrounds, spanning differences in language and customs (cf. Lichterman, 2005; Putnam, 2000). Additionally, Mutz (2006) argued that contacts with dissimilar others (with opposite political views) are important for the creation of tolerance. In other words, while our analyses indicate that associational involvement does not seem to have strong bonding effects, it may still encourage bridging contacts.

Apart from the participation effects we studied, one may also wonder to what extent selection effects exist in the relation between social resources and associational participation. By way of exploration, we analyzed whether reversal of the causation in our entry model would lead to significant results. In our view, if the selection effect is the result of a recruitment mechanism, a

higher amount of social resources at T1 should increase the chance of joining an association between T1 and T2 (this means that the selection effect is conceptually different from the participation effect, in which a change in membership status should cause a change in social resources). Without control variables there was a marginally significant effect, but this disappeared after entering sociodemographic characteristics. Theoretically, it is also unclear why such an effect would occur. There is a well-known recruitment hypothesis in research on voluntary associations (Tschirhart, 2006; Bekkers et al., 2007; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995), but this mainly stems from the fact that volunteers are often asked to participate, and that new members often already know someone “inside.” Although some researchers have extended this reasoning to network size (McPherson, Popielarz, and Drobnic, 1992), in our view this seems a long way from our concept of social resources (which emphasizes being able to trust and rely on the people in one’s nearby social network).

Although participation effects in the general population seem to be small or nonsignificant, we did find evidence for membership effects in groups that have fewer social resources from other domains. People above 55 years of age, without a partner, and from immigrant groups showed positive and significant participation effects. Since the possibilities in other domains are limited, voluntary association participation may become a more important means for acquiring social resources. Moreover, these groups have more to gain. Most respondents in our sample reported having sufficient social resources, and it seems reasonable to expect that once people have acquired those resources they remain quite stable. Our results therefore subscribe to Tschirhart’s (2006) conclusion that the generalizability of findings in voluntary association research is often low, but—from a more optimistic viewpoint—also indicate that if participation effects are lacking in general, there may still be effects under certain circumstances or among certain groups. In our view, it would be interesting to explore more of these circumstances and contexts of associational participation.

Taken together, we hope that this article will inspire researchers to conduct more panel studies and to be more precise in specifying participation and selection effects (and their accompanying mechanisms). This will help distinguish between fact and fiction regarding the effects of voluntary association participation in the future.

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