



A Qualitative Exploration into the Association between Volunteering and Well-Being in Mentors using Semi-Structured Interviews and Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

Emma Kay

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the association between volunteering and well-being. Previous literature supports the idea that taking part in volunteering increases well-being (see Thoits and Hewitt, 2001) yet highlight possible factors that may mediate this relationship, such as the volunteers motivations to participate (see Kwok et al, 2012). Although quantitative methods have dominated this research area, they cannot yield the same depth of subjective accounts from participants as qualitative methods. This study implemented semi-structured interviews to achieve this level of understanding of the volunteers experience and its impact upon well-being. The participants in this study were six mentor volunteers, aged 21-56, with one male and five females. Using Interpretive Phenomenological Analyses, two super-ordinate themes emerged that were characteristic of each interview. The first theme centred upon the impact of volunteer characteristics on well-being, whereas the second theme considered how aspects about the volunteer task can affect well-being. There was an overall consensus that mentoring enhanced the well-being of the participants. Interpretation of the accounts gave rise to the idea that factors such as underlying motivations and the nature of the task can affect well-being, as well as volunteer free time. Findings from this research may be beneficial to volunteer organisations when recruiting volunteers, as well as informing prospective volunteers about the well-being benefits of volunteering.

KEY WORDS:	VOLUNTEERING	WELL-BEING	INTERPRETIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS	MOTIVATIONS	MENTORING
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Introduction

There is a general consensus across previous research that taking part in volunteering is associated with better well-being (Thoits and Hewitt, 2001; Pozzi et al. 2014; Tabassum et al. 2016).

According to the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) (no date: online), to volunteer means to take part in 'any activity that involves spending time, unpaid, doing something that benefits the environment or someone (individuals or groups) other than close relatives...freely'.

Publications in this research area have suggested a number of factors that may mediate this relationship between volunteering and well-being which seem to interact with one another. These are presented and discussed here.

Basic Psychological Needs

Deci and Ryan (1985) produced a theoretical framework, the Self Determination Theory (SDT), suggesting that one's social environment must support three, universal basic psychological needs to enhance well-being. These basic psychological needs are Autonomy: a person self-endorsing their own activity; Competence: a person experiencing effectiveness of an act in their environment, and Relatedness: experiencing love and care from significant others (Vansteenkiste and Ryan, 2013). Volunteering is an example of such environment as in the above NCVO definition, volunteering must be done "freely" suggesting an active choice to participate (online: no date) and is done for the benefit of others. Kwok et al. (2012) applied SDT to volunteerism and found that volunteers reported better well-being if their basic psychological needs were met. Although this theory emerged over three decades ago, ongoing research by Deci and Ryan suggest that this idea is still credible (see Deci and Ryan 2008).

Motivations to Volunteer

SDT (Ryan and Deci, 2000) suggests that humans are innately intrinsically motivated in their behaviours, meaning they actively seek out challenges that will extend their capacities, such as volunteering, however, behaviour can also be extrinsically motivated, referring to acting in order to receive an outcome (such as to gain work experience). The above study by Kwok et al. (2012) also integrated motivation as a mediating factor between volunteering and well-being, measured using the Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI), developed by Clary et al. (1998).

The VFI is a widely used psychometric test which identifies volunteer motivations. This measure is based around the functional approach to motivation and volunteering, in that volunteers will engage with their role for different underlying reasons (Snyder et al. 2000). Psychometric testing has dominated this research area, as it is a competent and efficient method of gathering self-report data, otherwise inaccessible. Clary et al. (1998) proposed six motivations that underlie volunteering. These were Values; Understanding; Social; Career; Protective; and Enhancement. The 'Values' function relates to intrinsic motives, as it revolves around humanitarian concern for others (Clary et al. 1998) therefore has no extrinsic gain. The remaining five functions can be viewed as extrinsic as they involve a personal gain for the volunteer regarding knowledge, experience, and social connectedness.

According to Snyder et al. (2000), volunteer satisfaction and continued engagement is influenced by the match between the motivations to volunteer and the role meeting these motivations. Knowledge of volunteer motivations may be a useful tool for volunteer organisations in recruitment and retention. In a recent publication, Stukas et al (2016) utilised the VFI and concluded that other-oriented motives, centred around the 'values' function, positively correlated with volunteer satisfaction, whereas self-oriented motivations to volunteer, such as to gain work experience, showed a negative correlation. This measure may possibly be viewed as outdated as results from the 2016 Community Life Survey (formerly the National Survey of Volunteering) from the NVCO website (online: no date) showed that 27% of people who responded took part in regular volunteering, whereas the 1997 survey results, from around the time of the publication of the VFI, were 'disappointing' and volunteering engagement had 'gone down' (Davis Smith, 1998:6). Irrespective of its use in recent publications, this measure may not be fully applicable to volunteer motives in the present day.

Volunteer Age and its Association to Volunteer Motives

Upon using the VFI (Clary et al. 1998), Stukas et al. (2016) identified that the older volunteers in their study were more likely give higher importance to the 'values' items rather than items relating to the remaining five functions. They suggest that this age variation in volunteer motivation is due to younger volunteers engaging with volunteering for career development reasons, whereas older volunteers are likely to have established careers or no longer be in employment (Stukas et al. 2016). In a recent publication by Tabassum et al. (2016) whereby the association of volunteering with better well-being was measured over the lifespan, it was suggested that the association is only present in volunteers aged 40 years old and above, increasing with age. The findings of this longitudinal study may be due to the motivations of the older volunteers differing with those of younger volunteers and, as Omoto and Snyder (1995) suggest, motivation changes over time.

When integrating motivation into their research, Kwok et al. (2012) found that volunteers with intrinsic motives reported better well-being than those with extrinsic motives. Therefore, higher importance ratings of the 'values' function by older volunteers reported by Stukas et al. (2016) may give an explanation to the findings of Tabassum et al. (2016) as volunteering may have only been associated with better well-being in older volunteers due to them being more intrinsically motivated. However, Yang Yang (2008, cited in Bok, 2010:16) suggests that 'for most people...well-being declines slightly from youth until they are about 40 and then improves very gradually until they reach their early 70s'. Therefore, the findings of Tabassum et al. (2016) regarding better well-being only being present in volunteers aged 40 and above may be due to well-being increasing at this age anyway, irrespective of volunteer participation. Intrinsic motivation is not exclusive to older volunteers. Veersamy et al. (2014) found that even though 1/3 of the participants were below 25 years old, intrinsic motives were most prominent for these healthcare volunteers.

Volunteer Task

According to Morrow-Howell et al. (2009), certain volunteer tasks can lead to more positive outcomes for certain people, suggesting that the nature of the volunteering

must be suited to the person. Volunteer tasks deemed stressful by the volunteer can lead to them leaving their role (Musick and Wilson, 2008: 429) as this may have a negative impact upon volunteer well-being. However, better well-being outcomes are reported by those who feel that they have had sufficient support and training from their organisation (Morrow-Howell et al. 2009), which may explain why not all volunteers leave roles that they consider to be stressful.

Volunteer Duration

Morrow-Howell et al (2009) suggested that volunteers with more experience perceive more benefits from their role. Research carried out by Elias et al. (2016) presented a positive correlation between longer volunteer duration and better well-being and more positive changes to the self.

It is clear then, from the above literature review, that there are certain mediating factors about volunteers and the volunteering itself that can influence the association of volunteering and well-being. The vast majority utilised quantitative means of data collection, with the exception of Elias et al. (2016) who implemented a mixed methods approach. The participants in this study were interviewed about their volunteer duration and any positive changes as a result of volunteering, as well as completing a psychometric measure of well-being.

A dearth of research has explored the impact that volunteer free time could have on the relationship between volunteering and well-being. Offer (2016) suggests that more free time results in increased engagement and decreased stress. As Pozzi et al. (2014) point out; retired volunteers have more free time on their hands, and so can take part in volunteering more freely. It has also been suggested that volunteering aids the transition into retirement (Omoto and Snyder, 1995) as the immediacy of unemployment can be difficult for someone coming out of full time work, therefore volunteering can bridge this gap. Younger volunteers, however, are likely to have other commitments additional to volunteering such as schooling or employment, therefore do not have as much free time as older volunteers. This may also explain the findings of Tabassum et al. (2016) who suggested that better well-being is not as characteristic of younger volunteers as opposed to older volunteers.

For those who are in employment, but are unsatisfied with it, volunteering has been found to compensate this dissatisfaction, and therefore improve well-being (Ramos et al. 2016).

The current research project aimed to bring together the findings of previous, quantitative publications, to facilitate a qualitative data collection in order add to the literature by providing detailed accounts from volunteers in their own words regarding how their volunteer experiences have influenced their well-being. Six semi-structured interviews were carried out with mentors regarding their volunteer experience. Findings in this specific area of pro-social behaviour within positive psychology, and its effects on well-being can be beneficial in terms of informing current and prospective volunteers about the well-being benefits that are said to be associated with volunteering. This, in turn, can facilitate in the recruitment and retention difficulties faced by volunteer organisations.

Methodology

Design

This research adopted a qualitative phenomenological approach to exploring volunteering and well-being. One-to-one semi-structured interviews were carried out with six mentors to capture their subjective volunteering experiences. Interpretive Phenomenological Analyses (IPA) was then performed. This analysis technique was adopted with a phenomenological epistemological approach in mind, with the notion of the researcher being able to examine, in detail, the participant's subjective accounts of their volunteer experiences, a key feature of IPA (Howitt, 2013: 335). This design facilitates an in depth, holistic view of the individual experiences that is otherwise inaccessible.

Participants

Six mentors took part in this study. Small sample sizes such as this are characteristic of qualitative research, particularly those utilising IPA (Brocki and Wearden, 2006). All participants were aged between 21 and 56, with one male and five females, and volunteered for a mentoring programme run by an organisation in Warrington. This programme involves building a relationship with a young person in the area, a mentee, referred to the programme for reasons such as being a young carer. Each mentor is required to meet with their mentee for one hour a week for one year. All participants in this research project were at different stages of their service, ranging from three weeks to three months into their second year with a second mentee. The reasoning behind including mentors of different ages and volunteer durations was that previous research suggests that there are differences in the well-being of volunteers who differ on these variables. Regardless of these differences, the sample can still be considered homogeneous, a factor considered important for this research design (Smith and Osborn, 2003, in Howitt, 2013: 345), as all participants volunteer for the same programme.

A summary of the participants can be seen in table 1.

Participants were recruited via opportunity sampling. Permission from a gate keeper, the organisation co-ordinator, was obtained in order to recruitment the sample. The criteria for this research included being 18 or over and a current mentor volunteer. An email was sent out from the programme co-ordinator to all current mentors, containing an invitation to participate (appendices three), which outlined the research aims and how the research would be carried out, ensuring that each mentor was fully informed about the research. Six mentors contacted the researcher to organise an interview date, none of which were deemed to be vulnerable by the co-ordinator, therefore abides by the guidelines set out by the British Psychological Society (2010).

Procedure

This research was carried out in line with the British Psychological Society (2010) ethical guidelines, and was approved by Manchester Metropolitan University (see appendices one and two).

The interview location and volunteer organisation cannot be named so to maintain the anonymity of the participants. The interviews took place on a one to one basis,

over three days. On each of the days, two interviews were carried out, with time in between to transcribe the previous interview recording. This was done in order to allow for any responses to inform the next interview in terms of where to elaborate with the participant in areas of interest.

There were conversational interactions throughout the pre interview process to begin to build a rapport with each of the volunteers to enable the best possible quality of content from the interviews. Each of the volunteers were familiar with the interview location, a factor considered important for interviewee comfort (Smith and Osborn, 2003, in Howitt, 2013: 346), therefore along with a semi-structured, conversational design of interview, and the one-to-one arrangement, the best possible quality of data could be anticipated. Although quantitative methods have dominated this research area, and can be useful in the collection of subjective well-being data, qualitative means of data collection can provide much more in depth, subjective and lengthy responses from the volunteers about their own experiences and beliefs regarding whether volunteering has impacted upon their well-being. It also allows for a better understanding via interpretations from what is said by the participant in their own words.

Before the interview began, each participant was given an information sheet (appendices four), reiterating the aims of the research, what their responses will be used for, as well as indicating the withdrawal rights of the participant. They were then given a consent form (appendices five) which involved the participant writing their initials next to ten statements relating to the ethical guidelines of the study, to indicate their agreeableness with them, after this, the interview began.

A Dictaphone was used to record the interviews, which followed a predetermined interview schedule as a guide (appendices seven). The schedule contained open-ended, non-leading questions, relevant to the findings of publications in this research area, to yield detailed, subjective accounts of the volunteer's experiences in their own words (Howitt, 2013: 345). There were instances whereby the schedule was not used in sequence due to the interview progression being determined by the interviewee so that as much honest, subjective data could be collected as possible. This however is encouraged in this type of research design as it can elicit information from the participants that may not have been considered by the researcher, yet may inform future interviews to gain a deeper insight (Howitt, 2013: 347).

Each interview lasted between 15 and 26 minutes. Although recommendations from Wood et al. (2012) suggest a minimum of three hours of data collection to be sufficient, the information elicited from the data collected in this study (approximately two hours over all) did seem to suffice in terms of the quality of information and its relevance to the literature. However, this is not to say that further or longer interviews would not have provided better insight.

Once the interview had ceased, participants were given a debrief form (appendices six), containing the contact details of professional organisations recommended to be utilised should the participant feel that the research affected them psychologically, although this was not anticipated. If the participants wished to withdraw, they were instructed to email their personal code, created on the debrief sheet, to the researcher so that their data could be excluded from the analysis. Withdrawal was

permitted up to one week after their interview. No participants withdrew from this study.

Appendices eight provides an interview extract.

Analytical Technique

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was the chosen analytical method. This was because of the interpretive nature of this design allowing the researcher to gain an understanding of the volunteer's experiences as mentors, otherwise inaccessible when using other research designs that do not allow for interpretation. IPA gives the researcher an insider view about how people make sense of their experiences and the meanings assigned to them (Griffiths, 2009). IPA can be both idiographic in its interpretations of data, as emergent themes can apply to the subjective experience of one participant, or nomothetic, as themes can be evident across all transcripts.

Considering the above, semi-structured interviews and IPA were the most suitable research methods for this project as exploring the unique experiences of each volunteer was the central aim to this study.

Guidance from Howitt (2013: 348) was used to carry out the IPA process. The first step involved the researcher becoming familiar with the data by thorough reading and re-reading of the transcripts and listening again to the audio excerpts in order to make note of any initial comments about what was said that may be relevant in the analysis. Secondly, any preliminary themes identified were noted in the right hand margin near comments of interest, summarised by phrases that capture what is or may be being said by the participant, evidence of this can be seen in appendices eight. Step three involved searching for interconnections between these proposed themes. Each theme was written on a piece of paper and cut out in order to make a visual grouping of themes that may give rise to the same super-ordinate theme. Next, a table of themes was created for each transcript, made up of themes elicited in the previous step. These steps were completed for each of the transcripts, before a final table of themes was devised that grasped the super-ordinate themes that overarched all or at least most of the transcripts. Appendices nine presents this information and was used to inform the analysis and discussion section of this report.

Analysis and Discussion

This research project set out to gain an in depth insight into the association between volunteering and well-being and any possible factors mediating this relationship. There is an overall consensus throughout publications in this research area that taking part in a volunteer role enhances well-being (see Thoits and Hewitt, 2001; Tabassum et al. 2016; Pozzi et al. 2014). The current project explored this finding using subjective in depth accounts from volunteers about their experiences of volunteering.

Table 1 provides a summary of the participants in this study and should be used for reference throughout this section of the research report as each of the characteristics included will be discussed in relation to their impact upon well-being

and current literature. The participants consented to the information that they shared, including that within the table, to be used within this report.

Table 1. Presenting Participant Information relevant to the Analysis and Discussion of this research report.

Participant	Gender	Age	Lifestyle	Volunteer Duration
A	M	40	Full Time Job and Single Father, wants to work in social care	6 months
B	F	21	Recent Psychology Graduate, Part Time job, additional volunteer role, Clinical Psychology interest	3 weeks
C	F	36	Part Time Job, counselling qualification, adopted, additional volunteer role	4 months
D	F	44	Mother, works in social care, had foster siblings	3 months
E	F	56	Full Time Job in Primary School, due to retire, Daughter at University, Retired Husband, Lots of Personal Health Problems	2 months
F	F	27	Third Year Criminology Student, single mother of two children under 5, part time job	1 year and 3 months

Through IPA, two super-ordinate themes were constructed from the transcripts that summarise what was said by the participants regarding their volunteering experience and its impact upon their well-being, and the inferences made from this. These super-ordinate themes, as well as the subordinate themes within them are discussed here with reference to excerpts from the interview transcripts and relevant literature. A summary table of these themes can be found in appendices nine.

How Volunteering can Influence Well-Being

There was an overall consensus throughout the interviews that taking part in the mentor programme enhanced well-being.

“I feel worthwhile doing it, it makes me feel alive” (Participant A, line 66)

“It encourages me to be more positive and have a better outlook on life” (Participant B, line 42)

“It’s really rewarding” (Participant C, line 76)

“It makes you feel good and appreciate how lucky you are” (Participant D, line 54)

“It gives you confidence and self worth and something to get up for” (Participant E, line 132)

“Mentoring makes you feel good because you’re helping others” (Participant F, line 33)

However, previous literature has proposed some factors, encompassed by the super-ordinate themes here, which seem to mediate this relationship between volunteering and well-being. These themes were determined as they were shared and expressed by most or all of the current participants.

Super Ordinate Theme One: The Influence of Volunteer Characteristics upon Well-Being

A number of characteristics about the volunteers in this study, depicted by the subthemes, and consistent with relevant literature, seem to have an influence on volunteer well-being.

Motivations to Volunteer

Previous literature, such as that of Kwok et al. (2012), has suggested that the motivations behind volunteering can impact upon well-being. This study applied Ryan and Deci's (1985) Self Determination Theory, which suggests that humans are innately intrinsically motivated in their actions, but can have extrinsic motivations to act.

During the interviews in this study, the mentors expressed their underlying motivations, which, as Snyder et al (2000) suggested, differed from each other, as they largely interacted with their individual lifestyles.

Participant A, C and D expressed that they were looking to change their current careers.

“It's totally career motivated” (Participant A, line 56)

“I'm trying to totally change what I do” (Participant C, line 7)

“I would like to get back into working with children but my qualifications and knowledge are outdated so this was a good opportunity for me” (Participant D, line 35).

Evidently, these participants initiated their role to facilitate a career move. Participant B, a recent psychology graduate, and participant F, a third year criminology student, both expressed that their post-education aspirations required work experience, therefore initiated their roles to gain this.

“All of the jobs I'm looking at say you need experience with children and I haven't got any so I thought I'd better go and get some” (Participant B, line 26)

“It enhances my chances for a better career in the future” (Participant F, line 21)

From these extracts, it is evident that each of these five volunteers expressed motivations that seem largely extrinsic, as each of them gained experience from the role that facilitates their future career plans.

Participant C however made it clear that gaining experience was not the sole reasoning for participation. When asked to share her why she volunteers, participant C said:

“I was adopted...now I've built my own confidence up...I've realised that I really want to help somebody else because I've had so much help throughout my life” (Participant C, line 37 – 40)

“I’ve got loads of personal experience to deal with every scenario”
(Participant C, line 50)

“I just feel stronger as a person now and ready to do it and I want it more than anything” (Participant C, line 42).

It is clear from her response that, although she gains experience from the role, the most important aspect is helping a disadvantaged child: a more intrinsically oriented motive to volunteer. Her personal experiences seem to have massively influenced her initiation of volunteering, and the experience gained from her role seems to be just an added bonus.

Participant E was the only exception when it came to the expression of an extrinsic gain from the role. This participant only expressed motivations to volunteer that centred upon helping a disadvantaged child, further to the help she provides in her education based career, therefore had intrinsically based underlying motivations.

“Our children (in the school) are from very disadvantaged families and throughout the day they are surrounded by positive role models and are responding to praise, then we watch them go home and there’s nothing there for them and they get shouted at and are in the middle of domestic violence, so I wanted to do something like I do in the school but outside, so when I heard there were children out there like my mentee, it just pulled at my heart”
(Participant E, lines 32 – 39)

The fact that no extrinsic motive to volunteer was expressed by this participant may be due to the fact that a career was already established, a lifestyle factor that Stukas et al (2016) suggested in their research may be why older volunteers, such as participant E, are more intrinsically motivated, as they do not need to gain the career experience that younger volunteers strive to gain.

This intrinsic motive to engage in the programme however, was not exclusive to participant C and E. Intrinsic motives were expressed, however with less emphasis, by all participants. Each of them, through their chosen career interests or educational courses, showed an interest in helping others that is reflected in their role participation.

“It’s about what drives you; it’s definitely a passion thing” (Participant A, line 74)

“I wouldn’t...be interested in clinical psychology without wanting to help others”
(Participant B, line 29)

“I’m not doing it for money or because it’s my job, I’m doing it because I want to help others” (Participant D, line 47)

“I thought it was a lovely idea and I wanted to participate and help them”
(Participant F, line 20).

The effect that these motives have upon the well-being of the mentors can only be inferred from what was said within the interviews and applying the findings from previous research, as no psychometric measure of well-being was utilised in this

study. This may have provided more insight into how volunteer motivations can influence well-being.

As previously presented, each of the mentors agreed that their role enhanced their well-being. Previous publications have presented a potential debate as to whether or not underlying motivations (such as those expressed here) have a positive effect on well-being. According to Snyder et al. (2000), as long as the volunteer's motives are met (intrinsic or extrinsic), then volunteer satisfaction, and therefore, well-being, is enhanced. As each of the volunteers here gain experience useful for their future career aspirations, or help a disadvantaged child in need, their well-being should be enhanced by their role participation as their motives were met. However, findings by Stukas et al. (2016) suggested that those with 'self-oriented' motives to volunteer, such as career experience, have lower role satisfaction, and therefore well-being, compared to those who volunteer for 'other-oriented' or intrinsic motives. Therefore, although all six of the participants in this study expressed some sort of intrinsic motive, participant E, who expressed only intrinsic motives, may have better well-being compared to those who expressed extrinsic motives to volunteer. However, other factors mediating this relationship must be considered.

Volunteer Age

The age of the participants in this study ranged from "21" (Participant B, line 2) to "56" years old (Participant E, line 2). The oldest volunteer in this study did seem to express better well-being benefits in terms of her health as a result of volunteering:

"I've got really poor health... and something like that can make you depressed, but keeping my job and having this volunteering, you've got to keep going" (Participant E, lines 77-79).

Thoits and Hewitt (2001) state that volunteering provides physical and mental health benefits, an idea supported by this participant. Research by Tabassum et al (2016) suggested that better well-being is a characteristic of older volunteers only, specifically those aged 40 and above. This may explain the above statement from participant E, the oldest volunteer in this study, who expressed better health benefits as a result of her volunteering. However, as no quantitative measure of well-being was utilised in this study, it cannot be said that the well-being of participant E exceeded that of the other participants. Volunteer A and D were also above this age, and did not express any major well-being benefit compared to the younger volunteers, therefore it cannot be said that volunteering elicits better well-being in all volunteers over forty, as other factors also influence this relationship.

According to Yang Yang (2008, cited in Bok, 2010: 16), the well-being of an individual 'declines slightly from youth until they are about 40 years old, and then improves very gradually', irrespective of volunteering. Therefore, better subjective well-being reports from volunteers who are above this age, such as participant E, may be due well-being increasing regardless.

As presented in the previous subtheme, volunteer age can interact with the motivations to volunteer (see Stukas et al. 2016).

Free Time

A participant factor, not yet explored in terms of its possible impact on the relationship between volunteering and well-being, is the amount of free time that a volunteer has outside of their role and other commitments. According to Offer (2016), having more free time can decrease stress levels, therefore increases well-being.

The current participants were asked about their perceived free time. For participant A and F, a concern surrounding “fitting (volunteering) in” (Participant A, line 32, Participant F, line 12) arose during their interviews. These participants both have young children and are in full time employment or education, therefore expressed that they do not get much free time as a result of their commitments, meaning the additional commitment of volunteering may hinder their well-being further. However, as no quantitative measure of well-being was utilised, the extent to which this can affect volunteer well-being cannot be commented upon.

For those participants who felt that they did have enough free time due to having fewer commitments, such as participant B, the volunteer role seemed to give them a purpose.

“I’d recommend volunteering to people in my position...I was sat at home doing nothing and feeling a bit useless now that I’ve graduated so it does take up some free time but in a good way” (Participant B, line 65 – 68).

This participant gave rise to the idea that more free time may not always be beneficial, considering that she felt “useless” before volunteering. Therefore the effect that free time has upon volunteer well-being may be considered as life style dependent, as well as dependent on individual perception of free time. This may be a useful finding for volunteer organisations or those beginning volunteering, as it may help to give purpose to those who are not in employment or are retired, as too much free time may be detrimental to well-being.

Further exploration of this, using a well-being measure, is needed.

Super Ordinate Theme Two: The Influence of the Volunteer Task on Well-Being

There were a number of indications within the interviews suggesting that aspects of the volunteer task itself can impact upon volunteer well-being, as previous literature has suggested. These are outlined in the following subthemes

Mentee Situation

All six of the participants in this study commented upon how the situation that their mentee was in, the reason behind their referral to the programme, was of concern to them. These situations ranged from “behavioural issues” (participant A, line 21) to being a “young carer” (participant B, line 13) or having an “agoraphobic parent and autistic siblings” (participant E, line 61). These issues seemed to impact upon some of the mentors’ well-being, especially participant B, as concerns about their mentee’s situation worsening were voiced.

“I do worry about her and what she is doing through...if it got really hard I think it might affect me a bit more and bring me down” (participant B, line 56).

“If there was something getting to her...it would also get to me and make me over think and stress about it” (participant B, line 53).

Participant B was the only participant with no children of her own; therefore her more overtly expressed worries about her mentee may be due to being responsible for a child for the first time.

This volunteer task can be considered to be a stressful one, due to the responsibilities that the mentors have, as well as the emotional impact that the mentee situation can have upon the mentors. As we know from research by Musick and Wilson (2008: 429), stressful volunteer roles can lead to volunteers ceasing their participation, presumably due to the adverse affects that it can have upon their well-being. Therefore the participants in this study may have lower well-being if they perceive their role to be stressful.

Support

The support received from the organisation can elicit better well-being outcomes for volunteers (Morrow-Howell et al, 2009) and therefore may counteract the negative impact that a stressful role can have upon a volunteer. The volunteers in the current study commented on the importance of the support that they receive from the programme co-ordinators.

“There’s all sorts of support here with the guys running the programme and I know they’ll be here to help her and that there’s things put in place to support her” (Participant B, line 57)

“The support is really good” “I didn’t get that from my last role” (Participant C, lines 95 and 100).

Knowing that support is in place, should their mentees situation become worse, seems to be a relief for these participants, which can reduce the stressful nature of the role. Participant E expressed initial concerns when organising her meetings with her mentees parent.

“The only thing I found worry was the parent, I organised all of the mentee meetings through my co-ordinator, but after a while my mentees mum gave me her number and my co-ordinator asked me if I felt more comfortable now which I did” (Participant E, lines 33 – 36).

Therefore the support from the organisation staff for this mentor was vital for her comfort in the role, and her initial worries, which may have affected her well-being, were quickly addressed by the organisation staff.

Duration

Publications in this research area, including that of Elias et al. (2016) and Morrow-Howell et al. (2009) suggest that the longer a volunteer engages with their role, the better the well-being benefits are. The current research however seems to contradict this. Volunteer F has the longest volunteer duration:

“It’s been a year and three months since I first got matched” (Participant F, line 17).

This participant however expresses a lot of negative aspects about volunteering, including “fitting it in” (line, 12), “travel time” (line 38) and the “cost” (line 47) associated with her role. Whereas participant B, who had only been a mentor for three weeks, and participant E, who had mentored for two months, expressed no negatives relating to their role. This could either be due to the fact that they simply had not volunteered for long enough to experience these problems, or be due to individual differences and other factors such as those previously discussed, like having more free time. Nevertheless, longer volunteer duration in this study did not seem to have a positive impact on well-being, as previous research suggested.

Changes to Self

In line with the findings of Elias et al. (2016), participants from this study also reported changes in their perspectives of their own problems, deemed miniscule compared the issues faced by their mentees.

“it makes you think that there’s more to life than stressing out about missing a train and things like that” (Participant B, line 47).

A sense of purpose, reflective of the findings of Elias et al (2016), was also commented upon by participants, especially those with more free time who felt otherwise “useless” (participant B, line 68) before volunteering.

These changes may contribute to better well-being of the participants, as they are encompassed by decreased self-centredness and increased consideration for others, which both relate to more intrinsic motives to volunteer.

Final Discussion

The aims of this research were effectively explored through the discussion of the super-ordinate and subordinate themes derived from the IPA process. The current study supports the idea that volunteering is associated with better well-being, and explored possible factors that may mediate this relationship, encompassed by the super-ordinate themes. These findings were mostly in line with previous literature in this research area, in that the motivations (Kwok et al. 2012) and ages (Tabassum et al. 2016) of the volunteers, as well as the nature of the task (Musick and Wilson, 2008) and the support provided from the volunteer organisation (Morrow-Howell et al, 2009) all seemed to influence the well-being of the volunteers in this study.

The present study did however dispute the current literature in terms of the effects that volunteer duration can have upon well-being, contradicting the findings of Elias et al. (2016) and Morrow-Howell et al. (2009) that longer volunteer durations are likely to mean better well-being benefits. However, more exploration of this is needed to establish whether there is a causal link or whether other factors influenced this finding.

This study was not without its limitations. Lengthy interview durations were difficult to elicit from the participants in this interview, which may be due to the novice skills of

the researcher. A better interpretation of experiences could have been made had further data been collected with longer interview times and more volunteers.

This study nevertheless added to the current body of knowledge and literature surrounding this research topic, and provides a basis for future research to expand upon. Recommendations for further research include the use of a psychometric measure of well-being alongside qualitative data collection, so that well-being levels of participants are overtly presented and not merely inferred as they were in this study. Further exploration into the impact of volunteer free time on well-being is also recommended.

Reflexive Analysis

I chose this research area as I volunteer for the same mentoring programme as the participants in this study and felt that, during my six months as a volunteer, my own well-being had improved. I mentor a nine year old girl who has issues surrounding safe guarding. I felt the role gave me a sense of perspective on my university related stresses compared to the issues that she deals with on a daily basis, as well as giving me an escape from my studies which I believe reduces my stress levels.

Upon doing background research for the project, it was interesting to find that volunteering can impact upon well-being in different ways for different people. In my research, I expected to hear that the volunteers who were of similar ages and lifestyles to me to report the same well-being benefits as I felt I had received from my own participation, as previous research indicated this to be the case. Some of the volunteers even expressed well-being benefits further to what I had expected, such as their mental and physical health being impacted upon in a positive way by their volunteer participation.

The fact that I too am a volunteer for this programme, and that I was already acquainted with some of the participants, may have impacted upon the responses and the interpretations made within this research. I realise that the findings here may not be replicated should the same study be carried out by someone who is not in this position. However, a good researcher-participant relationship is essential in this type of data collected so to reap the best quality of responses from the participants, therefore this impact upon the research may have been a positive one.

Although I had carried out academic interviews prior to this research report, I did not feel confident in my interviewing skills when devising my proposed methodology and interview schedule. I do feel that my existing rapport with the participants helped somewhat with this fear. The biggest issue I faced in my data collection was getting the participant interviews to last a considerable amount of time. However upon the data analysis, I did feel that I had gathered sufficient evidence from the interviews to make interpretations that were relevant to previous literature in this research area.

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