

Title

Applying the Volunteer Process Model to understand the lived experience of habitual volunteers: during Covid 19

Abstract

This paper identifies the volunteer process model (VPM) as a useful umbrella term to situate and understand the lived experience of volunteering of a small sample of habitual volunteers during the Covid 19 pandemic. We use a methodological approach based on Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis to offer granular analysis of lived experiences of committed volunteers. Our analysis suggests first that the sample of committed volunteers lived experiences allow critical insights into how a particular user group can establish value and meaning and how these can be interpreted. Second, that the use of the VPM as a unifying concept allows a critical reflection on volunteering as an experiential activity that is wholly humanistic, and which contributes towards an understanding of volunteer engagement beyond the 'black box'. This paper provides an empirical basis for these arguments, offering a framework that can take forward this limited research as useful to provide explanatory rationales and expanded ways of organising and managing volunteer engagement.

Keywords: volunteer process model, volunteering, Covid-19, phenomenology

Introduction

The Covid 19 pandemic was a time of anxiety and reflection in the face of an existential threat to how people live and understand their lives (Bland, 2020, Tabri et al, 2020). There was no clear strategy detailing how to remedy the serious side effects of the instruction from the UK Prime Minister in March 2020 “to stop non-essential contact with others”. One side effect was the immediate and almost total temporary cessation of all practical volunteering activity. Another was a heightened interest in volunteering as a focal point for both social solidarity (Henley, 2020) and reciprocity (Solnit, 2020) as part of a response to the pandemic. During the pandemic there was also a rise in voluntary mutual aid groups focused on meeting particular community needs (Badger et al, 2022; Tiratelli and Kaye, 2020). For example, in England the NHS volunteer responders scheme recruited over 750,000 people in four days (NHS England, 2020). The resurgence of such mutual aid, reciprocity, trust and the general welfare of individuals and society (Springer, 2020) has been characterised as ‘community power’ (Pollard et al, 2021) where volunteering is critically identified as the vehicle for such promotion. In this article we employ the Volunteer Process Model (VPM) developed by Omoto and Snyder (1995, 2002) as an umbrella conceptual framework under which we include scholarly work that has focused on managerial or description of volunteer progression (examples needed). The structural sequential and interactive framework of the VPM (Omoto and Snyder, 1990, 1995, Snyder and Omoto 1992) is based on antecedent, experience, and consequence stages of volunteering equating to the basic life cycle of volunteering (Haski-Leventhal and Bargal, 2008; Wilson, 2012). We use this framework to order and structure the perceptions of a small sample of established (habitual) volunteers at a time of crisis

We use in-depth interview data to capture and explore their everyday experience of the experiential stage to make sense of how a group of habitual volunteers rationalise their experience as they react to the shutdown of their activity. Much of the academic literature points to a decline in this type of volunteer with a concomitant rise in short-term (especially episodic) volunteering (for example Cnaan & Handy, 2005; Hyde et al, 2014; and Hustinx et al 2010). Issues such as perceptions of motivational drivers, organisational attachment and biographical changes have been implicated in what Hustinx and Lammertyn (2003) term ‘reflexive volunteering’. Whilst it is generally agreed that volunteering is an intrinsically complex, multidimensional and dynamic phenomenon (Hustinx and Lammertyn, 2003; Hustinx, et al, 2010), our examination of volunteering perceptions has relevance in a context of biographical match where individual stories of the condition and experience of volunteering are reconciled proactively in this paper through the sharing of experiential interpretations (Hustinx and Lammertyn, 2003). The use of the VPM as a delineating framework enables an analysis of how experiences can be reconciled through interaction and negotiation

between phases of volunteering. In this way the intention is to move beyond static or monolithic portrayals of volunteering (Koolen-Mass et al, 2022).

The conceptual research framework of this paper is thus anchored by two pillars. First, the VPM as a unifying umbrella term is used to offer varied insights in understanding the 'black box' of volunteers lived experiences. This is no easy task and involves going beyond mere acceptance or legitimisation of inputs (antecedents) and outputs (consequences). We attempt to make sense of the inner workings of the black box to understand a moral dimension of volunteering during Covid 19 pandemic in how individuals made sense of their experiences within and through their own narratives (Kahana, 2021, Shachar et al, 2019). Second, and fundamental to meeting the first pillar, interpretative phenomenological analysis is used to and make sense of the lived experiences of a small sample of habitual volunteers. In this article we examine the lived experiences of a small sample of committed volunteers as they experienced the Covid 19 enforced lockdown 3 in England which represented a unique period and set of circumstances. Moreover, the subjects for this study are unique and whilst the findings are not generalisable to the world of volunteering we do suggest that there are inferences for practice and future research. In this regard this paper aims to understand how antecedents (the road worth taking), experiences (the life worth living), and consequences (the person worth being) at a time of trauma and existential threat, are experienced and negotiated within their volunteering activity (Kahana, 2021).

Contextualizing volunteering during Covid 19

Occasionally, collective trauma, a group-level cataclysmic, tragic experience that is reproduced through co-constructed discourse (after Hirschberger, 2018), can act as a shock that can have huge social economic and cultural ramifications for the possibility of volunteering and the volunteer experience. Covid 19 presented 'a moment' (Springer, 2020), an existential shock that represented a crisis of meaning for many people. It was in this moment that this research located the assumptions held by habitual volunteers to make sense of their experiential understandings and interpretations of their volunteering.

Covid 19 also presented a period of existential liberation, which describes a condition that is centred on normative freedom, embracing the present and changing lanes in respect of how the world can be seen. For Bland the existential liberation afforded by Covid 19 was an opportunity for change and reinvention 'an ineffective way of being is relinquished in order to clear a space to create something more sustainable to take its place.' (Bland, 2020, 711). For volunteering analyses this means reinterpreting its constitutional ingrained elements: "free choice", "remuneration", "structure" and "intended beneficiaries" (Cnaan et al, 1996). It is the individual experiential level insights about what

the experience of volunteering is and how it is perceived that help to explain how habitual volunteering through a time of crisis can be understood (Bland, 2020; Tabri et al, 2020). We also contend that insights stemming from one specific constituency of volunteers may have implications for other volunteers and their experiences, engagement and enduring participation in volunteering. The need for rethinking volunteer behaviour as a lifeworld concern (Van Manen 1997) – that is examining how the world of the lived experience can be understood through daily interactions, the “reflective attitude to life” (Husserl 1936/1970) – has been driven by concerns about how individuals understand their experience, the Covid 19 effect and its impact on human relations (Büntzel et al, 2021). The relational focus underpins a framework where “Mutual aid is just what we [humans] do, [it] is actually the wellspring of all life on this planet, both human and nonhuman” (Springer, 2020, p. 113). It has been documented that socio-political/economic global threats tend to provide opportunities for collective action that move beyond free rider problems and promote altruistic rather than strategic reciprocity (e.g., Springer, 2020; Manatschal and Freitag, 2014). For Springer it is “In this moment of COVID-19, we are seeing how it is in fact reciprocity that is saving us from complete catastrophe” (Springer, 2020, p. 113). Volunteering is thus a mixture of “selfless activity” and “rational action” (Manatschal and Freitag, 2014, p.205) and the balance between the two is contextual and emergent. In short, volunteering is a mutual aid driven critical success factor for any society but operates within an opaque space where this moral purpose is continually subject to human forces of ‘being true to yourself’ (Kahana, 2021, p.510) that shape the meaning and value of the volunteer experience.

The Volunteer Process Model (VPM) as umbrella framework

The VPM, described by Omoto and Snyder (1995, p.671) as a ‘general framework’ is used in this paper to delineate a three-stage descriptive framework that identifies and explains volunteering antecedents, experiences and consequences (Omoto and Snyder 1990, 1995, 2002). The VPM is built around a sequence of three stages. The antecedent stage refers to the background factors and pre-dispositions that enable a person to volunteer. In short, it underpins a search for the causes of volunteering (Wilson, 2012). Antecedents can include demographics (Agostinho & Paco, 2012), personality (Grube & Piliavin, 2000), motivations (Farmer & Fedor, 1999), expectations (Hager & Brudney, 2008), social support (Rehnborg, 2015), and individual and community resources (Cnaan & Cascio, 1998). The second stage, experiences, concerns what it is like to be a volunteer and how this experience impacts on their life course. This is necessarily subjective and reveals how volunteering can involve or create a special place, and time out of time where a sense of community power (Pollard et al, 2021) may be created and reinforced. The performance of a role, the social relationships, organizational support, satisfaction and limitations placed on an individual are all part

of their volunteering experience and constitutes a form of organizational socialization (Van Maanen and Schein, 1979). The third stage represents outcomes of the volunteering activity. These can be a range of attributes such as knowledge, skills, motivations, expectations and behaviours of individual volunteers (Omoto and Snyder, 2002). They can also be represented by a mutually agreeable dyadic relationship within which volunteer and recipient are enmeshed in a symbiotic relationship where altruism and reciprocity become self-reinforcing agents for volunteer action.

Within and through this framework volunteering is conceived of as a sequentially dynamic and multidetermined phenomena (Penner, 2004) that unfolds through three stages. Each stage captures a range of factors pertinent to volunteering practice and experience. The main reason the VPM is positioned as a hypernym for this article concerns its conceptual focus on stages which provides a structuring conceit for other frameworks that have been used by scholars. The Collective and Reflexive Styles of Volunteering model (CRSV) (Hustinx and Lammertyn, 2003) and the Volunteer Stages and Transitions Model (VSTM) (Haski-Leventhal and Bargal, 2008) each represents a development of a staged approach to consider how a volunteering may be understood. In this regard as an umbrella concept the VPM provides a structural basis for ordering social interactions, contexts, relations and networks and how these can be perceived and interpreted (Wilson, 2012, Pavlova et al, 2022). The concept also enables a more forensic exploration of causes, processes and benefits of volunteering through analysing antecedent, experience and consequence stages on personal, organisational and societal levels. Holistic analysis in this vein can thus highlight both the complexity and interrelatedness of various aspects of volunteering and provide (Wicker and Hallmann, 2013).

Taking a staged approach as a basic structure for analysis and developing this along moral axes Kahana (2021) has examined volunteer tourism as a form of moral understanding of the self that can have benefits for individuals as well as for those who may benefit from volunteer action. The staged approach in this research followed a similar pattern to that delineated by the VPM. Kahana's three stages included (2021, p.514-8); 'the road worth taking', 'the life worth living' and 'the person worth being'. Developed from narrative analysis Kahana's stages indicate how stage approaches that interpret the life course of individuals can be holistic and complex, but ultimately useful in making sense of that complexity through reflective and critical processes. Derived largely from social psychology, the VPM informed by a constellation of conceptual elements to make sense of volunteering episodes can be conceived of as a practical device (e.g., Wicker and Hallmann, 2013, Hustinx et al, 2010, Haski-Leventhal, 2009 and Hustinx and Lammertyn, 2003). The use of the VPM in this paper is premised on both pragmatic and theoretical grounds.

Following on we argue that the VPM is appropriate for an examination of volunteering during a period of existential shock based because it facilitates three actions. First, it enables disciplinary boundaries to be crossed, second, it lends structure to understand a real-life phenomenon and third, it allows us to contribute to the ongoing demand to shed light on the black box of volunteering using the lived experiences of volunteers (Bland, 2020; Scahchar et al, 2019, Hustinx and Denk, 2009). Applying the social relational aspect of the VPM privileges the understanding and sense making of individuals through their social relations and interactions and is contextualized by their socialization into their roles. This is similar to the volunteer stages and transition model (Haski-Leventhal and Bargal, 2008) that also sought to establish how within the quality of social relations that a volunteering disposition can inhere (Coleman, 1988). Paraphrasing Coleman (1994: 300), volunteering arises through resources that inhere in community social organizations and that benefit the cognitive or social development of an individual. These resources differ for different persons. Analysis at the interpersonal experiential level is critical for interpreting antecedent and consequences to understand how volunteers construct their social world. Thus, whilst much of the literature using the VPM has centred on revealing dispositional and motivational variables, activities and psychological processes of individual volunteers (Pavlova et al, 2022), the use of the VPM as a social construct not only privileges an understanding of social exchanges and relations, but also provides a context for an interpersonal examination of volunteering phases.

VPM limitations

The VPM is not without its shortcomings. First, its dominant sequential architecture suggests that structure is more important than that which goes on within that structure. This is problematic as many theories, conceptualisations and organisational issues relevant to uncovering and interrogating how volunteer experiences can be known and understood are subsumed within the VPM (Haski Leventhal and Bargal, 2008). In this vein the VPM has been criticised by Hustinx, Cnaan and Handy (2010) for not differentiating between complex stages and transitions involved in the volunteer experience itself, treating them as a single category. Whilst Haski-Leventhal and Bargal (2008), critiqued the model for not explaining the processes volunteers go through while performing their roles. Similar to other conceptual frameworks designed to account for human action, such as in the case of bonding and bridging social capital (see Putnam, 2000 for an overview), conceptual clarity does not always translate to the real world of the empirical. Nevertheless, the simplicity and clarity of the VPM facilitates micro level analyses of interpretative and subjective experiential data that inform on the meaning and relative interrelatedness of stages to make sense of individual action.

Summary

This paper contributes to how we can understand the meaning of volunteering in turbulent times and to the utility of such an approach in moving beyond simplistic lifecycle accounts of volunteering. To do this we foreground phenomenologically qualitative evidence to argue that the experiential everyday interpretation of the volunteer activity that is critical to aid progressive analysis of systemic approaches to volunteering. Concurring with Kahana we argue that in making sense of the sudden stopping of active volunteering during Covid 19 we need to move beyond 'macro-social forces affecting the individual in order to also examine the meanings that individuals ascribe to their actions in light of structural conditions.' (Kahana, 2021, p.523).

Methodology

Participants and procedures

Twelve volunteers were recruited from two cities in England (Smith et al 2009). All participants were established volunteers with between two and twelve years of volunteering experience. Eight participants were male and four were female with eight of the cohort aged fifty plus. Data collection consisted of semi-structured individual interviews conducted between March and August 2021 via Zoom, with participants signing an informed consent form before interviews commenced. Each interview was audio-recorded with verbatim transcripts completed using Otter AI. Transcripts were cross-checked by the authors and served as the basis for the analysis. The methodological approach was based on Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) which foregrounds the significance of individual experience. It encourages exploration of individual experience and how this is contextualised by history, society and cultural forces (Macleod, 2019). IPA facilitates sense making of interpretation of meanings of particular experiences and activities. It is an interpretative exercise that aims to produce an understanding of the everyday lived experience that is validated by the insights it brings. Semi structured interviews have been referred to as the exemplary method for IPA (Smith and Osborn, 2015) as they allow dialogue and room to manoeuvre in a dynamic process. The sample for study was purposive, small and homogenous in line with IPA method (Peat et al, 2018, Smith and Osborn, 2008). For the present study IPA is ideally suited to the task of unpicking volunteering as it allows the three phases of the VPM to be conceived of as the contextualising forces surrounding volunteer action allowing close examination of a topic that is complex, ambiguous and emotionally laden (Smith and Osborn, 2015).

An interview schedule was developed by reviewing theoretical guidance from past research and relevant studies using similar research methods (Bearman, 2019; Castillo-Montoya, 2001). The questions in the schedule probed participants' past experiences to uncover and report personal accounts and stories of volunteering during this period of stress. We did not limit the focus of the interview to specific aspects of volunteering, but using IPA purposively we established a dialogue between researchers and participants that allowed individuals a space to explore issues of interest as they emerged (May, 2001). The data set included reading and rereading, data chunking and notational intersectional analysis for each subject on a sequential basis drawing on concepts underpinning the VPM (Smith et al, 2009). The main questions were *talk me through your volunteer role and how you came to be involved and how long have you been doing it for, how important do you think being a volunteer is for you, when you've stopped volunteering how have you made sense of how you feel, has your volunteering come to mean something different to when you first volunteered in your role? How do you understand it differently, if at all.?* On average, each interview lasted for 50-60 mins.

Virtual interviews were the only means to engage on a face-to-face basis during the period of data collection and all participants appeared to be comfortable in engaging with the research process (Sparkes and Smith, 2014). The core interview item used the VPM to make sense of the context of each individual volunteer to share their perspectives on and experiences of volunteering cessation during lockdown 3 in England. This interview process was crucial to unearth subjective insights from participants relevant to the experience stage of the VPM that constitute their perceived lifeworld as a volunteer (Van Manen, 1997).

Table 1: Volunteers and their roles

Volunteers	Gender	Age	Volunteering experience	Main occupation	Main voluntary activity
1	M	40-50	6 years	Vet	voluntary sport club coach
2	M	20-30	2 years	Personal finance manager	community care volunteer
3	F	60-70	5 years	Retired Charity Manager	community care volunteer
4	M	60-70	7 years	Retired Civil Servant	Heritage railway volunteer
5	M	50-60	5 years	Transport logistics manager	scout volunteer
6	M	20-30	8 years	Primary School Teacher	scout volunteer
7	F	50-60	4 years	Retired Civil Servant	museum volunteer
8	M	50-60	7 years	Retired accountant	Park Run ambassador
9	F	50-60	5 years	Retired accountant	Park Run race Director,
10	F	50-60	5 years	Local government officer	sport club secretary

11	M	70+	12 years	Retired Naval Officer	sport volunteer referee
12	M	30-40	3 years	NHS Project Manager	sport club social secretary

Data analysis

The volunteer interviews were systematically analysed, and the information was categorized into themes (Creswell, 2012). Analysis used qualitative content analysis to analyse and interpret data in a logical and coherent manner (Krippendorff, 2019). The explanatory logic of qualitative content analysis followed an iterative process involving repeated cycles of coding interview data and comparison against the three phases of the VPM (Mayring, 2014). The initial coding and analysis of each interview was conducted by the first author. After initial analysis, codes and representations of the experiential aspect of volunteer interpretations were re-evaluated by the second author to identify relationships between the themes. This cross-checking process was continuous across each analytical iteration until no further insights were provided by additional analyses (Sparkes and Smith, 2014). The data set was then re-analysed thematically using the antecedent, experience, and outcome stages of the VPM to clarify themes that emerged inductively from the data (Smith and Osborn, 2015).

The trustworthiness of our findings, including categorical representative quotations, were established first through the iterative use of coding and text reading, and second, using a constant comparative method to ensure systematic and repetitive analysis of data and theory to assess the trustworthiness and validity of the overall findings (Kolb, 2012; Thomas, 2006). IPA method also facilitated credibility through applied rigor. First, by ensuring sensitivity to context; second, by ensuring commitment and rigor in undertaking the analysis; third, by ensuring transparency and coherence of the narrative produced. and finally, an attempt to ensure that the data and analysis were appropriate in terms of impact and importance (Finlay, 2002). The data that is reported is thus both credible and trustworthy and guides the analysis to identify emerging patterns, themes, and concepts

Findings and Discussion

The following subsections examine how a small sample of volunteers made sense of, and rationalised, their position during the third Covid 19 lockdown. The subsections reflect on the experience level of the VPM and echo across antecedent and consequence phases to interpret how being a volunteer, understood holistically and relationally, may condition perceptions of the world around them (Haski-Leventhal, 2009).

Understanding the meaning of reciprocal volunteering and altruism for the everyday

Giving something back is a consequence of volunteering. However, it is also an antecedent and a moral factor, which unites the antecedent and the consequence through the experiential. The experience level of the VPM thus presents an underexplored opportunity (Wilson, 2012) to understand what it means to be a volunteer. All interviewees (Table 1) as well as speaking of 'needing' to make a contribution or give something back, also indicated their desire to get back to their regular volunteering role. Comments such as "we're desperate to start up again" (1), "everybody wants to get back" (4) and "let's get back, I'm sick of it" (6) were commonplace and indicated a tension between the expected narrative of selflessness and the spatial and temporal restrictions imposed as a response to Covid 19.

The "reflective attitude to life" of the lifeworld (Husserl 1936/1970) was represented in two ways. First, by the overwhelming enjoyment of individuals reflecting on an activity that they enjoyed doing and which gave benefit to others, and secondly as a moral obligation felt by the majority of volunteers involved. The comments below were typical and reflect how antecedents and consequences are experienced and linked by volunteers to their past lives as much as they are to the future (Adams, 2011).

I think there is an element where you feel that you have to give something back, a sort of duty in the sense of, you know, you went through it yourself as a young person from age six all the way through to 18, and you had an experience, and you want to give some level of that back. (6)

I'd say I'm the sort of person that has, has a sense of moral obligation... and I think that I'm led as I believe there's a greater thing that we should all be working towards. I think that's important to me. I feel like there should be some level of giving back. (2)

I did it because I felt I had a duty and felt obliged to help out because it is a community-based organization. It is run by parents in the main and because I had two youngsters actually in scouting it was helping to contribute, and that's changed because I've got a better or greater awareness what scouting is all about. (5)

The latter comment above also signals the interweaving of moral responsibility and reciprocity in an obligation to volunteer and how, by volunteering, the individual had changed as the activity had taken hold. However, given that the outlet for that voluntary action had ceased, in some cases, other avenues were sought. Much of this drive was via opportunities to volunteer as a reciprocal activity, still driven by a moral sense of purpose but buttressed even more by a growth in reciprocity and reciprocal action as a result of community level reaction to Covid-19 (Aksoy et al, 2021). Indeed, the drive for desirable consequences was again the motivator, but is wrapped up in the search for experiential enhancement:

You have to do something, so it was an opportunity to go to spend a day a week contributing to another organization, (8)

Yes, it's called volunteering, but I also see it as a huge opportunity for oneself...[and] I'm hoping to be accepted soon to go and be a volunteer to vaccinate people. (1)

More prosaic altruistic comments were plentiful, reflecting motivational tensions and adding a note of dialectical pressure to the VPM in the way that consequences may determine how experience is perceived which may then be presented as antecedents.

It gives me purpose, something to do that's hopefully useful... let's hope it [volunteering] has improved me (9)

I didn't sort of see myself going into that side of it, but someone said, "can someone help out with a bit of admin" and I've sort of gone in with all guns blazing, and I've got myself, you know, doing all sorts of things that are appreciated (4)

I sewed scrubs and that was initially 'oh yeah there was a need' the equipment was not available, and they needed to fill this gap. I had a need to feel useful and was making a contribution, so that I could answer the question like 'what did you do in the war', you know, and that's what I did, (3)

Altruism was also expressed instrumentally in contexts where reciprocity was anticipated in a fateful expression of mutual aid. So, whilst the VPM delineates elements of voluntary action, in practice it is difficult to separate elements out cleanly between the phases. Thus, for one participant, antecedents and consequences are part of how they reciprocally comprehend their volunteering

Since I've been with [names organization] which I think was about 2018 I've realized that one day it will be me. So, I suppose there's a little bit of paying forward, if you like, but you know if I've helped people now there may be somebody will be helping me later on, that's not the reason I do it, I don't give with the expectation of you getting back, but it's an awareness that one day I might need that. (3)

This was also manifest in instrumental desires for self-improvement

I think that for me volunteering is one of those personal development tasks, I think that if you're not spending time working, or working on yourself in different means, I know full well that working my day job I'm not really going to learn anything new because I don't really care about doing spreadsheets, (2)

Whilst these accounts underpin how the VPM is an organisational concept they also suggest how it could be developed to have greater analytical and practicable application. These accounts also challenge the VPM to move from descriptive to analytical, but that to do so will require an understanding of how a conceptually rich framework that underscores how volunteering is constructed and promoted to discern volunteering as not just inputs and outputs, can be incorporated within the 'model' (Butrica et al, 2009, Hustinx et al, 2010b). Theoretically it is not just

about opening the 'black box' of volunteering but to locate this in and through discourses of volunteering that act to 'hold the black box in place' (Schachar et al, 2019: 247).

Experiencing social and structural factors during Covid 19

Whilst the VPM identifies volunteering as a dynamic activity, it became clear that predispositions to volunteer were located in the social relationships participants experienced (Wilson, 2012). These were perceived as structural factors that were reciprocal and suggested that reciprocity had an optimal level. This is something that was only really accessible at the experiential level and revolved around the balance between good will, necessary skills and no payment and the level of commitment, time and training needed. The indication is of a perceptual continuum in interpreting a volunteer role, its viability and ultimately attractiveness under a dominant neoliberal modernizing context (Dean, 2015).

I think there's a balance between, you know, when you get to 20 hours a week, then you're talking about nearly a proper job, you know, and then, then I think that ceases to be a volunteer role that's just 'Using your abilities or your good nature, without paying you (8)

All participants reflected on factors that impacted on their perception of their volunteering that resided out of their control and served to provide an architecture that facilitated and enabled their readiness to volunteer. The lockdowns that impacted on individual choice and ability to exert agency were effectively structural barriers, but they were also opportunities for innovation and adaptation, particularly in adopting new technologies and new ways of undertaking volunteering. In the first instance, for a sports coach, aspects of communication were enhanced:

I would say, probably the structure we have for stuff being fed back to us should stay because we were often a little bit in the dark about what to do and through the pandemic that has become much more clear as to what we need to do. (1)

For other participants it was about taking control of the innovation potential and adopting technology. For these participants Covid 19 facilitated their volunteering, from developing self-esteem and acting defensively, as a response to the stultifying effect of lockdowns, to tapping the human survival instinct

I set up a WhatsApp group so that we could all stay in touch with each other and ask for help if we needed it and I realized that I was the one who was seen as needing help. (3)

[My] takeaway would be the ability to adapt, the ability to accept a situation and find alternative ways of achieving what you're trying to achieve. (10)

Several participants expressed a close relationship between their volunteer activity and the tangibility of structure as manifest as a sense of community and of the place of where they

volunteered and a reflective longing for that place/community. Bland includes this sort of process in a sort of “existential liberation” that comes from insecurity and changes to patterns of social engagement (Bland, 2020, p.711). These poignant comments suggest that individual hunger for volunteering was embodied in how place and community is constructed through a perceived intimacy between our human experience, the world around us and as a volunteer consumed on an individual basis.

We’ve got the campsite up the road [names park] and so I pop up there every now and again on Saturday mornings. There’s a few volunteers that do a little bit of maintenance work up there, so I get some fresh air it’s nice place to be, I’m missing scouting but there’s nothing I can do about it really (5)

So, I have had occasion on a few times to go to the club. And you know obviously the ground is closed, but just physically being present at the club brings a huge sense of calmness to me, ... I miss the physicality of getting out of my car, getting the gear walking down that path to the training pitch, saying hello to everybody, looking around the pitch, seeing what the weather’s like. So, it’s almost like literally I would feel a tug for that all the time and that’s gone. (1)

Yes, it’s not exactly tactile... but I go in one day a week to the office... and I also sort of use it as an excuse ... But it’s just, being in the office and seeing the physical structure of the station and such like, it is sort of uplifting... I do look forward to actually going in there and sitting in an office, no trains running or anything like that, but I feel part of the of the family so to speak. (4)

Multiple emotions were evident in comments made about the significance of volunteering, such as fear, grief, loss, irritation and resignation were mentioned by the participants. Although these might be thought of as psychological coping tools, they should be also considered as experiential elements of the VPM that impact directly on a sense of community. Reconciliation with this structural condition almost removes the impersonal system and production line context that can objectify the self as individuals seek to fit in (Galvin and Todres, 2012):

There was a kind of grieving process. To me it’s almost something like a physical loss that I’ve experienced, (1)

There was a sense of loss, particularly with the Parkrun... but it was all part of a bigger picture wasn’t it, of a bigger loss and that’s why it’s quite hard. (8)

... I certainly did feel quite devastated at the start [of lockdown 3], and you knew that there was a hope that things would open up again, you know, which I think it gave you something to sort of hold on to, you know (7)

Conclusion

The current article uses Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to provide a critical and analytical assessment of the Volunteer Process Model (VPM) during a period of existential threat. It affirms that value, meaning, and understanding in volunteering contexts can or must be understood from the perspective of the individual indicating that the experiential dimension of the VPM can be a pathway to disentangle contextual variables in order to make subjective sense of volunteering. This article also provides evidence of how value, meaning and understanding are socially constructed factors that inhere in the social relationships within which individuals find themselves when volunteering. The evidence presented suggests that privileging the lived experiences of volunteers can enrich and enhance how a staged framework can be re-constructed phenomenologically to move away from a positivistic determination to prove causality. The article also presents evidence that the sequential structure that underpins the VPM has little semblance to the reality of the lived experiences of the volunteers involved in the research. These findings are significant for the conceptualisation and development of a bottom-up approach to classifying and categorising volunteering that can enable a distinct restructuring of the deterministic impact of antecedent and consequence components in relation to individual volunteering experience.

This article identifies that the VPM, when allied to a phenomenological approach, has the capacity to offer a more critical and analytical exploration of the experiential dimension of volunteering in affirming that value, meaning, and understanding in volunteering are socially constructed within the context of an individual's volunteer activity. It is noteworthy that this assessment of the VPM's organisational and descriptive strength in outlining the factors contributing to volunteer engagement has limited purchase in providing explanatory rationales for the 'how' and 'why' volunteer engagement may occur. The empirical data from this research suggests that the sequential structure of the VPM does not fully align with the lived experiences of volunteers, revealing a need for a less deterministic and more phenomenological analyses of volunteering. Moving away from a deterministic perspective to focus on these lived experiences may allow for a more nuanced understanding of volunteering. This may potentially reshape the VPM into a more useful framework that better reflects the complexity and diversity of volunteer experiences (Kahana, 2021).

The findings suggest that for effective promotion and incorporation of volunteer activity, policy makers and organisers need to value, understand and incorporate the lived experience as an underpinning feature of volunteer planning. The extensive use of volunteers' narratives to illustrate the value of the VPM reveals how volunteers contextually assemble their perceptions of volunteering and the sense of purpose this brings during a particularly stressful period. These narratives underscore the VPM's value as an analytical tool for making sense of how volunteer experiences are socially arranged and organised according to temporal, organizational, and spatial characteristics.

During the Covid-19 crisis, volunteering emerged as central to individuals' sense of connection with community and coping mechanisms during uncertain times. The VPM is thus an imperfect tool to view to understand volunteer engagement. For it to become a more effective analytical tool, greater acknowledgement of the value of the socially constructed experiential dimension of volunteering is required. Whilst this research builds on and extends the type of in-depth and interrogative analysis sought by Wilson (2012), it is limited by sample size, the sample of habitual volunteers and a unique set of circumstances afforded by the Covid-19 crisis. Further research is needed to build on the IPA used in the present study to expand on how experiential understandings of volunteering can be built

into a more robust bottom-up model that can be further validated through practical application and empirical research.

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