

An Exploration of Volunteering as a Path to Healthy Youth Development

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Abstract

Volunteering is commonly observed from the standpoint of the service recipient, and the effect it has on a volunteer's growth and development is often overlooked. Though quantitative studies, mixed method research, and surveys have explored the impact of volunteerism, very few look into its connection with healthy youth development. Furthermore, it has not received the academic attention it deserves in Sri Lanka, given that the country is globally ranked 1st in volunteer engagement. This qualitative study sought a psychosocial approach to explore and gain insight into the effects of volunteerism on the personal and social development of volunteers. Data collection was done through semi-structured interviews conducted with 6 (young adult) participants (4 females, 2 males), with at least 2 years of experience volunteering at an educational or psychosocial setting. The data were analysed through interpretative phenomenological analysis, which took a hermeneutical stance to explore the lived experiences of volunteers. The analysis revealed 2 superordinate themes: The 1st, a "journey of growth," emphasized the development through exposure to different realities and the discovering of career-related interests. The 2nd, "acceptance, support, and validation," illustrated the importance of sociocultural influences on volunteerism. The findings of the study provided insight into multiple implications including the role of supervisors and volunteer organizations in facilitating a healthy volunteering experience, the significance of sociocultural beliefs and philosophical drives in volunteerism, and the possibility of using volunteering as a standardized youth development program.

Key words: volunteerism, positive youth development, developmental assets model, interpretative phenomenological analysis, Sri Lanka



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Introduction

Positive psychology is the study of human strengths/virtues and psychological elements (Sheldon & King, 2001), which help people experience meaningful and fulfilling lives. Emerging from this school of thought, the positive youth development (PYD) perspective envisions the youth as “at-promise” rather than “at-risk.” It acknowledges the adversities they face in their developmental journey but sees beyond their maladaptive tendencies (Stevens & Wilkerson, 2010). The approach aims to understand, educate, and engage youth in productive ways to help explore their surroundings and acquire the capacity to increase competence and contribute to the world, and volunteering has been shown to facilitate similar opportunities and instigate PYD (Bhattarai, 2017).

Volunteerism, as understood by the Guttman scale, is an act done out of free will, with no expectations of remuneration (Guttmann, 1994), structured formally or informally, with volunteers enjoying benefits they gain through participation. Volunteering can be done individually or with a group and is usually broad and undefined as volunteers engage in direct and indirect service delivery (commonly interpreted as helping activities), working with both state and non-state sectors (President’s task force on the private sector initiatives, 1982). This is the definition of “volunteerism” used in the present study, inclusive of the characteristics of a volunteer’s role in Sri Lanka (the country in which the study is set; United Nations Volunteers [UNV], 2019).

Organisations demonstrate the value of a United States-based volunteer at \$27.20 per hour (Independent Sector, 2018), and while the impact of social work cannot be quantified with an economic value, its benefit to the volunteers is less discussed. This is relevant to youth volunteers transitioning into adulthood (Duke et al., 2009), as research shows volunteer experiences having a hand in the growth of values, social capabilities, and identities (MacNeela & Gannon, 2014), all connected to PYD. This long-term impact on the youth translates into a significant contribution to the economy, as volunteerism has an estimated global economic value of approximately \$1.348 trillion (Salamon et al., 2011).

Sri Lanka has a long history of volunteerism based sociocultural practices, mainly in the form of donation of labour (*shrama dhana* in Sinhala arterial language). While ethno-religious traditions had made volunteerism into small-scale charity work done at individual capacities, the outlook changed in the early 1900s. Volunteers were recruited by the state sector as a part of their response to the epidemics in 1915, 1934, and 1935, to bolster the health services (Walt et al., 1989), followed by the introduction of youth volunteers to urban slum areas by the health

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education bureau in the mid-1970s to educate communities on public health and hygiene (Adamson, 1982 as cited in Walt et al., 1989). While organised volunteerism is yet to become a norm, it has evolved based on values such as solidarity, mutual trust, and empowerment. Thus, presently has begun to factor into the socioeconomic development of the country as non-governmental organisations (NGOs) use volunteerism for development-oriented work (UNV, 2021).

Benefits of volunteering are visible in all aspects of the biopsychosocial model; for instance, it is associated with improved physical health (Van Willigen 2000; Morrow Howell et al. 2003; Piliavin & Siegl 2007); longevity (Brown et al., 2003; Oman et al., 1999); lower mortality rate (Musick et al. 1999); and lower likelihood of being diagnosed with mental illnesses, musculoskeletal disorders, and hypertension (Griep et al., 2015). From a social perspective, volunteering has provided a space for individuals to express their humanitarian values, gain exposure to diverse communities, and increase cultural awareness (Holdsworth & Quinn, 2010). This has resulted in changes in social ideals led by a positive perception of newfound inspiration in altruistic and prosocial behaviour (Steinberg & Levine, 1990; Dass-Brailsford et al., 2011). Volunteering facilitates ideal circumstances and flexible opportunities to try out a task while nurturing and caring for others and receiving gratitude in return for it (Okun & Schultz, 2003; Woodside & Luis 1997). Such positive experiences have been shown to reduce negative feelings and improve self-esteem (Okun & Schultz, 2003) and one's sense of belonging and purpose in life. It is also linked to a decrease in the likelihood of depression and increased happiness (Taylor & Turner, 2001).

Studies have also found that the forming and strengthening of social bonds through teamwork teaches volunteers how to manage interpersonal relationships (Okun & Schultz, 2003), thereby increasing their social competence (Allen & Rushton, 1983). These prosocial behaviours are linked to a sense of social commitment volunteers develop as they perceive themselves being part of a larger community (Clarke et al., 2007), resulting in developing a greater sense of social responsibility and concern (Hedin & Conrad, 1980).

As volunteers continue to engage in fulfilling experiences, they develop new skills such as time management, communication skills, resource management (McDowell, 2002), and other vocation-specific abilities (Allen & Rushton, 1983). This increases their academic capabilities (Hackl et al., 2007), and chances of employability (Seligman, 2011), with some displaying significant relationships between, volunteering, employment, retention of job, and job progression (Paine et al., 2013). The act of volunteering also allows one to look inward,

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enhancing positive intrapersonal qualities such as subjective well-being (Littman-Ovadia & Steger, 2010), resilience (Oliver et al., 2006), sense of achievement, self-efficacy (Williamson et al., 2017), self-esteem, and sense of purpose, while reflecting on their overall quality of life (Post, 2005; Seligman, 2011; Schwartz et al., 2003).

Current Study

As studies reveal, volunteerism is interwoven into both the personal and social lives of volunteers and plays a vital role in development at many levels. While studies have explored volunteer experiences and their contribution to personal and social growth (Furlong, 2012 as cited in Johnstone et al., 2017; Williamson et al., 2017) the applicability of the findings are marred in the local context as the lack of studies in Sri Lanka has hindered efforts to learn about volunteerism and its contribution to society and volunteers.

Therefore, this study hopes to be a first step towards bridging the gap in the lack of knowledge in the field and furthering the understanding of what volunteerism can offer to complement the quality of a holistic human experience. The purpose of the study is to explore the experiences of volunteers volunteering in educational and psychosocial settings in Sri Lanka.

Method

As the study aimed to engage the participants at a deeper level to explore the experiences of volunteers, it was decided that a qualitative approach and its inductive stance are more viable when exploring subjective experiences in depth (Davies, 2007). In addition to this, the lack of previous research was another reason for choosing a qualitative approach, as it delves into underexplored topics (Palinkas, 2014). Therefore, given the unexamined nature of the topic in the local context (Sri Lanka) and that the aim of the study is to explore personal and social experiences, a qualitative approach was chosen.

Participants and Sampling

After receiving the ethics approval from the ethics panel of the School of Human and Social Sciences at the University of West London, six participants (four females, two males) were chosen for the study through snowball sampling of volunteers and volunteer organisations known to the researcher. The specific inclusion criteria adhered to in the recruitment process are shown in Table 1.

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Table 1. Inclusion Criteria (Based on Rationale) for Participants in the Study

Criterion	Rationale
Age range: 18-35 years (early adulthood).	Most volunteers in Sri Lanka fit into this age range, as it is rather rare to see elderly volunteers in an educational/psychosocial setting in the local context.
The main volunteering experience needed to be in a psychosocial or educational setting.	Most of the volunteer organisations known to the researcher function within these two settings, and these two are most relevant to the researcher's major area of study.
Engages in a minimum of 8 hours of volunteering a month for a period of at least 2 years.	A study by Morrow-Howell et al., (2003), revealed that for a volunteer to reap optimal benefits, it was required that they complete a minimum of 100 hours of volunteering a year. Evenly spread throughout the year, it was 8 hours of volunteering a month.

Once a suitable participant was identified, the participant information sheet, was provided, which contained details on the study. If the potential participant showed interest in joining, the researcher contacted them, verified the research, clarified doubts, and shared the informed consent form, to be signed by the participant. Participant demographics are shown in Table 2.

Table 2 . Demographics of the Study Participants

Demographic	Number of participants
Age range	All participants were between 20 and 27 years of age.
Gender	4 females, 2 males
Marital status	5 single, 1 in a relationship
Number of dependents	All participants had no dependents
Highest educational qualification	Two participants completed their bachelor's degrees (one is currently pursuing a master's degree in applied psychology and behavioural change, the other is pursuing a second bachelor's degree in psychology). Two participants are undergraduates studying international relations, one participant is an undergraduate in medicine, and one holds a diploma in psychology.

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Table 2 . (continued)

Demographic	Number of participants
Volunteering institutions	<p>Non-governmental, not-for-profit organization: An international volunteer platform providing opportunities locally and overseas, mainly in teaching and mentoring (2 participants).</p> <p>Island-wide suicide hotline (1).</p> <p>Tertiary services providing state mental health hospital- Adolescent unit (2).</p> <p>Organization providing education freely to children from low socioeconomic backgrounds (1).</p>
Participant pseudonyms	Amali, Ayatt, Barnby, DT, James, and Jasmine

Material

A semi-structured interview was carried out to perform data collection, as it is ideal in allowing participants to speak freely and generate data focused on the elicitation of feelings, thoughts, and experiences (Kajornboon, 2005), thereby adding to the richness of data (Kvale, 2007).

The interview schedule consisted of two sections, the first inquired on the demographic data while the second section focused on covering the different aspects of a volunteering experience. The questions focused on their volunteer roles and responsibilities, motives to begin volunteering, factors and barriers to maintaining a healthy volunteering experience, and the perceived benefits of volunteering. The interview questions were semantically validated by a panel of two psychologists, one student of psychology, one lay individual (with no connection to the subject), and one English teacher.

Procedure

Interviews were scheduled after the participant submitted the signed informed consent form; they were conducted online due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the participants did not receive any incentives for participation. An external voice recorder was used to audio record the interviews, and the interviews were then transcribed verbatim by the researcher to prepare for the analysis process.

Analysis

This study utilized the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) for the purpose of analysing the collected data. The research methodology, introduced in the 1990s (Smith, 1996), is centred around three theoretical influences: phenomenology (the unbiased study of lived experiences and things as they appear to be [Giorgi, 2009]), hermeneutics (the attempt of the researcher to make meaning of the participant's interpretation), and idiography (an individual and case-specific, detailed examination; Smith, 2007). Each of these three concepts was relevant to the study as the aim was to explore the lived experiences of a volunteer, analyse the data and interpret the volunteers' interpretation of their experiences. Lastly, the study treats all participants separately delving deeply into their individual accounts.

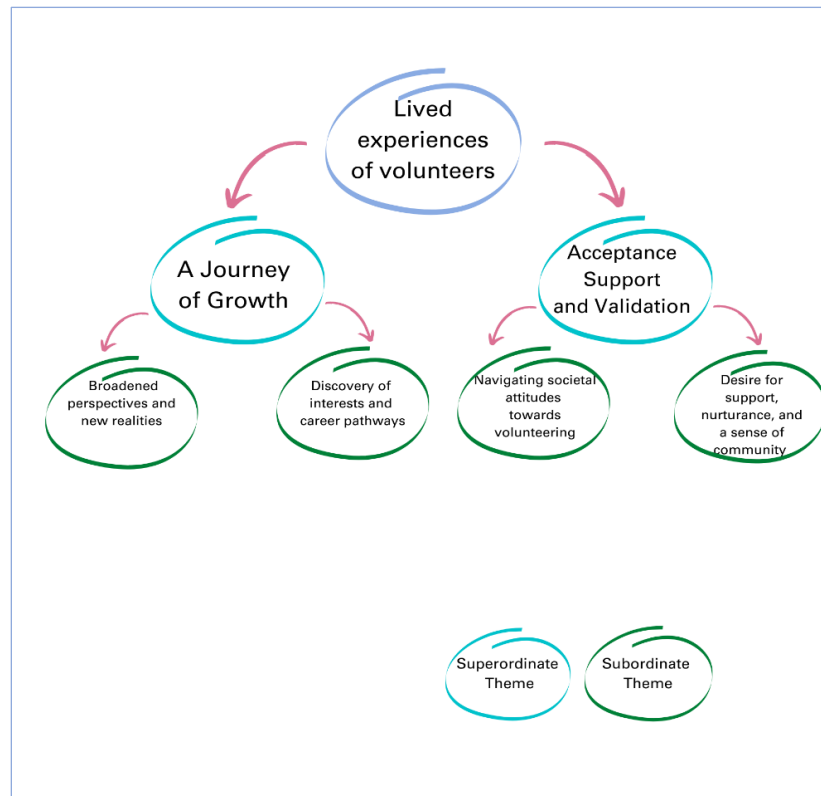
The study followed Smith and Osborn's (2014) guidelines for analysis. The transcripts were read multiple times before the coding process began. The first stage of coding focused on identifying experiences considered as significant by the participants, which were then concurrently reviewed by the two authors. This was followed by condensing codes and clustering them into emergent themes, which were reworked as each interview was analysed. The final step was the reflective process, as the themes were clustered based on how prominent they were to the participants' lived experiences. The researchers also reflected on their own experiences volunteering while being careful to remain objective, to reduce the chances of being biased.

Results

The analysis of the interviews revealed two superordinate themes, which further divided into two subordinate themes (see figure 1). The analysis in relation to the purpose of the study explored a volunteer experience and the role it played in the personal and social lives of the volunteers, delving into its socially embedded nature and how social interactions shape volunteering. In addition to this, the analysis also revealed the experiences of growth corresponding to healthy youth development from volunteerism.

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Figure 1. Themes That Emerged During Analysis



A Journey of Growth

The participants explored their volunteer experiences as marked by reflectivity and change in worldviews in relation to long-standing beliefs about the world and perceptions of one’s career and interests. It is overarched by the exposure gained through engaging in different settings and interacting with diverse communities, and the resulting emotional responses, which seem to play a key role in how the participants perceive volunteerism.

Broadened Perspectives and New Realities

The exposure through volunteering has led to many outcomes in volunteers, one of the most recurring being the instigation of reflective dialogues in participants, resulting in the re-evaluation of long-standing beliefs and broadening of perspectives contributing to personal growth.

Amali describes how she got the chance to work alongside “school children or religious leaders or just ordinary people.” For Amali, it was not just about meeting people from backgrounds she did not know; rather, it was being able to work alongside “just ordinary people” she had seen and heard but known less about. This exposure to the lifeworlds of different people, especially

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as she moved out of the urbanized western province to more rural areas, allowed Amali to see different realities, as she described:

And when we work with them only we understand reality, other than that it was only from the books that we learnt everyone is equal to everyone, just because the books say so we can't, humans can't put it into practice, but when we go into society and interact with people, we understand who humans are and we understand that they are just another individual like me, their clothing might be different, their language might be different, their accent might be different, the food they eat might be different but at the end of the day, we are all the same. And I got to learn that from volunteering and when I volunteered, I got to work with people from SL and I got to work with people from different ethnic and religious backgrounds and that was something very important.

The realization caused Amali to make a phenomenological inquiry of herself regarding the quality of the education she received at school. This led her to the conclusion that the education system is regressive as it expects books to teach students about society. She was disappointed and angry that she spent over a decade in school, only to feel as if she learned nothing.

Amali's experience from her volunteering placement in Malaysia supported the previous revelation. She describes her time as a volunteer teacher to refugee children as a "hard blow," due to witnessing the struggles refugees go through to make a livelihood. This prompted her to ask the question, "What are we doing as individuals?" showing evidence of reflective dialogue. As she contemplated how she spends her daily life worrying about insignificant things in comparison to the struggles of many others, she re-evaluated her "role as a human being in society." This resulted in a worldview that was more realistic, in comparison to her previously idealistic "fancy perception of life."

James spoke of his own journey of realization, drawing from his experience as a crisis supporter at a suicide hotline. His exposure to the darker realities of people over 2 years instigated in him a dilemma of how and why he could not solve some problems, as he initially thought that he had an answer to everything. But as he exercised his patience and empathy in the countless conversations with callers, he understood that there are people beyond his help, leading to the realization that "sometimes we can't solve problems or sometimes we don't have to solve."

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Barnby's narrative revealed another unique thought process, as he disclosed how an aggressive and uncontrollable child had to be forcibly bound to the bed in a hospital ward where he volunteered. This dilemma is characteristic of two phenomenological experiences: corporeal and communal. Firstly, he experienced a corporeal experience, as he was assaulted by this patient. Barnby described, "It wasn't scary per se like it was uncomfortable because you had to be on guard because you don't know when she'll suddenly do something."

While Barnby found the action of the nurses to be unjustifiable, he at this point had known the hospital staff for 2 years and his introspection of what was morally right and wrong was marked with doubt. This was noted in his voice and when he admitted that they were "probably doing what they were told to do," as he could not propose an alternative course of action. This was possibly due to his morals and lived body experience clashing with the (second) phenomenologically communal experience through his lived relationship with the hospital staff.

The circumstances, therefore, show volunteering experiences leading to cogitation, as it defies the black and white reasoning individuals often implore. This suggests that meaning-making dilemmas go through an interpretative process to arrive at a profound understanding, and not all come to a clean conclusion, as Barnby was not able to arrive at a definitive answer.

Discovery of Interests and Career Pathways

The journey of growth also encompasses volunteerism enabling the discovery and reinforcement of interests, along with the enhancement of skills, which aid when choosing career pathways.

Jasmine began volunteering during the after-hours of her corporate job as it offered an escape from mundane life. She spent more time volunteering as she preferred it over her job and found satisfaction, purpose, and the joy of productivity through helping another. This created a conflict between interests and needs as she preferred her volunteer work over her job, but needed the financial stability offered by her job to continue volunteering.

This incongruence of interests and needs led Jasmine to develop the skill of "counselling," which she saw as a need in her volunteer work. Eventually, she would decide to make a career transition from the corporate world to the social work sector. While it took her 3 years to decide, she emerged a changed individual who discovered her interests and was therefore confident of the decisions she made, all instigated by her volunteering experience and the skills she chose to harness.

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Amali's account explored a similar experience from a different angle, as she was adamant in her interests from an earlier age and knew what her ideal career would look like. However, she shared how her visualized role was rooted in idealistic perceptions which were challenged through volunteerism. While Amali perceives herself a realist, she mentioned that her original motives have persisted and strengthened as volunteering experiences complemented them. They remain as the foundations of her career as her goal to be on a humanitarian "mission." Building on this she now understands what she could truly be capable of based on a realistic perception of her role:

I believe that as any individual human being there is a role we have to play and empowering someone to bring them into a better positions, that is something I believe something we can do, like wars, will be there forever, conflicts will be there, but we can try to negotiate, we can try to come to an agreement, we can try and every time people who are suffering from poverty hunger and everything people will be there, but we can try to bring them to a better position, that also we can empower them we can tell them that they can do this.

Amali's understanding draws from her volunteering experiences as she suggests practical implications such as "empowerment" and "conflict negotiation," showing evidence of volunteering building on her career mindset. Volunteering has allowed Amali to grow, and accommodate her life goals, shaping them to better fit in with career prospects and realities she has come to perceive in the world around her.

Acceptance Support and Validation

Volunteerism exists within a social structure with overarching beliefs and expectations affecting the lived experiences of volunteers. In this context, being accepted, supported, and validated for voluntary work is important, as volunteering is rooted in social engagement within a communal framework. The participant narratives revealed that socio-cultural influences arising from the phenomenology of their lived relationships can directly inhibit or expedite volunteering and the degree to which volunteers are able to enjoy its benefits.

Navigating societal attitudes towards volunteering

Cultural and social influences were closely interwoven with volunteer experiences as they added value or posed hindrances when volunteering. Amali described Sri Lanka as a highly "conservative culture" as she explained how difficult it was to convince her parents to allow her to step out of her comfort zone. She observed that "conservative attitudes might be a barrier

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for people interested in volunteering.” These attitudes are often enforced by parents, because of the concern for the safety of their children, and in Amali’s experience, it is more apparent with daughters than sons. While she has understood it as a societal concern and not the fault of parents, it has hampered the efforts of many girls interested in volunteering.

Volunteers also described societal norms which stand against the perusal of work in the humanitarian sector. As Amali passed her Ordinary Level examination with nine As, she was expected to choose sciences or mathematics for further education. However, she went on to study in the “arts stream” (Humanities) which was met with harsh criticism from those around her.

In the face of criticism, Amali was able to persist only because of the “ultimate goal” she had in her heart and her passion of wanting to help others. A recurring concept in her narrative is her “passion,” which gave her purpose as an individual and was the root of her courage to persevere from the time she was fifteen years of age. It is noteworthy to mention that her resolve has been challenged, but it only gave her reason to be even more passionate and stronger to continue volunteering.

On the other hand, some volunteers had been exposed to volunteering through their families. Ayatt explained how she was exposed to charity work by her aunt, with whom she would often help in orphanages and elders’ homes, which drew her to volunteering and the helping profession. “So, I was accompanying her when helping differently abled persons. I would watch her help and I think that interested me and helped me from a very young age to begin volunteering.”

Furthermore, Ayatt’s father was supportive of her decision to volunteer, allowing her to be involved regardless of conservative cultural barriers which hindered other participants. This shows the significance of familial support and how socio-cultural beliefs can differ between households, as the support she received made it possible for her to volunteer to a degree other participants could not.

Jasmine’s story further demonstrates the importance of support from family; her narrative describes the influence from both her parents, who were retired teachers offering to teach children in the area for free:

I understood the role because my parents were also teachers, and they would teach without a fee. Even now students come to my place, now they are retired

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but even now they still teach, because around our area there are students who can't pay for class, so they would come and ask can you do maths class? So, my amma [mother] is an arts teacher and my appachi [father] is a maths teacher, and they are like, "Okay, we are free at this time you can come and learn." So, I think I also had that background as well—so, I think to begin teaching through volunteering was not a new thing for me.

Therefore, the role of a volunteer was not unfamiliar to her, due to her exposure to it from a very young age. Fascinatingly, the volunteer role she chose at the educational organization and the career pathway she transitioned into resonates quite well with the roles that she saw in her parents. This speculates on the role played by volunteerism in bringing out the submerged values and beliefs in some volunteers.

Desire for Support, Nurturance, and a Sense of Community

Being supported is necessary to continue volunteering, but an idea common to multiple participants' volunteer experiences was the clash between the motives of volunteers and those of the organizations where they volunteered. While individuals' motives can differ, the participants' accounts focused on how, in Amali's words, "Certain people and organizations and fundraisers aren't flexible, they want to do things in a certain way, and they have other motives to doing it that way."

According to Amali, organisations have their own agendas which "impede" what volunteers would want to achieve. These organizational barriers can lead to feelings of anger and demotivation, which in turn has made Amali feel that the situation is out of her control, and she is being "used." Trust and supportiveness have a deeper significance in a volunteer's lifeworld; therefore, feelings of anger and demotivation can be harmful, as volunteerism is built, as Ayatt described, on "self-satisfaction" and requires "self-motivated" individuals, due to the absence of materialistic compensation. Ayatt related a similar experience when her friend with whom she started to volunteer discontinued, and this loss of support made her feel alone and difficult to continue.

While the loss of support made volunteering difficult, participants also narrated the positive impact endorsement had on their volunteer experiences. James described,

The supportiveness of the people, like when you start out everyone is shy, and everyone is trying their best to help out and very supportive. The admins and the coaches are really nice; they always try to cheer us up. I felt the authentic support.

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Jasmine attributed the concept of “feeling supported and welcomed” to the support she received, making her feel accepted and welcomed in the community, resulting in continued volunteering.

The importance of support was also highlighted in James’ account; the sense of community at the suicide hotline where he volunteered was crucial, due to the emotionally taxing nature of the work. He further emphasized the comfort he received from his supervisors as a trainee, “They gave a lot of affection, I think I also gave that a lot to the newcomers and they became really friendly.” He described this “affection” as significant in his growth as a volunteer and was able to share the same affection he received with the new trainees, pointing out how positive influence can lead to modelling behaviour.

DT’s and Barnby’s accounts also mentioned the importance of caring relationships among volunteers. Barnby found that volunteering with a similar age group made it easier to connect and communicate with the other volunteers. DT found that the positive influence of senior volunteers motivated her and added to her passion to help others.

Jasmine’s narrative explored the supervisor–supervisee relationship in depth as Pooja (her supervisor) was close to the volunteers and got involved in the daily volunteer activities. To Jasmine, this attentiveness and involvement felt “very welcoming and good.” Pooja was extremely supportive and played a crucial role in Jasmine’s career transition:

She would encourage us to apply for training programs or scholarships, she was an amazing boss I mean she knows most of the things and how things are happening and when we were very new to the field she told us, all right, so you need to apply for this and go for this.

Pooja supported Jasmine emotionally, validating her struggles in the corporate sector. She encouraged learning-oriented attitudes among volunteers, which eventually pushed Jasmine to explore her passion (a career pathway in a different field).

As explored, volunteering exists in a complex social environment and thrusts into the personal and social worlds of volunteers. It is evident that these two domains exist in an interactive relationship between one another, marked by positive emotions stemming from support and acceptance. Experiences such as this affect how an individual perceives the world, and the meaning made from it is a crux of growth.

Discussion

A Journey of Growth

Growth was a major and overarching outcome of volunteerism. A noteworthy aspect of growth was that in both the interviews and the analysis, it appeared over time with experience, and in the presence of contextual factors such as support and validation.

Volunteers who were supported and felt belonged were able to establish positive connections with those around them. These relationships would uplift them in their journey of self-discovery, as they perceived themselves as being self-worthy individuals. This overlap of social and personal lifeworlds is indicative of the connections between the two superordinate themes, revealing that there is in fact only one such world (the participants), and their lived experiences are a mesh of all experiences reinforcing one another.

An example of this was when a participant referred to himself as “limited” without volunteering, indicating the impact volunteering has had on his life. This is implicative of internal assets (Lerner & Benson, 2003), defined by the developmental assets model as existing abilities volunteers possess that are enhanced by contextual factors. Research identifies the internal asset (IA), positive values (Benson 2008), inclusive of traits such as being more responsible; improving in decision-making skills; and abilities in planning, which guide the way youth think and act (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Participants described learning similar skills which taught them to function independently and increase their social competence. This internal asset, through which they learned how to resist herd mentality and become more assertive in collaborative decision-making processes, emphasizes how personal growth can make one more competent in one’s social lifeworld (Lerner & Benson, 2003).

Over time experiences, validation, competency, self-regard, and self-efficacy lead to an increase in confidence (Lerner et al., 2015), one of the Five Cs (competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring), traits conceptualized as indicators of healthy youth development (King et al., 2005). This reciprocally benefits volunteerism as volunteers themselves become more efficient at tasks in which they feel confident. This also promotes socializing behaviour and shouldering responsibility (Poulin, 2014), improving psychological well-being (Resnick et al., 2013), leading individuals to be insightful of their own sustainable development and purpose in life, all of which are associated with an increased likelihood of being employed (MacNeela & Gannon, 2014).

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It is also notable how the desire for employment is connected to volunteerism, as volunteering provides an opening to permanent employment in some cases. In the 1970s and 1980s in Sri Lanka, community health workers who had few job opportunities joined volunteerism with the intention of seeking employment. This has also been observed in Nigeria (Adeniyi & Olaseha, 1987) and India (Jaju, 1986), and since then it has been informally understood that volunteerism provided certain soft skills needed to excel in permanent employment.

Furthermore, participants also mentioned how volunteering and engaging in helping behaviours enhance skills such as empathy and sympathy. This is distinctive of the Five Cs trait “caring” (Conway et al., 2015), which recognizes, “helping another” as a strong motive to begin volunteering. Ellison and Kerr (2014) and Hallet et al. (2012) support the finding that such values-related motives as feelings of selflessness and the humanitarianism of “wanting to help another” encourage volunteerism in individuals.

A sociocultural nuance to the giving attitude of volunteers was revealed by the Charities Aid Foundation (CAF) World Giving Index survey (2019), in which Sri Lanka ranked first and Myanmar second in the category of “time spent volunteering.” CAF proposed that the reason for this could be the high population of Theravada Buddhists in the two countries. They suggested this as the philosophy encourages individuals to engage in small and frequent acts of giving in accordance with a monastic lifestyle. Therefore, these scores could point at a potential research focus on philosophical/religious beliefs with regard to volunteerism in the future.

The participants of the present study displayed similar humanitarian values as a motive to volunteer. The findings revealed that the exposure and interactions that followed, refined these ideals as volunteers began to see reality and come to understand that their meaning structures may not always align with the real world (disequilibrium). This exposure to reality and new experiences led volunteers to revise and assimilate their beliefs, and reach a state of accommodation, resulting in growth. This series of thought processes characterized by the interpretation and the reinterpretation of experiences are reminiscent of transformative learning by John Mezirow (1978), which outlines the effect volunteer settings have on the interpretation of experiences and personal and social advancement, emphasizing a complex relationship among the three (Kitchenham, 2008).

Another important finding the analysis revealed was a certain value which volunteers placed in their work. As their contribution to society was appraised, they felt valued and empowered, an external asset (factors based on contexts, which aid personal development; Krueger et al.,

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1999). This was observed in a study by Yates and Youniss (1996), where voluntary experiences at a disaster-stricken area made volunteers reflect on their perceptions of themselves and others in relation to their role in bringing about social change.

This was witnessed in the present study as consistent contact has led volunteers to consider the significance of their actions, which challenged personal beliefs and their stance on community work. These thoughts were overarched by organizational and political contexts, which questioned the moral order of society, and as hypothesized by Dass Brailsford et al., (2011) volunteering may be beneficial in aiding the development of positive, philanthropic, and community-oriented identities.

This type of identity can lead to a healthy emotional well-being (Keyes, 2005), marked by a deeper sense of satisfaction in one's actions and life. Volunteers described this feeling of contentment stemming from the validation they received from their families, which enabled them to work on improving skills and receive self-satisfaction from altruistic acts. This was characteristic of the trait competence (one of the Five Cs), which, as explained by Bowers et al. (2010), leads to the emergence of a positive outlook of one's own actions and an increase in self-worth. This resulting positive emotional well-being, coupled with acts of self-appreciation are indicators of healthy volunteering experiences.

Through this shared sense of satisfaction and knowledge that one's outlook is positive, volunteers begin to internalize common values, enjoy the positiveness of the self, and appreciate one's own growth (psychological well-being). McDowell (2002) suggests that community work must be carried out harmoniously with the populace with whom they are engaging, and volunteers must respect the socio-cultural diversity and develop a social conscience by being open to one's values being challenged. Lerner et al. (2015), described this as the trait character (another of the Five Cs), which was observed in the present study where volunteers showed respect to the communities and received support from them in return. This exposure to culturally diverse communities challenged and mitigated preconceived negative perceptions and allowed them to establish a healthier self-identity.

Scales & Leffert (2004) conceptualized this as positive identity (IA). They mentioned, that as the social views broaden by actively challenging and recalibrating one's own beliefs it leads to the enhancement of personal values. Volunteers displayed this when they mentioned that they chose to participate in voluntary activities which complement their purpose in mind. In turn, this has allowed participants to understand their purpose better and how their capabilities could

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contribute to the world, resulting in an increase in self-worth. This is suggestive of contribution as explained by Lerner (2004) in the 5C's model, characterized by maintaining and developing oneself while contributing to the community. It is recognized as a decisive element in PYD.

Acceptance, Support, and Validation

While the interviews kept the focus closer to the participants' personal lives, all narratives evidently came to the point of how volunteerism offered a space to pursue their interests and passions. This open facilitation of experiences provided by the setting was necessary to undergo personal growth.

This is reminiscent of the relational developmental systems theory (Dowling et al., 2004), which states that contextual factors have a hand in enhancing an individual's capabilities. These circumstantial factors are defined by the developmental assets model (Okun & Schultz, 2003) as external assets that lead to positive development when aligned with individual needs and strengths (Benson, 2008). In this case, support is an external asset that has manifested in the form of companionship and guidance volunteers have received from fellow volunteers, supervisors, and the communities they work with (Scales & Leffert, 2004). Studies have shown how volunteers seek support and direction as they are exposed to the demanding realities of a setting. This helps build resilience and as volunteering integrates itself into ones' routine it becomes habitual, and the feeling of being part of a community contributes to continued volunteering (Williamson et al., 2017).

Feelings arising from being part of a supportive group are important as it is what grounds the experience and helps volunteers establish positive affiliations based on trust among themselves. This alludes to the trait "connections" (5C's) (Lerner et al., 2015). Connections are important as it facilitates clear communication, helping volunteers understand each other's motives better. The subordinate theme, "desire for support, nurturance, and a sense of community" emphasized the significance of motives in a volunteer's lifeworld. As volunteers driven by similar motives are better at helping each other cope, due to knowing the challenges and stressors that come with engaging in that environment (Williamson et al., 2017). Therefore, when motives clash, it decreases support and threatens this co-dependency.

The findings also emphasized the association of experiences with positive feelings, stemming from the interactions volunteers have with the volunteer community, but more specifically, their supervisors. Their support was described as "authentic, welcoming and good," which made

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volunteers feel that they were using time constructively to develop positively (an external asset; O'Connor et al., 2014), leading them to model positive behaviour.

This highlights the pivotal role supervisors and volunteer organizations play in providing support and validation, which are crucial for continued volunteering. The training, overall satisfaction (Mui et al., 2013), and supervision are all important factors identified in previous studies (Williamson et al., 2017), which we recommend for future research.

A relevant implication outlined by the PYD perspective, is to apply research findings into creating a standardised volunteer framework (Lerner et al., 2005). As Roth and Brooks-Gunn (2003) recommend, the programs can give structure to volunteer-supervisor engagement by embedding it into the volunteer schedule. This inclusion will allow the volunteers to discuss barriers and challenges when volunteering, give supervisors an opening to gain qualitative feedback, and allow the organisation to implement support systems for volunteers. A structured approach allows volunteers to reflect and digest their experiences while sharing learnings. It makes way to build relationships between youth and caring, competent adults (Lerner, 2004a), and gives the space to value the sense of community and enjoy the non-tangible aspects of volunteerism, all in accordance with Blum's (2003) recommendations on building effective programs to optimize continued volunteering and provide a holistic volunteer experience (Clarke et al., 2007).

While support from within the group was important, participants also described the significance of the acceptance they received from others. For instance, volunteerism is negatively perceived by some due to its affiliation with the NGO sector in Sri Lanka, making it difficult to volunteer in some cases. This is a phenomenologically spatial experience that threatens to disrupt performance and hamper voluntary efforts (Williamson et al., 2017). The findings of this study support this as it highlighted the role of societal perceptions and how they affect volunteers' role and personal growth. Therefore, being accepted and supported is as important as the feeling of belonging to a community, as it results in a positive perception of oneself. Meeting these needs gives way to a sense of social well-being (Bornstein et al., 2003), where one sees their societal contribution and believes in the potential to actualize, change, and grow positively, while accepting human differences and building relationships based on intimacy, trust, empathy, and warmth (Keyes, 2005).

A final contextual variable connected to support revealed by the findings was parental perceptions of volunteerism. This was extremely significant in a Sri Lankan context, as most

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youth volunteers in Sri Lanka live with parents, and therefore are dependent on them. When parents understood their child's decision to volunteer, thereby validating their feelings, they were more likely to give permission for voluntary tasks which led to developing an interest in it at an earlier age. A study by Veludo-de-Oliveira et al. (2013) supported these findings as it indicated that approval and endorsement volunteers gained from family determined continued volunteering. The absence of support from parents or family led to feelings of abandonment and isolation resulting in premature discontinuation of volunteering. Relating to the previous suggestion on structured volunteer programs, parents are more likely to send their children to organisations which show professionalism and promise closer adult supervision, thereby increased chances of continued volunteering.

In closing, it must be noted that personal and social development is evident in volunteers and is characterized by the enhancement of internal assets aligning with the external assets provided by volunteerism. This is outlined in the developmental assets model and explained by the relational developmental systems theory (Dowling et al., 2004). This in turn has set volunteers on a path towards healthy youth development, conceptualized by the indicators of the Five Cs Model and three types of well-being, which were all evidently present in the discussion.

Lastly, as per the presented research question, the study explored volunteer experiences from educational and psychosocial settings. Described by Lerner et al. (2005), and observed in the present study, development occurs in a context of growth and adaptation, where one is committed to learning, actively taking initiative, and being open to experiences and progress in life (Roberts & Creary, 2011). As the discussion explored, in accordance with the findings of the present study, the social and personal lifeworlds of volunteers revealed how volunteerism facilitated each of these needs. The present study is suggested as foundational research to further understand volunteerism for the adaptation and implementation of youth development learning programs based on volunteering. Even though more research will be required for such a feat, a lower-middle-income country such as Sri Lanka could greatly benefit by investing efforts in youth development. And volunteerism could be the beginning to understanding a heavily under-researched and under-utilized youth population.

Strengths and Limitations

This is the first qualitative study in Sri Lanka, to explore volunteerism from a volunteer's perspective, in contrast to studies which aim at finding correlational relationships between certain characteristics of volunteerism (UNV, 2019; CAF, 2019).

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In a broader context, this study is quite timely, as 2019 marked the establishment of the “national policy on volunteerism” in Sri Lanka, which enabled volunteer mobilization and engagement at a national level. The study also falls directly under the fourth central idea in the national action plan, “recognizing volunteer efforts,” which states the need to recognize the volunteer requirements and understand motives to facilitate volunteer development (UNV, 2019). This is emphasised in the present study as it discusses the need for a volunteer to develop positively, which is often ignored in many agendas.

A few key limitations of the present study are that it did not consider volunteers from backgrounds other than educational and psychosocial settings; this is a major shortcoming as volunteerism is common in many other fields. In addition to this, all participants of the study fall in the young adult category. Therefore, the applicability of the research findings beyond these criteria must be done with caution.

Lastly, while the study explored broad experiential aspects of volunteerism, it failed to consider certain variables reflected in the research literature. For instance, studies show an association between volunteering and educational levels, school of thought (Holdsworth & Quinn, 2010), income levels (Independent Sector, 2002), and multiple socioeconomic variables (Wilson & Musick, 1997 as cited in Dass-Brailsford et al., 2011). Furthermore, the study did not explicitly speak of the coronavirus pandemic as the participants did not discuss it. This shortcoming may reduce the applicability of the findings in a post-pandemic world as the pandemic has drastically affected the way of life.

Conclusion

Volunteerism is more than just the fundamental desire to “give back” and research must not focus on the youth only in regard to developmental agendas. The present study sees beyond this and explores the lived experiences of volunteers and how volunteering has contributed towards personal and social advancement. As discussed, youth development was explored based on developmental assets, traits which allowed youth to reach their full potential. They were conceptualised through the relational developmental systems theory, which examined the effect of contextual factors on individual capabilities. Lastly, the Five Cs model and three types of well-being were used as indicators of healthy youth development, all of which made it evident that growth occurred in a compound context where it was dependent on socio-cultural influences and was governed by intra-individual factors.

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The study explored the significance of the volunteer–supervisor relations and pointed at the possibility of implementing standardised youth development programs based on volunteerism to allow youth to experience the positives of volunteering. While more research will be required for such a feat, a lower middle-income country such as Sri Lanka could greatly benefit by investing efforts on systemic ways for youth development. As volunteerism could be the beginning to understanding a heavily under-researched and under-utilized youth population. The researcher is optimistic that this study will serve as a foundation on which future research can build, so youth populations can use volunteerism to further their personal and social development and enjoy a flourishing adulthood.

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