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A Social Cure in the Community: A mixed-method exploration of the role of social identity in the experiences and well-being of community volunteers

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Abstract

Cohesive, resilient communities are vital to the well-being of residents. Uncovering the determinants of successful community identities is therefore essential to progressing the community health agenda. Engaging in community participation through volunteering may be one pathway to building local community identity and enhancing residents' health and well-being but the group processes connecting them remain unexplored. We conducted two studies investigated these dynamics using the 'Social Cure' perspective. First, we analysed 53 in-depth interviews with volunteers, finding that community relationships shaped their experiences and that volunteering influenced their sense of community belonging, support, and well-being. Second, a community survey (N=619) revealed that volunteering predicts well-being through the serial mediators of community identification and social support. Our paper demonstrates the Social Cure processes involved in community-based volunteering, their impact on community identity, support and well-being, and the implications for community health, and the provision and sustainability of community voluntary action and interventions.

Keywords: Social identity; Volunteering; Social Cure; Community; Group Processes; Well-being.

Introduction

Resilient, cohesive communities are important contributors to the health and well-being of their residents (Ehsan, Klaas, Bastianen, & Spini, 2019). Advances in social psychology suggest a multitude of physical and mental health outcomes derive from meaningful belonging in social groups within a range of contexts (Jetten, Haslam, & Haslam, 2012; Haslam, Jetten, Cruwys, Dingle, & Haslam, 2018). Recent research reveals that the community is one of these contexts, and that social identification with one's local community unlocks a range of psychological resources with positive implications for health (e.g., Fong, Cruwys, Haslam, & Haslam, 2019; McNamara, Stevenson, & Muldoon, 2013). However, despite the important health implications of building community identities, little is known about how these can be actively developed. Volunteering in the community is an inherently social activity affording individuals opportunities to interact and connect with those sharing their local community. Thus, it follows that where this form of community participation occurs, it may also facilitate the development of community identity. Furthermore, evidence suggests that volunteering may have its own psychological benefits, such as improved well-being (e.g., Jenkinson et al., 2013), however the mechanisms enabling such benefits are contested and psychological explanations tend to be individualistically focussed (see Wilson, 2012 for a review), neglecting the potential explanatory power of social relationships. To capture, enhance, and direct the benefits of volunteering, it is essential to explore the psychological processes connecting this community participation and community-level relationships, and how they influence volunteering experiences. Taking this 'Social Cure' perspective, we used a mixed-method approach to explore the social identity processes at the heart of experiences of community volunteering and identify the extent to which they relate to community relationships, and predict the well-being of volunteers.

The Health Benefits of Volunteering

Volunteering is defined by Volunteering England as unpaid work to help another individual, group, or the environment, that can be both formal: through a voluntary organisation, or informal: help offered to others outside one's family (NCVO, 2019). In England alone, volunteers in social and health care settings have been estimated at over 3 million individuals, with large sections of the community also engaged in informal volunteering (Naylor, Mundle, Weaks, & Buck, 2013). Volunteering is so economically and socially valuable that it has received significant governmental and academic attention in the UK (Casiday, Kinsman, Fisher, & Bambra, 2008) and overseas (Smith, 2016), and the extensive study of volunteering motives attests to its value (Snyder & Omoto, 2008; Wilson, 2012). Volunteering is not without its rewards. Research shows volunteering is associated with improved psychological well-being (Wilson, 2000), quality of life (Cattan, Hogg, & Hardill, 2011), physical and mental health (Cole & MacDonald, 2011; Howlett, 2004; Piliavin, & Siegl, 2015), and reduced loneliness and depression (Joloza, 2013; Musick & Wilson, 2003). Volunteering has been linked with self-rated health across low- and high-income countries in Western and Eastern hemispheres (Kumar, Calvo, Avendano, Sivaramakrishnan, & Berkman, 2012), and its influence on well-being persists across time (Thoits & Hewitt, 2001), and across multiple European contexts (Hansen, Aartsen, Slagsvold, & Deindl, 2018). Moreover, whilst volunteering is particularly useful for older adults (Van Willigen, 2000), it also influences the well-being of young people (Kim & Morgül, 2017), and marginalised groups, such as refugees (Carlton, 2015).

Despite this convincing body of evidence, researchers claim little is known about the associations between volunteering behaviour and well-being (Kim & Morgül, 2017), and suggest social context moderates these relationships in ways that are yet to be understood (Cattan, Hogg, & Hardill, 2011). A large-scale systematic review the UK Department of

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Health (Casiday et al., 2008) confirmed that whilst volunteering improves life expectancy, physical health, and well-being, these processes are highly context-dependent, stressing the need to identify variables mediating these relationships. However, attempts to isolate these variables tend to focus on individual dispositions (e.g., personality and optimism, Mellor et al., 2008), or increases in personal esteem and confidence (Messias, De Jong, & McLoughlin, 2005). Thus, understanding of the psychological influence and health benefits of volunteers' social relationships remains lacking.

Volunteering and Social Relationships

Despite the paucity of psychological analysis, several studies have suggested that social processes might be the mechanisms connecting volunteering with well-being. Some suggest that volunteering promotes better health because it connects volunteers with social networks espousing health-enhancing behavioural norms (Kim & Konrath, 2016). However, because volunteering provides opportunities to contribute meaningfully to others within a social context, it is likely that the experience of social connection *itself* also benefits volunteers. Recent survey data supports this, demonstrating that self-reported social connectedness mediated the relationship between volunteering behaviour and depression (Creaven, Healy, & Howard, 2018). This may apply particularly to older volunteers who report that helping creates a sense of meaningful social engagement that reduces loneliness associated with ageing (Smith, 2012). Musick and Wilson (2003) have also articulated the links between volunteering and reductions in depression for older people as being a result of improved social integration, which unlocks valuable social resources.

Sociological accounts suggest these processes of integration and engagement facilitate the building of 'social capital' providing resources including trust, mutual helping, and supportive social networks (Coleman, 1990; Putnam, 2000). This forms the bedrock of well-

functioning, cohesive communities where community members can rely on others for support: a process known to be beneficial to individual and community health (Kawachi & Berkman, 2000; Poortinga, 2000; Thoits, 2011). This increase in social support has been proffered as a key explanatory pathway between civic engagement in the form of volunteering and self-reported health (Kumar et al., 2012). Accordingly, survey data from older volunteers has demonstrated that through increased social integration, volunteering provides opportunities for the giving and receiving of social support, which in turn enhances subjective well-being (Pilkington, Windsor, & Crisp, 2012). Furthermore, volunteering motives relating to the provision of social resources have been linked with greater rewards (e.g., well-being and role satisfaction), than those resulting from extrinsic motivations (Stukas, Hoye, Nicholson, Brown, & Aisbett, 2016).

Whilst these results highlight the links between social relationships and volunteering outcomes, they do not explicitly define or measure the psychological mechanisms through which volunteering behaviour contributes to subjective investment in social groups (i.e., social identification; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) nor do they directly examine how these relationships contribute to well-being within local community groups. Nevertheless, connection with the local community is a key component of the volunteering experience and when social capital is conceptualised as psychological phenomena: community belonging and trust in neighbours, research suggests it mediates the relationship between volunteers' altruistic behaviours and self-reported well-being (Theurer & Wister, 2010). Moreover, social capital within local community settings has been aligned with Sarason's (1977) 'Psychological Sense of Community' (Perkins & Long, 2002); a phenomenon also previously connected with better health and well-being for community members (Pretty, Bishop, Fisher, & Sonn, 2007) and volunteerism (Omoto & Snyder, 2002; Stukas et al., 2016). Despite these findings, the evidence regarding the relationship between community connectedness

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and volunteering remains conflicted and indicates that the relationship is potentially

bidirectional. Whilst several studies indicate that possessing a stronger sense of community is

an outcome of volunteering, others suggest psychological sense of community predicts

volunteering behaviour (Okun & Michel, 2006; Omoto & Packard, 2016). A theoretical

framework which can capture, isolate, and explain these processes is therefore required.

Volunteering as a 'Social Cure'

The social identity approach to health (Haslam et al., 2018; Jetten et al., 2012) has

provided a robust theoretical framework to explain why social connection influences health

and well-being. Drawing upon Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and Self-

Categorisation Theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), theorists suggest

that the social dimensions of self (i.e., the emotional, cognitive, and behavioural impact of the

sense of 'we-ness' derived from the group membership) define our social worlds and how we

experience them and that the pivotal psychological process connecting social relationships

with health and well-being is meaningful social identification (Jetten et al., 2012). Even when

contact with social groups is controlled for, it is this *subjective* sense of belonging and

identification that predicts health and well-being outcomes (e.g., Sani, Herrera, Wakefield,

Boroch, & Gulyas, 2012). A growing body of research has now demonstrated that social

identification is associated with physical and psychological health outcomes in clinical and

practice settings (Haslam et al., 2018). Moreover, the more groups with which individuals

identify, the better their health and well-being tends to be (Sani, Madhok, Norbury, Dugard &

Wakefield, 2015a, 2015b).

As well as positively influencing health and well-being, social groups also provide

contexts for members to feel supported: an experience fundamental to the impact of social

identity upon health (Haslam, Jetten, Postmes, & Haslam, 2009). This group-based support influences appraisal of challenges and mediates the relationship between group identification and lower stress/greater satisfaction (Haslam, O'Brien, Jetten, Vormedal, & Penna, 2005). Social support is therefore likely to be a key variable mediating the links between volunteering and well-being. Moreover, social identification increases trust and reciprocal helping (Levine, Prosser, Evans, & Reicher, 2005; Wakefield et al., 2011) and the likelihood that support will be offered and received in the manner intended (Haslam, Reicher, & Levine, 2012). In line with this, volunteering research has reported that volunteers are more likely to offer their help to those with whom they share a group identity (Stürmer, Snyder, & Omoto, 2005).

Social Cure research has also provided a valuable framework for the study of community processes. The local community is a social group most people can claim some access to, and it is as valuable in terms of life satisfaction as other important social identifications (e.g., family, Wakefield et al., 2017). Moreover, while neighbourhoods have long been found to have a profound impact on the residents' health, recent research points to the pivotal role played by identifying with one's local community neighbourhood in improving mental health and buffering against negative health effects (Fong, Cruwys, Haslam, & Haslam, 2019). Even stigmatised communities are potentially valuable resources that can enhance members' feelings of support and improve psychological well-being (McNamara, Stevenson, & Muldoon, 2013). Shared community identification has also been identified as a valuable resource during emergencies, and in the wake of disaster (Ntontis, Drury, Amlôt, Rubin, & Williams, 2018). However, at present the community receives relatively little interrogation through a Social Cure lens, and no studies have explored the health-promoting benefits of community connections related to community volunteering.

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Specifically, it is not known whether forms of community participation, such as volunteering, could be connected with the development of community identity.

Whilst a social identity analysis of volunteering is typically lacking, one recent study has paved the way for future work. Gray and Stevenson (2019) have begun to explore the collective dimensions of volunteering arguing that social identity is a critical variable in explaining the links between organisational volunteering experiences and their consequences. Their interview data revealed that identification with fellow volunteers led to feelings of belongingness and collective support within voluntary organisations. These dynamics were associated with feelings of happiness and satisfaction, as well as how well volunteers felt they could cope with challenges. This study has laid the foundations for understanding the benefits of social connections resulting from volunteering but was limited to exploring the social identity dynamics of individuals within their organisations. Given, the evidence reviewed above highlighting how volunteering influences community connectedness (e.g., Theurer & Wister, 2010) and the impact of community identity on health and well-being (Fong et al., 2019; McNamara et al., 2013), more research is needed to fully appreciate the links between volunteering behaviour, identity processes, and the role of community-based social identification in volunteers' experiences and well-being.

The Present Studies

To address the limited interrogation of community behaviour through Social Cure lenses and identify the processes connecting volunteering, community relationships, and well-being with a unifying explanatory framework, we conducted a mixed-method exploration of the relationship between community volunteering and well-being, using a social identity perspective. We sought to elucidate whether volunteering in the community is related to increased community identification and social support, and whether these

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psychological processes help explain the relationships between community volunteering and

well-being. We addressed the aims of the study using a mixed-method approach to allow a

quantification the predicted identity processes, whilst also giving voice to the experiences of

volunteers themselves. In doing so we sought to address concerns over the paucity of high

quality qualitative and multi-method research addressing these questions (Cattan et al., 2011).

We present findings from the following two studies:

1. A qualitative interview study exploring the experiences of active community

    volunteers, their understandings of their relationships with the community, and their

    sense of well-being.

2. A large-scale community survey investigating relationships between time spent

    volunteering, self-reported community identification, social support, and

    psychological well-being.

Study 1

Rationale

This study aims to explore volunteers' accounts of community volunteering using a

theoretically-guided thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) with a social identity

perspective. This approach enabled us to explore and understand the complex and

subjectively defined nature of community connections, which are not always amenable to

quantitative analysis. Thus, we explored how volunteers described and interpreted their

volunteering practice in relation to themselves, their community, processes of community

identification, and their experiences of volunteering over time. Additionally, we explored

how these community identity processes might relate to perceptions of social support, and to

a sense of personal and collective well-being.

Method

Participants

Data for this study were collected through semi-structured interviews with 53 volunteers from a range of volunteering organisations across the South and South West of England. Participants were recruited purposively to capture a range of different ages, types of volunteering activity, time committed to volunteering, and stages of volunteering experience (e.g., new volunteers, working volunteers, and retired volunteers) to allow exploration of variations across patterns of connection and time committed. Participants were initially contacted through two volunteering membership organisations that represent volunteering organisations across the South and South West of England. Thereafter, recruitment was targeted through organisations with types of volunteer underrepresented in our sample. For example, we recruited participants through university volunteering centres to reach younger volunteers, who were not captured in the first round of recruitment. To protect confidentiality, participant pseudonyms are used, and organisation/place names removed. Many participants volunteered in multiple formal and informal locations/roles, making it difficult to accurately determine how many organisations were represented in the sample. Volunteering categories varied greatly, and included older adults' services, befrienders, youth clubs/groups, search and rescue, fundraising, emotional support and psychological services, hospice work, church/religious projects and supporting health and well-being services (see Table 1 for participant information).

(TABLE 1)

Procedure

Following institutional ethical approval, participants were recruited through an email advert sent by the respective organisations. Participants then contacted the study researcher directly to organise interviews. Participants were informed of their rights to free participation and withdrawal and were offered a small monetary reward for participation. Interviews were biographical in nature, using a series of open-ended questions about interviewees' lives, the communities in which they lived, their volunteering history and experiences, and their interactions with other volunteers and volunteering organisations[1]. Before the interview began, participants were asked to complete a short demographic questionnaire establishing age, gender, and employment status. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were conducted both face-to-face and via Skype by five trained interviewers.

Data Analysis

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data were primarily analysed using a theoretically-guided thematic analysis (as described by Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2013). However, in order to allow for novel observations, coding proceeded using a "hybrid" approach integrating deductive codes derived from our theoretical framework, with data-driven inductive codes (e.g., Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Swain, 2018). This approach was essential for addressing the research question, as it allowed us to explore how participants spoke about their volunteering experiences in social identity terms, whilst also allowing codes to be data driven. The data were analysed by two of the authors using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six stages; details of these stages and how they were carried out are provided in Table 2. Themes and the evidence supporting them are provided below.

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[1] Information on organisational dynamics was collected for the purposes of alternative studies.

TABLE 2

Results

The analytic process identified numerous themes relating to social identities,

volunteer well-being, and the transformative processes involved in volunteering. Here, we

discuss themes that correspond with our research aims to explore the links between

volunteering, community identity processes and well-being. These themes demonstrate that:

1) community relationships are an important motivator for volunteering; 2) the community

identification central to volunteering experiences is important for sustaining volunteer

commitment; 3) volunteering can create a sense of community support, and 4) volunteering

can contribute to a positive sense of well-being. Each of these processes are discussed below

with indicative extracts from volunteer interviews provided as supporting evidence.

Theme 1: Volunteering for the community

The participants interviewed had a variety of complex volunteering histories,

volunteering for different organisations at different times and places across their lives. For

many, these volunteering roles overlapped, and volunteers held several different volunteering

roles at the same time. Participants' intentions regarding these roles were similarly complex

and changed over time. However, what is striking across the different accounts of

volunteering is the ways in which participants commonly framed their volunteering

motivations in relation to their own sense of community. For example, in Anne's account of

why she started volunteering in an earlier period of her life, after having children, she draws

upon on the notion of reciprocity central to positive community relationships:

Extract 1 (Anne, 74 years):

INT: So, was there a specific person or an event that inspired you to volunteer or…?

Anne: No, it was just me not only wanted to give back to the community but also as I said to

get out of the house and get to meet people [rather] than being a mummy brain I

suppose really [laughs]

Community relationships, and a sense the community needed her, are also drawn upon in

Sophie's explanation for the initiation of her volunteering work as a response to help she and

her family have received from within the community. This reinvestment of her time further

reveals the importance of reciprocity as a feature of community membership.

Extract 2 (Sophie, 72 years):

INT: What were you hoping to get out of it, if anything?

Sophie: Putting something back first, you know. I felt I'd been quite lucky. I've always

worked hard. Like most families we've had our trials and tribulations, but as I was

maturing, and life was becoming a bit more relaxed, I thought, you know, now is the

time. Yeah, it sounds a bit corny really, so I went back into that community. I've had

a lot from the community in one way or another over the years, and there's nothing

there now, and now is the time I can put it back. So, that's really what made me think

I could do it.

These two extracts highlight some of the many motivations expressed by our

participants for volunteering, including wanting to make social connections and managing

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identity transitions, e.g., the transition to parenthood (Anne, Extract 1), or the transition to

retirement as a more time-rich period of life (Sophie, Extract 2). However, common to both

accounts is the framing of volunteering in community terms, i.e., as a way to, first and

foremost, '*give something back*' to the community. As is evident in both of these extracts,

such motivations were primarily related to an already-existing sense of community

membership and they reflect observations from both the social identity and volunteering

literature discussed above outlining reciprocal helping between ingroup members. Indeed,

both Anne and Sophie frame their reasons for volunteering as a way of giving back to a

community that they see themselves as members of.

As in these cases, many of the other participants interviewed described such

community-based motivations in reciprocal terms. Where community members had received

help and support from the community, volunteering was seen as an important way of

returning that help for other community members. Particularly, where there was a perceived

need in the community that is not being met, e.g., where Sophie talks about how '*there is*

nothing there now' and about how she feels able to '*put it back*'. In this way, volunteering

was often described by our participants as act of community (re)building, based on a sense of

community belonging and a commitment to the preservation of group continuity. This

concern for the restoration and protection of the community demonstrates its importance to

those who identify with it and supports the claim that pre-existing community memberships,

as well as resultant community connections, can influence how people experience and make

sense of their own motivations for volunteering. Thus, where volunteering takes place in

communities where volunteers already have a sense of connection, the existence of bi-

directional relationships between volunteering and social identification is possible. Moreover,

it highlights how such motivations are related to broader social norms about the reciprocity of

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community helping: that volunteering is about helping others that have helped you or could

help you, and that this is a crucial part of 'good' community membership.

Theme 2: Volunteering and the community: A committed relationship

Importantly, this understanding of volunteering as a feature of community

membership, was not simply a feature of why people started to volunteer, but also played a

central role in how our participants explained their continued volunteering over time. For

example:

Extract 3 (Lisa, 50 years):

INT: Okay. Do you think you'll continue volunteering?

Lisa: Yeah, I suppose I will, because I think we all feel a certain obligation towards doing

it, to be honest. I think it's more now, and what you're looking for is a purpose in it

all. The reasons why you perhaps started is different to the reasons of why you

continue. You continue because, I suppose, to some extent, you don't want to let your

community down, in my case anyway. I don't know about anybody else, but that's

the way I feel.

In this extract, Lisa, who has been volunteering for a number of years, talks about

how her continued engagement with volunteering is now fundamentally related to her own

feeling that she doesn't want to '*let [her] community down*'. This was a common narrative

across the interviews, where many participants talked about their continued volunteering in

these terms: as a form of community 'commitment' underpinned by a sense of obligation to

help the community they feel connected with. Moreover, as can be seen in Extract 3, this

sense of community commitment was often framed by participants in developmental terms:

as something that developed across a person's engagement with volunteering over time. That

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is, over time, a commitment to volunteering was seen to develop into a (more) committed

relationship with one's community that in turn led to a more committed relationship with

volunteering. This commitment to other community members and their feelings is also

evident in Simon's account:

Extract 4 (Simon, 68 years)

INT: So, what does your current volunteering week look like?

Simon: Right. Current volunteering week is, it's, kind of, developed, and my wife said, you

have to be so careful (…) because the minute you retire and start to volunteer the

word gets out, especially in the small communities up here. People ask you things,

and you don't want to let them down. You don't want to upset them, and you feel

quite, proud, and quite, sort of, they think I'm up to do this.

This extract highlights some of the developmental nature of community-based

volunteering. Simon, who is new to volunteering, describes here (and later in his interview)

how his volunteering life developed following his retirement and from one initial

volunteering role. From this, he talks about how he got to know people in (and across) his

community, and that this meant that he was asked to take part in more activities by others in

his community. As in the case of Lisa (Extract 3), this connection into the community where

he doesn't want to '*let people down'* is an important element of his continued commitment to

volunteering. These examples reveal the ways in which volunteering can build social and

community connections, and how this can lead to a strengthening of community bonds for

volunteers and, in turn, a strengthening of their commitment to volunteering. In this way,

community identification can be both a precursor to, and an emergent property of,

volunteering activity over time.

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This developmental and emergent nature of volunteering and community engagement was a common feature of the interviews. Indeed, many participants talked about how volunteering had connected them to a wider community of neighbours, friends, and colleagues beyond those associated with the original volunteering opportunity, opening up further opportunities for formal and informal giving and receiving of help in their communities. Importantly, however, this sense of community commitment was not always framed in entirely positive (or indeed negative) terms. The use of the term '*obligation*' by Lisa in Extract 3, and Simon's sense that he has to be '*careful*' in Extract 4, begins to underline the ways in which this sense of community commitment can be problematic in some instances, e.g., where people felt overwhelmed by the demands on their time, or where they feel that this commitment has taken over other aspects of their lives. Helping is hard and requires intergroup and intragroup management (Gray & Stevenson, 2019). However, it was also the case (as in Simon's experience, Extract 4) that this central role in their communities' engendered feelings of pride, self-efficacy, and community support. We pick up on some of these themes in the sections below. However, it is important to note the potentially ambiguous nature of people's relationship with their volunteering – and community – commitments, as well as how such community commitments can be an important contributor to people's continued engagement with volunteering.

Theme 3: Volunteering as Community Support

Across the interviews, there were a range of ways in which our participants described their volunteering as an important source of social and community support, for both themselves and for others. For example:

Extract 5 (Alex, 72 years):

INT: So, can you tell me a little bit about why you started volunteering?

Alex: Well, I just feel that, you know, you've got to give something back, and there

            might be a time, in years to come, that I need this support, and I won't feel so

            bad at asking for it if I've actually done something, earned brownie points, to

            use it. So, yes. I don't know. It's a funny thing. I just feel it's nice to be able

            to do something for other people and know they will do something good for

            you.

This extract highlights many of the themes discussed already. Again, we see the

framing of community volunteering motivations in terms of '*giving something back'*, as was

evident in Extracts 1 and 2. Moreover, we see volunteering once again described as a form of

reciprocal community helping, as is the case of Sophie (Extract 2) above. In Alex's account,

that reciprocation is seen to come full circle providing the sense that he will be helped by

others in his community, should he need it. Indeed, Alex describes his motivation for

volunteering as being directly related to the social contract of reciprocity and the building of

a community supply of mutual support that is seen to lie at the heart of community-based

volunteering. That is, he feels the need to contribute, so that he is justified when calling on

this shared community support later. In this way, volunteering is seen as both as a way of

giving support to others, when you can (Sophie, Extract 2), and as a way of ensuring that

support is returned, if it is needed (Alex, Extract 5), and is indicative of group-based helping

where groups provide the context for social support processes.

For most of our participants, this social and community support function of

volunteering was where the real benefits of volunteering were seen to lie, both for themselves

as volunteers and for the strength of the wider community. Indeed, for most of the volunteers

interviewed, it was not the direct provision of help that was seen to be the key benefit of

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volunteering; although, clearly this was also important. Instead, many argued that the real

benefit of volunteering was the psychological safety that it provided for themselves and for

others in knowing that help could and would be available. For example:

Extract 6 (Sandra, 48 years):

INT: And what good do you think the organisation does?

Sandra: Well, I mean, obviously within the role, it does the community good. It puts

                  people's minds at rest, even people that haven't got people missing. I've heard

                  people come out and say, you know, it's good to know people are out

                  there. So and so has a form of dementia, and it's good to know that if anything

                  happened there will be someone out there looking for them.

        Sandra volunteers with a search and rescue organisation, where they work in teams to

find people who have gone missing, e.g., local individuals suffering from dementia. Here she

describes how she sees the key 'good' provided by this volunteering organisation – and hence

her volunteering role – as not solely role-based, but also by providing a community resource

that puts '*people's minds at rest*'. That is, providing the wider community with the

knowledge that people will be there for them. Indeed, later in this interview, she describes

how a central part of her role as a volunteer for this organisation is to tell the community

about this service, primarily because it is important that people feel that if anything happened

to them or to a loved one, there will be someone out there looking for them. Many others

described their voluntary roles in similar ways, i.e., that a central part of their understanding

of their volunteering action was to provide this sense of psychological safety and to give

people the sense that they will be supported when needed.

This highlights the ways in which volunteering can provide psychological benefits to people both directly through the giving (and receiving) of help, and indirectly by providing a psychological sense of social support, safety, and collective resilience in the face of potential adversity. For many of our participants, this social and community support element of volunteering makes it an essential community resource, one that has important implications for people's personal and collective well-being. We turn to this point below, in our final theme: Volunteering for Well-being.

Theme 4: Volunteering for Well-being

As discussed above, the participants in our study came from a variety of different volunteering roles and had a range of different volunteering experiences. Perhaps unsurprisingly, therefore, there were also a range of different ways in which they saw volunteering as being positively related to their own sense of well-being. In many cases, this relationship between volunteering and well-being relates to the themes already described. For example, knowing that help could and would be available when needed was seen by many participants as central to their own (and others') sense of happiness and security (e.g., Sandra, Extract 6). Others additionally spoke of how volunteering provided them with opportunities for social connection to their community in ways that helped them to escape potential isolation by '*getting out of the house and get to meet people, [rather] than being a mummy brain'* (Anne, Extract 2). Finally, some spoke about how their commitment to their volunteering and their communities, engendered feelings of pride and social connectedness that were directly linked to their own sense of subjective well-being (e.g., Simon, Extract 4). Thus, for our participants, social support, social connection and community commitment were all important ways in which volunteering were seen to enhance subjective wellbeing.

Common to these different accounts of volunteering and well-being, is the importance of community identification and belonging. Indeed, for many participants, their volunteering role is clearly an important context for the enactment of personal and social/community identities in ways that are central to their well-being. For example:

Extract 7 (Chloe, 22 years)

INT: Do you feel like you kind of belong here?

Chloe: Yes, definitely, that's my zone, I couldn't leave, it's one thing that I couldn't do, like...if I had to…that's why I also wanted to commute to here, because I felt I couldn't leave, it's my commitment that makes me happy and makes the girls happy and if that's not in my life, I'm not saying I'm going to kill myself, but I'm going to say that that's a part of me that's missing and I'd miss me and I'd miss them.

Chloe volunteers at a local youth club for young girls and has done so for a number of years. She has since left to go to university but commutes back to the community the youth club is situated within once a week to fulfil her volunteering role with this group. In this extract, she describes her commitment to the volunteering role, and to this community and how this relates to her own (and their) sense of happiness. For Chloe this volunteering commitment is clearly related to her own sense of identity (to her sense of 'me'), which in turn sustains her involvement and further commitment to the group over time. Indeed, for Chloe ceasing to volunteer with this group would involve losing a part of herself. This highlights the ways in which community identification is central to volunteers' motivations for starting, and continuing with, volunteering. Moreover, it highlights the ways in which social and community identification can be an important mediator of well-being benefits for volunteers, in the sense that volunteering can provide an important context within which volunteers can build and maintain meaningful identities that can have a positive impact on

their well-being, even when this commitment becomes difficult and costly (e.g., in terms of

her commuting time).

This social connection influences the life of some volunteers in such a pervasive

manner that they described their volunteering in transformative terms: as having positively

change their whole sense of self. For example:

Extract 9 (Louise, 68 years)

INT: If you are reflecting back on your volunteering experience, how would you say it's

affected your life?

Louise: Oh, it's completely enriched my life. My, I don't think I would be me without

volunteering. It's such a part of me and it's part of my son because that's the way I

brought him up, umm, it brings something so different to your life, socially you come

in to contact with people that you wouldn't normally meet, intellectually it challenges

you in a different way from work, umm, and obviously the feel-good factor and the

rewards of actually doing what you do umm are huge, I mean, a massive boost for

your self-esteem, gives you something to talk about at dinner parties, it sets you out

from the crowd in job interviews, but mostly I do it because it enriches my life.

In this extract, Louise describes how volunteering has become a central part of her

personal and social identity, and how this valued understanding of volunteering has positively

'enriched' her family, her social life, her work life, as well as her sense of self-efficacy and

self-esteem. This demonstrates the many ways in which volunteering can impact on peoples'

lives in positive ways that promote their sense of well-being across different contexts. Indeed,

for some, the whole notion of volunteering as good for them and for the community was so

self-evident, they questioned in the interviews why we would ask them about it. As described

by Joy (Female, 74 years), "*doing things to try and make [the] community a better place and help others is <u>obviously</u> the best way to live [laughs] - the right way to live*". In this way, the benefits of volunteering stem from an alignment with a set of shared values about the importance of helping others and making communities better. It is about choosing what is described by many participants as a 'positive life': of kindness, purpose in life, helping others and making the communities around them a better place.

Discussion

These findings provide important insights into the social identity dynamics of volunteering: how features of belonging to a community, such as the receipt of help and a desire to reciprocate that help, can motivate volunteering, and how community identification can be built as a result of volunteering over time in ways that sustain people's commitment to their volunteering roles. This highlights the ways in which a psychological sense of community could be considered both predictor and outcome of volunteering behaviour (Okun & Michel, 2006; Omoto & Packard, 2016) pointing to a potentially bidirectional relationship between volunteering and community identification. We can also see how such processes can be directly linked to people's subjective sense of well-being through a 'Social Cure' lens (Jetten et al., 2012; Jetten et al., 2017). Our findings show that volunteering provides a context for the meaningful enactment of identity; social connection, even during identity transitions (e.g., motherhood; see Seymour-Smith, Cruwys, Haslam, & Brodribb, 2017); with opportunities to reciprocate previous ingroup support (Levine et al, 2005); and opportunities to build support resources that contribute to social capital (Putnam, 2000) and the community efficacy viewed as essential in disaster responses (Ntontis et al, 2018). These results highlight the mechanisms through which the health and well-being benefits accrued through community volunteering may be explained and why community volunteering is such a

valuable resource. Our research also shows that volunteering can be a complex mix of roles

and commitments that can require careful balancing of costs and benefits. For some,

volunteering roles are central to their sense of self, allowing them to enact valued identities

and contribute to their community in meaningful and valued ways. The importance of these

opportunities and the benefits they confer is reflected in the time community members devote

to their volunteering activities. These relationships are further explored in Study 2.

Study 2

Rationale

This study aimed to quantitatively test the relationships between volunteering

behaviour, community identification, and well-being, utilising the Social Cure framework.

As reviewed earlier, evidence suggests that community identity is a valuable resource that

enhances well-being (e.g., McNamara et al., 2013), and the results of Study 1 suggest that

Social Cure dynamics may provide an explanation for the improved well-being of community

volunteers. However, it is also apparent that community relationships may motivate

volunteering as well as being further developed by volunteering, suggesting that the nature of

the relationships between these processes needs to be established. As suggested above, social

support is a central feature of positive group dynamics and it features throughout our

interviewees' accounts, therefore its place within community volunteering will also be

investigated. Evidence suggests volunteering creates opportunities to improve social support

(Pilkington et al., 2012), whilst Social Cure research shows the supportive contexts provided

by groups can foster well-being (e.g., Haslam et al., 2009). This suggests both social

identification and associated social support may mediate the relationship between

volunteering and well-being. Study 2 therefore tested two predictions:

1. Compared to non-volunteers, people who volunteer within their community will report a stronger sense of identification with that community, greater social support, and higher levels of well-being.

2. There will be a positive relationship between time spent volunteering and well-being, and this will be serially mediated by increased community identification and social support. Specifically, more volunteering will positively predict community identification, which will positively predict social support, which will positively predict well-being.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Postal invites to participate in an online, area-specific survey were sent to all households in two localities in the East Midlands in May 2018. The letter included participant information, an explanation of the research, and a web-link to the online survey. Interested participants provided informed consent online before taking part. Paper copies of the survey were available on request. Respondents were required to be over 18 years and resident in the area. Data collection resulted in a sample size of 619 respondents (online survey, $n = 617$; postal survey, $n = 2$). Following data cleaning, data were retained from 529 participants: 200 described themselves as male (38%), 322 as female (60%), two left gender undisclosed (1%), and five chose to self-describe their gender (1%). Participants were between 18 and 95 years old ($M = 41.59$, $SD = 15.48$), the majority were in a relationship ($n = 346$; 65%), while 183 (35%) participants were not. Finally, 118 were unemployed (22%), while 411 were employed (78%).

Measures

The following measurement scales were included. For all scales, the mean of the items was calculated for analysis.

Community identification was measured using four questions adapted from McNamara et al. (2013). Participants rated their agreement with each item (e.g., *I feel strong ties with members of my local community*) on a 1-5 scale (*'strongly disagree' – 'strongly agree'*). Higher values indicated greater community identification.

Social support from others in the local community was measured using four-items adapted from Haslam et al. (2005). Participants rated how often they received different forms of support (e.g*., Do you get the help you need from other people in your local community?*) on a 1-5 scale (*'not at all' – 'completely'*). Higher scores indicated greater social support.

Personal well-being was measured by four items adapted from the Office for National Statistics (2018) Personal Well-being Scale. Participants rated how positive or negative they felt about aspects of their life (e.g., *Overall, to what extent do you feel the things in your life are worthwhile?*) on a 0-10 frequency scale (*'not at all' – 'completely'*). Higher scores indicated greater personal well-being.

For the purposes of this study, *community volunteering behaviour* was broadly defined with the following description: "*Volunteering may involve voluntary helping activities which provide services to a group of others over a period of time, which benefit the group."* Participants were given this definition and asked whether, based on this description, they volunteered in a group within their community. If the participant responded with 'no', they were taken to the end of the survey. If they responded with 'yes', they were asked to name the group and to indicate how many hours they spent volunteering there in a typical

week, before completing a series of measures related to volunteering. These are not of interest for the present study, so are not reported. Due to the insights gained in Study 1, volunteering time was used as a linear measure of volunteering behaviour as it was deemed capable of capturing the extent of the time commitment involved for each participant across the potentially multiple volunteering roles participants could be involved in.

Results

The sample contained 76 individuals (14%) who stated that they were volunteering within a group in their community. Volunteering roles within the two target communities varied greatly, and included school governing, working with community sports clubs, Scouts, Parent-Teacher Associations, parent and baby/toddler groups, church/religious groups, and charity groups. Each week an average of 3.96 hours was spent volunteering (*range* = 1-16 hours) and total time volunteering ranged between less than one month to 450 months, with the average length being 49.69 months. To explore the extent to which volunteering behaviour predicts community identification, social support, and personal well-being, Multivariate Analyses of Variance (MANOVAs) were conducted to compare results between volunteers and non-volunteers. Supporting our first prediction, results showed that volunteers (vs. non-volunteers) identified significantly more strongly with their community, felt significantly more supported within their communities, and reported having significantly greater personal well-being (see Table 3).

(TABLE 3)

Due to the non-equal group sizes of volunteers versus non-volunteers, we also conducted a non-parametric Kruskal-Wallace H test. This showed that there was a statistically significant difference in personal well-being between the volunteer and non-volunteer groups, $\chi2(1) = 7.24$, $p = 0.007$, with a mean rank personal well-being score of

319.82 for volunteers and 267.20 for non-volunteers. There was also a statistically significant difference in community identification between volunteers and non-volunteers, $\chi2(1) = 26.92$, $p < .001$, with a mean rank community identification score of 361.51 for volunteers and 260.49 for non-volunteers. The analysis also showed that there was a statistically significant difference in social support between the volunteer and non-volunteer groups, $\chi2(1) = 21.61$, $p < .001$, with a mean rank social support score of 352.41 for volunteers and 261.95 for non-volunteers.

Providing initial support for our second prediction, correlation analyses (Table 4), showed that hours spent volunteering was significantly associated with greater perceptions of social support and increased identification with the community. Volunteering behaviour was also significantly associated with greater personal well-being.

(TABLE 4)

Mediation Analysis

To further test our second prediction, we used model six in version 3.0 of Hayes' (2017) PROCESS macro to investigate whether the relationship between hours spent volunteering and personal well-being was mediated by increased community identification and social support. The analysis involved 5,000 bootstrapping samples with 95% confidence intervals (LLCI/ULCI), using the percentile method. Values were mean centred for the construction of products. Participants' gender, age, relationship status (yes/no), and employment status (yes/no) were controlled for, since these demographic variables are known to influence well-being (Alexopoulos, 2005; Artazcoz, Benach, Borrell, & Cortes, 2004; Nolen-Hoeksema, 2001).

Supporting our second prediction, we found a significant indirect effect of number of volunteering hours on personal well-being through community identification and social support, *Effect* = 0.01, *Boot SE* = .007, *Boot LLCI* = .0007, *Boot ULCI* = .03. Number of volunteering hours was a positive predictor of community identification, *Coeff* = .10, *SE* = .02, *t* = 4.44, *p* < .001, *LLCI* = .06, *ULCI* = .15, while community identification was a positive predictor of social support, *Coeff* = 0.63, *SE* = .04, *t* = 14.11, *p* < .001, *LLCI* = .54, *ULCI* = .72, which in turn was a positive predictor of personal well-being, *Coeff* = .21, *SE* = .10, *t* = 2.18, *p* = .03, *LLCI* = .02, *ULCI* = .40. The total effect of number of volunteering hours on personal well-being was significant, *Effect* = .16, *SE* = .05, *t* = 3.11, *p* = .002, *LLCI* = .06, *ULCI* = .27, and this became non-significant when community identification and social support were accounted for (direct effect), indicating full mediation, *Effect* = .10, *SE* = .05, *t* = .1.87, *p* = .06, *LLCI* = -.005, *ULCI* = .20. See Figure 1 for the serial mediation model.

(FIGURE 1)

For completeness, we also analysed a model with the positions of volunteering hours and community identification switched to address the existing evidence reviewed above suggesting that increased community connectedness may predict volunteering behaviour, and that these social relationships may be a predictor rather than an outcome of volunteering behaviour. Nonetheless, the resultant model was non-significant, *Effect* = 0.003, *Boot SE* = .003, *Boot LLCI* = -.0005, *Boot ULCI* = .01[2].

Discussion

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[2] Model figure presented in supplementary materials.

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As predicted, the survey results indicated that volunteers reported higher levels of well-being, social support, and community identification than non-volunteers. Whilst it should be noted that this was not a volunteer/non-volunteer condition design, and variables such as well-being may influence volunteering behaviour, correlational analyses also revealed time spent volunteering was associated with increased community identification, a stronger sense of social support, and increased personal well-being, demonstrating the social and psychological as well as health outcomes predicted by volunteering behaviour. Furthermore, the serial mediation analyses have demonstrated that engaging in volunteering activities predicts increased community identification, which in turn positively predicts social support, which in turn predicts well-being, suggesting that increased feelings of connection and belongingness within one's community can be classed as a psychologically valuable outcome of volunteering, rather than as a mere predictor or context for this behaviour (Omoto & Snyder, 2002).

The current findings extend previous literature highlighting that those who volunteer report higher well-being (e.g., Thoits & Hewitt, 2001) and psychological sense of community (e.g., Omoto, & Snyder, 2002). Building on the findings of the interview study, these cross-sectional statistical models provide preliminary evidence that volunteering does indeed offer opportunities for community connection through a strengthening of social identification. This provides initial support for our proposal that volunteering could be a way of facilitating the development of community identity. In turn, this 'unlocks' Social Cure processes, such as enhanced social support, revealing the processes through which increases in volunteer well-being may be experienced. Overall, there is initial evidence from these findings to indicate that engaging in volunteer roles has the potential to positively predict the health and well-being of community members, and that this is connected with their sense of belonging within a supportive community group.

General Discussion

Previous research has highlighted three broad benefits of volunteering, over and above the help received by recipients of aid: the health benefits to volunteers, rewards gained by volunteers from relationships with others, and the benefits accrued by the volunteers' local communities. However, the largely individualistic approach taken to understanding the motivations and experiences of volunteers has neglected the role of group dynamics operating across these domains. In this paper we have provided a unifying framework to explain how the actions of volunteers can shape their group memberships and identification with their broader communities, which can in turn improve social relationships and the health and well-being of volunteers themselves. In doing so, our findings provide insights into the inherently collective and situated nature of volunteering as well as the benefits to be had in enhancing and improving community connectedness in several ways.

First, our work sets out a clear, evidence-based case for the application of social identity principles to the study of volunteering. In line with previous work by Boezeman and Ellemers (2007, 2008, 2009), we find that, as volunteers do not work for monetary gain, intrinsic rewards are pivotal to their motivations. Central to these rewards are their social relationships and, specifically, feelings of being supported by peers. Likewise, in their study of volunteering organisations, Gray and Stevenson (2019) revealed the importance of groups in motivating volunteering as well as providing emotional and practical support to cope with the challenges posed by volunteering roles. Our mixed-method research builds upon this work, showing that these social identity processes predict the health of volunteers, through the support unlocked within their local communities. In other words, whilst relationships with

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volunteer peers are important, volunteering is also an inherently *community*-based Social Cure.

Second, our work provides definitive evidence of the close relationship between volunteering and the community it is situated within. Research within community psychology has long established the importance of shared habitat in developing community belonging and a 'Psychological Sense of Community' (Obst & White, 2005) whilst recently the Volunteer Process Model has emphasised the importance of local community factors for the motivations and outcomes of volunteering (Omoto & Snyder, 2010). However, this work has typically cast community as the backdrop to volunteering. In contrast, our work views community as intimately bound up in the dynamics of locally-based volunteering, whereby processes of community identification predict both the motivations for volunteering, volunteers' commitment to it, and its long-term benefits. Volunteers report wishing to 'pay back' into their communities, out of a sense of duty, pride, and obligation. Volunteering also effectively provides a privileged advantage for the individual. It offers increased social contact in a community where their support is valued and meaningful and allows them to display the moral characteristics of good community citizenship (Pancer, 2015; Stevenson et al., 2015), thus imbuing their interactions with additional positivity and reward and conferring enhanced status within the community.

Third, our work provides a conceptual and methodological approach to addressing the longstanding question of whether volunteering enhances community identification or emerges from it. While previous research suggests volunteering increases community belonging (Theurer & Wister, 2010), others have argued psychological sense of community predicts volunteering (Okun & Michel, 2006; Omoto & Packard, 2016). Our studies shed light on this uncertainty. Our participants' accounts of their volunteering experiences indicate they recognise both pathways: their sense of community membership and duty increases their

likelihood of volunteering, but the rewards of volunteering also enhance their community

connection and commitment. Our survey data then provide further insight into the possible

sequence of identity processes involved, demonstrating that time spent volunteering does

indeed predict enhanced identification, which in turn predicts identity-based resources such

as perceived social support. Whereas the qualitative study identifies the complexity of

potential bidirectional relationship between being part of a community and volunteering

behaviour (a desire to reciprocate resources already provided by community), the quantitative

study findings suggests that level of volunteering predicts increased subjective community

identification and support, and that these mediate the relationship between volunteering and

well-being. While longitudinal work is required to establish the causal relationships between

these variables (as well as the degree to which there is a recursive relationship between

volunteering and identification[3]), this provides the first substantive evidence of how

volunteering predicts collective identification. Arguably this also contributes to the

developing community identity literature within the Social Cure tradition. To date, this

research has focused on determining the health consequences of community identification.

Here we offer evidence to suggest how community identity can be developed or enhanced via

a specific form of community participation, namely volunteering. Where existing research

has extoled the virtuous cycles operating between subjective social identification and mental

health in comparison with those involved in objective community participation and mental

health (Miller, Wakefield, & Sani, 2017), here we show how this community participation

may actually contribute to the building of these beneficial identity processes. Ascertaining the

determinants of social identification with groups is something that is, until now, relatively

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[3] Given recent work suggesting that social support and identification can be concurrent, and potentially mutually reinforcing, features of group life (McKimmie, Butler, Chan, Rogers, & Jimmieson, 2020), longitudinal analyses could also explore the recursive nature of identification and support and their impact on well-being as a result of continuing volunteering.

under-researched in the Social Cure field (Cruwys, Steffens, Haslam, Haslam, Hornsey, McGarty, & Skorich, 2020).

Fourth, a wide range of previous work (e.g., Jenkinson et al., 2013) associates volunteering with health benefits, but fails to provide convincing evidence for why this might be the case. Our work provides convergent evidence from qualitative and quantitative methods that Social Cure processes underly this relationship. Our interviews highlight the links volunteers themselves see between their experiences and their well-being in their everyday volunteering practices. For some, volunteering is a source of pride, satisfaction, and well-being, for others it has a transformative impact upon their lives. The significance of these findings within the Social Cure framework is that these are precisely the experiences that one would expect to impact upon appraisal-based responses to coping with challenges because they influence beliefs around available resources and whether help will be forthcoming when needed. As outlined above, the Social Cure paradigm posits that groups provide informational, emotional, and practical resources to cope with challenges, thereby reducing stress and improving well-being (Haslam et al., 2005, 2009). In effect, these volunteers' accounts suggest that volunteering feeds into this process by unlocking the identity-based social support within the community. In turn, this is borne out by our statistical model which evidences the classic Social Cure pathway, whereby community identification predicts well-being through the provision of social support (Haslam et al., 2005). In addition, we show that volunteering predicts community identification and social support, and that this pathway mediates the relationship between volunteering and well-being. This is the first tentative evidence of social identity processes underpinning the health benefits of volunteering suggesting that volunteering may unlock the Social Cure within local communities. Moreover, it builds upon the previous work attesting to the health benefits of community identification (McNamara et al., 2013; Fong et al., 2019) by suggesting that

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volunteering may be a method through which these variables could be developed and enhanced.

Our research has limitations which should be borne in mind when interpreting results. Our interviews are with volunteers from a specific local context and do not span the scale, economic prosperity, or demographic composition of local communities within or beyond the UK. Likewise, our survey is also geographically-bounded and is cross-sectional in nature, limiting our claims to the causal direction of the relationships between variables. Additionally, using 'time committed to volunteering' as a proxy for volunteering commitment is not problem-free, but the measure does enable some sense of a distinction between those who do not volunteer, those who volunteer infrequently, and those who volunteer more regularly and for longer. Moreover, the depth and richness of the interviews as well as the scope and scale of the survey allow us to confidently triangulate these methods and, we believe, shed the first definitive light on the community identity processes underpinning volunteering.

In addition to modelling these effects over time, future research should aim to incorporate these community-level identity dynamics into more conventional assessments of volunteering motivation and experience to assess their relative contributions to predicting volunteering benefits and behaviours; particularly as our interviews and existing research suggests that social rewards are linked to sustained volunteering behaviour (Boezeman & Ellemers, 2009). It is also possible that community volunteering and the identity processes involved may create other benefits such as collective resilience and efficacy. Both outcomes have been linked to community identification and social support (e.g., Heath, Rabinovich, & Barreto, 2017) and these suggestions concur with sociological perspectives of community volunteering as an empowering political resource, which can deliver resilience when communities are disempowered by disadvantage and austerity (Montforte, 2019). In addition

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to allowing a fuller understanding of the Social Cure processes underpinning community

resilience to collective disadvantage, such work would potentially afford an insight into how

volunteering can challenge inequality beyond simply helping residents cope with their

disadvantage.

On this basis, a number of recommendations arise from our findings. One key

challenge facing contemporary healthcare systems is the need to involve communities in the

provision of holistic treatments addressing the social as well as medical factors influencing

health. A substantial body of evidence has attested to the negative mental and physical health

outcomes of social isolation and loneliness, e.g., heart disease (Valtorta, Kanaan, Gilbody,

Ronzi, & Hanratty, 2016), depression (Cacioppo, Hughes, Waite, Hawkley, & Thisted,

2006), and suicide risk (Calati et al., 2019). As a result, strategies such as 'social prescribing',

which use community-based social interventions to address the social determinants of ill-

health, are multiplying across the globe (Alderwick, Gottlieb, Fichtenberg, & Adler, 2018;

Brandling & House, 2009; Kimberlee, 2015; Thomson, Camic, & Chatterjee, 2015). Almost

without exception, these interventions are atheoretical, lacking explanations for why

increasing social connectedness influences well-being (Halder et al, 2018; Kellezi, et al,

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mixed-methods study on the benefits of social connectedness on quality and effectiveness of

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potentially transformative contribution by identifying the social psychological processes

explaining the personal and social benefits that can be derived from active community

involvement. As the work of community volunteers is central to the successful delivery of

these community-based interventions, we suggest that initiatives should work towards

activities and practices which enhance community identification through the building of

social cohesion, a sense of belonging, and strong support networks. Our evidence suggests

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that these Social Cure processes have the potential to result in health benefits for their

volunteers and their communities.

Whilst the international move towards provision of healthcare within community

settings does not shift the responsibility for service provision, it does place a substantial

burden on the third sector. Community groups are often expected to shoulder an increasing

share of healthcare burden, especially within ageing populations. Therefore, a key priority for

community groups is the sustainability of their provision. Our research suggests that

volunteering can benefit the individual by providing them with the chance to contribute to

and access social support, whilst also increasing their sense of connection and commitment to

community life. In other words, by attending to the social identity principles underpinning the

recruitment and engagement of volunteers, and promoting their position within local

communities, voluntary organisations not only enhance the lives of individuals and

communities, but also promote the sustainability of their provision. The latter of these

benefits proves increasingly important in response to both crises, e.g., the 2020 Coronavirus

Pandemic, and impoverished community resources.

Reflections on Volunteering and the Coronavirus Pandemic

Since this research was conducted, the Coronavirus pandemic has placed enormous pressure

on communities across the globe. Decisive local responses are vital for effective

management of the pandemic, and such responses tend to emerge from cohesive

communities: a point recognised by psychologists (e.g., Elcheroth & Drury, 2020) and

governments alike (e.g., the UK government's 'All in, all together' campaign, Degun, 2020).

Helping behaviours are key features of cohesive communities and critical elements of disaster

responses. It has therefore never been more critical to understand the drivers of this

behaviour. Our data suggest that community relationships and the deep sense of commitment

that residents often feel towards their community act as powerful motivators for volunteering.

In the context of the pandemic, these processes were observed during the rapid surge of

volunteer registrations to the UK's National Health Service Volunteer Responders

programme, and the proliferation of community-based mutual aid groups developed in

response to calls to support vulnerable community members across the UK. The UK was by

no means alone in these responses: Coronavirus-related volunteering and helping has

flourished across the globe (Monbiot, 2020). Nonetheless, concerns remain about the

sustainability of these acts of giving, particularly as volunteers' circumstances change and the

sense of urgency dissipates. Moreover, those cautioning against the conceptualisation of

volunteers as a 'resource' suggest attention must be paid to supporting volunteers and

protecting their well-being (Gilbert, 2020); particularly as they are donating their time to help

in potentially risky circumstances and helping in ways that governments cannot or will not.

Our findings speak to these issues in two ways. First, they show that a sense of

community commitment not only motivates volunteering, but it is also experienced as a

reason to continue volunteering over time. Second, our data show that, for those who can,

volunteering is a vehicle through which residents can build a sense of belonging to their

community. This belonging is closely connected with residents' evaluation of their

community as supportive, and these experiences predict better personal well-being, thus

unlocking social cure processes that are vital during these most challenging times (Jetten,

Reicher, Haslam & Cruwys, 2020). In these ways, cohesive community relationships not only

create the conditions that help drive community helping, but they also sustain volunteering

behaviours over time, whilst making the experience rewarding for volunteers and beneficial

for communities. Thus, whilst we already know that cohesive communities tend to cope

better with challenges (Ntontis et al, 2018), by appreciating the complex links between

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identity processes and volunteering behaviours, we can begin to address crucial issues such as

how to ensure that such behaviour remains sustained as communities deal with the long term

effects of the pandemic and look towards recovery.

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