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**How Can 'We' Help? Exploring the Role of Shared Social Identity in the Experiences and Benefits of Volunteering**

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# How Can 'We' Help? Exploring the Role of Shared Social Identity in the Experiences and Benefits of Volunteering

**KEYWORDS:** Social identity, volunteering, social cure, helping behaviour, intergroup processes

## 1. ABSTRACT

Previous research on volunteering has largely focussed on the individual characteristics and experiences of volunteers, or on their relationship with the volunteering organisation; neglecting the group dynamics of volunteering. To address this gap, we apply a social identity and 'Social Cure' perspective in a thematic analysis of interviews with 40 volunteers from across the South of England. This analysis highlights that group identities are fundamental to volunteers' motivations and experiences of volunteering. Sharing an identity with other volunteers promoted feelings of belonging, which in turn impacted upon participants' wellbeing. Identity processes also underpinned interactions with the beneficiaries of help, and how volunteers managed the challenges of helping. Finally, shared identity facilitated collective support between volunteers, which was necessary to deal with the challenges of the volunteering role, and this could be facilitated or hindered by the volunteering organisation. We discuss the implications for how volunteering organisations can enhance identity-mediated helping, as well as for understanding the impact of volunteering on health and wellbeing.

## 2. INTRODUCTION

Volunteering is often a collective activity. While volunteering can be done on an individual basis, volunteers usually join groups and organisations dedicated to coordinating efforts towards a common goal. Likewise, the recipients of help are often groups of individuals with specific needs. Yet, despite this recognisably collective nature of much volunteering, the psychology of volunteering has remained largely focused at the individual and interpersonal level; examining the motivations, experiences and health benefits of the individual within a volunteering role and organisation. A growing body of social psychological work has demonstrated the importance of social group memberships across a range of different helping situations, including: bystander behaviour (Levine, Cassidy, Brazier, & Reicher, 2002; Levine, Prosser, Evans, & Reicher, 2005), humanitarian emergencies and natural disasters (James & Zagefka, 2017; Zagefka & James, 2015) and charitable donations to the poor (González & Lay, 2017). However, this work is most often focused on one-off (and often extraordinary) helping situations, e.g. providing emergency aid or donating money. As

yet, this intergroup perspective has not been applied to volunteering, which is a fundamentally different form of helping, in that it involves the sustained donation of time, effort and skills to others, often on a daily basis and often over many years.

In this paper, we argue that there is much to be gained from understanding volunteering from a social identity perspective, in terms of understanding how sharing an identity with others shapes helping behaviour. Moreover, we uniquely argue that a 'Social Cure' perspective is useful in understanding the experiences and consequences of volunteering for people's health and wellbeing. To this end, we examine the experiences of 40 volunteers from across the South of England in order to illustrate the fundamental importance of social identities and group dynamics to the experiences and consequences of volunteering.

### ***Individualistic Accounts of Volunteering***

The dominant psychological understandings of volunteering have come from the USA, where volunteering is usually conceptualised as a form of civic engagement (Pancer, 2015) or citizen participation (Dalton, Elias & Wandersman, 2001). Much of this existing work is focused on the individual volunteer, in terms of the personality characteristics of volunteers, their individual motivations and anticipations and their experiences of personal rewards and accomplishments (Omoto & Snyder, 2010). This research has found evidence for a wide range of individual factors - including, age, ethnicity, and self-reported level of civic responsibility - that reliably predict a person's willingness to volunteer, their level of participation and their intent to remain as volunteers.

The most comprehensive model of volunteering behaviour is that provided by Omoto and Snyder (e.g. 2010). Their Volunteer Process Model (VPM) divides contributing factors into antecedents, experiences and effects and examines these within the context of the volunteering organisation and broader social system. In addition to specifying the individual antecedents of volunteering, they specify the experiences that volunteers are likely to have with their voluntary agency (organisational integration and support) and clients as well as personal performance and experiences of satisfaction. Together these are thought to lead to changes in the individual identity, attitudes and behaviour of volunteers as well as in their future commitment to volunteering and their volunteering agency.

Research in this area also provides evidence for the positive impact of volunteering for individual volunteers, particularly in terms of: an increased sense of personal efficacy and personal empowerment (Piliavin & Siegl, 2015), improvements in mortality risk, as well as improvements in mental and physical health and wellbeing (Jenkinson et al., 2013). However it is notable that the

area lacks direct evidence on the precise mechanisms by which individual volunteers accrue specific benefits (Jenkinson et al., 2013; Piliavin & Siegl, 2015).

### ***Organisational and Community Factors in Volunteering***

The role of organisations in facilitating volunteering has also been noted. An individual's psychological engagement with their volunteering organisation is increased by their pride in their organisation as well as their feelings of being respected within the agency (Boezeman & Ellemers, 2008). In turn respect is predicted by the level of support perceived from the organisation and from fellow volunteers which increases the attractiveness of the organisation as well as job satisfaction (Boezeman & Ellemers, 2009). Additionally, the support provided to volunteers by organisations is also associated with an intention to remain as volunteers, as well as organisational commitment and perseverance (Ellemers, De Gilder, & Haslam, 2004). In this way the volunteering agency can enhance the intrinsic rewards of the volunteering experience, in the absence of material benefit.

More broadly, these experiences occur within a societal context which provides both the need for (and response to) the volunteering efforts. As Omoto and Snyder (2010) point out, in individual's sense of attachment to their community has consistently been found to predict engagement with volunteering and to mediate the effects of volunteering on psychological wellbeing. Moreover, volunteering and community empowerment can be mutually reinforcing, in the sense that volunteering is seen to result in higher levels of 'connectedness', greater trust in neighbours, and a generalised norm of reciprocity (i.e. 'social capital': Putnam, 2001). This in turn has the potential to lead to an improved sense of community that can encourage further engagement and involvement in volunteering (Casiday et al., 2008; Omoto & Snyder, 2010).

For this reason, volunteering is seen as having great potential for ameliorating a wide variety of social problems, including unemployment, crime, loneliness and poor health, across a broad range of community and organisational contexts (Gray & Manning, 2017). However, there is currently little research on the specific role played by volunteering organisations and communities in encouraging, sustaining, and enhancing the effects of volunteering (Casiday et al., 2008). We argue that this is due to several limitations inherent in this previous work. Firstly, it is mainly descriptive in that it lacks a theoretical basis for understanding of the relationship between the various groups to which volunteers belong, their engagement in collective activity and the individual and collective outcomes that result. Secondly, it is largely decontextualised, in that it typically does not differentiate between the wide variety of forms of volunteering available to individuals and the variations within the communities they inhabit. Thirdly, while it recognises the value of voluntary groups and

organisations, it lacks an explanation for why these sustain volunteering over a prolonged period of time. To address these gaps, we next review recent advances in the understanding of group dynamics and apply these to the volunteering context.

### ***Groups, Shared Identity and the 'Social Cure'***

Over the past two decades, the Social Cure tradition of research (Jetten, Haslam, Haslam & Branscombe, 2009) has systematically examined the positive impacts of group membership on social interactions and wellbeing. It posits that social identity (that aspect of the self-concept derived from group membership) serves as a perceptual prism through which group members experience the world (Haslam, Reicher & Levine, 2012), which in turn transforms their relations with others within and outside the group. Specifically, the mutually recognised sharing of an identity with others leads to expectations of sharing a common worldview and cooperation. These transformed social relations then form a basis for the group to collectively respond to the challenges they face. In other words, shared identity is pivotal to the collective perception, response and transformation of the social world.

Fundamental to these dynamics are the ways in which shared identity serves to shape helping behaviour. At its most basic, there is evidence that sharing a social identity - a sense of 'we-ness' - encourages helping between group members, with people more willing to help ingroup members than outgroup members (Dovidio et al., 1997). For example, Levine and colleagues (Levine et al., 2005) showed how simply priming and manipulating the inclusivity of the category of 'football fan' was sufficient to increase bystander helping towards a stranger in need. Likewise, James and Zagefka (2015) showed how respondents were willing to give higher donations to (national) in-group disaster victims, than to outgroup members. Group memberships are also important to people's strategic motivations for whether to help or not. For example there is evidence that intergroup helping can be used as a means of managing ingroup reputation and image-related concerns (Wakefield and Hopkins, 2017; van Leeuwen, 2007). And, there is evidence that the strategic construction of in-and-out-group identities can be flexibly deployed to in arguments for the giving or withholding of help, e.g. to recipients inside and outside national boundaries (Reicher, Cassidy, Wolpert, Hopkins & Levine, 2006; Stevenson & Manning, 2009).

Shared social identities also enable group members to coordinate their actions and achieve their goals more effectively. Individuals who see themselves as sharing group membership expect to have a common understanding of the social world and more readily communicate with one another, thus facilitating a coordinated response in emergency situations as well as situations requiring collective

action (Haslam & Reicher, 2006; Reicher, 1987). Furthermore, studies of collective action have demonstrated that participation in successful collective behaviour leads to a heightened sense of group empowerment and collective efficacy (Drury & Reicher, 2005). These, in turn, lead to increased commitment to future action as well as increasing psychological resilience to future threat and collective wellbeing (Van Zomeren, Postmes & Spears, 2012).

Flowing from this, the social identity approach also provides an explanatory model for the impact of group membership on individual and collective wellbeing. Indeed, research on the relationship between health, wellbeing and social identities (the 'Social Cure' paradigm), suggests that there are a multitude of physical and mental health outcomes deriving from meaningful sense of belonging to social groups in a range of practice and community settings (Jetten et al, 2012; Haslam, Jetten, Cruwys, Dingle & Haslam, 2018). This work highlights that groups provide psychological support through the knowledge that one can rely on the assistance or intervention of fellow group members in times of adversity (Jetten et al., 2009). This security increases members' sense of being able to cope and reduces psychological and physiological stress, thereby improving wellbeing (over and above the positive benefits of the actual help received). In samples of students, community groups, social support groups, groups of trauma survivors and even those with stigmatised group identities, this impact on wellbeing has been shown to be robust (Haslam, Jetten & Haslam, 2012).

The 'Social Cure' paradigm provides a robust and valuable theoretical framework for the study of volunteering motivations, experiences and outcomes. To the extent that volunteers share an identity, we would expect this to have a transformative effect on their motivations for volunteering, their relations with other volunteers, their collective experiences, their interactions with beneficiaries and for the consequences of their activity for themselves and others. Moreover, we would expect this shared identity to shape and be shaped by their relationship with their voluntary organisation. To date, however, there is no research which has interrogated these relationships in a volunteering setting, or through a social cure lens. This study therefore provides a unique perspective on the intra- and -intergroup processes involved in volunteering, through a qualitative analysis of the shared identity processes that underpin the motivations and experiences of volunteers, and the related health and wellbeing-promoting benefits of social connectedness and shared social identities important to volunteers.

### **3. METHOD**

The data for this study were collected through interviews with volunteers from across the South of England. Volunteers (n=33) were recruited through Community First Winchester, an umbrella organisation for 600 volunteering organisations across the region. An additional 7 participants were also recruited through the University of Winchester volunteering centre. This strategy was employed in order to recruit a wide range of ages and time spent volunteering. Participants were recruited through an advert that was sent out by the respective organisations, using their email databases. Participants were told that the study was about their volunteering activity, motivations and experiences. Participants contacted the study researcher directly to organise an interview. Participants were given a £10 voucher to thank them for their participation. The demographic characteristics of the participants can be seen in Table 1 below.

Age	<i>Range (years)</i>	18-74
	<i>Mean, SD (years)</i>	56.44 (17.42)
Gender (%)	<i>Female</i>	67.5%
	<i>Male</i>	32.5%
Ethnicity (%)	<i>White British</i>	98%
	<i>NA/Other</i>	2%
Employment Status (%) <sup>1</sup>	<i>Full Time Employment</i>	21.9%
	<i>Part Time Employment</i>	17.8%
	<i>Retired</i>	28.12%
	<i>Student</i>	28.12%
	<i>Unemployed</i>	9.4%

**Table 1: Participant Demographics**

Interviews were semi-structured in nature, consisting of a series of broad open-ended questions that asked participants about their volunteering history, their volunteering experiences, the communities in which they lived, and their interactions with volunteering organisations. Interviews were conducted both face-to-face and via Skype by trained interviewers. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Pseudonyms have been used for participant and

<sup>1</sup> Please note that the employment status of the sample does not add up to 100%, as some of those who were students also indicated that they worked part-time. For completeness, these participants were added to both categories.

organisation/place names. Approval for this project was granted by University of Winchester Research Ethics Committee.

The data were analysed using a theoretically-guided contextualist thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Coding was guided by the social identity approach, focusing on the ways in which participants talked about their membership of and experiences in different groups, their own sense of belonging in relation to these groups, and how this related to their experiences of volunteering. First, the transcripts were read and re-read, and initial codes were noted. The codes were then organised into potential themes, which were then reviewed to see whether these themes were relevant to the whole dataset. Finally, a negative case analysis was also conducted to look for themes that were not prevalent, but where important issues relating to identity or volunteering were discussed, or where they added another dimension to an already-existing theme. The three themes that developed most clearly from this process are presented below.

#### **4. RESULTS**

All of our participants had volunteered in different places and at different times across their lives; often having multiple volunteering roles at the same time. Given this, it is perhaps unsurprising that the identity-related aspects of volunteering described by our participants were complex. Here we summarise three main aspects of these identity-related concerns: 1) that shared identity is fundamental to volunteering motivations; 2) that sharing an identity is important to understanding volunteering benefits; and 3) that social identity processes and inter-and-intra-group dynamics are central to how volunteers experience and manage the challenges of helping.

##### ***Groups as Fundamental to Volunteering Motivations***

All of our interviewees gave detailed accounts of their motivations for starting - and continuing - to volunteer, and groups were fundamental to these explanations. Indeed, the most common rationale for volunteering was that it was reported to fulfil a group-based need; to gain a feeling of belonging part of a volunteering group. For example:

##### **Extract 1: [72; Female]**

I: How important is that to you?

Joanna: Terribly important.

I: Yeah.

Joanna: Yeah. It's primarily, I think, when you join something like that, I think that's the primary reason...you'll fulfil primarily from the fact that you're a part of this really active, supportive group. Yes.



**Extract 2: [74; Female]**

- I: And when you're volunteering do you feel like you belong in a group?  
Mary: Yes usually and if I don't I don't continue volunteering, no.  
I: Okay and you would...  
Mary: It, I've got to feel that this is a worthwhile use of my time, and if I feel that I don't belong, then...I would question why I'm there really, why I'm giving any time to it.  
I: How important do you think that feeling of belonging is to other people?  
Mary: Belonging... Um... I think it's often important. I think it's being part of something good that's bigger than yourself, and if you don't feel part of it, then it's, you're not yeah. It's not really... don't know what it is really. Not volunteering really. You're just doing something you're interested in yourself if you're not part of something bigger.

As in Extract 1, participants spoke directly about how their primary reason for joining a volunteering organisation was related to the need to feel part of a (in Joanna's case an 'active and supportive') group. This is not to say that the activity of volunteering and its outcomes were not important, but rather that a key element for participants was the value they placed on the membership of the volunteering group, as well as the acceptance they felt from other group members. For participants, the need to belong was a core aspect of volunteering, and volunteering was central to their daily social lives.

For participants, such belonging motivations shaped their choice of volunteering activities. This can be seen in Extract 2, where Mary talks about how a sense of belonging was central to her decision about whether to continue volunteering or not. For her the value of volunteering depended upon feeling part of the broader enterprise of helping others; being part of something '*bigger*'. Moreover, such feelings of belonging were seen as inherent to the very definition of volunteering; as contrasted (unfavourably) against individual-level or self-interested behaviour. These group-level motivations were also often presented as core to the maintenance and sustainability of volunteering, as the bonds created through 'belonging' keep people engaged in the collective enterprise of volunteering.

For some participants, these group-level motivations intersected in complex ways with already existing social identities, e.g. particular professional identities. Moreover, they also developed over time and over different contexts of practice, and different stages of life. For example:

**Extract 3 [74; Female]:**

- I: So when did you first become interested in volunteering then?  
Shona: Um well I suppose because I was a nurse I've always wanted to help people, as well as myself if you like... and once my children went to school, I then at that stage decided that I could...umm...participate in volunteering really. That was linked with the school and that sort of thing. And then when they got slightly older, I

volunteered with a lunch club in the village and I graduated to the cook [laughs]... and then my... my...umm my mother in law became ill so I looked after her for a few years and then...I needed something else to do...

In this extract, Shona describes how her motivation to become a volunteer stemmed directly from her professional identity; in this case as a nurse, which she sees as fundamental to both her sense of who she is, and importantly aligned with what she thinks volunteering is for: helping people. In addition, her decision to volunteer was linked to important transitional moments: her children going to school and caring for an elderly relative. In this sense, volunteering helped her to replace a particular aspect of her life; here the participant reports this as *'needing something else to do'*. Moreover, it helped her to cope with this transitional moment by ensuring identity continuity, as a helper of others. Across the interviews, volunteering often intersected with particular moments of transition, e.g. becoming a parent, relocating, retiring, children going to school, which can provide important resources for volunteering (e.g. time), but where volunteering can also fulfil an important transitional role (e.g. *'giving you something meaningful to do'*; *'being of use'*). This highlights the ways in which such identity dynamics are complex, developmental and emergent; enabling people to create new in-group identities (and resolve old identities) that are central to their experience of volunteering over time.

### ***The Benefits of Volunteering***

Across the interviews, participants' talked about the many benefits of volunteering to them: building confidence, self-esteem, resilience, and a sense of purpose. As with motivations for volunteering, such benefits were often grounded in accounts that are primarily social in nature; stemming from how memberships of groups afforded feelings of belonging, acceptance and respect. For example:

#### **Extract 4 [68; Male]**

I: So would you say there's quite a social element to it?

Paul: Yes, definitely. Yes. Social element. And just the people, they just make you feel welcome, I think, and it makes you want to go in to you know into other industries and stuff like that because you feel confident, because you've already made friends, and stuff like that, that you know how to do them things, and put it in to the working industry.

#### **Extract 5 [58; Female]**

I: And is there a specific moment in volunteering that stands out for you?

Rachel: I don't know really. I also collect, I do collections, standing outside with a little tin for a couple of hours and I do those for just some cancer charities, just not on a regular basis, just as and when they need you, when they have a collection organised they'll email and say can you do any of these dates and so, I do that as well and that's always nice because people talk to you then when you're collecting. Because I had cancer myself so I kind of, people will talk to you about their experiences as well and you sort of understand what they're going through, and they understand you. So yeah, I think all of it, it does make you very happy in a way.

These two extracts highlight a number of ways in which our participants talked about the group-based benefits of volunteering. In Extract 4, for example, Paul talks about how others are the source of his confidence and his sense of efficacy, and that knowing that he can form new social bonds and work with others is understood to be a valuable and transferable skill set. In Extract 5, Rachel highlights a different dimension of this, when she talks how her volunteering role enables her to give (and receive) support from others going through the same experience as her; in her case cancer. For her, such mutual support is directly linked to her own sense of happiness and wellbeing. This was a key feature of the interviews: that a feeling of belonging, welcome and support from others was seen as vitally important to their own sense of personal fulfilment; both in their volunteering roles and in their wider lives.

While these accounts of personal fulfilment, grounded in social interactions, were a common feature of the interviews, this was not the only way in which participants saw the benefits of volunteering. Instead, some also described volunteering as a collective effort with collective benefit:

**Extract 6 [57; Male]**

Mark: The second you've joined the team, it's like you've known each other for years. Everyone says hello to you from the first minute...It's a great vibe within the team, considering the situations that we deal with. And, like I say, any issues, we're all there for each other...

Straight away you were feeling like you were helping people. And then the first live call-out, it's difficult to say, but it's an amazing experience, as us, for being operational volunteers, seeing the family gain, I'm not quite sure what the word is, it's just knowing that people are out there looking for you, and knowing that something is being done. Seeing the relief on the family's face when we turn up. There's sixty of us in the team. So, seeing sixty odd people turn up, with the walking and everything, going out looking for your missing loved one. It's quite a rewarding feeling.

In this extract, Mark is talking about his experiences of helping others as part of a search and rescue team. What is notable about this extract is that he sees this role as rewarding, not only because vulnerable people are helped, but also because of the broader sense of community that such helping engenders. Thus, for Mark, his volunteering role helps to develop the knowledge that *'people are out there'* doing something to help. Others evinced similar ideas, arguing that volunteering is about *'knowing there are others that you can rely on'* [74; Female]. Thus, the rewards of volunteering are constructed as moving beyond the individual helper (or helped), and instead as a central feature of what it means to be a part of a community. A sentiment that echoes Mary's account in Extract 2 above, where she talks about how she defines volunteering as being about the broader collective effort of helping people.

### ***Managing the Challenges of Volunteering***

For our participants, these social identity and group-based benefits of volunteering - feelings of belonging, acceptance, respect and community – were also described as central to how they manage the challenges and stressors of their volunteering role. In particular, participants described how the group-based bonds that emerged from their participation in volunteering gave them the sense that they could rely on other group members for support when needed. For example:

#### **Extract 7 [21; Female]**

Amy: ...everything is like if you need me, just call me, you know, and that's just amazing to just have people who are just there for you and no matter what and like with my (.) I'm doing my pack holiday licence, she's like, if you need any help, I'm here, but I know you can do it, but if you need any help, I'm right here, tell me and I'm doing the admin for [ORGANISATION] at the moment and she was like I don't really want you to do it because obviously you're at uni and you've got a lot of things on, but she was like if you need any help, if you need anything, come to me, I'll be there for you, and just so nice to have such a good support of people and I wouldn't change it.

Here, Amy is talking about the difficulties she has experienced in her role as a volunteer with disadvantaged young girls. She herself has dyslexia, and so has found it difficult to manage many elements of the role (particularly administrative), on top of her own life. In this extract, she talks about how important the direct support of another volunteer has been to her: helping her to manage and therefore continue in her role, as well as helping her to develop her sense of efficacy as a volunteer. However, over and above this direct support, she also refers to the importance of support in a broader (collective) sense, i.e. that it is *'nice to have such a good support of people'*. This is echoed in Extract 6 above, where Mark talks about how a sense of being *'there for each other'* is

important to him (and others). This once again highlights the ways in which volunteering is important in developing and sustaining social identities, and, moreover, how such social identities can act to build a sense of collective efficacy that enables coping with adversity (Haslam et al., 2005).

However, while such intra-group processes clearly helped volunteers to cope, at times the intergroup dynamics of volunteering raised additional challenges. Some participants had relationships with service users that spanned several years and, in such cases, close bonds developed between helper and recipient. For these volunteers, an additional challenge was to maintain a clear distinction in terms of roles and responsibilities, especially where they could feel overstretched or overwhelmed by the demands for assistance. For example:

**Extract 8 [72; Female]**

Sarah: You know, she was quite jealous that I had a child and a family to look after. She wanted my whole attention. And I suppose from that, I now make sure that I keep it at a level that I'm comfortable with, rather than being sucked into their dependency, because that can be quite restricting, and then once it becomes a chore it's no longer pleasant to do. So, I tend to be stricter, with myself, I set the boundaries. I suppose, yes, its setting boundaries really.

Here, Sarah is describing a previous volunteering role where she helped an elderly lady in her community. In this instance, the boundaries between helping relationship and long-term helping commitment (akin to family membership) become blurred. She reports that, in effect, the recipient's dependency was being used to manipulate her to a point that exceeded her capacity to give. In the end, Sarah reported the need to distinguish between the roles of helper and beneficiary, to set '*boundaries*', in order to maintain professional distance and to administer assistance effectively. Such boundary maintenance was difficult for some participants. This was particularly the case given that participants recognised that recipients of assistance were often part of their own communities and were keen to extend help to them on the basis of this shared identity. However, it was also the case that, while extending the boundaries of the group was indeed associated with increased helping behaviour, having clear group boundaries was recognised as important in maintaining effective helping.

For participants, volunteering organisations were key to managing some of these identity-related complexities of volunteering. Organisations tended to be characterised positively if they recognised the value of their volunteers and also facilitated the shared identity dynamics between them. This was clearest when the organisation failed to do this:

### Extract 9 [74; Female]

Pam: So I think the dementia champions – brilliant...you've got somebody there constantly on e-mail and you've got you know phone number umm and they will be in touch with you and you can be in touch with them, so lots of support and help to get into it, and it's very clear. Um I think with one of the um patient group that I'm on, the practice manager is absolutely lovely, and she will give support and encouragement to anybody on the patient group. The group is under a lot of pressure from the Clinical Commissioning Group that they want us to be more independent from the practice, and I'm quite resistant to that, because if the practice manager isn't giving us that support, who is? Are we gonna be expected to support each other? Most of us don't have the time and one who does seem to have the time is quite a disrupter, and I wouldn't want to be in a group that he's running, so, I think there's a risk there, and um in terms of pushing it too much onto the volunteers.

As evidenced here, volunteering organisations were expected to provide a range of support and help to volunteers: practical and emotional. Fundamentally, while volunteers provided help and support to service users, organisations were expected to provide help and support to volunteers to enable them to fulfil this role effectively (and easily). As we can see in the Extract above, good support is often defined in terms of *'being in touch'*, where volunteers can ask questions, and get help and support with their relationships with service users. Where this did not happen, volunteers often felt unable to cope with the demands of the role (e.g. too little time), or saw this as unfair (as *'pushing too much onto the volunteers'*). In this way, volunteering organisations play a central role in how well volunteers feel able to manage the challenges and stressors of a volunteering role.

Importantly, this lack of support was also seen to upset the group dynamics amongst volunteers, in this particular case by enabling a *'disrupter'* to take on more of the running of the group. This was a common concern across the interviews, as volunteers often described the dynamic of intra-group relations amongst volunteers as being one of equality (rather than hierarchy). They therefore relied on organisations to support this equilibrium. Where organisations did not do this, volunteers often saw the emergent relations as dysfunctional and as risky to the whole identity-dynamic enterprise of volunteering.

## 5. DISCUSSION

Building on work on the social identity of helping and the Social Cure tradition (Haslam et al., 2019; Jetten et al., 2012) we have focussed in our analysis on the group-level identity dynamics of volunteering. This is not to discount the contribution of other approaches to understanding the

individual motivations, performance and consequences of volunteering (Omoto and Snyder, 2010), but to draw attention to this neglected level of analysis and to illustrate its fundamental nature in the collective experience of volunteering. In doing so we illustrate the potential of social identity approaches for understanding the dynamics and outcomes of volunteering, adding to a growing body of social psychological work that has begun to demonstrate the importance of social group memberships for understanding helping behaviour across a number of different contexts (e.g. Levine et al., 2002; Levine et al., 2005; González & Lay, 2017; James & Zagefka, 2017; Reicher et al., 2006; Wakefield & Hopkins, 2017; van Leeuwen, 2007).

First, our analysis highlights the group-level nature of volunteers' experiences in relation to their perceptions and motivations for volunteering and their experience of the benefits and challenges of their volunteering role. In doing so, we have moved beyond a focus on the *individual* motivations of the volunteer, and instead have highlighted the ways in which volunteering motivations relate to previous group memberships and experiences, as well as to the dynamic and unfolding processes of developing a shared sense of identity with others. Importantly, we have demonstrated how this shared identity provides feelings of acceptance and belonging that shapes participants' needs and desires to volunteer, as well as an enduring identity-based commitment to their work. While previous research has captured something of these collective elements of volunteering (e.g. Boezeman & Ellemers, 2007; 2009; Omoto and Snyder, 2010), our analyses provide a theoretical basis for understanding the ways in which this group-based and collective level of volunteering is fundamental to encouraging, sustaining, and enhancing the effects of volunteering more broadly.

Secondly, our work goes some way towards shedding light upon the well documented but poorly understood relationship between volunteering and health (Jenkinson et al., 2013). At the most basic level, social isolation is detrimental to mental and physical health. For our participants, especially those recovering from illness, bereavement or major life transitions, volunteering provided a source of identity-based support and a means of social reintegration. In addition, while volunteering often posed challenges and stresses to our participants they reported that, to the extent they felt appropriately supported by their colleagues, they were well able to cope. This patterning of community resilience, efficacy, and stress reduction has been demonstrated extensively throughout the Social Cure literature to positive health outcomes (Jetten et al., 2009; Haslam et al., 2012) and indeed was reported by our participants to be a source of wellbeing as well as satisfaction. Our work therefore suggests that further exploration of the link between volunteering and health should examine the pivotal role of shared identity in stress reduction.

Thirdly, these group dynamics do more than simply satisfy the individual's need for pride, respect and job satisfaction (Boezeman & Ellemers, 2007; 2009; Omoto and Snyder, 2010). In effect they provide the resources necessary to deal with a demanding and challenging role. Helping is hard and group support is necessary to deliver help professionally and effectively, and balance competing demands on time and resources. Moreover, this effort is complicated by the fact that volunteering is often an intergroup phenomenon or, more accurately, it sits at the *boundary* of intragroup and intergroup dynamics. A shared identity with the recipients of help may ease the giving and receiving of help, but maintaining or strategically asserting the boundary between helper and helped is sometimes necessary to effective volunteering. In this way, our work goes beyond the Social Cure tradition (Jetten et al., 2009) to draw attention to the intergroup context of volunteering and the need to examine how intragroup support processes can help cope with the challenges of intergroup helping.

Finally, this highlights a specific role of the volunteering organisation hitherto underexplored by researchers, to facilitate shared identity development. Previous work by Boezeman & Ellemers (2008; 2009) has shown how an individual's organisational identification increases enduring commitment at the individual level, and how emotional as well as task-oriented organisational support helps promote this. While this is indeed evident in our own data, it overlooks the importance of the transformation of social relations between volunteers as an emergent property of the development of a shared identity. Insofar as organisational structure and ethos was felt to facilitate shared identity development, it was seen to positively impact upon volunteers. Moreover as shared identity was an integral part of coping with the challenges of volunteering, organisational structures that facilitated this, indirectly provided the resources to cope with the challenges of intergroup encounters.

Of course, our findings are limited. We acknowledge that the experiences of these volunteers from the South of England may differ from those in different contexts, e.g. where there are fewer resources for volunteers or far more challenging socio-political and economic climates. However, within this context, we have captured a range of different volunteering experiences and a range of different volunteering stages/ages. Given this, we suggest that the fundamental nature of the social identity processes reported here are likely to be replicated in similar contexts elsewhere. Indeed, it could be the case that such processes may be more central in other contexts, e.g. in situations where there is more duress (e.g. because of fewer resources or a more hostile climate), where identity dynamics of support and resilience are likely to be more rather than less relevant, and where



intragroup support is more fundamental to their success. This would be a useful area for future research.

Bearing in mind these limitations, our findings have several practical implications for the current practice of volunteering. One of the major challenges facing the Third Sector in contemporary societies is that of sustainability (HM Treasury and Cabinet Office, 2007). The ability of charities to maintain their volunteers over time is essential to reduce training and replacement costs. Our findings highlight that while organisations typically focus on providing emotional and instrumental support directly to individuals as the main route to retaining their involvement, the ability to facilitate peer support among volunteers should also be a key priority. Fostering a developing sense of 'we-ness' through a horizontal organisational structure and the delivery of assistance through a peer (rather than hierarchical) support system is likely to promote peer solidarity as well as resilience (Haslam et al., 2018).

Second, while the health benefits of both volunteering upon volunteers and community-based support groups for beneficiaries are well documented, they are typically assumed to have different dynamics and so are studied separately. Our work indicates that the same social identity-based benefits for wellbeing are likely to operate in each circumstance. Given the rise in community-based interventions which attempt to address the social processes influencing ill-health by linking patients to activity groups, e.g. through 'social prescribing' (Kimberlee, 2015), we suggest that more active group participation among beneficiaries, and more collective volunteering among volunteers is likely to benefit both groups. Volunteers are central to the successful delivery of social prescribing interventions, and so we suggest that such initiatives should work towards activities and practices which enhance identification and a sense of belonging, and build strong social support networks through social connectedness and social cohesion. In this way, volunteer organisations can not only enhance the lives of individuals and communities, but also build sustainable volunteering communities.

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