

Flourishing in trying circumstances: A hermeneutic phenomenological exploration of volunteer well-being



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Orientation: Owing to the reliance on volunteer labour for their success, the behaviour and attitudes of volunteers is of central concern to non-profit organisations (NPOs). To optimise volunteer functioning and retention in a unique and challenging work context, it is necessary to understand their well-being.

Research purpose: The objective of this study was to explore the work-life experiences of volunteers to better understand the manifestations of well-being in the volunteering work context.

Motivation for the study: Because of the unique and challenging work setting that constitutes volunteering, and the important contribution volunteers make to society and the economy, research is needed from an industrial and organisational psychology (IOP) perspective on the well-being of volunteers.

Research approach/design and method: This study was directed by a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology. Eight volunteers from an NPO operating in the South African provincial health sector participated in in-depth interviews. The data obtained were analysed using a six-stage theoretical thematic analytical process.

Main findings: Guided by 'flourishing at work' as the theoretical framework, four themes were co-constructed from the data: *learning and growing in competence, demonstrating an engaged state of mind, exhibiting emotional well-being and feeling socially integrated and connected.*

Practical/managerial implications: The results of this study may assist NPOs in developing context-specific interventions aimed at managing and enhancing well-being in volunteers.

Contribution/value-add: This study contributes to the body of knowledge on the well-being of volunteers, who are considered a distinct workforce in the field of IOP.

Keywords: volunteer; well-being; flourishing; industrial and organisational psychology; hermeneutic phenomenology; qualitative.

Introduction

Well-being is important for employers and employees alike (Kowalski & Loretto, 2017). In view of its influence on outcomes such as job satisfaction, positive working relationships, productivity and performance, it is in the best interests of organisations to focus on well-being (Kowalski & Loretto, 2017; Kun & Gadanez, 2019; Roemer & Harris, 2018; Theobald & Cooper, 2012). For employees, higher levels of well-being result in lower levels of burnout and increased cooperation, coping abilities and prosocial behaviour (Kun & Gadanez, 2019). The well-being of volunteers is of particular importance because of the vital role they play in society (Mellor et al., 2008), the challenging work environments they are faced with and the dependence of voluntary organisations on volunteer labour (Boezeman & Ellemers, 2009; Garner & Garner, 2011; Handy & Mook, 2011).

Volunteering is an essential phenomenon in any society owing to its positive socio-economic impact (Carter Kahl, 2019; Haski-Leventha, Hustinx, & Handy, 2011; Manetti, Bellucci, Como, & Bagnoli, 2015). Moreover, in the hospital environment volunteering has cost-saving, labour resource and service expansion benefits (Lourens & Daniels-Felix, 2017). Volunteers commit their personal time, energy and effort (Clary et al., 1998) to benefit others (Penner, 2002). Volunteering is a planned, freely chosen, long-term activity that is conducted without the expectations of reward and occurs in formal organisations (Penner, 2002; Snyder & Omoto, 2008). Volunteers represent a distinct workforce as they are motivated by altruism, and are not remunerated for

their involvement (Fallon & Rice, 2015). They often work under emotionally challenging circumstances (Crook, Weir, Willms, & Egendorf, 2006) especially in the hospital environment (Folwell & Kauer, 2018). In addition, volunteers from low-income countries such as South Africa frequently encounter trying personal and socio-economic constraints (Kiyange, 2018; MacKenzie, Baadjies, & Seedat, 2015).

Quantitative research about the well-being of volunteers has focused on how volunteering contributes to and promotes enhanced feelings of well-being in general (McMunn, Nazroo, Wahrendorf, Breeze, & Zaninotto, 2009; Mellor et al., 2008; Son & Wilson, 2012; Tabassum, Mohan, & Smith, 2016; Thoits & Hewitt, 2001; Van Willigen, 2000; Vecina & Fernando, 2013) in later life (e.g., Hao, 2008; Haski-Leventhal, 2009; Morrow-Howell, Hinterlong, Rozario, & Tang, 2003; Russell, Nyame-Mensah, De Wit, & Handy, 2018), and the direct relation between the number of hours volunteered and well-being (Windsor, Anstey, & Rodgers, 2008). Qualitative research related to the well-being of volunteers has focused on understanding how volunteering affects their well-being (Black & Living, 2004; Brunier, Graydon, Rothman, Sherman, & Liadsky, 2002; Elias, Sudhir, & Mehrotra, 2016; Messias, De Jong, & McLoughlin, 2005; Newman, Vasudev, & Onawola, 1985). These studies were conducted amongst American, Canadian, European, Indian and Australian volunteers. There is, however, a lack of research on the well-being of volunteers in South Africa, and notably so from an industrial and organisational psychology (IOP) perspective. This is of concern, considering the need for research about volunteers in and from non-Western, African contexts who are affected by individual, institutional and system related challenges such as poverty, inadequate training and support, funding and financial constraints, transport difficulties and lack of policy frameworks to manage volunteers (Kiyange, 2018; VSO & RAISA, 2011). This is true in the South African context, where many volunteers also come from less privileged socio-economic backgrounds (Barnard & Furtak, 2020). Industrial and organisational psychology furthermore contributes to understanding the psychosocial well-being and performance of employees in the organisational context (Coetzee, 2019; Van Vuuren, 2010), offering a valuable yet unexploited disciplinary perspective for studying volunteer well-being.

Although the well-being of employees has been emphasised as being imperative for organisations, IOP research on well-being in the workplace has predominantly focused on paid employees (Coetzer & Rothmann, 2007; Kheswa, 2019; Roemer & Harris, 2018; Rothmann & Malan, 2011). The discipline of IOP is nevertheless equally applicable to unpaid work, as volunteer workers associated with formal organisations are likely to experience stress and dissatisfaction, which may consequently have an impact on their tenure and retention (Huynh, Metzger, & Winefield, 2012). The economic and social contribution that volunteers make to society (Haivas, Hofmans, & Pepermans, 2013) and the dependence of non-profit organisations (NPOs) on volunteer labour

underscores the importance of ensuring their optimal functioning, well-being and retention. Volunteering also presents itself as a unique field of study for industrial and organisational (IO) practitioners owing to the distinct organisational context (Boezeman & Ellemers, 2009). As volunteering is considered an altruistic activity, volunteers are not concerned with financial security and advancement opportunities and could leave at any time (Fallon & Rice, 2015); still, these organisations rely on volunteers for their performance and success. The behaviour, attitudes, satisfaction, turnover intentions and work engagement of volunteers are therefore of central concern to NPOs (Garner & Garner, 2011; Haivas et al., 2013; Huynh et al., 2012) and to optimise volunteer functioning and retention, it is necessary to better understand their well-being. As the discipline of IOP is concerned with both organisational health and employee wellness (Van Vuuren, 2010) in the context of volunteering, IOP offers a valuable approach to understanding the well-being of volunteers for the benefit of the individual volunteer, the success of the organisation and society at large.

Research motivation, objective and contribution

The researchers were motivated to conduct this study by the importance of volunteer well-being, the unique and challenging work setting that constitutes volunteering and a lack of studies exploring the well-being of the volunteer in the field of IOP. To contribute to the body of knowledge on managing the optimal functioning and retention of volunteers, the objective of this study was to explore the work-life experiences of volunteers to delve deeper into the understanding of how volunteer well-being manifests itself in a volunteering-work context.

Theoretical framework

Research on well-being has increased to encompass a range of disciplinary fields (Fleuret & Atkinson, 2007). This can be attributed to its relationship to desirable outcomes such as productivity and good relationships (Huppert & So, 2013). Well-being is considered beneficial for individuals and society and makes financial sense for organisations as employees with high levels of well-being and positive functioning are considered valuable assets (Cooper & Dewe, 2008; Roemer & Harris, 2018). Research on well-being is typically conducted from two different perspectives, namely hedonia and eudaimonia (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Kashdan, Biswas-Diener, & King, 2008). As a philosophy, hedonia focuses on outcomes such as happiness and the attainment of positive affect. Eudaimonia on the other hand takes a process approach, focusing on the content of one's life and is conceived as a way of living, in other words realising one's full potential (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Ryan, Huta, & Deci, 2008). Although these philosophies have provided researchers with a common language for well-being (Kashdan et al., 2008), many scholars (e.g. Fleuret & Atkinson, 2007; Huppert & So, 2013; La Placa, McNaught, & Knight, 2013) are of the view that well-being is dynamic, complex and multidimensional.

This view is supported by the abundance of integrated well-being conceptualisations that have emerged, such as Keyes' (2002) model of mental health, Seligman's (2011) positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (PERMA) model and Rothmann's (2013) flourishing at work framework, which comprise both hedonic and eudaimonic well-being components (Henderson & Knight, 2012). Given the plethora of conceptualisations and operational models of well-being, it is important to specify how well-being was defined and conceptualised in this study. In the present study, well-being was conceptualised as a multidimensional concept, explored specifically in the work context. Therefore, the flourishing at work framework which was extended by Rothmann (2013) into the South African work context was deemed relevant for addressing the objective of this study. Flourishing at work conceptualises well-being in terms of psychological, emotional and social well-being.

Flourishing at work

According to Keyes (2002), flourishing is a state encompassing high levels of well-being. Flourishing individuals experience positive feelings and positive functioning (Keyes, 2002; Wissing, Potgieter, Guse, Khumalo, & Nel, 2020). Recognising that flourishing is highly relevant for organisational contexts, as individuals spend a large part of their adult life at work and because organisations are starting to value the strategic importance thereof, Rothmann (2013) extended the flourishing framework into this context. Rothmann (2013) conceptualises employee flourishing as consisting of three dimensions, which together capture the nature and attainment of flourishing, namely, psychological well-being (autonomy, competence, relatedness, learning, meaning and purpose, and engagement), emotional well-being (positive and negative affect, and job satisfaction) and social well-being (social acceptance, social growth, social contribution, social coherence and social integration).

Psychological well-being

To flourish in the work context, employees need to experience positive feelings and functioning (psychological well-being) (Janse Van Rensburg, Rothmann, & Diedericks, 2017). At work, psychological well-being consists of the distinct aspects of autonomy, competence, relatedness, learning, meaning and purpose, and engagement (Redelinguys, Rothmann, & Botha, 2019). To attain positive functioning and psychological health, it is important for employees to satisfy the psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). *Autonomy* is associated with the desire to feel volition and voluntariness in terms of one's behaviour and actions, whilst *competence* refers to the need to feel effective and experience mastery in a work environment. As competence can readily be thwarted by challenges and negative feedback in the work context, employees have a need to feel that they are able to perform their jobs effectively. *Relatedness*, which is considered a fundamental need, pertains to employees' innate need to feel socially connected, cared

for and significant amongst others. Equally essential to this need is contributing to and giving oneself to others (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Rothmann, 2013; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Learning, meaning and purpose are also important facets of psychological well-being. Learning is progressive and improvement-focused in nature and employees experience learning when they continue to grow and develop in their jobs over time (Spreitzer, Lam, & Fritz, 2010). Meaning and purpose refers to employee's subjective judgements regarding the personal significance, value, worth and purpose of their work. Employees who experience meaning and purpose care about what they are doing and feel that their work matters and is important and meaningful (Rothmann, 2013; Steger, Dik, & Duffy, 2012). Engagement, as the last facet, refers to the psychological states and behaviours that employees bring into their work roles (Kahn, 1990). Engagement is expressed physically, cognitively and emotionally; engaged employees experience a positive work-related state of mind and display *vitality* (energy, mental resilience and persistence) and *dedication* (sense of significance, enthusiasm and pride) (Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, & Bakker, 2002).

Emotional well-being

Emotional well-being refers to employees' perceptions regarding the job satisfaction and positive emotions they experience in the work context (Janse Van Rensburg et al., 2017; Redelinguys et al., 2019; Rothmann, 2013). Considering a state that comprises both cognitive and affective components, *job satisfaction* is defined as an employee's attitude or evaluation; what they think and how they feel about their job or various aspects/facets of their job (Saari & Judge, 2004; Spector, 1997). Job satisfaction can be assessed using the global approach, which entails obtaining an overall feeling about the job as a whole, or the facet approach, which entails determining an employee's satisfaction or dissatisfaction with an aspect, or part of a job such as the nature of the work and supervisory and co-worker relationships (Spector, 1997). Job satisfaction has been linked to improved performance and is highly correlated with life satisfaction, whereas job dissatisfaction leads to turnover, absenteeism and withdrawal behaviours such as late coming and grievances (Saari & Judge, 2004). The other aspect that contributes to an employee's emotional well-being is *positive emotions*. Positive emotions, which include joy, interest, gratitude, hope, contentment and love, fuel psychological resilience, build enduring personal resources and act as solutions for negative emotions (Fredrickson, 2001; Janse Van Rensburg et al., 2017; Rothmann, 2013).

Social well-being

Social well-being is defined as the assessment of one's condition and functioning in society and entails appraising the quality of one's social health (Keyes, 1998). Although the literature has focused on well-being as being predominately a private phenomenon, Keyes (1998) was of the view that because life is social in nature and we are embedded in

society, it is important to consider how social health contributes to optimal functioning (Westerhof & Keyes, 2010). Influenced by the work of sociologists and social psychologists, Keyes (1998) proposed five indicators of social well-being which reflect an individual's optimal social functioning and positive social health (Westerhof & Keyes, 2010). When applied to the work context, the indicators of social well-being are *social acceptance* (having a positive attitude towards others and acknowledging their diversity), *social growth* (belief in the potential, growth and development of colleagues, groups and organisations), *social contribution* (the feeling that one's actions add value and contribute to others and the organisation), *social coherence* (perceiving one's organisation and social life as meaningful and understandable) and *social integration* (experiencing a sense of relatedness, belonging, comfort and support from the organisation one works in) (Janse Van Rensburg et al., 2017; Redelinghuys et al., 2019; Rothmann, 2013). Rothmann (2013) emphasises that in the South African work context, social well-being is particularly important owing to the collectivist philosophy of *ubuntu*.

Workplace flourishing provides a multidimensional perspective to understanding, assessing and promoting well-behaviour (Rothmann, 2013; Wissing et al., 2020). Individuals who flourish learn and are engaged, they display happiness and satisfaction with their jobs, and they feel socially connected. As such, all the dimensions of the flourishing at work framework need to be considered to understand and promote the well-being of employees (Janse Van Rensburg et al., 2017; Wissing et al., 2020).

Research design

Guided by the perspectives of Heidegger, this study employed a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology (Horrigan-Kelly, Millar, & Dowling, 2016). In hermeneutic phenomenology, in-depth understanding and sharing of human experience are obtained through interpretation to provide meaningful co-constructed knowledge of the research phenomenon (Beck, Martinsen, Birkelund, & Poulsen, 2017; Davidsen, 2013; Dreyer & Pederson, 2009; Egbert & Sanden, 2020). Interpretation is multi-perspectival and derived from the research context, as well as the understanding and experience of both the researcher and the participants (Crowther, Ironside, Spence, & Smythe, 2017). Knowledge of and exposure to the volunteering environment and the well-being theoretical framework influenced interpretations of the meaning that resides within the volunteer's work-life experiences of volunteering (Crowther et al., 2017; Dreyer & Pederson, 2009). As interpretation leads to multiple meanings and in this study was based on 'insights that matter to us' (Crowther et al., 2017, p. 827), the findings presented in this article represent one perspective of the research phenomenon and are based on a co-constructed understanding of the experiences and manifestations of volunteer well-being in a volunteering work context.

Research setting

This study was conducted at a faith-based NPO that operates in the Gauteng provincial health sector. The participants of the study are volunteers, who work for the NPO, which provides volunteer services to government-run hospitals in the province. The volunteers' main activities include providing spiritual care and counselling, as well as emotional, social, trauma and physical support for patients and their families in these government-run hospitals. This setting constitutes a unique tri-party relationship with challenges faced by the client (hospitals), the NPO and the volunteer. On the one hand, government-run hospitals in South Africa experience challenges such as inadequate human resources, shortage of medical equipment, long patient waiting times, poor service delivery and hygiene, and lack of cleanliness (Maphumulo & Bhengu, 2019). On the other hand, the NPO functions from a non-profit perspective, having to rely on subsidised and donated resources. Moreover, the volunteers have to cope with personal, financial and resource constraints.

Researcher roles

The primary researcher is a lecturer and was involved in the NPO through a community service project. Her profession as an IO psychologist, her scientific interest in well-being in the workplace and observations during her community work of the volunteers' positive well-being and continued retention, despite their difficult personal circumstances and the challenging work context, prompted her to explore their well-being. The secondary researcher, an academic and psychologist registered with the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA), was interested in studying well-being in such a unique work context. All the interviews were conducted by the primary researcher.

Sampling and participants

Purposive sampling was employed (Ngulube & Ngulube, 2017), focusing on participants who fit the definition of a formal volunteer and had volunteered at the NPO for a minimum period of 12 months. The services of formal volunteers are defined as voluntary, unpaid and dedicated to a specific cause over an extended period through a formal agency or organisation (Snyder & Omoto, 2008). The NPO provides its services to eight hospitals in the Gauteng province and extended the invitation to participate in the study to formal volunteers in this context. The richness and depth of the data dictated the sample size (Ngulube & Ngulube, 2017; Thorne, 2016). After having conducted interviews with eight participants from four hospitals in Gauteng province no new themes emerged, and the richness of the data was ensured by follow-up interviews. In this way, data saturation was achieved (Thorne, 2016) and a sample size of eight was retained. The volunteers who participated in this study come from low-income living conditions and the majority were all formally unemployed. Being socio-economically disadvantaged themselves distinguishes the volunteers in this study from

TABLE 1: Demographic profile of research participants.

Participant number	Gender	Age	Ethnicity
PR1	Female	34	Black person
PR2	Female	54	White person
PR3	Male	61	Black person
PR4	Male	58	White person
PR5	Female	42	Black person
PR6	Male	60	Black person
PR7	Female	58	Black person
PR8	Female	53	Black person

those in first world countries such as the United States of America (USA) and Europe (Kiyange, 2018; Niyimbanira & Krugell, 2017). A demographic profile of the participants, which includes their allocated pseudonym (for confidentiality and anonymity purposes), gender, age and ethnicity, is provided in Table 1.

Data collection

Data were collected through in-depth unstructured interviews, following an informal conversational style. The aim of the interview was to elicit narratives of the lived work–life experiences of volunteers (Lauterbach, 2018; Yin, 2016). An open-ended question initiated the discussion with the participants, such as ‘Can you tell me about your experiences of being a volunteer?’ or ‘How did it come about that you started volunteering?’. As the conversation developed, probing and follow-up questions such as ‘How did that make you feel?’, ‘Can you give me an example?’ focused on obtaining clarification on thoughts and feelings, and expanding on a particular issue, thus enabling in-depth exploration of the participants’ narratives (Dahlberg, Dahlberg, & Nyström, 2008). Direct and leading questions were avoided (Laverty, 2003) thus allowing for the research phenomenon to emerge naturally from the volunteers’ lived experiences (Yeung, 2004). Interviews ranged between 60 min and 90 min and were tape-recorded and transcribed by a professional transcriber.

Data analysis

The data obtained were analysed using theoretical thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2017). Interpretations were related to the theoretical framework of flourishing at work. Analysis started by becoming familiarised with the data by actively reading the transcripts several times and making notes of initial thoughts and ideas. The second stage involved producing initial codes by identifying and naming sections of meaningful text. Next, the codes were sorted and collated into potential sub-themes and themes. A review and refining of the themes followed. The potential themes were reviewed by investigating the data within them to establish their relevance to that theme. The themes were also reviewed to determine whether they appropriately represented an understanding of the data as a whole. Lastly, the themes were refined by naming and conceptualising them to reflect the essence of their meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2017).

Strategies employed to ensure data quality and integrity

Rigour and trustworthiness form an integral part of qualitative research (Given, 2016). Rigour in this study was sought by applying the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). These criteria were achieved by employing several techniques including providing a detailed audit trail of the research process, describing the research context, purposive sampling, peer review and debriefing, providing direct quotations to support the interpretations of the data and addressing the role played by the researchers by making experiential and theoretical preconceptions transparent and acknowledging their role in the research process.

Reporting style

In line with hermeneutic phenomenology and qualitative research, the findings are presented in a narrative format. Interpretations are expressed using rich and descriptive explanations supported by verbatim excerpts to remain faithful to participants’ lived experience.

Findings

Guided by the meta-theoretical perspective of flourishing at work, four themes were constructed to describe how volunteer well-being manifests in the context of this study. Well-being is evident in the way volunteers experienced personal growth, in an engaged state of mind, in the emotional well-being they displayed in the workplace and in their social connectedness.

‘I am not so bad’ ... Learning and growing in competence

Despite being confronted by a new role and its associated challenges, the volunteers reported how they experience personal growth on different levels of the self. They related how their self-confidence had increased through positive work experiences, how they felt increasingly self-efficacious and ultimately experienced enhanced self-esteem. The personal growth of PR4 is evident in the way he narrates his initial self-doubt in the context of voluntary work. Yet, positive encounters with the patients banished these doubts and his confidence grew:

‘... you grow in confidence as the time goes by and you see no but people are comfortable, you know, they, I saw they are comfortable with me, and because I am a listener rather than a talker, you know. So, and then I saw that people appreciate it, you know, when you sit down and you show interest in them and afterwards you, you know, they say thank you very much and that gives you confidence for the next week.’ (PR4, M, 58)

As a psychiatric nurse, PR6 related his learning and growth in gaining spiritual experience and thought it was a valuable addition to his medical background. For him, learning how to apply his beliefs in the volunteering context, over and above his medical knowledge, helped him not only to

reconcile the internal doubts he felt but also to build his self-efficacy. His self-confidence and volunteering self-efficacy grew as he experienced the fruit of his labour:

‘What is beneficial about the volunteer work is that what you get from it is the practical aspect and the experience, you know sometimes praying for somebody, laying hands on them and seeing them recover.’ (PR6, M, 60)

Whilst engaging in volunteering, PR4 emphasised spiritual growth more pertinently; yet, as with PR6, this growth was experienced in relation to eliminating self-doubt and growing in self-efficacy as a volunteer:

‘When I get days that I am not, that I am doubting or just feel a bit down, you know, then I can sort of look back to the times when I saw other people and see the difference that God made in their lives.’ (PR4, M, 58)

For PR4, this ability to reflect on his past experiences as a volunteer diminished the doubts that his volunteer work was not good enough. He felt strengthened not only in his competence but in his belief that God strengthens him and his clients:

‘Well it strengthened my view of God you know, it strengthens my view ... So it helps me in my own life, you know, and also, in their time of distress and, you know, feeling helpless and that kind of things.’ (PR4, M, 58)

The sense of personal growth experienced in the volunteering context is also seen in a growing self-esteem, for example PR2 relates how her sense of self has changed for the better:

‘Yes, it makes a big change in my life as I can tell you this how I am feeling. I see it in my eye, in my – hoe ek dit sien né, is dat ek maak [*how I see it is that I make*], we make more time for somebody else and it makes me grow inside and when I feel down, and I can say, “I am not so bad.”’ (PR2, F, 54)

Personal growth is reflected in the way the volunteers gain self-confidence through positive work experiences and how they feel strengthened spiritually to believe that they can do this work. From this personal growth, volunteers learn what internal and spiritual resources they can rely on and they feel more confident about their ability to do volunteer work as described by PR1:

‘So, sometimes when things like this are happening, I just ask God to help me how to come out of this or how to solve this. I must listen to the inner person, what does she tells me to do.’ (PR1, F, 34)

Helping the hospital patients reflects a learning process which nurtures a more favourable view of the self in the volunteers, reflecting enhanced self-esteem. These personal growth experiences, in terms of increasing self-confidence, volunteer self-efficacy and self-esteem, relate to the psychological well-being constructs of learning and competence. By volunteering, the volunteers learn, progressively improving themselves through their experiences and, as their competence grows, they feel more effective and self-efficacious in this work context.

‘I will not stop’ ... demonstrating an engaged state of mind

The volunteers displayed an engaged affective-cognitive state of mind in the workplace which is reflected in the vigour and dedication they expressed despite taxing personal and work circumstances. This state of mind represents their general attitude, connection and approach to the work role of volunteering. Vigour, which is characterised by a willingness to persist and persevere despite obstacles, challenges and difficulties, is apparent in the way the volunteers continuously but positively and with fortitude navigated contextual and personal challenges. Despite, for example, being challenged emotionally by disheartened patients and abrasive doctors, PR2 demonstrates energy and vitality in emphasising her responsibility and commitment to remain positive and constructive:

‘There are very negative patients ... they wait for the theatre and they say don’t eat and they didn’t eat for one, two, three, four days ... then the doctor is not nice to me, the doctor don’t tell me – and then you sit and you must make it positive. You must take the negative out and you must make it positive for the patient.’ (PR2, F, 54)

Volunteers are also challenged by a lack of resources such as insufficient parking on the hospital premises. This challenge is exacerbated by their own health problems, yet PR2 persisted in her dedication to go to work:

‘The parking is a big problem for us, you know. But XXX help us to park here, but it is very far to walk for my back and my knee operation, but I do this with XXX, we wait for her together and walk together, but it is very far.’ (PR2, F, 54)

Other contextual challenges include fear of the constant exposure to viruses:

‘... because it is sick people, you can get a virus.’ (PR2, F, 54)

Personal challenges encompass, for example, financial constraints:

‘... sometimes I have not got the money for the taxi and then I walk with my foot to go to the hospital.’ (PR7, F, 58)

The volunteers persevere, however, and remain dedicated to continuing to volunteer:

‘I must walk, I must pray for them, I cannot, I cannot go because the ward is stinky, no, it is human being, they must get healed, they must be comforted.’ (PR7, F, 58)

PR3 also demonstrated dedication in the face of potential obstacles:

‘Ai, by the way, so and so in that ward doesn’t need me. But I am going there. You surprise that you go and say I am going there, let that person say whatever they want to say.’ (PR3, M, 61)

PR6 plainly said:

‘I am a volunteer at XXX hospital ... I am devoted, I am committed.’ (PR6, M, 60)

The volunteers' vigour is complemented by their dedication which is reflected in their commitment and the significance they attribute to the work role of volunteering. The extent of the volunteers' dedication is apparent in the emotional words of PR8:

'I will not stop to volunteer; as long as I am still here on earth I can do some, because I cannot stop.' (PR8, F, 53)

The significance of volunteer work for the volunteers is evident from the way they feel when being absent from the work environment:

'There are times that you can have the edge and then think of the tight schedule that you have. There are times when I cannot come on Tuesdays and I feel pain if I cannot come on Tuesday.' (PR3, M, 61)

These words of PR3 reflect the emotional connotation and investment they portray regarding volunteering.

'I'm happy' ... exhibiting emotional well-being

The volunteers spoke about how volunteering provides them with job satisfaction and elicits positive feelings in them such as happiness, hope and gratitude. PR6 described his job satisfaction as specifically related to the patients' reactions to his services:

'You get this person, you come to them, they are depressed, and the minute you say you love them they glow, they radiate from the face and their countenance change. So, you can see it is very therapeutic, those are the things that give me job satisfaction, those are the things that make me to continue doing this.' (PR6, M, 60)

For PR3, volunteering enabled him to satisfy a personal desire to help others; in turn, his job satisfaction extended to feeling content and positive about his whole life:

'... after helping with what I can then I feel peace, and then I am able to sort of you know enjoy life.' (PR3, M, 61)

PR3's words also relate to a range of positive feelings such as happiness, enjoyment, hope and gratitude experienced by the volunteers in the context of their work role. For PR5, her happiness stemmed from reaffirming her faith in the work context:

'I'm happy because I am doing God's work.' (PR5, F, 42)

For PR8 helping the needy: '*[v]olunteering makes me happy because you help another people.*' (PR8, F, 53)

In addition to feeling happy, more exhilarated feelings are experienced, which are described by PR3:

"I feel my blessings you know, my thrills and so on after helping with anything thing that I could." Overall, volunteering is experienced as being an enjoyable work role: I enjoy it, I enjoy it, I enjoy volunteer work, it is so rewarding.' (PR3, M, 61)

PR2 came to the hospital '*with a joy in me*' and liked volunteering because of the variety it offers:

'... every day it is nice to come back, because it is not, two days is not the same or two patients is not the same.' (PR2, F, 54)

PR5 spoke about the loss of positive affect when she was not able to go to work:

'... when I am not going to the hospital, my heart is not good.' (PR5, F, 42)

The volunteers' narratives further revealed experiences of hope and gratitude. Despite the challenges present in the work environment, the volunteers felt hopeful that these challenges could be resolved and that there was a positive future for the patients:

'... there is hope, you know, sometimes you see a patient and yoh, will this patient ever experience better health again, you know, and then maybe one day you will see him here when you come to one of the clinics, after he has been discharged, and you see yoh it is a different person that you see now, you know, and you realise it, there is really hope, there is really hope.' (PR4, M, 58)

Religiously-rooted gratitude is expressed for the positive encounters the volunteers have with patients:

'... there is lots of patients that I can tell you, but this one was for me so special, but I didn't take her name and her number because you know it was for me so special and when I go out, I come to my car and I thank God for every patient.' (PR2, F, 54)

and for making a meaningful contribution to the patients' lives:

'When I wake up in the morning, I say thank you to God that I can do a difference for somebody else.' (PR2, F, 54)

Similarly, PR1 recounts a positive testimony from a patient and emphasises her gratitude:

'... we thank God.' (PR1, F, 34)

Volunteers demonstrated their emotional well-being in the volunteering context in their reported work and life satisfaction and in the positive emotions they recounted.

'We are a family' ... feeling socially integrated and connected

Volunteers spoke of their connection to the organisation in a way that reflected their sense of feeling supported by and belonging to the group of volunteers that provide their services to the NPO. Support, belonging, feeling cared about and valued characterise the quality of the volunteers' relationship with one another. Speaking about the other volunteers, PR2 referred to them as her new family: '*... we are a family; new family and God give me a new family*'. The positive relationships that have been built between the volunteers are revealed by PR4, implying a sense of belonging and connectedness:

'... what also means a lot to me is our group of volunteers, you know. To share and, so that means a lot to me, you know, because afterwards, after we are finished in the wards, we go to the tearoom there and, on an informal basis we share, and we become spiritual friends.' (PR4, M, 58)

The volunteers' support and care for one another is further reflected in the story of PR2 who remembers how the other volunteers made her feel special (cared for and valued) during her knee-replacement:

'... what made me special that you volunteers, ons span [*our team*] came and visited me. And I cannot walk you know, the knee replacement was very sore and I was seven days in the ICU and XXX come and visit me in the ICU and XXX and XXX ... and they said "because you are special for me" and I was crying and I say, "God, I am really special."' (PR2, F, 54)

This theme illustrates the positive and intimate relationships that have been formed between the volunteers and demonstrates an approach that is rooted in valuing each other and in feeling a special connectedness. The volunteers' sense of belonging in this work context is further highlighted by their sense that they add value to the hospital staff and contribute to the patients' needs. At times the nurses ask the volunteers to pray for them:

'... that nurses, they say pray for us because this work is too hard for us.' (PR8, F, 53)

PR7 described how she felt valued by the patients because of the appreciation they expressed towards the volunteers:

'The mommy of the little babies, they are welcoming us, and then they said last week mama you were here, and I got healed, now the Doctor said two weeks, three days, four days I am going home. It is nice so.' (PR7, F, 58)

By volunteering, the volunteers enhance their social well-being and through their work experiences, they feel connected to each other, the patients and the workplace.

Discussion

The objective of this study was to develop a deeper understanding of how volunteer well-being manifests. The context of the study focused on volunteers who deliver their services consistently over an extended period, despite their financial and resource constraints and the emotionally taxing hospital environment they operate in. Such contextual challenges are said to potentially moderate the well-being effects of volunteering, as they may heighten volunteers' stress and burnout (Crook et al., 2006; Fuertes & Jiménez, 2000). The findings of this study portray and conceptualise volunteer well-being as a positive phenomenon despite the contextual challenges the volunteers face and demonstrate how the participants *flourish* in this work context. Volunteers' flourishing is evident in the way their sense of competence is enhanced through personal growth and learning as well as in the way they demonstrate engagement, which are both aspects of *psychological well-being*. Flourishing is further evident in their *emotional well-being*, exhibited in positive emotions and job satisfaction. Lastly, volunteer well-being manifests as *social well-being*, that is in the way they feel connected and valued in this volunteering context. The findings therefore correspond with volunteering research which highlights the internal well-being benefits that

volunteers derive from volunteer work such as personal growth, life satisfaction and social connectedness (see Andersson & Öhlén, 2005; Casiday, Kinsman, Fisher, & Bamba, 2008; Low, Butt, Paine, & Smith, 2007).

The participants' flourishing is firstly apparent in the way they felt more self-confident and self-efficacious in their ability to service the hospital patients. Volunteering also enhances their self-esteem in that they increasingly realise their own worth. Such personal growth is conceptually related to *competence*, which, as a component of *psychological well-being*, refers to feelings of personal mastery and efficacy in the work environment (Deci & Ryan, 2000). For optimal functioning and flourishing to manifest, individuals need to experience personal growth (Ryff, 1989) and a sense of competence (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Volunteering provides the volunteers with opportunities for self-enhancement (learning) and affirmation of their value (self-esteem) and ability (self-efficacy) to do this work. The volunteers' narratives of personal growth correspond with the existing theory that suggests, continuous development in the face of new challenges and experiences are associated with higher levels of well-being and lower levels of distress (Ivtzan, Chan, Gardner, & Prashar, 2013).

Flourishing was secondly also evident in the passion and dedication with which participants spoke about their work. The physical and emotional connectedness they expressed towards volunteering as a work role (Kahn, 1990; Schaufeli et al., 2002) echoes *engagement* as a sub-component of *psychological well-being* in the flourishing at work framework (Rothmann, 2013). Engagement is displayed through vitality (energy, resilience and persistence) as well as in dedication (sense of significance, enthusiasm and pride) (Schaufeli et al., 2002). The narratives portray the volunteers as being passionate, energetic and committed to volunteer work, despite the personal and contextual challenges they experience on a day-to-day basis. These results are congruent with studies showing that volunteer engagement takes on a similar structure to that of paid employees and the volunteers tend to experience high levels of engagement (Vecina, Chacón, Sueiro, & Barrón, 2012). This physical, cognitive and emotional investment of the self in volunteer work reflects how the volunteers are positively oriented towards their work role and this enables them to persevere, confidently meet challenges and cope resiliently with experiences of adversity.

The participants' flourishing is demonstrated in the third theme, which reflects the feeling-well facet of flourishing (emotional well-being) that the volunteers experience. Volunteer work appears to be an important source of *emotional well-being* for them and promotes *job satisfaction* and *positive emotional responses* such as hope, gratitude and happiness. In the absence of financial rewards, job satisfaction and positive emotions are considered an important way to sustain the desire to volunteer (Boezeman & Ellemers, 2009; Jiménez & Fuertes, 2005). Serving as indicators of optimal well-being

(Fredrickson, 2001), positive emotions are further viewed as critical ingredients that enable individuals to flourish and grow psychologically (Rothmann, 2013). This implies a reciprocal effect between the psychological and emotional well-being facets of flourishing.

Studies have shown that volunteering enhances social well-being (Son & Wilson, 2012). From the findings it is proposed in the fourth theme that *social well-being* manifests because the participants reported a sense of social connection and belonging with significant others, as well as being valued for the contribution they make to others. The importance and benefits of employees' social health are evident in several models that include positive relationships as an aspect of flourishing (e.g. Huppert & So, 2013; Keyes, 2002; Noble & McGrath, 2015; Seligman, 2011). Volunteers' social integration and connectedness reflect their embeddedness in supportive social networks and highlight the crucial role played by social processes in the volunteering work context.

The findings demonstrate the manifestation of the well-being of volunteers as a multidimensional and dynamic phenomena consisting of feeling well and functioning well dimensions (cf. Janse Van Rensburg et al., 2017; Wissing et al., 2020). Their well-being is described as dynamic because these facets seem to build on and mutually affect one another. For example, it appears that when volunteers experience less emotional well-being (e.g. 'feeling down' – PR2 and PR6), they are able to rely on psychological well-being facets to become resilient and maintain their volunteering interest, dedication and effort. When their own psychological well-being resources run low (e.g. PR2 and PR4), they rely on their social well-being to sustain them.

Implications

The significance of volunteering is affirmed by the contribution that volunteers make to the cultural, political and economic spheres of society (Laverie & McDonald, 2007; Oppenheimer, 2008). As such, much research is dedicated to identifying what motivates volunteers to continue volunteering and some have pointed to the positive effect volunteering has on the volunteers' well-being. The findings of this study offer valuable insight to NPOs, emphasising a focus on volunteer well-being to retain this valuable workforce, but also to sustain their psychological resilience under challenging work circumstances. Limited developmental resources are spent on volunteers in the context of non-profit functioning because such resources are rather directed at full-time employees. Yet, considering the importance of well-being, NPOs should partner with the health care institutions that they are servicing to consider contextual interventions that focus on both feeling and functioning well aspects to sustain and enhance the well-being of volunteers. Such interventions should focus on programmes that facilitate continuous self-development and growth, acknowledge and promote engagement, and enhance and build positive social networks and relations in a volunteering work context.

A recent study comparing cross-national differences in volunteer well-being highlighted the possibility of moderating factors in low-income contexts that have not been adequately considered in mainstream volunteer well-being research. The authors suggest that regular volunteering is detrimental to well-being when volunteers do not have access to generous unemployment benefits (Kameråde & Bennett, 2018). The limited logistical and financial resources of many South African volunteers may be a case in point. Therefore, even though the context of this study and its findings demonstrate how volunteers flourish despite their difficult circumstances, Kameråde and Bennett's (2018) word of caution rings true. Personal growth and competence, engagement, job satisfaction and positive emotions, as well as social integration and value, represent the intrinsic motivational factors that influence volunteers' prolonged labour in the volunteering context. It is the reciprocal social responsibility of NPOs as well as the hospitals they serve to not only rely on volunteers' intrinsic motivation, but to build on it through relevant intervention and investment in this important human resource. Knowing what makes volunteers perform well (from this study, for example) provides insight into their motivation and focusing on these well-being dimensions will constitute targeted strategies to enhance and sustain volunteer well-being. Moreover, the socio-economic constraints of these voluntary workers render them a vulnerable population, and their well-being should not only be addressed by focusing on motivational factors, but by providing them financial support (in the form of a stipend) and other pragmatic resources, such as transport assistance and the wherewithal to maintain good personal hygiene, as an investment in the motivational factors suggested here.

Limitations and recommendations

Although this study offers in-depth insight and understanding of how volunteer well-being manifests, it is limited in the extent to which all facets of flourishing have been reported on. Owing to the limited scope of the article format and the need to ensure rigour in the discussion of the findings, some aspects in the flourishing of volunteers may have been overlooked in favour of the ones presented. The findings, however, offer foundational insight and highlight the importance of understanding volunteer well-being to enable the enhancement thereof. Further research is recommended to consolidate intervention design in the aspects of well-being that needs to be nurtured. Another limitation to be acknowledged is the religious context of the NPO that may not be reflective of the contexts within which all volunteering is conducted in South Africa. However, the findings contribute to an understanding of what motivates, sustains and retains volunteers in low-income, resource-constrained and faith-based settings. Lastly, interpretations were influenced by a specific theoretical framework and offer just one perspective of the research phenomenon which contributes to the existing body of knowledge. The possibility of alternative interpretations, however, provides scope for continued research which could adopt different theoretical perspectives. Future research could also explore the sources

of volunteer well-being and the possible interventions that NPOs can use to promote volunteer well-being using other volunteer contexts.

Conclusion

Drawing on the work–life experiences of volunteers, this study facilitated an understanding of how volunteer well-being manifests. Volunteer well-being manifests in a sense of growing competence, an engaged work orientation, job satisfaction and positive affect, as well as feeling socially integrated and valued in the workplace. As such, volunteers flourish because they experience the multidimensional facets of psychological, emotional and social well-being in the volunteering context. Enhancing their well-being therefore should entail a multidimensional approach working dynamically on all three levels of well-being. Volunteers should not be left to their own internal psychological resources to sustain their well-being. Characterised by a unique work context, NPOs should invest in the well-being of volunteers by developing appropriate context-specific programmes aimed at capitalising on the unique manifestations of volunteer well-being. Volunteers with high levels of well-being may be better retained and could continue to contribute positively to the success of NPOs.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Author's contributions

This article is based on the thesis of Aleksandra Furtak, University of South Africa (UNISA) in fulfilment of the requirements for her Doctor of Philosophy degree in Psychology and Antoni Barnard (UNISA) is the project supervisor. The authors collaboratively conceptualised the research project. A.F wrote the original draft of this article and was responsible for the literature review, data gathering and findings. A.B. contributed to the methodology, data analysis, writing and review of this article.

Ethical consideration

Ethical approval to conduct the study was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of the University of South Africa (2015/CEMS/IOP/050). Written authorisation to conduct the study was obtained from the management of the NPO. Once consent to conduct the study had been received, the NPO volunteer coordinator acted as the gatekeeper, establishing contact between the primary researcher and suitable participants who fitted the inclusion criteria. Prior to

the interviews, all participants consented in writing to participate in the study.

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Data availability statement

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.

Disclaimer

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