

THE EFFECTS OF VOLUNTEERING ON STUDENT VOLUNTEERS

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to find out how students are influenced by the practical work ('volunteering') they do as part of a course in psychology at Unisa. Psychological and educational theories that can be related to volunteering are discussed briefly. Qualitative research was done by analysing students' feedback on their voluntary work. Students reported mostly on the positive effects of volunteering, which is consistent with existing research. The most prominent of the positive psychological effects is that of self-awareness. A further very important effect is increased open-mindedness with regard to people of other cultures and socio-economic backgrounds. Other positive effects found are career awareness, a sense of achievement, and the opportunity to put theory into practice. It is concluded that students at an open distance learning university benefit from doing practical work related to their field of study, and they also contribute to communities' development nationally and worldwide. 'Volunteering' (implemented more than 10 years ago) is compared to newer concepts such as 'work-integrated learning', 'experiential learning' and 'service-learning', and it is recommended that future planning for this course should attempt to bring volunteering more into line with these new concepts. A further recommendation is that more intensive research be done on the effects of volunteering on the transactional distance between students and university.

Keywords: Volunteering, psychological effects of volunteering, self-awareness, qualitative research, open and distance learning, work-integrated learning, experiential learning

1. BACKGROUND: EXPERIENCES OF STUDENT VOLUNTEERS

For the last few years about 800 students per year have enrolled for Therapeutic Psychology, a module that forms part of the Psychology honours course at the University of South Africa (Unisa). These students are required to do practical (volunteer) work under the supervision of an appropriate person who is able to guide them and take responsibility for the work they do. They do volunteer work at welfare organisations, hospitals, schools, HIV clinics, children's homes, old age homes, churches or any place where people require assistance. Students are expected to do any work the organisations need them for, but because they are not yet trained counsellors or therapists, they are expected not to become therapeutically involved with clients, whom they will have to leave when they have completed the course. The practical work in this module, called 'volunteering', was implemented more than 10 years ago – before concepts/terms such as 'experiential learning', 'simulated work experience' (Unisa 2012, 1), 'work-integrated learning (WIL)' (Council on Higher Education 2011, 4) and 'service-learning' (Munter 2006, 6; Tinney and Wolff 2006, 57) were formally introduced into the educational field. Our students' volunteering has much in common with all these concepts, and the greatest common denominator is the notion that student learning can be enhanced by practical experiences in the 'real world' (Council on Higher Education 2011, 4), whereby students get the opportunity to integrate theory and practice. The aim of 'service-learning', namely that students serve their communities, is also our aim with their volunteering. There are, however, also differences between our module's volunteering and the other processes named above; for example, WIL involves assessment of the practical work, whereas our students are not assessed on their volunteering as such. WIL can also lead to a specific profession or registration with a statutory body, which is not the case with our students' volunteering.

Volunteering is also in line with Unisa's Community Engagement and Outreach Policy (Unisa 2008a, 3), in which the university's academically based community engagement is described as follows: 'The goal is service to the community, on the one hand, and student experiential learning, the enrichment of academic discourse and the creation of new knowledge, on the other. ... The students learn from experience, apply their knowledge, explore career possibilities, become more aware of community needs and learn how to do research.' Additionally, it could further contribute 'to develop a culture of philanthropic volunteerism' among our students, as stated in the 2015 Strategic Plan (Unisa 2005, 17) with reference to the University's contribution to community development. One can also add to this Boyer's (1990, 23) view that academic knowledge

should be applied in service of the world. He cites Oscar Handlin, who referred to ‘our troubled planet’, which ‘can no longer afford the luxury of pursuits confined to an ivory tower’.

In 2011, on reading an article by Wilson and Musick (1999) dealing with the effects of volunteering on the volunteer, I realised that we do not know much about the effects of volunteer work on our students. At about this time I spoke to a few students about their volunteer work and started collecting e-mail enquiries and feedback about their volunteering. After their practical experience, students are required to complete an assignment in which they apply the theory learnt during the module to their practical volunteer work. Furthermore, they report on how they experienced the volunteer work. This qualitative data on their volunteering experiences is kept, whereas their assignments are returned to them, but we have not yet formally done research on these reports.

Considering Unisa’s Open Distance Learning Policy (ODL Policy) (Unisa 2008b, 2), the University strives to bridge the distance between students and the institution (therefore between me as the lecturer, representing Unisa, and the student). I came to realise that we, as lecturers, did not know enough about what the students were experiencing and about the effects of the volunteer work on them. I also realised that it is imperative that we know what the students experience when taking this module, and specifically when doing the voluntary work required by this module. Furthermore, this knowledge is essential for me, as lecturer, to know what actions to take in future to fulfil the purposes of student-centredness and student support (according to the ODL Policy), when re-curriculating, planning and developing the module in future. This realisation was further supported by the view of Cormack and Konidari (2007, 92), who state that lecturers can learn from their students’ experiences, and that the new knowledge thus gained can be utilised to promote students’ academic development. Prior to this we had not conducted research into the effects of volunteering on our students, and I realised the necessity of doing so in order to enhance our students’ academic and experiential development. It can be said that there was a transactional distance between us and our students which I intended to narrow by studying their feedback on their volunteering (Transactional distance refers to a psychological and/or communicative distance between lecturer and students – see Morgan’s theory on transactional distance in Mbweza 2014, 176; Moore 1973, 665; Shin 2003, 69).

As a distance learning institution, Unisa is in a unique position regarding its students, who are physically separated from the institution. This means these students are spread all over South Africa and the world, where they make contributions to their communities in various ways. As an open institution through which students can study at their own time and pace, our students can do their volunteering when and where they are able to (after being approved by us). The Open Distance Learning Policy also stresses student support. My supportiveness as lecturer refers to being available for students to contact me about their volunteering through technology, for example myUnisa’s discussion forum or e-mail.

2. DEFINING VOLUNTEERING

Although, strictly speaking, the students' practical work is not voluntary, it can be called 'volunteer work' in terms of the majority of definitions found in the literature. In many publications volunteerism is defined as the giving of the volunteer's time, energy, material goods and even blood, and as contributing to other people's lives and their communities without being paid.

For the purpose of the study (on the effects of volunteering on students reported on here), volunteerism is defined as *the giving of students' time, energy and money to the advantage of other people and their communities without being paid*. The most important element of this definition is the fact that students are not paid for their services.

3. THEORY AND RESEARCH ON THE EFFECTS OF VOLUNTEERING ON VOLUNTEERS

The broad approach to psychology into which volunteer work fits is that of positive psychology, which is a reaction against the emphasis on the negative aspects of human development characteristic of earlier psychology (Lyubomirsky 2008, ix; Park and Peterson 2007, 293; Wallace and Bergeman 2007, 323). Positive psychology is described as 'an umbrella term for theories and research about what makes life most worth living' (Park and Peterson 2007, 292). Volunteer work is therefore related to positive psychology because volunteers make a contribution to the lives of others and because the volunteers, too, experience positive effects (Ronel 2006, 1135, 1147).

I was unable to find specific psychological theories dealing directly with the effects of volunteer work on the volunteer. There are, however, theories that can be applied to the effects of volunteer work. The functional theory, for example, was applied to volunteer work by Clary, Snyder, Ridge, Copeland, Stukas, Haugen and Miene (1998, 1517) and also by Francis (2011, 2). The functional theory deals with the psychological functions (consequences) that people's actions can have for them and thus explains the motivation for volunteer work, but it also serves to explain the consequences of volunteer work for volunteers. According to the abovementioned authors, volunteer work can fulfil positive functions for volunteers in the areas of gaining knowledge, building social relationships, expressing values, protecting their egos and fostering their careers.

A theory from the field of education that can be applied to students doing practical work is Boyer's Model of Scholarship (Boyer 1990, 16), describing four functions of scholarship. The kinds of scholarship that can be regarded as especially relevant to student volunteering are integration and application. Integration refers to not isolating academic knowledge from the wider community or the general public sphere (Boyer 1990, 21; McCarthy and Higgs 2005, 7; University of Western Australia 2003, 2). Application refers to academic knowledge in a specific field that can be applied to

practice (e.g. by doing community service), which can also lead to students' better understanding of the theory (Boyer 1990, 22; University of Western Australia 2003, 4).

Most of the research on volunteer work deals with people's motivation for doing this kind of work. The body of research dealing with the effects of volunteer work on the volunteer is far smaller. Most studies conducted to investigate the effects of volunteer work show positive consequences for volunteers, with a much smaller number dealing with negative consequences.

There are, however, theories in addition to the functional theory that can be applied to explain the (mostly positive) consequences of volunteer work, such as the existentialist theory and other theories that relate to social involvement, even if these do not deal with volunteer work as such. These theories and the effects of volunteer work are discussed below.

3.1. Positive effects of volunteering

A significant amount of research literature on volunteer work refers to the benefits of volunteer work for the volunteer. Piliavin and Siegl (2007, 450) highlight the positive effects of volunteer work: 'Doing work that serves others has mood-enhancing, social-integrating, health-promoting, or even death-delaying power'. These and other positive consequences of volunteer work as described in the literature will now be discussed.

3.1.1. Psychological well-being

Part of psychological well-being is experiencing positive feelings or a positive sense of enjoyment. Such positive feelings engendered by volunteering are reported by several researchers, for example Noble (2000, 157) and Steffen and Fothergill (2009, 31, 42). A very important part of psychological well-being is the feeling that life is worth living. One factor that can give meaning to one's life is making a difference in other people's lives; one can therefore expect that most volunteers will feel their lives are worth living. For example, Wilson and Musick (1999, 154) have found that volunteer work gives people a sense of making a difference; Greenfield and Marks (2004, S258) hold that doing volunteer work brings a sense of purpose in life; and MacNeela (2008, 133) reports that volunteers feel that they are doing something worthwhile and that their lives therefore have meaning.

3.1.2. Physical health

Physical health benefits, and even a lower mortality rate among volunteers, have been reported by researchers such as Ayalon (2008, 1001, 1009); Baldock (2000, 85, 90), Cocca-Bates and Neal-Boylan (2011, 97); Lum and Lightfoot (2005, 31–36), Luoh and Herzog (2002, 492, 505); Piliavin (2010, 159–160); Snyder, Omoto and Lindsay (2004,

461) and Steffen and Fothergill (2009, 42). Windsor, Anstey and Rodgers (2008, 59) write about the ‘delayed mortality’ of volunteers, and Wilson (2000, 232) states that ‘Good health is preserved by volunteering; it keeps healthy volunteers healthy’.

3.1.3. Social benefits

The benefits of being socially integrated (which include meeting other people and making friends, being less lonely, enjoying others’ company, and being part of a community) are reported by researchers such as Bierhoff (2002, 315); Hardill and Baines (2003, 105); Lum and Lightfoot (2005, 37); Miller (2000, 185); Snyder et al. (2004, 451); Steffen and Fothergill (2009, 42); Van Willigen (2000, S309); and Yeung (2004, 33).

3.1.4. Reasons for positive effects of volunteering derived from theories

The reasons for the positive effects of volunteering can be explained by a number of familiar developmental psychology theories. Ayalon (2008, 1001) identifies four theories, namely *activity theory*, *role theory*, *continuity theory* and *social engagement theory* as providing an explanation for the positive effects of volunteer work.

Piliavin (2010, 160–161) identifies a number of other theoretical approaches that explain the positive outcomes of volunteering. The idea of *alienation versus social integration* originated with Durkheim, who stressed the importance of being part of a group or community which gives one a sense of attachment or integration (as opposed to a sense of alienation). This can be obtained through volunteering. *Social identity theory* refers to gaining identity by fulfilling social roles (for example volunteering); the theory on *volunteer motives* refers to obtaining self-esteem by participating in society’s activities, such as volunteering; and the theory on *mattering* states that social activities such as volunteering bring a ‘sense of mattering’ – a feeling that a person matters to society (Piliavin 2010, 162).

According to all these theories, an activity such as volunteering will therefore have mostly positive effects on volunteers. In the ODL context one could probably expect that the transactional distance between our students and the university/lecturers will be narrowed by a sense of attachment to fellow students and the university and by a sense of identity, because they represent Unisa at the institutions where they are working voluntarily.

3.2. Negative effects of volunteering

Although it is widely accepted that volunteering has positive effects on volunteers, we have to acknowledge that there are also some negative effects. These negative effects do not receive emphasis in the literature except in the case of research focusing specifically on negative consequences, as in the work of Moodley (2009) on burnout in

lay counsellors, Rughoo (2010) on vicarious trauma and compassion fatigue in novice trauma counsellors, and Graaf (2011) on the experience of, *inter alia*, compassion fatigue, burnout and secondary trauma suffered by caregivers of HIV/AIDS patients.

Negative effects mentioned in the literature, such as negative emotional effects, bad experiences, distress, burnout, secondary trauma and vicarious traumatisation are related to particular kinds of volunteer work, and also to factors such as the way the volunteers are treated by the organisation and the volunteers' emotional overload, over-commitment and inability to cope with the situation (Cocca-Bates and Neal-Boylan 2011, 96; Miller 2000, 185; Noble 2000, 157).

4. STUDENT VOLUNTEERS

4.1. Students learning theory through practice

Early in the 20th century, John Dewey disagreed with the educational philosophy of his day, which regarded 'students as depositories of facts' (Edlefsen and Olson 2002, 93). He advocated that students should learn from experience and emphasised 'learning by doing' (Niu 1994, 2).

It is currently widely accepted that all learners should obtain practical experience related to the theoretical knowledge they acquire (Edlefsen and Olson 2002, 93; Garcia, Clark and Walfish 1979, 268; King 2009, 18; Lewis 2009, 24–26). One way of obtaining practical experience is to be involved somewhere as a volunteer. Therefore, some colleges, universities and high schools encourage their students to engage in volunteer work, while others require them to do practical work as part of their course.

In this regard Hall (1995, 216) holds that the central task of the education of students is to teach them that they are part of a community, and that they have an obligation to contribute to their communities. In his view it is the task of educators to teach their students the values of service to their communities through doing volunteer work, and he concludes thus, 'Inspired by an awareness of the moral and historical roots of voluntarism, this effort to include civic values as a part of the educational process may yet become a powerful force for transmitting to future generations the traditions of a caring society' (Hall 1995, 217).

4.2. Effects of volunteering on student volunteers

Volunteering offers a number of advantages to young volunteers. They are 'getting first-hand experience' (Lewis 2009, 26) of the theories they learn about, and it is reported in several research reports that students derive not only educational benefits but also social and psychological benefits from doing volunteer work.

5. THE RESEARCH

5.1. The research question and rationale for the study

The study conducted was planned because such a large number of students (about 800 students per year) do volunteer work, yet we as lecturers do not know enough about the effects of this work on our students. Therefore, the research question is: *What are the effects of volunteering on the students?*

The question about the effects of volunteer work on the student volunteers led to a search for existing research on the topic. It soon became evident that I was unlikely to easily find South African research reports on this topic. Of the South African research reports I found, only two dealt specifically with volunteering: that of Akintola (2008); on the coping strategies employed and challenges faced by volunteers caring for AIDS patients, and that of Surujlal (2010) on the motivation of sport volunteers helping people with disabilities. I did find other South African research studies relating to volunteering; these did not focus on volunteerism as such, however, but mostly on lay counsellors: examples are research by Jansen van Rensburg (2008), Hassim (2009), Moodley (2009), Rughoo (2010) and Graaf (2011), and one report on patterns of giving in South Africa by Everatt, Habib, Maharaj and Nyar (2005).

Taking the above discussion into consideration, it is clear that the rationale for this study emanated from the need to know more about our students' experiences while doing volunteer work (which is prompted by our ODL Policy to bridge the distance between lecturers and students) and from the paucity of research on South African volunteers, specifically in the area of the effects of volunteer work on student volunteers.

5.2. Aims

According to MacNeela (2008, 127), most of the current research studies on volunteering use the volunteer process model, which focuses on three phases in the volunteer process: the antecedents (the motives for volunteering), the experience of volunteering, and the consequences of volunteering. The present research concentrates on the last phase, namely the consequences or effects of volunteering on the volunteer – specifically on the effects of volunteering on students enrolled for a specific course.

The aim of the study was therefore to explore the effects of volunteer work on honours students enrolled for Therapeutic Psychology at Unisa.

5.3. Research paradigm

The conceptual framework or world view for this project entails acceptance that each person experiences a different reality and that 'multiple realities' do exist (Krauss 2005, 759; Williams 1998, 3). The participants' experiences of their world (how they

experienced their volunteer work) are therefore acknowledged as their ‘truth’. Therefore, attempts were made to understand the point of view of the participants.

In carrying out this project, my team and I were open to the experiences of the participants and to letting our conceptualisation emerge from encounters with the data in order ‘to gain “deep” understanding ... of the participants’ viewpoints’ (Krauss 2005, 764).

This paradigm can be considered interpretive as opposed to positivist, as in terms of the latter the researcher believes in an unchangeable reality. An interpretive approach was chosen because the ‘reality’ to be studied was the volunteering students’ subjective experiences and the meanings they attached to their social world (see Terre Blanche, Durrheim and Kelly 2006, 321–322).

5.4. Research design

The qualitative research design served the paradigm or world view underlying this project and the purposes of this project, which influenced the ways in which data was collected and analysed. In this kind of design there is no control and prediction of variables (as in the quantitative paradigm); instead, the meaning the participants attach to their experience of the world is explored (Brown 2008, 21).

5.5. Research methodology

5.5.1. The data and sample

The units of study were the students’ answers in writing as attached to their assignments (these were not part of their assignments and were not assessed for marks). These could be termed ‘personal documents’ (considered by Babbie and Mouton 2001, 300 to be a type of qualitative data), containing their answers to *inter alia* the following questions:

- Describe some of the challenges that you had to face whilst doing volunteer work.
- How did you cope with these challenges?
- Share some of the high and low points of your volunteer work.

Of the approximately 800 answers we received in 2009 we randomly selected 130 students’ answers by selecting every sixth student’s assignment until we had 130. We distributed the 130 students’ answers among the team of five (myself as the researcher, and four MA Research students) as follows: I took 50 assignments to code, and each of the remaining team members was given 20 students’ answers to code. We planned to select more answers for coding but found the themes to be saturated after the coding of the sample of 130 students’ answers.

The answers received with the assignments were detached from the assignments and were coded anonymously.

5.5.2. Analysis of the data

Thematic analysis (TA), which was used in this study, is currently a recognised method of qualitative data analysis, providing means to identify the patterns or themes in the data (Anderson 2007, 1; Braun and Clarke 2006, 78).

The following TA steps were followed (adapted from Anderson 2007, 2–3; Braun and Clarke 2006, 87–93; Terre Blanche, Durrheim and Kelly 2006, 322–326): (1) familiarisation and immersion in the data (repeated reading to know the data well); (2) labelling and listing preliminary/initial themes; (3) coding the data by placing sections (for example, lines or sentences) of the data into a table of themes and sub-themes; (4) elaborating and reviewing these themes by collapsing some into one theme and separating others into more themes; and (5) defining the themes by scrutinising them, making sure that they were not too broad (or narrow) or overlapping and giving them names for use in the reporting of the findings.

The members of the team began coding on their own and then had regular meetings to discuss the themes that emerged. Each of us reported on the themes and these were compared in the group by examining the same units of data. Interestingly, the same themes tended to manifest, and we were able to reach consensus about the themes. From the third step (coding the data) the themes, sub-themes and quotes were merged into one document (in the form of a table), and the table was updated at each meeting. After the process was completed, I again read through all the 130 students' answers and re-checked the identified themes, but did not find it necessary to change the original coding.

5.6. Reliability and validity

A trap that the qualitative researcher may easily fall into is the temptation to impose his or her own views on the data; this we avoided as far as possible. I accepted the fact that I was not an expert on the topic, and the coding team and I strived to empathise with the participants so that their point of view would prevail (Krauss 2005, 764–765).

A term often used in qualitative research for 'reliability and validity' is 'trustworthiness'. This refers *inter alia* to credibility: ensuring that the researcher's view of the participants' reality is really their view. Therefore the team held a peer review during regular meetings to synchronise their coding (see Babbie and Mouton 2001, 276–277). We also went back to the original data time and again ('cycling between interpretation and observation' – Stiles 1993, 605). To further ensure the credibility of the study, a senior colleague who was experienced in qualitative research and not part of the study reviewed the whole project and specifically the analysis of the data and my reporting on it (this is termed by Babbie and Mouton 2001, 278 an *inquiry audit*). By

having my colleague oversee the project, we endeavoured to ensure the trustworthiness of this qualitative research project to the greatest extent possible.

5.7. Ethical considerations

Participants' names or identifying details were not made available and were not considered when analysing the data. The research participants were informed that their answers could be used for research purposes; however, they were not put under any risk, and no harm was done to them. The research therefore adhered to the principles of *autonomy of participants*, *nonmaleficence*, *beneficence* and *justice*, as described by Wassenaar (2006, 67–68).

6. FINDINGS – DISCUSSION OF THEMES

The findings are reported according to the most prominent themes and sub-themes that we were able to identify. The following themes reflect the effects of volunteering on a group of psychology students. The students' responses were so rich and vivid that a considerable part of the discussion comprises quotations of the students' exact words.

6.1. Theme 1: Awareness

The most prominent theme that emerged from the participants' responses about volunteering was awareness, divided into the sub-themes *self-awareness* and *career awareness*.

6.1.1. Self-awareness

Taking existential theory and Gestalt theory into account (see Corey 2009, 145, 206–207, 214), we defined self-awareness as gaining insight into one's own characteristics, abilities and social relationships. These insights lead to self-confidence and personal growth and maturity, enabling one to manage one's emotions and also to find meaning in one's existence. It is accompanied by awareness of one's environment, and specifically of other people.

It became evident from the students' answers that various aspects of their self-awareness developed, for example increased *self-confidence*, *personal growth and the ability to manage emotions*, better *knowledge of themselves*, *finding a purpose or meaning* for their lives and developing greater *acceptance of others*.

One participant articulated some of the facets of the theme of self-awareness quite clearly by saying: 'I know myself a bit better – I have learnt some of my personal limitations and what I can personally draw on to exceed them. Volunteering certainly allowed me to penetrate well beyond the surface, and made me feel I have a purpose.'

Participants also realised that they had become better able to deal with their emotions through learning to detach themselves from emotional situations. One participant learnt fast that she should act less emotionally and do something more constructive when trying to deal with a youth group: ‘I cried at first and realised soon that crying does not help, I had to communicate with the group.’

Responses reflecting self-awareness also revealed that participants had gained an understanding of their characteristics and behaviour and that they had found meaning in their own lives through doing volunteer work. With regard to self-insight, one wrote: ‘On a personal level it has made me to understand and acknowledge who I am and realise my abilities and limitations.’ With regard to finding a purpose or meaning in their lives, quite a few participants reported that the volunteer work made them accept more responsibility, and that consequently they felt a greater sense of purpose.

Further, in the category of self-awareness there were reports of *increased open-mindedness about other people* as a result of volunteering. Involvement with people who differed from the volunteers also encouraged less stereotyping of others as described in the words of another student whose volunteering brought her into contact with people of diverse backgrounds and cultures: ‘During the past couple of months I have learned that people from all walks of life deserve respect and that strong willed individuals are to be found in all cultures, in both sexes and from any socio-economic status.’

6.1.2. Career awareness

The volunteer work and consequent self-awareness of the participants also encouraged them to consider their possible future roles. We identified a category of responses that we coded as ‘career awareness’, which included *insight into own abilities with regard to future roles* and *confirmation of career choice*.

While doing volunteer work, some participants gained insight into their own abilities, which had the potential to lead to a possible future role and professional identity: ‘How I would like to be as a professional, in what sort of direction I would like to follow and concentrate on.’ Several participants realised that they would indeed like to follow a career in which they could help people. Other participants realised that they would not like to follow a career in counselling or psychology. The volunteer work therefore helped some participants to obtain clarity about their career choice.

6.2. Theme 2: A sense of achievement

Many students felt that they made a contribution to individual clients and to the organisations where they were volunteering and they therefore felt that they had achieved something worthwhile.

The sense of achievement is described by two participants as follows: ‘I felt so good inside when I know I truly made a difference’ and ‘The feeling that I helped others

and really enjoyed the experience of doing so, enriched my life by giving me confidence that I could help and left me feeling proud that I had done something good for others.’

6.3. Theme 3: Exposure to the ‘real world’ – realising the importance of putting theory into practice

Many of our students had not previously been exposed to such real-life situations, and the fact that they described this exposure to the ‘real world’ (putting theory into practice) as a high point was encouraging. Two sub-themes emerged from this theme and are discussed below.

6.3.1. Theory and practice

The students realised the importance of putting theory into practice: ‘I feel that I have surely learnt so much that a textbook (with all due respect) will never be able to give you’ and ‘A theoretical framework of understanding is certainly invaluable but does not always encompass the human-to-human relationship as it is practically experienced.’

6.3.2. Witnessing the dedication of staff

Students also had the privilege of meeting the staff of helping organisations. This gave them the opportunity to observe ‘people who live to help others’ and ‘It is truly inspiring to meet people who are so selfless and dedicated to serving humanity.’

6.4. Theme 4: Emotions

Many participants found coping with their own emotions a challenge. As one volunteer stated: ‘In this year I have had to come to grips with feelings of extreme anger as well as overwhelming sadness’. Most participants found it especially difficult to deal with their own emotions when witnessing people’s pain: many participants were touched emotionally by observing others’ agony and struggles; some experienced helplessness, frustration and disappointment and others felt disconnected and exhausted after a day when they felt they had not accomplished enough. One participant wrote: ‘Sometimes I went home in tears.’

6.5. Theme 5: Sacrifices and rewards

Volunteering had an effect on students’ finances and time – in that they had to make sacrifices by spending money on transport and giving up time in order to volunteer. However, some participants were rewarded with a sense of doing something worthwhile; volunteering therefore brought some meaning to their lives.

One participant wrote that she had to sacrifice a portion of her salary and some luxuries to be able to afford the travelling costs associated with her volunteer work. Fortunately she also experienced rewards, and described this as follows: 'It actually felt good to do this as I felt that I was contributing to my self-worth by giving up something for the sake of someone else.'

Another challenge entailed finding enough time to do volunteer work and achieving a balance between roles; as one participant put it: 'Working full time and volunteering is hard.' Again, there were rewards as described by another participant: 'It was difficult to give up my weekends to work for no money, but rewarding at the same time.'

7. DISCUSSION

Little research has been published on the experiences of volunteers in South Africa. More specifically, we as lecturers also did not know enough about what our students experience when volunteering as part of the Therapeutic Psychology course at Unisa. We therefore perceived a need to conduct research in order to shed some light on the topic.

It is interesting to note that most of the participants in the study reported more positive than negative effects of volunteering. This supports other findings in the research literature on volunteering such as those of Wilson and Musick (1999, 141) and Piliavin and Siegl (2007, 450, 461–462), who report that not only the person receiving help but also the giver of help (the volunteer) receive benefits. The primarily positive effects can be explained by means of theories relating to the meaning of one's life, finding a purpose, having the identity of a helping person and being socially integrated.

The specific effects of volunteering as identified through the study conducted and compared with existing research are discussed below.

Under the broad theme of 'awareness', the most prominent sub-theme to emerge from the data was self-awareness, with many students reporting that they had developed self-awareness as a result of their volunteering. This self-awareness led to greater self-knowledge and therefore to increased self-confidence, to growing as a person and realising what their values were, and taking responsibility for their own lives and consequently finding a purpose. Self-awareness also contributed to the mature management of their emotions. However, self-awareness as such does not receive significant attention in the research literature as a benefit of volunteering.

Of particular importance is that self-awareness leads to increased open-mindedness about people in all their diversity. Such openness towards people who differ from oneself is essential in multicultural societies such as in South Africa. Despite the introduction of democracy in 1994, in terms of which any form of discrimination is illegal, the remnants of apartheid and racism still remain in the minds of some citizens, and therefore it is encouraging that contact with people of other races and socio-economic backgrounds has had this positive effect on our student volunteers. This finding is consistent with the

research of Edlefsen and Olson (2002, 93), which also showed how students' attitudes and stereotypical ideas about people who differed from them changed as a result of their volunteering.

Most of the participants in this study gained greater insight into their abilities with regard to future roles and whether they would like to work with people, and if so, what kind of people. This knowledge provided confirmation of the field in which they wanted to follow a career. The literature on volunteering by young people or students contains few references to career awareness, but focuses more on gaining experience, developing skills, learning about work ethics and contact with possible future employers as a result of volunteering (see, for example, Lewis 2009, 26; MacNeela 2008, 131–132; Yumei 2008, 62).

Another positive effect of volunteering on our participants was that through their volunteering they gained a sense of achievement and positive feelings such as pride, satisfaction and enjoyment. These positive feelings are consistent with what is revealed in many other research studies on volunteerism, for example the work of Baldock (2000, 85, 88, 93), Jansen van Rensburg (2008, 12), Kottler (2000, 1–2), MacNeela (2008, 133), Noble (2000, 157), Snyder et al. (2004, 459), Steffen and Fothergill (2009, 42) and Yeung (2004, 33).

Volunteering exposed our students to the 'real world' and they reported that their experiences made them acknowledge the importance of putting what they had studied in theory into practice – a widely accepted principle today. They also observed what goes on in helping organisations, where the staff dedicate themselves to the welfare of others, which the students experienced as 'touching' and 'inspiring'.

For some of the participants, volunteering was characterised by emotionally laden experiences. Some experienced extreme emotions, and found it difficult not to get emotionally involved with clients and their suffering. For some, their emotional experiences were a low point of their volunteer work; the fact that volunteering can involve stress and other negative effects is consistent with other research findings such as those of Batson, Ahmad and Stocks (2004, 371, 380), Noble (2000, 157) and Rughoo (2010). However, fortunately our students were supervised by professionals or other staff at the organisations.

The shortfalls of this study (as is the case with most qualitative studies) include the relatively small number of research participants, which means that one cannot generalise in terms of the total population of volunteer workers or in terms of all students who do volunteer work. Therefore I did not try to generalise but rather to describe the experiences of the participants in this study. The data obtained is indicative of the effect of volunteer work on these 130 research participants.

8. CONCLUSION

The mostly positive psychological effects of volunteering as reported in this article confirmed that lecturers can expect students at an open and distance learning institution

to get involved in practical experiences related to their field of study. ‘Learning by doing’ (Niu 1994, 2) is in line with policies of educational institutions worldwide. Our students gained insight into the theory they had to study for this module while doing their volunteering as demonstrated in the theme identified from their feedback, namely ‘Exposure to the “real world” – realising the importance of putting theory into practice’. This theme does fall under ‘learning through reflection on doing’ of Unisa’s Experiential Learning Policy (Unisa 2012, 1–3), in which experiential learning is identified as an educational method to expose students to realistic experiences. This is also in line with the guide on work-integrated learning of the Council on Higher Education (2011, 4), which states that formal learning can be enhanced by experiences in the workplace. However, our way of practising ‘volunteering’ falls short in some important ways from being identified as ‘experiential learning’, ‘work-integrated learning’ or ‘service-learning’. To bring ‘volunteering’ into line with these concepts will be a complex process because of the reality of our open and distance learning situation at Unisa (for example, the great number of students in this module spread over our country and the world). It is nonetheless recommended that in re-curriculating the module Therapeutic Psychology, the possibilities should be investigated of bringing it more into line with these concepts, and therefore institutionalising ‘volunteerism’ in the context of distance education, although this would involve a process full of complexities.

It is possible that students of an open and distance learning university like Unisa could feel isolated. By representing Unisa at work places, volunteerism could narrow the transactional distance between student and university. This aspect calls for further research into the transactional distance of Unisa students and the effects of doing practical work on their experience of distance. The need for systematic research into the area of distance as experienced by students is stressed by Mbwesa (2014, 177), who did this kind of research at the University of Kenya, although she did not relate her research to practical work.

It is therefore recommended that much more intensive research be done on ‘volunteering’: on its possible reconceptualising (with regard to concepts such as WIL, experiential learning and service-learning) and on the effects of volunteering on students of an open and distance learning institution with regard to the aspects specifically related to their ‘distant’ situation.

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