



Exploring Female Psychology Students' Volunteering Experiences at the Inside-Out Outside-In South African Corrections Interest Group

Mbongiseni Mdakane^a

a. Department of Psychology, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

Email: emdakam@unisa.ac.za



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ABSTRACT

In the context of higher education, as propounded by the Community Engagement and Outreach Policy (Unisa, 2013), the University of South Africa (Unisa) academics are encouraged to involve students in In-Service Learning programmes, including those who may wish to volunteer their time to gain soft skills, experiential learning, and work-related skills. This study explored the volunteerism experiences of female Psychology students as part of Unisa's "Inside-Out Outside-In" Corrections Interest Group. An exploratory, qualitative approach grounded in a phenomenological research design was incorporated into the study, and the standard ingroup identity model was used as the study's theoretical framework. Ten study participants were recruited purposefully, and the data were collected using semi-structured interviews and analysed thematically. The results revealed that the terrain of volunteering is abundant with learning opportunities and that the volunteering experiences are unique, vary widely across individuals, and hold different meanings to different people. The results showed that volunteering among students requires resilience as its challenges can easily lead to burnout and despondency, owing to the fluctuating emotional situations they confront in carceral communities. It was also found that upon joining the Inside-out Outside-in South African Corrections Interest Group, the students did not come 'empty-handed' but brought misguided perceptions about the Criminal Justice System (CJS). However, through their participation over time, they gradually developed a rational understanding of the CJS. Conclusively, this study demonstrated that volunteering manifests many benefits, including debunking personal myths about carceral communities, deriving satisfaction and a sense of purpose, and building the capacity for active citizenship.

KEYWORDS

Volunteerism; inmates; correctional centres; community engagement; empowerment; burnout.

INTRODUCTION

Correctional Centres or prisons, as they are called in other parts of the world, are marginalised spaces. More often than not, persons convicted of a prison sentence are ostracised by their very families and spend lengthy periods without receiving visits or social contact with acquaintances. Their plight is compounded by the fact that even in correctional facilities, they are subjected to inhumane treatment in retribution for the crimes they committed. The study reports on a community interest group called the *Inside-out Outside-in South African Corrections Interest Group*. It is a multidisciplinary, engaged, community-focused scholarship group founded by members of the Department of Psychology at the University of South Africa (Unisa) in 2013 (Fourie, 2015). As a repository of information, the purpose of the Inside-out Community Engagement Project is to collect and distribute information about experiences of incarceration, including issues related to social reintegration, recidivism, and criminal desistance, among others. Members of the group focus on building capacity in and around carceral communities. Silva et al. (2015, p. 33) define a community engagement project “as the university’s use of knowledge and resources to enrich scholarship, research, and creative activity; enhance curriculum, teaching, and learning; prepare educated, engaged citizens; strengthen democratic values and civic responsibility; address critical societal issues; and contribute to the public good.” As such, every aspect of the programme is aligned with the institutional academic structure of the university and promotes student participation as a civic duty (Resch et al., 2021). This involves a myriad of scholarly initiatives, such as conducting research and supervising Masters and Doctoral students. Resource mobilisation constitutes another crucial aspect of the Inside-out Project, mainly through initiatives such as the Inside-out Books Project, which aims to enhance offenders’ learning journey by providing workshops on career guidance and counselling, hosting seminars, and webinars where students, researchers, and different stakeholders interact and actively engage with the carceral population, that is inmates and correctional officials. Since January 2018, the Inside-out Books Project has managed to reach out to a considerable number of correctional centres across South Africa with the assistance of the Inside-out Student Volunteers to achieve the goal of distributing books and empowering the carceral community through reading. In so doing, the Inside-out Project “encourages communities through its community engagement activities to embrace learning as part of its lifestyle, thereby helping communities to improve their quality of life.” (Unisa Community Engagement and Outreach Policy, 2013, p. 6). Bezuidenhout and van Niekerk (2015, p. 39) also concur and uphold that “universities have no choice but to...prepare future leaders and change agents [by] adopt[ing] a policy of transformation with a strategy whereby students are allowed to engage constructively in neglected populations.” Hence, 11 years on, the project continues to attract the student population both within and outside the University of South Africa. While it was established with psychology students in mind, its appeal has seen students from different academic disciplines enlisting their services as volunteers for the project.

Stukas et al. (2014, p. 2) define volunteerism as “a form of prosocial behaviour that involves a freely chosen decision to commit a sustained amount of time and effort to help another person, group, or cause, typically through a nonprofit organisation.” To put simply, it is “the practice of doing work for good causes, without being paid for it” (The Cambridge Dictionary, 2020, n. p). The social transformation of volunteering is widely accepted in the context of youth transitions, and the opportunities for young people to accumulate social and humanitarian skills while also enhancing their prospects of employability and lending a helping hand for the ‘greater good’, are primarily undeniable (Holdsworth & Brewis, 2013). Therefore, higher education institutions are some of the entities strategically positioned to hone students’ character of selflessness through integrating volunteerism for students in partial fulfilment of their studies. Initiatives such as the Inside-out Outside-in Project dovetail with the clarion call made by the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) to create spaces and opportunities for students to experience volunteerism. Not only does volunteering have serious implications for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), but it also contributes a great deal towards ensuring that the world becomes a better place for all and no one is left behind (UNICEF, 2023). In the grand scheme of things, the nobility of student volunteerism stems from its propensity to improve a one’s sense of purpose and self-worth as one experiences the difference and the joy that their selfless actions of improving social conditions and situations of the marginalised people bring. The skills acquired through volunteering, such as time management and effective communication, can positively impact a student’s levels of self-efficacy and altruism. The concept of volunteerism concerning university students is a significantly under-researched topic (Gage & Thapa, 2012; Haski-Leventhal et al., 2020; Resch et al., 2021; Williamson et al., 2018), particularly in the South African higher education landscape (Bhagwan, 2020; Perold et al., 2006).

The reviewed studies further suggest that volunteerism has been studied predominantly using quantitative research. For example, Taylor and Pancer (2007) used surveys to study volunteerism in Canada, while Schwingel et al. (2009) used randomised trials to study the effects of continued work employment and volunteer well-being among older adults in Singapore. Similarly, Kulik (2010) used a correlational design in Israel to study the community service experiences of 201 Israeli women. In South Africa, Dhurup and Surujlal (2008) used a 5-point Likert-type scale to draw responses from South African students on their experiences of volunteerism in a major sports event, while Joseph and Carolissen (2022, 2018) recently used a mixed-method study design incorporating open-ended questions ranked on a Likert-scale section to investigate recruitment and retention of South African university student volunteers in higher education. Notwithstanding the above, other researchers incorporated a purely qualitative approach. For instance, Bezuidenhout and van Niekerk (2015) captured the community engagement experiences of 42 Criminology students using a phenomenological report, while Bhagwan’s (2020) qualitative study investigated the role of volunteerism on the educational experiences of pre-service teachers (students) at a South African university. In

addition, Perold et al. (2006) investigated the contribution of universities in improving students' development of social responsibility competencies through volunteerism.

All these studies maintain that despite several contextual barriers, student volunteerism enacts social activism and a sense of responsibility among students. Given the scantiness of multifaceted understandings of the effect of volunteerism on South African university students' character development and personal well-being (Bhagwan, 2020), this study explored the lived experiences of ten female Psychology students who volunteered at the Inside-out Project during their undergraduate studentship at Unisa. A breakdown of the study's research questions is as follows:

- What motivates students to volunteer at the Inside-out Project?
- What sustains students' motivation to volunteer at the Inside-out Project?
- What are the perceived rewards or challenges associated with volunteering at the Inside-out Project?

The structure of the research questions is informed by a recommendation tabled by Van Den Berg and Cuskelly (2014), stating that to generate a broader view of university students' experiences of volunteerism in community-based organisations, researchers ought to consider probing both the inroads and barriers to that pursuit.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Volunteerism in Global Societies

Schmidt (2018) defines a volunteer as someone aged 15 years and older who does work or renders a service without remuneration. Internationally, literature on volunteering suggests that retired North Americans contribute significant amounts of time each year assisting others through volunteer work (Cavanaugh & Blanchard-Fields, 2019; Corden & Sainsbury, 2005). Similarly, researchers in New Zealand and Israel disclosed that females, especially women in late adulthood, perceived volunteering as a more positive experience and felt greater empowerment than other age groups (Kulik, 2010; Wiles & Jayasinha, 2013). The reasons provided were that older people are more satisfied with their emotional maturity to volunteer than younger women (Kulik, 2010). In essence, the results suggest that the experience of volunteering is more positive in late adulthood than in earlier life stages. These findings further corroborate previous studies confirming that age and family commitments are significantly and positively associated with the number of organisations a person volunteers and the length of time spent volunteering (Merrell, 2000; Penner, 2002). However, as demonstrated later, the motives for volunteering vary among individuals. One explanation is that "women's adjustment to their environment improves over the life cycle [such] "that the experience of volunteering is more positive in late adulthood than in earlier life stages" (Kulik, 2010, p. 383).

Historically, people have volunteered to keep themselves occupied with activities after retiring from the labour market (Morrow-Howell, 2010). From a developmental perspective, it stands to reason that volunteering in late adulthood compensates for losing a diversity of initial

life roles and contributes significantly towards older women experiencing higher levels of volunteer work than younger women (Schwingel et al., 2009).

However, nowadays, the thinking paradigm around volunteering has shifted towards enabling youth to experience the labour market and, in the process, acquire skills that can enhance their employability. According to the Volunteer Activity Survey conducted every four years by Statistics South Africa (StatsSA), the number of South Africans doing volunteer work increased from 1.3 million in 2010 to 2.2 million in 2014 (Schmidt, 2018). The 2014 figure represents 5.8 percent of the South African population aged 15 years and older, spending an average of 277 hours per volunteer annually, and valued at R9.8 billion (Schmidt, 2018). There is thus a general awareness that youth “volunteering also helps erase social norms, encourage people to engage more, as well as create and enhance ethical values” (Fondling et al., 2023, p. 2). For example, a massive-scale South African study that analysed all three available waves of Statistics South Africa’s Volunteer Activities Survey data found that volunteers were predominantly female Africans aged 25–34 years without a Matric qualification (Fondling et al., 2023). Its findings indicate that motivation to volunteer is higher among youth without formal post-school education qualifications. The findings further showed that the rate of participation in volunteerism is relatively higher among females than among men, and even so, the culture of volunteering is exclusively concentrated in only three of the nine provinces, namely the urban areas of KwaZulu-Natal, Gauteng, and Limpopo (Fondling et al., 2023).

However, the author contests this explanation by counter-arguing that South Africa is culturally and contextually different from Western societies. Bosch et al. (2012) also previously addressed this issue by nullifying the notion that senior Black South African women are relieved of some of their traditional family roles. In a somewhat similar study, Suwarno (2018, p. 3) showed that gender disparities in Indonesia were comparably related and as equally pervasive as in South Africa, particularly “women and the poor [who] continue to face challenges when it comes to employment opportunity.” Therefore, from a non-Western perspective, the cross-cultural comparison shows that family responsibility associated with caring, not only for children and elderly parents, including paid labour and household chores, may not hold owing to the “crowded nest” many older South African women experience throughout their lives.

Next, I consider the perceived contribution made by volunteers, the extent to which volunteers perceive they are making a difference or contributing to organisations and communities, *vis-a-vis* negative responses such as the subjective experience of burnout. The experiences one goes through as a volunteer may play a crucial role in determining the impact community service will have on the individual (Taylor & Pancer, 2007). For example, volunteers with positive experience are confident, feel more informed about their career choices, and perceive greater clarity regarding their career aspirations. Other benefits include psychological gains such as a sense of achievement, competence, satisfaction, confidence, and self-esteem (Corden & Sainsbury, 2005; Kulik, 2010). Wiles and Jayasinha (2013) also share these views, as

do Merrell (2000) and Taylor and Pancer (2007), who posit that volunteer work constitutes an important element for identity construction.

Volunteerism as Part of Institutional Academic Culture: Engaged Scholarship at Unisa

Individuals whose core responsibilities revolve around university teaching and research are classified as academic professionals or staff. In the context of Unisa, the academic staff's work plan comprises several Key Performance Areas (KPA's). These KPA's are assumed to be rolled out within the framework of the university (Teichler, 2017). One of these KPAs is Engaged Scholarship (ES), regarded as the third KPA, the first teaching and learning and the second research. At Unisa, ES activities are guided by the ethos of social responsibility, which mirrors the university's vision: "towards the African university in the service of humanity" (Community Engagement and Outreach Policy, 2013, p. 3). In theory and practice, the Unisa Policy on Community Engagement and Outreach Policy (2013) acknowledges that many communities are poorly resourced and remain excluded from accessing knowledge and development opportunities. Bridging this gap through collaborative approaches such as multi-, inter-, and transdisciplinary (MIT) research serves as a mechanism to bridge the divide between the traditional academy and the needs and expectations of societal stakeholders located outside of formal HE structures (Community Engagement and Outreach Policy, 2013; Du Plooy & Von Moellendorff, 2024). Therefore, academics are encouraged to involve students in In-Service Learning programmes, including those who may wish to volunteer their time to gain experiential learning and work-related skills. This endeavour aims to contribute to the gradueness of Unisa students who are socially responsible and well-suited to participate professionally and meaningfully in communities while meeting the university's teaching, learning, and research objectives.

The purpose of volunteering among students and higher education systems varies greatly and is based on different reasons, contextual situations, and learning outcomes (Bryson, 2014). It may occur in partial fulfilment of a single module, practical assignment(s), or the Work Integrated Learning (WIL) unit of their courseware or degree. There is, thus, a widespread view that student engagement, which, among other things, includes volunteerism, enables students to experience four distinct perspectives (Kahu, 2011), as further discussed below:

- 1) the behavioural perspective, which relates to student behaviour and institutional practice;
- 2) the psychological perspective, which outlines engagement as an individual psycho-social process;
- 3) the socio-cultural perspective, which underscores the critical role of the socio-political context;
- 4) the holistic perspective, which takes a broader view of engagement.

In concert, these perspectives contribute to a positive experience and are critical for identity development, and the opposite is true for individuals with less successful experiences. Also related to a successful identity construction is the level of institutional support student

volunteers receive from their placement settings. That is, the extent to which they perceive they have acquired skills while volunteering and the amount of enjoyment they experience. Several studies on volunteerism have found convergence on the numerous benefits associated with student participation and volunteering in general (Joseph & Carolissen, 2022, 2018; Stukas et al., 2016). Equally, research documents a significant relationship between personality traits and participation in community service (Louis, 2002). Other studies reveal that helping behaviour in volunteering is underscored by antecedent factors and subjective experiences (Davis et al., 2003; Kulik, 2010; Taylor & Pancer, 2007).

Regarding the meanings attached to volunteering, research emanating from the United Kingdom (UK), Indonesia, Singapore, and Canada show variations in volunteering patterns between different ethnic groups as well as males and females (Merrell, 2000; Schwingel et al., 2009; Suwarno, 2018; Taylor & Pancer, 2007). Despite being dated, the preceding studies demonstrate young people's accounts of how they had transformed other people's lives and how they were treated humbly by the organisations they worked for (Taylor & Pancer, 2007). Furthermore, stemming from the observations made by the researcher, it is unclear whether females are generally more altruistic than their male counterparts (Cavanaugh & Blanchard-Fields, 2019; Merrell, 2000). Given this lack of understanding, together with the research findings above, this study sought to explore the motives behind volunteering at the Inside-out Project and identify benefits, if there were any, attached to the participants' involvement in the project.

However, different contexts can engender different findings. For example, volunteering in carceral communities is often met with complexities that mirror the stereotypes of the many Criminology Honours students who participated in Bezuidenhout and van Niekerk's (2015) study. This assertion aligns with Joseph and Carolissen's (2022) study, who confirm that only a handful of South African higher education students geared themselves up to explore volunteerism and that the few who agreed to do it did not last long in the organisations they were assigned to. Suffice it to mention that students' observation of the dynamics that plague the organisations they are assigned to do somewhat determine their resilience to stay on. Wu and Xu (2022) established that Chinese student volunteers' resilience and volunteering behaviour were mainly influenced by the treatment they received from their organizations' leadership, and family support and encouragement or the lack thereof also had a lot to do with this. Other studies provide evidence that emotions are linked to the motivation of volunteers to stay the course. As pointed out in the conclusions of a study by Joseph and Mueller (2015), volunteers deplete their cognitive resources as they try to navigate hostile organisational terrains characterised by unfriendly dialogues, bottom-up communication, and ambiguous assignment of responsibilities. This seems to suggest that burnout is one of the spillover effects of much of the non-participation due to the organisations' failure to cultivate a climate that guarantees [non-monetary] compensation, including motivation, appreciation, and hospitality for work executed. Cavanaugh and Blanchard-Fields (2019) define burnout as the exhaustion of

a person's energy and motivation, loss of occupational idealism, and feeling exploited. To the extent that burnout is related to loss of energy because of daily stressors rather than major life events, those stressors are difficult to identify, and people usually do not protect themselves against them (Etzion et al., 1998, as cited in Kulik, 2010). Due to these nuanced daily stressors, studies on volunteerism are mostly devoid of theories explaining non-participation compared to those studying coping and adjustment. Thus, comprehensively considered, and by way of conclusion, it can be deduced from the literature reviewed that volunteering has advantages and disadvantages. The present study problematises previous research and puts forth the argument that age, context, culture as well as qualitative methods of studying volunteer work, especially when exploring the lived experiences of volunteers at the Inside-out Project, could influence study participants differently, thus adding significant knowledge on volunteering patterns in the South African context. Therefore, consistent with the study's objectives, the aim of the study centred on investigating how volunteering experiences differ and compare to what other researchers have published on the subject matter.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopted the standard ingroup identity model as its theoretical framework to explore volunteering experiences from a group of Psychology students at Unisa's Inside-out Project. In its application, the model asserts that *ingroup formation*, or the potential of recategorisation from two groups to a standard ingroup identity, can be achieved by introducing everyday tasks and increasing ingroup enhancement instead of outgroup devaluation. Given the multiplicity of activities at the Inside-out Project, which invariably involve visiting and interacting with the carceral population, both male and female offenders, including the correctional staff, makes the model ideal for exploring the experiences of recategorisation when student volunteers form a new standard ingroup identity. This is a grey and less researched area regarding what attracts female Psychology students to do voluntary work at a corrections-based project (such as the Inside-out Project). Additionally, the model further proposes that a *standard ingroup identity increases positive feelings and attitudes* towards former outgroup members and facilitates the arousal of promotive tension whereby a person's motivational system becomes coordinated to the needs of another, such as, for example, *exhibiting prosocial behaviour*. In the present study, many of the participants had already previously volunteered at one or another organisation before joining the Inside-out Project, and this effectively reconfigures their membership status from an outgroup identity to an ingroup identity. This underscores the fluid nature of ingroup identity formation and membership owing to, for example, the diverse background and heterogenous composition (i.e., race, age, ethnicity, level of study, and more.) of the participants. Notwithstanding these variations, the model stresses that it can reduce intergroup bias and conflict by reducing the psychological distance and bringing ingroup members closer to the self, while the distance between the self and outgroup members remains relatively unchanged. Exploring the volunteering experiences and the reasons that motivate and sustain

female Psychology students to volunteer in carceral contexts makes it equally important to understand how volunteers construct a revised, more inclusive one-group identity upon forming new group memberships.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach was adopted to explore the participants' lived experiences and their motivations for volunteering at the Inside-out Project. Thus, the study's qualitative orientation permitted the use of purposive sampling, where ten study participants were subsequently identified and recruited. Purposive sampling is deemed useful in providing information-rich cases where one can explore and learn more about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research and for its ability to select participants based on the relevant experience and source of interest (Nkambule & Ngubane, 2024). The present study used qualitative exploratory research grounded in a phenomenological design to explore the participants' lived experiences.

Taherdoost (2022) asserts that interview data collection ought to occur in an environment that allows participants to feel at ease to share their perspectives on the research phenomenon extensively. Data collection occurred in one of the lecturer's offices in the Department of Psychology at Unisa's Muckleneuck Ridge Campus in Pretoria. Data collection occurred over two months. Permission to use an audio recorder was sought from each of the ten study participants before the interviews' commencement to accurately capture the participants' unique and individual volunteering experiences at the Inside-out Project. An interview schedule was also used to guide the interview sessions. The length of the interviews varied between twenty to 38 minutes. Data transcription and analysis were performed shortly after the interviews. Participant observation and field notes were also consolidated to assist with triangulation during the analytic stage. The demographical details of the participants are documented in Table 1. Ten female student volunteers participated in this study. Collectively, using semi-structured interview data and participants' field observation data enabled the researcher to cross-check the consistencies and inconsistencies of the cornerstones in these bodies of data (Nkambule & Ngubane, 2024).

"Establishing inclusion and exclusion criteria for study participants is a standard, required practice when designing high-quality research protocols" (Patino & Ferreira, 2018, p. 84). Because the researcher was interested in gaining insights into the research topic from the perspectives of the youth, only the participants within the age bracket of 22 and 26 years were selected. They were purposively sampled due to their proximity to the Unisa campus, implying that only Pretoria-based female Psychology students were included in the study. Although study participants were at different levels of their academic studies, that is, 2nd year to Masters level, they were all enrolled towards a Psychology Degree at Unisa. This is true except for Participant 3, a South African citizen registered with the University of Liverpool in the United Kingdom. The period in which all ten participants volunteered at the Inside-out Project varied between three to fifteen months.

Table 1.*Demographical Information of Study Participants*

Participant No.	Number of Months Volunteering	Employment Status	Race	Age (in years)	Gender	Level of Study
1	5	Unemployed	Black	23	Female	3rd Year
2	12	Unemployed	Black	22	Female	Honours
3	14	Employed	White	24	Female	Masters
4	15	Unemployed	Black	22	Female	3rd Year
5	13	Unemployed	Black	22	Female	Honours
6	3	Unemployed	Black	26	Female	3rd Year
7	10	Employed	Black	23	Female	Honours
8	10	Unemployed	Black	22	Female	3rd Year
9	7	Unemployed	Black	21	Female	2nd Year
10	10	Unemployed	Black	23	Female	3rd Year

Thematic content analysis was used to analyse the interview data. This was done by exploring the properties and dimensions of categories, identifying relationships between categories, uncovering patterns, and testing categories against the full range of data. At this stage, inferences were proposed, including reconstructions of meanings derived from the data. Once these steps had been completed, four superordinate themes were constructed from the data, which were later deconstructed and eventually reconstructed again to produce a set of seven subordinate themes. In practice, when using themes as coding units, the primary idea is to express an idea. Consequently, each theme that emerged from the data analysis process was titled and stated metaphorically to represent an issue of pertinence to the study's research questions.

To ensure the integrity of the study's findings, several measures were implemented. Lincoln and Guba highlight the importance of assessing whether the study's findings could be independently verified. In this study, confirmability was addressed through an informal peer review process. Independent auditors, including critical readers from the researcher's institution, provided impartial critiques to minimise any apparent bias in data reporting. Furthermore, data triangulation was achieved by incorporating participants' verbal accounts alongside a thorough review of the literature. This approach ensured that interview data were grounded in diverse empirical perspectives rather than a singular viewpoint (Yende, 2024). Despite these efforts to establish trustworthiness, De Vos et al. (2005) argue that concepts like replication and dependability in qualitative research remain challenging in a socially dynamic world. Nevertheless, the researcher believes that the measures employed adequately captured the lived experiences of Unisa student volunteers and their understanding of volunteering within the Inside-out Outside-in South African Corrections Interest Group.

Ethics are an integral process of social research that enables researchers to condition their actions and behaviour, make decisions within ethical parameters and enhance the integrity of data collection, analysis, and reporting practices in their research (Awal, 2023). Consistent with this assertion, ethical clearance permission was obtained to conduct the study, and participants were informed about the non-binding nature of the study and their right to withdraw if they so wished. Furthermore, their identity was concealed by using numbers as pseudonyms to refer to them, and their verbatim responses are presented in italics.

RESULTS

Extrinsic motivation - establishing connections aimed at enhancing career development

At the beginning of the interviews, it was essential to establish early on how the participants discovered the existence of the Inside-out Project. The data analysis revealed that eight out of the ten participants learned about the Inside-out Project through word of mouth from either a friend or colleague; one participant mentioned Unisa's Support Services, and the other mentioned course material. Given the current 'information age,' these results instantly confirmed that word of mouth remains a powerful marketing tool, particularly if close friends and colleagues recommend referrals. Participant 4 supported this claim like this:

"I found out when I was doing my third year Community Psychology module, on the study guide...on the annexure, they had a story, and the story was based on one of the lecturers in the Psychology department...from reading the story, I found out about Inside-out being a community engagement in the Department of Psychology and because my Community Psychology module required me to volunteer I decided to try my luck at volunteering at the Inside-out, that's how I found out about Inside-out"

Participant 5 said:

"It was basically the third year module I was enrolled for, Community Psychology...that's what got me to volunteer...I wanted a place to volunteer because I had just moved to Pretoria and then I met Lerato, and she told me about Inside-out, and I was interested, that's how I got to know about it, and that's how I started...I don't think if it wasn't for that, I would have even known about inside-out or even thought of volunteering!"

In light of the above, due consideration was given to the reasons, including the participants' motives for joining the Inside-out Project. A multiplicity of motives was identified, and the reasons ranged from gaining practical experience (e.g., either as a prerequisite for a module or qualification) or out of curiosity and fascination with the Criminal Justice System (CJS) (e.g., causes of offending behaviour and how they link with Psychology). To this effect, Participant 1 elaborated this way:

"I heard through a friend who was [already] part of the project...I'm studying Psychology [so] I'm interested in knowing why people do what they do [or] what led them to prison or what drove them to do what they did... I want to understand how people think, and I was interested because community work is my thing."

Further to this, Participant 8 said:

"I found out from Katherine, she is also a volunteer here...she told me about Inside-out [and] because I was home and I wasn't doing anything besides studying, I wanted to do something...[and]...I was inspired by the work that Inside-out does. Inside-out is interested in the world of corrections, and my dad works in correctional services. So, I've always been interested, and I have always wanted to work with inmates."

Four out of ten participants indicated that they joined the Inside-out Project as part of the practical component for the Community Psychology module (PYC3716), which requires students to volunteer at an organisation of their choice. In particular, one participant indicated that she joined the group as a precondition towards a Master's admission. In higher education, specifically within community engagement, these results suggested that the Inside-out Project fulfilled a significant role at Unisa in infusing Work Integrated Learning with opportunities for learning soft skills necessary in the workplace. These skills are expanded on below.

Intrinsic motivation - deriving a sense of community

From an open distance electronic learning (ODEL) perspective, it is possible for Unisa students to feel lonesome and physically detached from their peers and university. Apart from deriving self-gratification through helping others, the participants' narratives strongly suggest that the Inside-out Project offered a "home" and, by implication, a sense of community, not only to a group of peers and students but also the establishment and maintenance of relationships as well as networking with the academic staff and broader Unisa community. To illustrate with an example, Participant 6 narrated her experience as follows:

"Uhm it's what we do, the book capturing, going to correctional centres, it feels good to do something for the community...that is what motivates me the most, the people you are working with love what they do, it feels good, it feels nice."

Participant 1 echoed similar sentiments. She said:

"...my love for Psychology is something else...it's on steroids, but besides that, I'm gaining experience, and I believe in sisterhood more than friendship. So when I'm here with the volunteers, I feel at home."

Similarly, Participants 8 and 2 respectively stated:

"The work we are doing, the relationship I have with the members at the Inside-out...it's more like work-family relationship, we get along, we interact with work-related things, school-related work, we share a lot of stuff together."

"Besides everything I'm learning and what I'm expected to do, it's the people in the group, I think they're hot, they make you feel comfortable enough to stay even though I already completed my Community Psychology module, and I could have left, but here I am because the group is just so welcoming and I feel the need to just stay with the group because of that."

From the responses above, it can be deduced that the Inside-out Project was perceived and experienced as providing a strong sense of attachment, an important psychological

construct necessary to maintain group cohesion. Correspondingly, to understand what kept volunteers motivated at the Inside-out Project, study participants were encouraged to think about and reflect on their achievements regarding how volunteering at the Inside-out Project benefitted them (personally and collectively). Over half of the participants believed the Inside-out Project offered many opportunities to accumulate work and research-related skills. Other opportunities included practical engagement with correctional facilities, and based on the narratives above, it stands to reason that the “hunger for knowledge and eagerness to learn” kept participants motivated. This theme suggests that the landscape of volunteering is abundant with opportunities for self and collective development. However, traveling through this landscape requires some form of intrinsic motivation from those who intend to embark on this journey.

Confronting myths, unfounded fears, and stereotypes of the Criminal Justice System

When study participants were requested to recall their first visit to a correctional facility, nine out of ten participants reported going through feelings of psychological discomfort such as anxiety, apprehension, and fear. Only one participant deviated from the rest; on probing further, it transpired that the participant’s father was a correctional official employed by the Department of Correctional Services. This finding led to the assumption that perhaps the sense of security provided by a father figure, who was also a correctional official, could be responsible for the participant’s lack of anxiety, apprehension, and fear of correctional centres. To affirm this claim, engagement with other study participants concerning issues of corrections revealed, with the notable exception of one participant who possessed prior knowledge of corrections through an incarcerated family member, that almost all participants had never been directly nor physically exposed to correctional facilities prior to joining the Inside-out Project. Four of the study participants remarked as follows:

“I’ve never been exposed to prisons whatsoever [and] I had a very biased view of them; I only had a media-influenced idea of what prison was, so the image in my head was a depiction of vile, full of criminals, people that should be removed from society, completely ostracised...” – [Participant 3].

“I was scared, I was very scared. I was afraid of offenders. I didn’t know how they would react when they see us, so it was a bit scary for me because I didn’t know if they are violent or not, I didn’t have any idea of how the inside was.” – [Participant 7].

“It [the first trip] gave me mixed of emotions. I don’t know what I was expecting...I have always wanted to [visit a prison] but I was nervous because I had never been to such a place before.” [Participant 9].

“The first trip was scary, but upon subsequent visits, I saw that they [offenders] are normal people. They are just like us.” [Participant 10].

Connecting the narratives above constructed the idea that when the student volunteers joined the Inside-out Project, they carried particular judgements, stereotypic views, and preconceived ideas suggesting a biased view about the CJS. However, based on the excerpts

above, there is reason to believe that regular field trips to correctional centres provided countless opportunities to break those stereotypes and challenge their unfounded fears. Therefore, the extent that all participants reported having adjusted well following subsequent field trips to correctional centres, with the notable exception of one participant who maintained some apprehension and doubtfulness on safety measures when volunteering in correctional centres. Nevertheless, there is reason to believe that attitudinal change occurred amongst the participants regarding their perceptions of the CJS. This change in the participants' cognitive and motivational processes is significant insofar as it allows for more harmonious intergroup relations with the carceral community.

In essence, the theme of confronting myths, unfounded fears, and stereotypes of the Criminal Justice System encapsulate this experience by showing that joining the Inside-out Project also partly challenged study participants' comfort zones by confronting myths and unfounded fears about correctional centres, which seem to have been ingrained by sensationalised media reports.

An endless fountain of opportunities

The present study aims to explore the lived experiences of ten female student volunteers and how they made sense of volunteering at the Inside-out Project. Examining how study participants made sense of their volunteering experiences simultaneously required determining what meanings were attached to these experiences. For instance, one participant stated that coming from a conservative family, the rewarding experience of volunteering altered her perceptions and opinions regarding the CJS, starting with family and friends. She said:

Uhm...what does it mean to volunteer at the Inside-out Project? It means a lot. I remember discussing it with my grandparents, my parents, [and] my other family members; it was stressful for them all. They couldn't understand why I would put myself in this situation...[but] I got to show a whole family a different side to prisons. It's become very rewarding because I could change the opinions of my friends, family members, and my grandparents who are very difficult to change, I mean they are old. So, the biggest and most important thing for me is that volunteering changes perceptions. I have been achieving it at home and trying to spread it as far as possible [Participant 3].

It means helping and supporting those in need but also developing yourself in the process. I think I motivate offenders to do better, that there's life after prison. So, I am a beacon of light that triggers change [Participant 1].

The inference that can be made from these extracts is that volunteering at the Inside-out Project provides a rich and rewarding experience for breaking stereotypes, with participants perceiving themselves as catalysts of change in the lives of those they live and work with. Furthermore, the two extracts convey a sense of mutual benefit in helping others. For instance, constant and regular field trips to correctional centres to conduct workshops and/or donate books were perceived and experienced as providing personal growth and an endless fountain of opportunities.

“It means getting an opportunity, a window of opportunity...an endless fountain of opportunities.” [Participant 4].

“Volunteering at the Inside-out Project took me outside of my comfort zone and made me part of something bigger than myself. As a shy person, I had to really come out of my shell and learn to talk and interact with others.” [Participant 7].

As metaphorically stated by Participant 4 above, every field trip to a correctional centre brought about many different learning experiences. In addition, this assertion was validated by Participant 4, who also reaffirmed that the field trips challenged her to overcome her introversion and develop her social skills. Towards this end, it can be inferred from this theme that participants' experiences varied at the Inside-out Project, and rightfully so, given the short period some of the volunteers have had. Nonetheless, the overriding impression is that they deemed the selfless exercise of volunteering to have surpassed their personal gratification and tangible benefits by showing, for example, how the “inside” (correctional centres) rehabilitates and prepares offenders for the “outside.”

The manifestation of and management of burnout

Fundamentally, the key to the volunteering experience is managing and preventing burnout. Thus, consistent with the study's objective, the researcher subsequently explored how study participants balanced their academic work and volunteering duties, including determining coping strategies for managing burnout. Parallel to the above, study participants were asked to reflect on their perceived workload at the Inside-out Project and how this affected other life areas such as employment and academic duties. Six participants reported feeling overwhelmed, especially during the examination period, while four did not feel overwhelmed. Two of the ten participants reported prioritising academic work over volunteering and suspending all participation until the end of examinations. To this end, Participant 2 elaborated as follows:

“It was too much to handle. Sometimes I couldn't even volunteer because it was the assignments at some point. Some assignments were really demanding, and during the exams, I wasn't available to volunteer at all. I decided to take a step back. Until I was done with my exams.”- [Participant 2].

“During exams, I lose all tie and stop everything I do. I no longer attend church the way I used to. I no longer work...even volunteering, I slag a bit...remember, we are here for school purposes”... - [Participant 1].

“It's easy, but sometimes difficult...I say easy because...well, for me, it's something that I love doing even though some days it becomes difficult. I don't feel like coming, but I just love being here [laughs], and we don't have to meet every other Thursday, so I have like six days to do my school work...so yes, it goes both ways, it's easy and difficult...” – [Participant 8].

“I don't think [I] get overwhelmed, I think it all goes with planning...passion, knowledge of why you're doing something...there's nothing else really...if you know that things will happen the way you planned them, you won't get overwhelmed” – [Participant 7].

"I balance my work, I have sufficient time to read, study, and revise...[so] I do not feel I need to stop volunteering because it doesn't take much of my time..." – [Participant 6].

When interpreting these results, it is essential to consider that the variation among study participants' responses could have been due to the influence of examination stress since data capturing for this study occurred during the May/June examination period. However, as already indicated, most study participants (eight out of ten) responded that they continued volunteering even during the examination period. From the participants' responses, the following keywords and phrases were noted: "keeping a schedule,"; "being disciplined,"; "maintaining a balance by keeping a diary"; "have a timetable,"; "having a plan,"; "planning ahead"; "keeping a calendar or schedule of activities" and "schedule your work." Taken together, these phrases suggest that coping requires structure. While some participants maintained this structure because "it is easier in numbers," others mentioned passion and motivation, commitment, and mental fortitude, working hard and being goal-oriented, as well as knowing the purpose and remaining true to the purpose of volunteering, which invariably kept them afloat.

DISCUSSION

The present study sought to answer three research questions about what motivates students to volunteer at the Inside-out Project. According to research, people volunteer for various reasons (Stukas et al., 2016; Wiles & Jayasinha, 2013). Based on the study's findings, one can reasonably assume that there are both intrinsic and extrinsic reasons students volunteer at the Inside-out Project. The principal aim was to gain experiential learning so that the students could advance and further develop their academic careers. Several other studies have identified benefits associated with career advancement as a critical tangible outcome for many university students (Stukas et al., 2016). In the present study, most participants derived some form of gratification from the volunteering experience and the subsequent acquisition of work-related skills. As mentioned, some students joined the Inside-out Project to comply with the requirements of a third-year Community Psychology module. However, the results also showed that most participants were already in the process of establishing connections, part of which was to acquire soft skills and gainful work experience. This finding confirms that volunteering is indispensable and necessary to bridge the gap between higher education and employment through skill-set acquisition (Holdsworth & Brewis, 2013). In addition to the above, when students participate and keep to their work schedule, they benefit positively from this experience (Stukas et al., 2016).

Consequently, this exemplifies the social exchange theory, which views volunteers as givers and takers (Kulik, 2010; Merrell, 2000). Therefore, in a mutually beneficial way, the circular exchange process balances itself out between the volunteers and the group (Merrell, 2000; Thoits & Hewitt, 2001). As an example, when the volunteers joined the Inside-out Project, their participation became instrumental and indispensable to the extent that it would have been challenging to maintain and keep some of the sub-projects afloat.

These findings mirror previous literature documented in the United Kingdom and the United States of America (Ellis, 1993; Merrel, 2000; Phillips & Phillips, 2000). Furthermore, the study established a strong cohesion and community among the participants. This finding echoes Stukas et al.'s (2016) sentiment that a strong sense of community increases volunteering, which is consistent with the tenets of the standard ingroup identity model that presupposes that inducing students of different groups to conceive themselves as belonging to the same more inclusive entity engenders a sense of belonging which subsequently manifests into positive experiences involving empathy and altruism as well as prosocial behaviour. In terms of the second research question, what sustains students' motivation to volunteer at the Inside-out Project, the results showed that altered perceptions and confronting their deep-seated fears and unfounded myths and stereotypes of the Criminal Justice System were the main catalysts for the sustenance of students' motivation to volunteer at the Inside-out Project. Additionally, this was also experienced as equally empowering.

In a similar South African study, Bezuidenhout and van Niekerk (2015) also found that many students who initially considered doing practical community engagement in corrections a high-risk endeavour, ultimately altered their perceptions and found the experience rewarding at the end of the course. Concluding the final set of research questions was determining the rewards gained by volunteering at the Inside-out Project. In this regard, enlightenment was provided for by the theme - the *endless fountain of opportunities* - which seemed to convey the essence of and confirm the positive aspects of volunteering. For instance, volunteering at the Inside-out Project presented many opportunities for acquiring research-related skills such as proposal and report writing, which are indispensable in propelling students to their next academic level, the Honours and Masters levels. In their quest to explore the core motives for volunteering among South African university students, Joseph and Carolissen (2018) also emphasise the importance of acquiring technical skills and knowledge that enhance graduate attributes. Another related question was to determine the challenges experienced by the student volunteers at the Inside-out Project, and consistently, the subjective experiences of burnout continued to feature in this study as they do in contemporary research (Cavanaugh & Blanchard-Fields, 2019; Kulik, 2010). In the present study, interpretations of burnout varied, and this was ascribed to participants' differences in terms of coping strategies. Concerning research, volunteering is associated with numerous positive experiences (Kulik, 2010; Wiles & Jayasinha, 2013), despite the negative connotations associated with the correctional milieu. Along this premise, a manifest of psychological repertoire and coping strategies involved in volunteering such as motivation, resilience, passion, and adherence to a structure transpired more often. Further to this was the psychological growth attained while confronting stereotypical views and biases about the correctional milieu.

CONCLUSION

The study explored the lived experiences of the University of South Africa (Unisa) student

volunteers, including how they made sense of volunteering at the Inside-out Outside-in South African Corrections Interest Group. The results revealed that the terrain of volunteering is abundant with learning opportunities and that the volunteering experiences are unique, vary widely across individuals, and hold different meanings to different people. Furthermore, the results showed that students rely on coping mechanisms to manage burnout and the emotional roller-coaster associated with volunteering in carceral environments. Interestingly, the findings also suggest that upon joining the Inside-out Outside-in South African Corrections Interest Group, the students did not come 'empty-handed' but brought stereotypic and biased views about the Criminal Justice System (CJS). However, over time, they gradually confronted these stereotypes, unfounded myths, and beliefs about the CJS, thus unsettling their comfort zones and improving their capacity to reason and sympathise with the plight of the inmates. The shift in positive feelings and attitudes towards the incarcerated population reflects the process of recategorisation, where volunteers' motivation aligns with the needs of the carceral community. The study's findings further demonstrate that sustaining students' positive attitude towards staying the course as volunteers requires that proper support systems be put in place to ensure that they obtain appropriate motivation and intangible returns for their work.

Regarding the study's limitations, it is acknowledged that gender representativeness deprives the study of balanced perspectives. Another limitation of the study is associated with its small sample frame (Perold et al., 2006), which implied that the views of the studied participants were insufficient to highlight the general view of the population of students within the Inside-out network. Therefore, it is recommended that future studies involve longitudinal research with male and female student volunteers.

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