



Exploring the Meaning of Lived Experiences in Community Service Among Young Adult Volunteers in Urban Youth Organizations: A Study on Personal Growth, Social Engagement, and Civic Responsibility

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ABSTRACT

Community service plays a crucial role in fostering social inclusion, collective empowerment, and sustainable development across diverse cultural contexts. However, existing scholarship remains limited in explaining how participants interpret their roles and construct personal meaning through such initiatives, leaving a research gap in understanding the transformative dimensions of service engagement. Despite the growing implementation of these programs, there is insufficient clarity on the mechanisms through which community service shapes identity, resilience, and social interaction. To address this gap, this study employed an interpretative qualitative design, utilizing semi-structured in-depth interviews with 12 young adult volunteers engaged in structured community service programs. Thematic analysis was applied to ensure methodological rigor in capturing nuanced patterns of meaning. The findings identified five core themes: rediscovery of personal identity, development of emotional resilience, building meaningful relationships, redefinition of empowerment, and sustaining motivation through shared impact. These results highlight not only descriptive experiences but also the deeper processes through which community service contributes to individual transformation and social cohesion. The study's implications extend beyond descriptive accounts by emphasizing the need for participant-centered strategies that intentionally foster identity development and resilience. For scholars, the findings enrich theoretical discussions on lived experience and meaning-making in community contexts. For policymakers and practitioners, the study offers evidence-based insights to design culturally responsive and sustainable community service models that enhance both personal growth and collective empowerment.



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INTRODUCTION

Community service has become an essential component of social development, serving as a bridge between individual agency and collective well-being. Across diverse cultural and social contexts, community-based initiatives aim to address societal challenges such as educational inequality, poverty, and environmental sustainability (Mukhlis, 2025a; Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). These programs often engage volunteers, students, and professionals in collaborative efforts that foster social inclusion and empower marginalized groups. In recent years, the increasing complexity of social issues has highlighted the need for holistic approaches that integrate personal experiences with broader structural interventions.

Within these initiatives, the human experience plays a pivotal role (Sharma et al., 2023; Sweeney et al., 2023). While community service programs are frequently assessed based on measurable outputs such as literacy rates, economic growth, or participation levels the subjective meanings constructed by individuals involved remain underexplored. For many, participation in community-based projects is not merely a civic obligation but a transformative journey that reshapes personal identity, values, and social relationships. Volunteers, beneficiaries, and facilitators often

encounter moments of emotional challenge, personal growth, and collective solidarity, which cannot be fully understood through quantitative measures alone.

Understanding these lived experiences is critical in the context of contemporary social change. Community service does not operate in isolation but reflects the dynamics of culture, power, and social relationships within specific communities (Dlamini, 2020; Lopez-Class et al., 2012). Exploring how individuals perceive and interpret their roles in these initiatives offers valuable insights into the deeper processes that sustain social empowerment and resilience. Such exploration highlights the importance of acknowledging personal narratives and collective meaning-making as integral components of effective social programs.

Given this context, there is a growing demand for research approaches that capture the essence of subjective experiences and the meanings participants assign to their involvement in community service. Phenomenology provides a suitable lens for addressing this gap, allowing researchers to move beyond surface-level descriptions toward a deeper understanding of how individuals experience, interpret, and give meaning to social engagement. By focusing on the richness of human experience, this study seeks to illuminate the complexities of community service as lived, rather than as abstract policy or programmatic outcomes.

Building upon the broader relevance of community service, recent scholarship has increasingly emphasized the importance of understanding participants' lived experiences within these initiatives (Mukhlis, Janwari, et al., 2023; Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). While previous research has examined the measurable impacts of community programs such as improvements in literacy, economic stability, and civic participation there remains a critical need to explore how individuals perceive, interpret, and assign meaning to their involvement. Investigating these subjective dimensions has emerged as a vital area of study, as it provides insights into personal transformation, emotional resilience, and the dynamics of collective empowerment.

However, examining the depth of these experiences presents significant methodological challenges (Kituuka et al., 2023; VanDeusen, 2019). Much of the existing literature relies heavily on quantitative approaches, focusing on metrics, surveys, and statistical correlations to evaluate program effectiveness. While valuable, these approaches often fail to capture the nuances of personal narratives, emotional struggles, and evolving identities of those engaged in community service. In particular, they overlook the layered meanings participants construct in response to complex social and cultural realities.

Furthermore, prior studies that have adopted qualitative methods frequently demonstrate limited analytical depth. Some tend to provide descriptive summaries rather than interpretive insights, making it difficult to reveal the essence of lived experiences (Campbell et al., 2019; Price & McGowan, 2025). Without a methodological framework that foregrounds participants' voices, much of the subjective richness embedded in these experiences remains unexplored. Consequently, our current understanding of how individuals make sense of their participation in community-based programs is still fragmented and incomplete.

Phenomenology offers a rigorous and structured framework to address these challenges (Canellas et al., 2024; Eliasi et al., 2025). By focusing on the subjective essence of experience, phenomenological inquiry enables researchers to delve beneath observable behaviors and uncover the personal and social meanings participants assign to their roles, relationships, and actions within community service contexts. This perspective facilitates a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon, positioning individual narratives at the center of knowledge production while simultaneously linking them to broader cultural and societal dynamics.

Despite the increasing implementation of community service programs aimed at addressing social and educational challenges, most existing studies rely on practical frameworks that primarily emphasize measurable outcomes and project-based interventions (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, & Zulbaidah, 2025; Mukhlis, Suradi, et al., 2023). These frameworks typically evaluate success through quantitative indicators such as literacy improvements, participation rates, or economic development

indices. While these measures provide useful insights into program efficiency, they fail to capture the deeper, subjective dimensions of individuals' lived experiences within these initiatives.

Current approaches also demonstrate significant limitations in understanding the complexity of personal meaning-making (Evans & Narasimhan, 2020; Glick et al., 2023). Quantitative evaluations and descriptive qualitative reports often overlook the transformative processes that participants undergo, such as identity reconstruction, emotional resilience, and evolving perceptions of empowerment. As a result, the essence of participants' experiences including how they interpret challenges, negotiate social relationships, and internalize personal growth remains underexplored.

To address this gap, a phenomenological approach provides an alternative lens capable of exploring the core meanings underlying participants' experiences in community service contexts (Rajabiun et al., 2021; Watson et al., 2023). Unlike outcome-driven models, phenomenology prioritizes understanding how individuals perceive, interpret, and construct meaning from their engagement with social programs. This methodological shift enables a holistic and nuanced exploration of participants' narratives, uncovering insights that remain invisible within traditional frameworks. Such an approach offers the potential to advance both theoretical understanding and practical strategies for designing more effective, participant-centered community service programs.

Recent studies have highlighted the growing importance of understanding participants' lived experiences within community service programs (Mukhlis, 2025b). Research in this area has explored how individuals engage with social initiatives and the ways in which participation shapes their identities, relationships, and emotional well-being. However, while these studies provide valuable insights, they often focus on program outcomes rather than the essence of subjective experiences. Theories of social empowerment and participatory engagement suggest that personal meaning plays a central role in sustaining community-based initiatives. Therefore, exploring individual perceptions and interpretations remains essential to understanding the phenomenon in a more comprehensive and holistic way.

To address this need, the present study adopts a phenomenological approach to examine the core meanings participants assign to their experiences in community service. This method was chosen for its ability to capture the depth and richness of subjective narratives, moving beyond descriptive accounts toward interpretive understanding (Brewster et al., 2022; O'Connell & Billingsley, 2020). By focusing on the ways individuals perceive, interpret, and construct meaning from their engagement, the study responds directly to the knowledge gap identified in previous research. This approach provides an opportunity to uncover hidden insights into participants' emotional journeys, challenges, and personal transformations. It also contributes to advancing theoretical understanding while informing more effective, participant-centered practices.

This article is structured to provide a clear and coherent presentation of the study. The introduction establishes the research context, identifies the gaps in existing literature, and explains the significance of exploring lived experiences (Villaire et al., 2025). The methodology section outlines the phenomenological approach, data collection procedures, and analytical framework applied. The results section presents the main findings organized around emergent themes, illustrated by participants' direct quotations. Finally, the discussion and conclusion interpret the findings within broader theoretical and practical contexts, highlighting implications for future community service initiatives.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

A qualitative research design grounded in phenomenology was adopted to explore the lived experiences of participants involved in community service initiatives (Fenton & Baxter, 2016; Murphy & Dingwall, 2017). Phenomenology was selected as it enables an in-depth understanding of how individuals perceive, interpret, and derive meaning from their experiences within a specific social context. This design is particularly appropriate when the goal is to uncover the essence of a phenomenon based on subjective perspectives rather than objective measurement.

In this study, an interpretative phenomenological approach was employed to capture not only the descriptive accounts of participants but also the contextual meanings embedded within their narratives. This approach aligns with the aim of revealing the complexity of human experience while considering personal, cultural, and situational factors that shape meaning-making.

Participants

Participants were selected using a purposive sampling strategy to ensure that those included possessed relevant experiences related to community service programs (Daly, 2007; Longhofer et al., 2012). Inclusion criteria required participants to have actively engaged in structured community-based initiatives within the last two years and to demonstrate the ability to articulate their lived experiences. Individuals without direct involvement in community-based programs were excluded.

A total of 12 participants were involved, comprising seven females and five males, aged between 22 and 34 years (mean age = 27.6 years). All participants were university students or recent graduates with diverse educational and cultural backgrounds. This demographic diversity enriched the data and contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of the studied phenomenon.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, designed to encourage participants to share detailed reflections on their personal experiences (Carreiras & Castro, 2012; Iosifides, 2016). An interview guide was developed based on relevant literature and pilot-tested for clarity and cultural sensitivity.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face in a private and neutral setting to ensure participants' comfort and openness. Each session lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent. Field notes were also maintained to capture contextual observations and non-verbal expressions.

To ensure data richness, probing questions were applied to elicit deeper insights into participants' emotions, perceptions, and meaning constructions. All interviews were transcribed verbatim, and anonymity was maintained by replacing participants' names with unique identifiers.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using a thematic interpretative phenomenological approach, enabling the identification of recurring meanings and patterns across participants' narratives (Hillman & Radel, 2018; Migdal, 2018). Analysis followed an iterative process comprising the following steps:

- Familiarization – Interview transcripts were read repeatedly to gain a comprehensive understanding of participants' narratives.
- Initial Coding – Meaningful units were identified and labeled to represent emerging concepts.
- Theme Development – Codes were clustered into potential themes reflecting shared experiences and essential meanings.
- Refinement of Themes – Themes were reviewed, compared across participants, and revised to ensure conceptual clarity and internal coherence.
- Integration – Final themes were synthesized to represent the essence of participants' lived experiences.

NVivo 14 software was utilized to assist in data organization and coding but did not influence the interpretative process. Direct quotations were preserved to strengthen the authenticity and validity of findings.

RESULTS

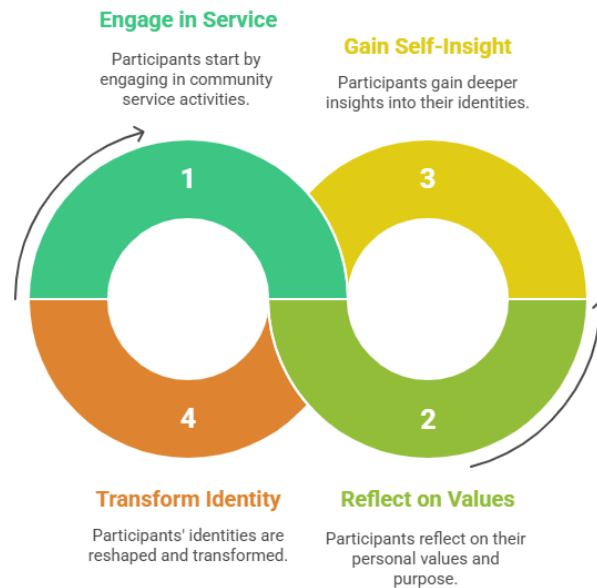
Rediscovering Personal Identity Through Community Service

Participants consistently reported that their involvement in community service activities reshaped their self-perception and identity. Engaging in programs designed to empower marginalized communities allowed them to reflect on their personal values and sense of purpose.

“I came here thinking I was the one helping them, but in the end, they helped me understand who I really am and what matters most in my life.” (Participant 3)

This theme highlights the transformative nature of service engagement, demonstrating that participants not only contributed to community development but also gained deeper insights into their own identities and aspirations.

Cycle of Personal Identity Transformation



Emotional Challenges and Resilience in Facing Social Inequality

Another prominent theme involves the emotional struggles participants encountered while witnessing systemic poverty, educational deprivation, and limited access to resources. These encounters often triggered feelings of helplessness but simultaneously nurtured a strong sense of resilience and determination to make a difference.

“At first, I felt overwhelmed by the situation; the lack of facilities, the children’s conditions, everything felt beyond what I could handle. But over time, I learned that small actions can bring real changes.” (Participant 7)

Participants emphasized that emotional resilience was developed through collective collaboration and continuous adaptation, shaping their long-term commitment to social justice.

Building Meaningful Relationships with Local Communities

The findings also indicate that trust-building and reciprocity were critical to participants’ success in implementing sustainable community programs. They developed meaningful relationships with local residents, which not only facilitated project implementation but also enhanced their cultural competence.

“It wasn’t easy at the beginning; the community didn’t trust us. But when we listened more and imposed less, they began to open up and share their real concerns.” (Participant 5)

This relational aspect demonstrates that effective community service goes beyond delivering resources; it involves co-creation, where participants and community members jointly shape initiatives based on mutual understanding.

Redefining the Concept of Empowerment

Participants expressed a significant shift in their understanding of empowerment. Initially, they associated empowerment with providing solutions or resources. However, through sustained interaction, they realized that true empowerment involves enabling communities to take ownership of their growth and development.

“Before, I thought helping meant giving them what they needed. But I learned that empowerment is about making them realize their own strengths and capabilities.” (Participant 2)

This theme highlights an essential reorientation from charity-based approaches to capacity-building frameworks, reflecting a deeper appreciation of participatory methodologies.

Sustaining Motivation Through Shared Impact

Finally, participants described how witnessing tangible changes within communities served as a powerful source of motivation to continue their involvement in community service. Seeing progress, no matter how small, reinforced their sense of purpose and inspired them to initiate further action.

“When I saw the children start reading better after just a few weeks, I felt this incredible sense of fulfillment. It wasn’t just their progress; it was also my growth.” (Participant 6)

This theme underlines the reciprocal benefits of community service, where positive social impact fosters both community development and participants’ personal growth.

DISCUSSION

Contribution of Findings to the Research Question

The findings provide an in-depth response to the central research question by illustrating how community service functions not only as a form of social contribution but also as a transformative personal journey. Participants reported profound changes in how they perceive themselves, their roles, and their relationships with others, highlighting identity reconstruction as a critical dimension of their experiences. The study contributes uniquely to the literature by showing that empowerment within community service is not defined solely by external resources or structural change but emerges through mutual learning and co-creation between participants and communities.

Furthermore, the results highlight how emotional resilience develops when individuals are exposed to social inequities and cultural complexities. Participants described their struggles as catalysts for personal growth, demonstrating that engagement in challenging contexts fosters adaptive coping strategies and a deeper commitment to social justice. These insights extend the understanding of community service beyond functional outcomes, revealing its potential to shape participants’ personal, emotional, and relational development in meaningful ways.

Relationship to Previous Literature and Theoretical Perspectives

The findings resonate with prior studies emphasizing the transformative potential of community service, supporting theories of experiential learning and social empowerment. Similar to Mukhlis et al. (2024), this study confirms that participants derive meaning from reflective engagement with communities rather than from structured outputs alone. However, the results extend existing literature by illustrating how co-created relationships between participants and community members serve as a foundation for sustained empowerment, a nuance often overlooked in previous quantitative evaluations.

Additionally, the study complements phenomenological research on identity formation, demonstrating that lived experiences within community service contexts can lead to self-redefinition and emotional transformation. While previous studies highlighted programmatic success metrics, this research foregrounds the subjective essence of engagement, capturing meanings and interpretations invisible to traditional assessments. By integrating these perspectives, the study advances a more holistic understanding of community service as both a social process and an individually transformative experience.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study provide significant practical and theoretical implications for understanding the transformative nature of community service within broader social and cultural contexts. On a practical level, the results highlight the importance of designing community-based programs that go beyond providing external resources and instead facilitate mutual learning and empowerment between participants and local communities. By capturing the essence of participants' lived experiences, this research demonstrates that meaningful engagement fosters personal growth, emotional resilience, and stronger social cohesion.

From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to the advancement of phenomenological inquiry by illustrating how subjective meaning-making shapes individuals' perceptions of their roles and responsibilities within society. These findings are relevant for practitioners, educators, and policymakers seeking to design interventions that are more participatory, culturally sensitive, and sustainable. Furthermore, the research underscores the importance of placing participants' voices at the center of community service initiatives, making the findings applicable across diverse populations and contexts where personal agency and collective empowerment intersect.

Limitations of the Study

While the study offers valuable insights, certain limitations must be acknowledged to contextualize its findings. First, the research was conducted within a specific socio-cultural setting, which may limit the transferability of results to different populations or contexts. Second, the sample size, while sufficient for phenomenological inquiry, was relatively small and purposively selected, which may not represent the diversity of experiences across broader communities.

Additionally, the focus on in-depth interviews, while effective in capturing rich narratives, may have excluded other perspectives that could emerge through alternative qualitative techniques such as participant observation or longitudinal tracking. These limitations highlight the need for caution when applying the findings universally but also serve as opportunities to inform future research designs aimed at deepening and expanding the current understanding of the phenomenon.

Future Research Directions

The findings of this study open several pathways for future exploration (Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023; Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulbaidah, et al., 2025). First, researchers could expand the investigation to include a wider range of participants across diverse cultural, socioeconomic, and geographic contexts to examine variations in meaning-making processes. Second, longitudinal studies could be conducted to explore how participants' perceptions and identities evolve over time following sustained involvement in community service.

Furthermore, integrating mixed-method approaches may enrich the understanding of both subjective experiences and measurable program impacts, creating a more holistic framework for evaluating community service initiatives. Finally, future research could explore the intersection between personal transformation and collective empowerment, providing deeper insights into how individual experiences shape broader social change. These avenues would strengthen the theoretical foundations of phenomenological inquiry while enhancing practical applications for policy and program development.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences of participants engaged in community service, aiming to understand how they construct meaning and develop personal and social identities within these initiatives. The findings revealed five key themes: rediscovery of personal identity, emotional resilience, meaningful relationships, redefined empowerment, and sustained motivation, all of which highlight the transformative potential of community-based engagement. By adopting a phenomenological approach, the study addressed limitations in previous research that often overlooked the subjective essence of participants' experiences. The results contribute both theoretically and practically by demonstrating the value of participant-centered strategies that foster

mutual learning, empowerment, and cultural sensitivity. These insights can inform the design of more inclusive and sustainable community service programs across diverse social contexts. Future research may expand on these findings by exploring longitudinal impacts and cross-cultural variations to deepen the understanding of personal and collective transformation.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest related to the conduct of this research, the preparation of the manuscript, or its publication.

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