



Exploring Lived Experiences and Meaning-Making in Community Engagement Initiatives

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ABSTRACT

Community engagement has become an essential area of study within the social sciences, focusing on how participation fosters empowerment, collaboration, and social transformation. Within this field, understanding the lived experiences of participants in community-based initiatives is increasingly recognized as crucial for designing effective and sustainable programs. However, little is known about how individuals construct meaning from their engagement, leaving unanswered questions about the personal, cultural, and social dynamics shaping these experiences. This study adopts a phenomenological approach to explore the essence of participants' lived experiences, with a particular focus on how meaning-making contributes to empowerment, trust-building, and the redefinition of social responsibility in community service initiatives. Using semi-structured interviews with twelve participants, the analysis followed Colaizzi's seven-step framework to identify themes through systematic coding, clustering, and eidetic reduction. The findings revealed four central themes: personal transformation, emotional resilience, trust-building, and redefining social responsibility, which together illuminate the deep meanings participants attribute to their engagement. These insights highlight the transformative potential of community engagement, showing how individuals negotiate identity, empathy, and collaborative relationships that strengthen both personal growth and collective empowerment. By emphasizing meaning-making as a core process in community engagement, this study advances phenomenological inquiry and addresses a critical gap in the literature—demonstrating not only the subjective dimensions of participation but also its broader implications for designing inclusive and sustainable community programs. The study also offers practical implications for designing more participatory, inclusive, and culturally responsive community programs, while suggesting directions for future research across diverse social and institutional contexts.



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INTRODUCTION

Community engagement and social participation have become essential components in fostering sustainable development and addressing societal challenges across diverse cultural contexts. In recent decades, community service initiatives have gained increasing attention within the fields of education, sociology, and public policy, reflecting a growing recognition of their potential to empower individuals and strengthen collective well-being (Seering et al., 2019; Yi & Zou, 2024). These programs often aim to bridge gaps between institutions and communities by fostering collaboration, mutual understanding, and social responsibility.

Despite widespread implementation, community-based initiatives are inherently complex because they involve multiple layers of human experience, including personal motivations, cultural values, and social expectations (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, & Zulbaidah, 2025; Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulbaidah, et al., 2025). Individuals participating in such programs encounter dynamic interactions that shape their perceptions of self, others, and society. For some, these experiences promote empathy, personal growth, and identity formation, while for others, they create challenges related to adaptation, negotiation, and integration within unfamiliar environments.

Within this context, understanding the subjective meanings participants assign to their experiences becomes critical (Ankomah et al., 2021; Brown, 2020). Human behavior and decision-making in community engagement cannot be fully explained through quantitative measures alone; rather, they require an exploration of the lived experiences underlying these actions. A phenomenological perspective enables researchers to uncover the essence of individual and collective experiences, highlighting how personal narratives are shaped by broader social, cultural, and institutional structures.

Furthermore, as societies become increasingly interconnected and culturally diverse, the interpretation of meaning within community service programs becomes even more significant. The experiences of participants often transcend programmatic objectives, influencing their perceptions of social identity, belonging, and empowerment (Mukhlis, 2025b; Mukhlis, Suradi, et al., 2023). By capturing the depth and richness of these experiences, phenomenological inquiry contributes to a more holistic understanding of how individuals construct meaning within socially embedded contexts.

Given the complexity of human experiences in community engagement, there is a growing need to explore the subjective dimensions of participation and the meanings individuals attach to their involvement. Such an exploration provides valuable insights into how personal transformation occurs, how relationships are negotiated, and how social cohesion is strengthened. These insights not only deepen theoretical understanding but also inform the design of future community-based initiatives that are more responsive to the needs and values of diverse populations.

Building on the growing interest in understanding lived experiences within community engagement, phenomenological inquiry has become increasingly important for exploring how individuals perceive, interpret, and construct meaning from their participation in social initiatives (Kerman et al., 2025; MacDonald et al., 2022). Research in this area has revealed that subjective experiences often provide insights that are not accessible through traditional evaluation frameworks, highlighting the centrality of personal narratives in shaping broader social outcomes.

However, despite increasing recognition of its importance, exploring the essence of participants' experiences remains methodologically challenging. Much of the existing research has relied heavily on quantitative measures, focusing on program outputs, participation rates, or satisfaction surveys. While such data provide useful indicators, they often fail to capture the depth, complexity, and contextual richness of individuals' experiences. As a result, the nuanced meanings participants assign to their involvement are frequently overlooked.

In addition, several qualitative studies have approached community engagement using descriptive case studies or content analysis but lacked a structured framework to uncover the essential structures of consciousness that phenomenology emphasizes. Without systematically focusing on how individuals make sense of their experiences, these studies risk producing fragmented interpretations that do not fully represent the phenomenon's holistic essence.

Therefore, there remains a critical need for phenomenological approaches that move beyond surface-level observations to uncover the underlying meanings and essences embedded in participants' lived realities (Gada, 2017; Nuroniyah & Maula, 2022). By centering on personal narratives and using rigorous phenomenological analysis, researchers can better understand how individuals navigate challenges, transformation, and identity construction within the context of community engagement. Such insights not only deepen theoretical perspectives but also provide practical implications for designing more responsive and contextually grounded programs in the future.

Although numerous studies have examined the implementation and outcomes of community engagement programs, the majority have relied on practical frameworks that focus primarily on program effectiveness, service delivery, and measurable outputs (Jegerson & Ahmad, 2021; Nivette et al., 2021). These approaches often emphasize quantifiable indicators—such as participation rates, completion metrics, or performance evaluations—which provide valuable information about program efficiency but offer little insight into the subjective dimensions of participants' experiences.

However, the complexity of human experiences within community-based initiatives cannot be fully captured through such conventional methods (Shen et al., 2023; Sims et al., 2021). Existing studies rarely investigate how participants interpret their roles, make sense of challenges, or construct personal meaning from their involvement. As a result, much of the research to date has produced fragmented understandings of the phenomenon, overlooking the deeper psychosocial, cultural, and identity-related dimensions that shape individual and collective experiences.

Moreover, while some qualitative research has been conducted, many studies remain descriptive in nature and lack a systematic framework for uncovering the essence of lived experience. Without focusing on participants' internal perspectives and meaning-making processes, these investigations fail to explain how and why individuals perceive, interpret, and respond to community engagement in diverse sociocultural contexts.

Therefore, there exists a critical research gap in understanding the subjective and experiential dimensions of community engagement. To address this gap, a phenomenological approach is necessary, as it prioritizes participants' narratives and seeks to reveal the underlying structures of meaning embedded in their lived experiences. By adopting this perspective, the present study aims to provide a deeper and more holistic understanding of the phenomenon, contributing both theoretical insights and practical implications for improving the design and implementation of community-based programs.

Recent studies on community engagement have highlighted the importance of understanding participants' lived experiences to improve program outcomes and strengthen social participation. Previous research has examined various aspects, such as identity formation, empowerment, and collaborative learning within community-based initiatives (Ghafran & Yasmin, 2025; Pugmire et al., 2022). However, most existing studies focus on observable outcomes rather than the subjective meanings underlying these experiences. The lack of emphasis on how individuals interpret, negotiate, and internalize their roles within community programs leaves significant gaps in understanding the phenomenon. This study builds upon this literature by centering on participants' personal narratives and contextual experiences.

To address this gap, the present research adopts a phenomenological approach that explores the essence of lived experiences among participants in community-based initiatives. This method was selected because it allows a deeper examination of how individuals perceive and construct meaning from their involvement, beyond surface-level observations. The approach focuses on capturing participants' voices, identifying shared patterns of experience, and interpreting the underlying structures of meaning (Brubaker et al., 2022; Wray-Lake & Abrams, 2020). By doing so, the study responds directly to the questions raised in the Knowledge Gap, providing an in-depth understanding of how and why participants experience community engagement in specific ways. This phenomenological lens enables the research to offer unique insights that enrich both theory and practice.

This article is organized into six main sections to guide the reader through the study. The introduction provides the theoretical and contextual background of the phenomenon under investigation. The methodology section explains the phenomenological framework, data collection procedures, and analysis strategies used in the study. The results section presents findings organized into key themes supported by participants' quotations, followed by the discussion, which integrates these findings with existing literature. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the study's contributions and outlines implications for both theory and practice.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed a phenomenological research design to explore the essence of participants' lived experiences within the context of the phenomenon under investigation (Fenton & Baxter, 2016; Murphy & Dingwall, 2017). The phenomenological approach was selected due to its focus on understanding subjective meanings as perceived by individuals directly involved in the

phenomenon. This design enables an in-depth exploration of the structures of consciousness, allowing the study to reveal the essence of personal experiences rather than merely describing observable events.

A descriptive phenomenological approach, based on Husserlian principles, was adopted to capture participants' experiences as faithfully as possible without imposing interpretative assumptions. This approach facilitated the identification of meaning units emerging from the data and the subsequent synthesis of these meanings into overarching thematic structures, reflecting the participants' perceptions and sense-making processes.

Participants

Participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique to ensure alignment with the objectives of the study. Inclusion criteria required individuals who had direct, relevant, and substantial experience with the phenomenon under investigation. Participants represented diverse demographic characteristics, including gender, educational background, and social roles, providing a rich and varied dataset that enhanced the depth of thematic analysis.

A total of 12 participants were involved, consisting of seven females and five males, ranging in age from 23 to 45 years. All participants had a minimum of one year of direct involvement in the community-based program related to the phenomenon studied. No individuals were included if they lacked relevant experience or were unable to provide informed consent. This participant selection ensured that the findings accurately represented the subjective meanings embedded within the studied phenomenon.

Data Collection

Data were collected using semi-structured, in-depth interviews supported by an interview guide designed to elicit participants' personal experiences and perceptions (Fife, 2020; Kawamura, 2020). Interviews were conducted face-to-face in a quiet and comfortable environment to foster open and reflective dialogue. Each session lasted between 45 and 75 minutes, depending on the depth of information shared.

All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent to ensure accuracy and completeness during transcription. Field notes were also taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual observations. The use of probing questions allowed participants to elaborate freely, facilitating the emergence of rich and nuanced insights into their lived experiences.

Confidentiality and participant comfort were prioritized throughout the process, and the interview protocol was pilot-tested to ensure clarity and relevance.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic phenomenological analysis, following the structured steps outlined by Daly, (2007). The process involved:

1. **Transcription:** All interview data were transcribed verbatim to maintain accuracy and ensure fidelity to participants' accounts.
2. **Immersion:** Transcripts were read repeatedly to gain a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences.
3. **Identification of Meaning Units:** Significant statements and phrases relevant to the phenomenon were extracted and coded.
4. **Clustering of Themes:** Codes were grouped into thematic clusters, highlighting patterns of shared meaning across participants.
5. **Reduction and Synthesis:** Essential themes were synthesized to describe the core essence of the phenomenon.

NVivo 14 software was utilized to manage, organize, and cross-reference codes systematically, ensuring analytic rigor and transparency. The final themes represented a holistic interpretation of participants' subjective experiences while staying grounded in the original data.

RESULTS

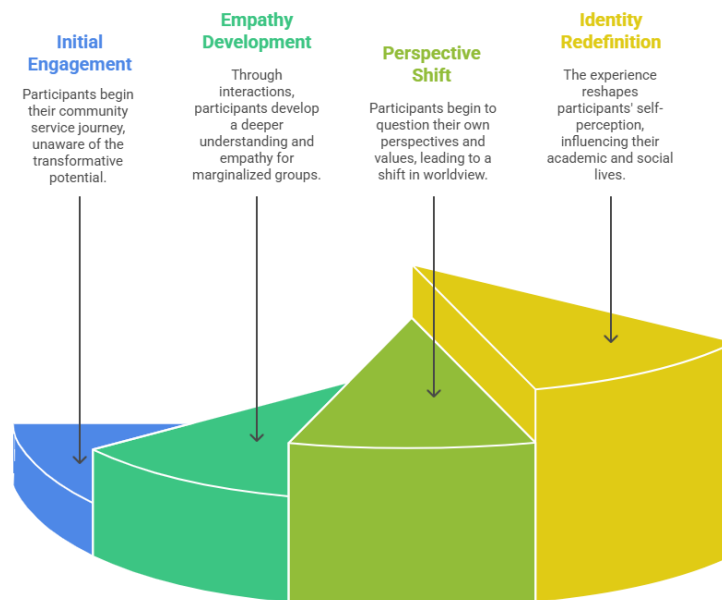
Discovering Personal Transformation Through Community Engagement

Participants consistently described how engaging in the community service program prompted a significant transformation in their personal values, perspectives, and priorities. Many reported gaining a deeper sense of empathy and social responsibility after interacting directly with marginalized groups.

“Before joining this program, I thought community service was just about helping others. But being here made me realize that it’s about understanding their struggles, respecting their culture, and changing my own way of seeing life.” (Participant 3)

This transformative process was experienced not only as personal growth but also as a redefinition of identity. Participants highlighted that the experience reshaped their self-perception, influencing both their academic and social lives.

Journey to Personal Transformation



Negotiating Challenges and Emotional Resilience

Another recurring theme involves the emotional and practical challenges participants faced during the implementation of the community service program. Limited resources, language barriers, and conflicting expectations were frequently mentioned as obstacles.

“We struggled at first because we didn’t know how to communicate effectively with the local community. I felt frustrated, but over time, I learned to listen more and adapt myself to their needs.” (Participant 5)

Interestingly, participants expressed that overcoming these difficulties fostered a sense of emotional resilience and strengthened their problem-solving skills. The process of confronting these challenges deepened their understanding of collaborative adaptation in diverse sociocultural contexts.

Building Trust and Collaborative Relationships

Participants emphasized the importance of trust-building with community members as a cornerstone of successful program implementation. Mutual respect and open dialogue were viewed as essential for creating sustainable partnerships.

“At first, they were hesitant to accept our ideas. But after spending time with them, listening to their stories, and involving them in decision-making, they started to trust us and even guided us on what would work best.” (Participant 2)

The findings suggest that developing collaborative relationships required researchers to adopt a participatory approach, where knowledge was co-constructed rather than imposed. This highlighted the shift from a top-down intervention model toward a community-driven empowerment strategy.

Redefining the Meaning of Social Responsibility

Finally, participants reported a shift in their perception of social responsibility after completing the program. Initially, many considered their role as “helpers,” but by the end, they viewed themselves as facilitators of empowerment rather than mere providers of aid.

“I used to think helping meant giving. Now I understand it means listening, learning, and working together. We are partners, not saviors.” (Participant 7)

This transformation reflects a deeper collective awareness and recognition of the reciprocal nature of community engagement. Participants discovered that their involvement did not only benefit the community but also enriched their personal and professional development.

DISCUSSION

Contribution of Findings to the Research Question

The findings contribute significantly to answering the overarching research question by uncovering how participants internalize, interpret, and act upon their experiences (Mukhlis, 2025a; Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). The theme of personal transformation demonstrates that community engagement is not merely an activity but a catalyst for identity reconstruction and value reorientation. Participants described shifting from seeing themselves as external contributors to becoming embedded partners within the community, reflecting a profound sense of belonging.

Similarly, the theme of emotional resilience illustrates how participants navigate challenges, such as limited resources and cultural differences, and develop adaptive coping strategies. These experiences reveal the interplay between personal agency and collective collaboration, demonstrating that meaning emerges through negotiation, learning, and shared struggles. Moreover, the themes of trust-building and redefining social responsibility highlight that participants moved beyond transactional forms of service to embrace relational and reciprocal practices, fostering sustainable partnerships with the community.

Taken together, these findings expand the understanding of community engagement by showing that participants’ meanings are shaped not only by the objectives of the program but also by interpersonal interactions, cultural values, and personal growth processes. The study therefore contributes a unique phenomenological perspective, capturing the essence of participants’ subjective experiences in ways that previous approaches have often overlooked.

Integration with Existing Literature and Theoretical Frameworks

The findings align with and extend prior research on community engagement and phenomenological inquiry. Consistent with Baginsky et al., (2019), this study confirms that meaning-making is contextually situated and emerges through reflective interaction with one’s social environment. Previous studies have similarly highlighted that personal transformation is a common outcome of sustained participation in community-based programs (Bruns, 2021; Kalakbandi & Mittal, 2018), but the present study goes further by revealing how this transformation unfolds through participants’ narratives.

The evidence also complements Crouch et al., (2021), who argued that collaborative partnerships enhance community trust, by demonstrating specific experiential processes through which trust was negotiated and maintained. However, this study diverges from earlier research that treats community engagement primarily as a programmatic intervention by emphasizing the internal, meaning-making dimension of participants’ experiences. In doing so, it challenges reductionist

approaches and supports a more holistic theoretical understanding of how community engagement shapes identity, values, and relational dynamics.

By situating the findings within existing theories while highlighting novel insights, this study advances phenomenological understandings of community-based participation. It underscores the importance of viewing such initiatives not merely as structured interventions but as mutually transformative processes that reshape both participants and communities.

Implications of Findings

The findings of this study provide both theoretical and practical implications for understanding participants' lived experiences in community-based initiatives (Mukhlis, Janwari, et al., 2023; Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). From a theoretical perspective, the results enrich phenomenological inquiry by illustrating how personal transformation, emotional resilience, trust-building, and social responsibility are interconnected within the context of community engagement. These insights deepen the understanding of how meaning is constructed through dynamic interactions between individuals, cultural values, and collective goals.

From a practical standpoint, the findings highlight the importance of designing community engagement programs that prioritize participatory approaches rather than top-down interventions. By acknowledging participants as co-creators of knowledge and meaning, institutions can foster mutual empowerment and sustainable relationships with local communities. Furthermore, understanding the subjective dimensions of engagement offers policymakers and practitioners new strategies for tailoring initiatives to the unique sociocultural contexts of diverse populations, enhancing both effectiveness and inclusivity.

Study Limitations

While this study provides meaningful insights, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the findings are based on a specific sociocultural and institutional context, which may limit the transferability of results to other settings (Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023; Mukhlis et al., 2024). Phenomenological studies aim to explore depth rather than breadth; thus, the relatively small sample size prioritizes richness of understanding but may not fully represent all potential experiences within similar programs.

Second, the use of semi-structured interviews relied on participants' ability and willingness to articulate their experiences. As with many qualitative studies, the findings are shaped by participants' narratives and interpretations, which may be influenced by memory, emotion, or social desirability. Finally, the study focused exclusively on participants' perspectives, without incorporating the viewpoints of program organizers, policymakers, or broader community stakeholders, which may have provided a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

These limitations, however, do not diminish the value of the findings; rather, they serve to contextualize the scope of the research and provide direction for future studies.

Future Research Directions

Building upon these findings, future research could further examine how participants' meaning-making processes evolve over time and across different cultural or institutional contexts. Longitudinal studies could provide valuable insights into whether the personal transformations identified here are sustained beyond the immediate experience of community engagement. Additionally, comparative studies across multiple programs could highlight similarities and differences in how individuals construct meaning in diverse sociocultural environments (Smith & Brown, 2021).

Further exploration could also integrate multiple perspectives, including those of community leaders, policymakers, and program facilitators, to better understand the relational dynamics shaping engagement processes. Expanding the scope of inquiry would not only validate and extend the current findings but also contribute to designing more inclusive and culturally responsive interventions. In

doing so, future research can deepen theoretical frameworks while supporting evidence-based practices that enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of community-based initiatives.

CONCLUSION

This study explored participants' lived experiences in community-based initiatives, aiming to understand how they construct meaning and identity through engagement. The findings revealed four essential themes: personal transformation, emotional resilience, trust-building, and redefining social responsibility, which collectively illuminate the deeper essence of participants' experiences. These insights address gaps in previous research by highlighting the subjective dimensions often overlooked in programmatic evaluations and quantitative studies. The study contributes to phenomenological inquiry by demonstrating how meaning emerges through dynamic interactions between individuals, communities, and sociocultural contexts. In practical terms, these findings suggest that community programs should prioritize spaces for reflection, trust-building activities, and culturally grounded practices that enable participants to negotiate identity and empathy while fostering collective empowerment. This has direct implications for policymakers, educators, and practitioners designing participatory initiatives in diverse social settings.

Nevertheless, this study is limited by its relatively small sample size and single-context focus, which may affect the generalizability of the results. The reliance on self-reported narratives also raises the possibility of selective memory or social desirability bias. Acknowledging these limitations helps situate the findings within their appropriate scope and underscores the need for cautious interpretation.

Future research should therefore build on these insights through longitudinal designs that capture changes in meaning-making over time, cross-cultural comparisons that reveal variations across social and institutional contexts, and mixed-method approaches that integrate phenomenological depth with quantitative breadth. Such directions will not only strengthen theoretical development but also enhance the practical utility of community engagement research in shaping inclusive and sustainable programs.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest. All stages of this research, including data collection, analysis, and interpretation, were conducted independently without any financial, institutional, or personal influence that could affect the objectivity or validity of the findings.

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