



Exploring Identity Transformation and Meaning-Making Among Volunteers in Post-Disaster Community Service Programs in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Community service plays a crucial role in fostering social resilience and collective recovery, particularly in post-disaster contexts where volunteers actively contribute to rebuilding affected communities. Despite its significance, little is known about how volunteers construct meaning, redefine their identities, and navigate emotional challenges during community engagement. Previous studies have predominantly emphasized the functional or outcome-based contributions of volunteerism, leaving a research gap in understanding its deeper psychosocial and identity-related dimensions. This study addresses this gap by asking: How do volunteers experience identity transformation and derive personal meaning from their involvement in post-disaster community service programs? To investigate this, an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach was employed, focusing on volunteers' lived experiences to uncover the underlying meaning-making processes shaping their engagement. Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with twelve volunteers participating in community service initiatives in Central Java. The use of IPA highlights methodological rigor in capturing subjective narratives, which are often overlooked in outcome-driven frameworks. Thematic analysis identified three interconnected findings: volunteers reconstructed their social identities, balanced emotional vulnerability and resilience, and discovered personal meaning and purpose through service. Rather than merely presenting results, these findings are interpreted as evidence of community service operating as a transformative process that fosters psychological adaptation and deeper social connectedness. Overall, this study contributes by extending the understanding of the psychosocial dimensions of volunteerism, while also demonstrating the value of phenomenological methods in capturing identity transformation and meaning-making processes. The study underscores the importance of designing community service programs that integrate reflective practices to support personal growth. Future research is encouraged to adopt longitudinal and cross-cultural designs to further explore the long-term impacts of transformative volunteer experiences.



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INTRODUCTION

Community service has increasingly become a critical mechanism for fostering social resilience and collective well-being, particularly in contexts affected by crises and disasters (Mukhlis, 2025a; Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). Across the globe, volunteer-based initiatives play a central role in rebuilding communities, restoring livelihoods, and empowering individuals to recover from traumatic events. In many post-disaster settings, community engagement transcends material support and becomes a transformative process for both beneficiaries and volunteers, as individuals collectively navigate social, emotional, and cultural challenges. This process situates community service as more than an act of charity; it emerges as a social phenomenon deeply embedded in values of solidarity, empathy, and shared responsibility within society.

The relevance of this phenomenon extends beyond the functional outcomes of recovery to encompass the subjective experiences of those involved, particularly volunteers who engage directly

with affected populations (Lawson et al., 2025; Tuncalp, 2025). Participating in such programs often requires individuals to confront complex realities involving loss, suffering, and vulnerability, while simultaneously developing new forms of identity, meaning, and social belonging. These processes highlight the interplay between individual transformation and collective empowerment, reflecting broader cultural expectations about social responsibility and human connectedness.

Despite the growing recognition of community service as a catalyst for social and personal change, limited attention has been given to understanding the lived experiences of volunteers from their own perspectives. Traditional quantitative frameworks often emphasize program effectiveness and measurable outcomes, overlooking the emotional, psychological, and existential dimensions underlying volunteers' engagement. Phenomenology provides a suitable approach to bridge this gap by capturing the essence of personal meaning and exploring how individuals construct, interpret, and internalize their experiences within broader social contexts.

Therefore, exploring volunteers' subjective experiences in post-disaster community service programs is essential for understanding how individuals make sense of their roles, reconstruct their identities, and derive meaning from their contributions (Sawant, 2024; Siebzeher & Senkman, 2019). By illuminating the psychosocial dimensions of community engagement, this study advances current knowledge while offering deeper insights into the transformative nature of volunteerism within culturally and socially embedded contexts.

While the broader relevance of community service has been widely acknowledged, research focusing on the subjective experiences of volunteers in post-disaster contexts remains limited. Understanding how individuals perceive, interpret, and internalize their involvement in such programs has emerged as a significant sub-area within phenomenological studies (Mukhlis, Janwari, et al., 2023; Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). Scholars increasingly recognize that volunteering is not merely an act of social contribution but also a transformative journey that shapes identity, emotional resilience, and personal meaning. However, the complexity of these lived experiences requires methodological approaches capable of capturing their depth, nuance, and authenticity.

Existing research has predominantly relied on quantitative frameworks to evaluate the effectiveness of community service programs, focusing on metrics such as program reach, community impact, and outcome-based indicators (Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023; Mukhlis et al., 2024). While valuable for assessing broader trends, these approaches are inherently limited in their ability to illuminate the inner realities of volunteers' personal journeys. Key dimensions such as identity transformation, emotional coping strategies, and the construction of meaning are often overlooked or reduced to measurable variables, leaving significant aspects of the phenomenon unexplored.

Furthermore, prior qualitative studies have often lacked the methodological depth necessary to uncover the essence of lived experience. For instance, many studies have applied thematic analyses or descriptive frameworks but failed to address the interpretative layers of meaning-making inherent in volunteers' narratives. Without exploring how individuals actively construct and negotiate meaning within social, cultural, and emotional contexts, these studies provide only a partial understanding of the phenomenon.

Given these limitations, there is an urgent need for research employing a phenomenological approach capable of revealing the richness and complexity of volunteers' subjective experiences. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) offers a powerful lens for understanding how meaning emerges from lived experience, allowing researchers to examine not only what volunteers experience but also how they make sense of those experiences within broader social and cultural frameworks (Acharya et al., 2024; Castellanos, 2019). This study responds to that need by exploring the transformative processes underlying identity, resilience, and meaning-making among volunteers engaged in post-disaster community service programs.

Although numerous studies have investigated the role of community service in promoting social recovery and collective well-being, most existing research has primarily relied on practical frameworks and quantitative approaches to evaluate program outcomes (Gao et al., 2025; Zhandossova et al., 2025). These approaches typically focus on measurable indicators such as the

number of beneficiaries reached, the economic impact of recovery programs, and the overall efficiency of interventions. While such metrics are valuable for assessing program effectiveness, they fail to capture the subjective and experiential dimensions of volunteering, including identity transformation, emotional resilience, and meaning-making processes.

The prevailing methodological tendency to prioritize outcome-based assessments has resulted in a fragmented understanding of the deeper psychological and social experiences of volunteers. Standard evaluative tools, while practical, are inherently limited in their ability to uncover the richness and complexity of lived experiences within post-disaster community service programs (Papakostas, 2024; Petitta et al., 2023). As a result, the essential question of how volunteers interpret their roles, negotiate emotional challenges, and construct personal meaning remains largely unanswered in the literature.

To address this limitation, there is a growing recognition of the need for research that adopts a phenomenological perspective. Unlike conventional frameworks, phenomenology enables an in-depth exploration of individual subjectivities by focusing on how participants experience, interpret, and make sense of their involvement in a broader social and cultural context. The Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, in particular, provides the tools necessary to examine the essence of lived experience and reveal the meaning structures embedded within personal narratives.

This study seeks to fill this knowledge gap by employing a phenomenological lens to explore volunteers' experiences in post-disaster community service programs (Aldoughli, 2024; Ayten et al., 2019). By prioritizing participants' voices and capturing their meaning-making processes, the research aims to generate a more holistic and nuanced understanding of the transformative dimensions of volunteering—an aspect often overlooked by prior studies that relied heavily on practical and outcome-driven assessments.

Recent studies have highlighted the significance of understanding volunteers' subjective experiences in post-disaster community service programs. Research has demonstrated that volunteering often triggers personal transformation, emotional growth, and the reconstruction of social identity (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, & Zulbaidah, 2025; Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulbaidah, et al., 2025). However, existing literature rarely captures the inner meaning-making processes that volunteers undergo while facing complex emotional and social challenges. Theories of identity reconstruction and resilience suggest that these experiences involve multidimensional shifts, including psychological, social, and existential changes. By situating this study within these theoretical frameworks, it addresses a critical gap in understanding the essence of lived experience in community engagement.

To explore this phenomenon, the study adopts an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, which focuses on uncovering how participants perceive, interpret, and make sense of their experiences (Safronova, 2024; Shimshi, 2025). This method was selected because it enables the examination of volunteers' narratives in their own voices, prioritizing subjective meaning over generalized outcomes. IPA allows researchers to answer the central question raised in the Knowledge Gap: How do volunteers reconstruct their identities, manage emotional challenges, and derive personal meaning from their involvement in community service programs? Through this lens, the study seeks to reveal patterns of transformation while respecting the uniqueness of each participant's story. This phenomenological approach ensures a rich and holistic understanding of the phenomenon.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. The introduction presents the conceptual background and identifies the research gap addressed in this study (Gillis & Krull, 2019; Shutaleva et al., 2019). The methodology section explains the phenomenological design, participant selection, data collection, and analysis procedures using IPA. The results section organizes findings into thematic categories supported by direct quotations from participants. Finally, the discussion integrates the findings with existing literature, highlights theoretical and practical contributions, and concludes with recommendations for future research.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed a phenomenological research design with an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the subjective experiences of volunteers participating in community service programs following post-disaster recovery (Daly, 2007; Longhofer et al., 2012). The phenomenological framework was chosen for its ability to examine the lived experiences of individuals and uncover the essential meanings embedded within those experiences. By focusing on participants' perspectives, the design facilitated an in-depth exploration of the psychosocial dimensions of identity transformation, emotional adjustment, and meaning-making.

An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) framework was applied, following the principles outlined by Iosifides, (2016). This approach enabled a double hermeneutic process, wherein participants made sense of their personal experiences while the researcher interpreted these meanings within a broader contextual framework. The method was deemed appropriate for addressing the research question: "How do volunteers construct meaning and perceive identity transformation through community service in post-disaster contexts?"

Participants

Participants consisted of 12 volunteers (6 females and 6 males) actively involved in post-disaster community service initiatives in Central Java. Purposive sampling was employed to select individuals who met the following inclusion criteria:

1. Aged between 21 and 40 years old.
2. Had participated in a structured community service program for at least three months following a disaster.
3. Willing to share personal reflections on identity transformation and emotional experiences.

Exclusion criteria included individuals who participated solely in administrative roles or those unable to provide informed consent. The age of participants ranged from 22 to 38 years ($M = 29.4$ years), and they represented diverse educational and occupational backgrounds, including university students, community leaders, and independent volunteers. This demographic diversity enriched the contextual understanding of lived experiences.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews guided by a flexible interview protocol designed to capture personal narratives and meaning-making processes. The interview guide contained open-ended questions focusing on participants' identity reconstruction, emotional challenges, coping strategies, and personal transformations throughout their volunteer engagement.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face at community centers and private meeting rooms to ensure a comfortable and confidential environment. Each session lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent. Observational field notes and reflective journals were also incorporated to enrich contextual interpretation.

To enhance credibility, probing techniques were used to elicit rich, detailed accounts while allowing participants to direct the narrative flow. All interviews were transcribed verbatim before analysis.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to identify emergent themes that represented the essence of participants' lived experiences (Carreiras & Castro, 2012; Migdal, 2018). The analytic process followed these stages:

1. Immersion in the Data – Transcripts were read multiple times to gain a holistic understanding of participants' narratives.

2. Identification of Meaning Units – Significant statements were highlighted and coded based on relevance to identity transformation, emotional processes, and meaning-making.
3. Theme Development – Codes were clustered into themes and subthemes that reflected shared patterns across participants.
4. Integration and Interpretation – Themes were synthesized to reveal the underlying psychological and social dynamics of volunteer engagement.

NVivo 14 software was utilized to manage and organize qualitative data but was not central to the interpretative process. Analytical rigor was maintained through iterative cross-checking and reflective memoing.

RESULTS

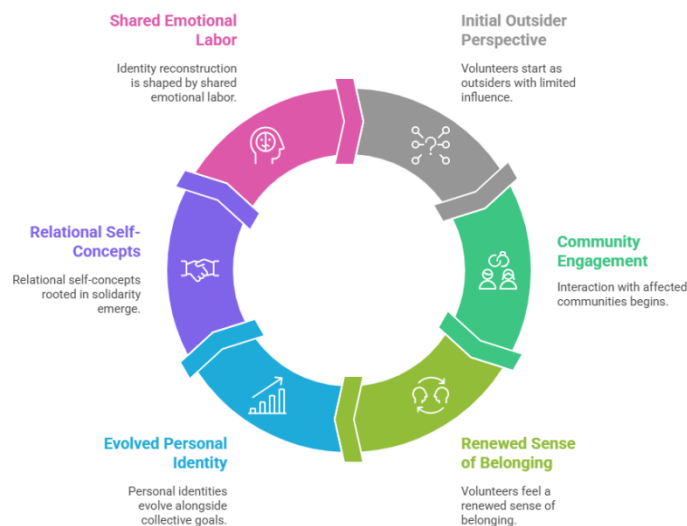
Reconstructing Social Identity Through Community Engagement

Participants described a profound transformation in their sense of self while engaging in community-based recovery programs. Before joining the initiative, many volunteers viewed themselves as “outsiders” with limited influence on collective recovery. However, sustained interaction with affected communities fostered a renewed sense of belonging and social identity.

“At first, I thought I was just here to help distribute aid, but the experience changed me. I began to see myself as part of the community, someone who could contribute to rebuilding their lives.” — (Participant 3)

This shift reflects how personal identities evolved alongside collective goals, supporting the emergence of relational self-concepts rooted in solidarity and mutual support. The volunteers’ narratives highlight that identity reconstruction is not merely personal but deeply shaped by shared emotional labor and communal meaning-making.

Cycle of Identity Reconstruction



Navigating Emotional Vulnerability and Resilience

While volunteers expressed fulfillment from contributing to societal recovery, many revealed emotional struggles triggered by exposure to trauma, suffering, and uncertainty. These emotions often coexisted with a growing sense of resilience and psychological strength.

“Seeing people lose everything was overwhelming; I cried almost every day during the first week. But over time, I learned to manage my feelings and focus on what I could do to help them.” — (Participant 7)

This theme underscores the dual nature of emotional experiences: vulnerability and resilience develop in parallel as volunteers confront distressing realities while cultivating adaptive coping

strategies. These findings suggest that participation in community service can act as a catalyst for emotional growth, mediated by collective empathy and social connectedness.

Constructing Meaning and Purpose Through Service

Participants consistently described their involvement as a journey toward discovering deeper meaning and purpose. Their narratives indicate that community service offered opportunities for self-reflection, value alignment, and a redefinition of life priorities.

“I realized that helping others is not only about charity; it’s about finding meaning in my own life. This experience taught me what really matters — relationships, kindness, and hope.” — (Participant 11)

These accounts reveal that volunteering fostered a transformative meaning-making process, enabling individuals to integrate personal aspirations with collective welfare. This experiential shift represents a significant contribution to understanding the psychosocial dimensions of community engagement following disasters.

DISCUSSION

Contribution of Findings to the Research Question

The findings of this study directly address the primary question regarding how volunteers reconstruct their identities, manage emotional challenges, and derive meaning from their participation in community service initiatives. Through interpretative phenomenological analysis, the study uncovers that identity reconstruction occurs as volunteers move from perceiving themselves as passive contributors to becoming integral members of the affected community. This shift emerges from active engagement, shared emotional labor, and relational meaning-making processes.

Furthermore, the results highlight the dual nature of volunteers’ emotional experiences, where vulnerability and resilience coexist within the same narratives. The volunteers’ capacity to manage distress while sustaining empathy and motivation illustrates the complexity of psychological adaptation in high-stress environments. Most significantly, the study demonstrates that community service facilitates a transformative meaning-making process, enabling individuals to align personal values with collective well-being. These insights offer a richer understanding of the psychosocial dynamics of volunteering, going beyond program-based assessments to capture the lived realities of human experience.

Relationship to Previous Literature and Theoretical Perspectives

The findings are consistent with prior research emphasizing the transformative potential of volunteering within community-based recovery efforts (Mukhlis, 2025b; Mukhlis, Suradi, et al., 2023). Similar to earlier studies, this research supports the notion that volunteering fosters identity development, strengthens emotional resilience, and deepens social connectedness. However, by employing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), this study provides a more nuanced perspective that extends beyond descriptive accounts to reveal how meaning is constructed and negotiated by volunteers themselves.

The findings also complement theoretical frameworks on identity reconstruction and psychosocial adaptation in crisis contexts (Beatty et al., 2025; Shirish et al., 2023). While previous studies primarily reported outcome-based measures of program success, this study illuminates the inner processes through which volunteers interpret their experiences and integrate them into personal narratives. By doing so, it bridges a significant gap between quantitative evaluations of program effectiveness and the qualitative depth required to understand the essence of lived experience. This contribution strengthens the theoretical discourse on meaning-making and expands the literature on post-disaster community engagement.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study provide significant implications for both theory and practice in the context of post-disaster community engagement. From a social perspective, the reconstruction of

social identity among volunteers highlights the central role of collective belonging and shared meaning-making in strengthening resilience within affected communities. Culturally, the findings demonstrate that volunteering is not merely a functional act but a transformative social process rooted in empathy, solidarity, and communal responsibility (Nozaki et al., 2005; Purnomo & Dinar, 2023). Professionally, these insights have implications for policymakers and community organizers seeking to design volunteer-based interventions that foster psychological adaptation and long-term engagement. By emphasizing the psychosocial dimensions of community service, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how meaningful participation can influence both individual growth and collective recovery. Importantly, the results suggest that programs integrating opportunities for reflection and dialogue may better support volunteers' emotional well-being and identity development.

Limitations of the Study

Despite its contributions, this study acknowledges several limitations that may affect the transferability of its findings. First, the sample consisted of 12 participants drawn from a specific post-disaster context in Central Java, which may limit the generalizability of the results to broader populations or different cultural settings. Second, while Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) provides rich insights into subjective experiences, its depth-oriented design inherently restricts the scope to small and context-specific samples (Petrov et al., 2025; Radzi et al., 2021). Third, as with all qualitative studies, the interpretation of findings is influenced by participants' narratives and the analytical framework applied, which may introduce certain subjective biases despite the rigorous validation strategies used, including member checking and triangulation. These limitations do not undermine the study's contributions but instead emphasize the need for cautious interpretation when applying the results to different settings.

Future Research Directions

The findings of this study open several avenues for future research on community service and volunteerism in post-disaster contexts. Future studies could expand the participant base to include volunteers from diverse cultural backgrounds or different geographic regions to explore potential variations in identity reconstruction and meaning-making processes. In addition, combining phenomenological insights with mixed-method approaches may provide a more comprehensive understanding by integrating subjective narratives with broader programmatic outcomes. Further research might also investigate the long-term psychological effects of volunteering, examining how transformative experiences influence identity, resilience, and personal growth over time. Finally, future studies could explore interventions and training programs that support volunteers' emotional well-being, enabling policymakers and community leaders to design more effective and sustainable recovery initiatives. By extending the current findings, such research can advance theoretical frameworks and enhance practical strategies for community engagement and resilience-building.

CONCLUSION

This study explored volunteers' lived experiences in post-disaster community service programs, focusing on how they reconstruct social identities, navigate emotional challenges, and construct personal meaning through their engagement. The findings reveal that volunteering serves as a transformative process, fostering identity development, emotional resilience, and a deeper sense of belonging within affected communities. By adopting an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, the study provides a nuanced understanding of volunteers' meaning-making processes, addressing gaps left by previous outcome-driven research. Beyond restating findings, the study offers several implications. First, it underscores the need for community service programs to integrate structured reflective practices and psychological support mechanisms, ensuring that volunteers not only contribute materially but also experience personal growth and sustained engagement. Second, the results inform policymakers and organizations to design volunteer initiatives that balance immediate disaster recovery needs with volunteers' long-term psychosocial development. From a theoretical standpoint, the study contributes by positioning volunteerism as a transformative

identity and resilience-building process, expanding existing models that often reduce it to functional contributions. Practically, program designers should consider embedding mentorship, peer-support groups, and post-service debriefing sessions to strengthen volunteers' adaptive capacities. Future research should move beyond single-context and cross-sectional designs by employing longitudinal and cross-cultural approaches. Such directions will allow scholars to examine how identity transformation and meaning-making evolve over time and across diverse cultural settings, ultimately enriching global perspectives on the psychosocial dimensions of volunteerism.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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