

TRANSFORMATIVE IMPACTS ON TRANSFORMERS: VOLUNTEERS IN BOTANIC GARDENS

Nicholas Catahan and Kim Cassidy

Edge Hill University Business School, England, UK, Catahann@edgehill.ac.uk
Edge Hill University Business School, England, UK, Cassidyk@edgehill.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Transformative Service Research (TSR) has highlighted how volunteer engagement in services can create a plethora of health and wellbeing outcomes for a range of stakeholders (Di Pietro *et al.*, 2022; Mulder *et al.*, 2015; Rosenbaum, 2015). This research explores value co-creation practices and transformative learning experienced by a sample of volunteers from community-based, charitable groups across three UK Botanic Gardens. The findings add to the emerging TSR literature across novel contexts and enhances understanding of the role of volunteers across service settings (Rosenbaum, 2015). First, we provide empirical evidence to expand the list of volunteer well-being outcomes presented by Di Pietro *et al.*, (2022). Second, our evidence supports the Transformative Charity Experience (TCE) framework developed by Mulder *et al.*, (2015), offering insights about immersion, value co-creation and epistemological change. Our study contributes to the TSR paradigm (Rosenbaum, 2015), and reinforces the value, significance, and importance of volunteering as co-creative, transformative service experiences and provision regarding Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) (United Nations, 2023). Our findings also contribute to insights on reciprocal relationships and self-development for planetary and community-based health strategising and promotion (Chou *et al.*, 2023; Patrick, Henderson-Wilson and Ebdon, 2022), health benefits on older people including effective healthy aging intervention (Jongenelis *et al.*, 2022; Pettigrew *et al.*, 2020), and considerations of service work and service-giving for well-being outcomes via volunteering (Wilson, 2000; Thoits and Hewitt, 2001; Smith 1994,1981).

METHODOLOGY

Eighty-four garden volunteers participated in the study, which began with an open call for interest sent out across UK Botanical Gardens via an online newsletter. This received the support of Botanic Gardens Conservation International (BGCI), a membership organisation, representing Botanic Gardens around the world, and PlantNetwork, a charity organisation who provides training and network support to gardens and gardeners throughout Britain and Ireland. Three garden Directors/Managers who responded first were chosen to facilitate the next stage of data collection. Each centre was of a similar size with similar facilities, services, and volunteering numbers. Follow-on emails, telephone exchanges, online and in person interviews, free flowing discussion, and field observations, generated narratives from volunteers aged between 22 to 87 years of age, of mixed gender, ability, and levels of education. Narratives were analysed using Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis and manual content analysis (Silverman, 2022), to generate themes and concepts linked to Di Pietro *et al.*, (2022) well-being outcomes, and the TCE framework (Mulder *et al.*, 2015).

FINDINGS

The findings add to the emerging TSR literature across novel contexts and enhance understanding of the role of volunteers across service settings (Rosenbaum, 2015). First, we expand the list of volunteer well-being outcomes presented by Pietro *et al.*, (2022). Within the category of satisfaction and realisation (Pietro *et al.*, 2022) we identified additional benefits including opportunities for enhanced knowledge/learning, physical benefits, 'structure' to life,

enhanced social interaction, improved self-esteem, and mental health benefits linked to feelings of support, transformative value, and inclusion. Second, we provide empirical evidence from a new setting to support the TCE framework offering examples of immersion, value co-creation and epistemological change. Most significant of our findings is the nature of the epistemological change experienced by our volunteers. Extracts from the narratives indicate '*alterations in how participants act, think about themselves and the world, and the interaction between the two*' (Mulder *et al.*, p.875). Volunteers describe their experience as '*THE best thing ever!*' and many talked about volunteering giving renewed purpose to their life; one stating their experience as '*Life-saving. Soul-saving*'. Another participant described how volunteering had brought them back from the brink of suicide. Such remarkable well-being impacts cannot be underestimated in these transformative, cocreated service exchanges across such service settings as Botanic Gardens. Our research highlights the importance of the context for epistemological change, emphasising how volunteering has helped participants cope with retirement, a major 'transformation' milestone in their lives.

RESEARCH LIMITATIONS/IMPLICATIONS

As this is a UK-centric study, we recommend further research in other geographical areas and contexts. This might focus on Botanic Gardens and wider garden volunteering but could also examine volunteers associated with other community groups with diverse cultural interests and identities. Implications of the research will inform the ever-changing global Botanic Garden sector, which, according to BGCI (2023), supports over 3,087 Botanic Gardens in the world, located in more than 160 countries. In our findings we realised that various actors/entities, and volunteers in our studies were connected to numerous other gardens, service settings, and communities. We envisage our new insights into well-being outcomes with such transformative elements, especially epistemological change, will highlight the importance of volunteering in Botanic Gardens, and inform policy, practice, and innovation across the Sector.

ORIGINALITY/VALUE

Aside from the research cited in this abstract, little is known about the transformative impact of volunteers and the well-being outcomes across different service settings regarding TSR. Our TSR facilitates a discussion about volunteering service exchange in the novel context of UK Botanical Gardens. Our findings add new insights, extend Di Pietro *et al.*, (2022) categories of well-being outcomes, and provide support for the TCE framework (Mulder *et al.* 2015). We have responded to the call from Rosenbaum *et al.* (2015), to shine a spotlight on the role of volunteers who play an integral supporting role in many service settings. Recommendations contribute to a broader discussion of how service ecosystems and underexplored resources can be brought together to attain and enhance significant transformative service for people, place, and planet, alongside meeting and measuring SDG (Verleye and Reber, 2022; Field *et al.*, 2021; Vink *et al.*, 2021; Finsterwelder and Kuppelwieser, 2020; Vargo and Lusch, 2018; Elmqvist *et al.*, 2013).

Emphasis of our key finding of the dramatic and significant epistemological change across older aged volunteers is insightful. Volunteering across the UK Botanic Gardens in our study shows evidence of transformative experiences for various retired individuals in a variety of ways. While there is limited TSR specifically on the transformative effects of Botanic Garden volunteering for retired people, there is evidence from our studies that suggest its benefits and health and well-being outcomes. Volunteering in these Botanic Gardens provides opportunities to connect with nature, which has been linked to improvements in mental and physical health and well-being, whilst contributing to SDG (Chou *et al.*, 2023; Elmqvist *et al.*, 2013). Studies have shown that spending time in natural environments can reduce stress, anxiety, and depression, and improve mood and self-esteem (Wilson, 2000). For retired individuals who may have fewer opportunities for social interaction and physical activity, volunteering can provide a sense of purpose, place attachment and community engagement

(Jongenelis *et al.*, 2022). Volunteering in the UK Botanic Gardens in our studies offer opportunities for transformative service and learning. This type of experience involves fundamental shifts in how individuals view themselves, others, and the world around them (Mulder *et al.*, 2015). Through volunteering, individuals and groups can learn new skills, gain new knowledge, and develop a deeper understanding of the interconnections between human beings and nature, and *vice versa*, especially with the older aged volunteers in our study; volunteering can lead to long-term epistemological change. This refers to a shift in how individuals think about knowledge, learning, and their own capacity to contribute to society. By engaging in meaningful work in these UK Botanic Gardens and other garden-related service settings, retired individuals develop a sense of mastery and competence that lead to a more positive self-image and greater sense of empowerment, whilst contributing to the efficacy of their aging process. Findings are salient for ongoing conceptualisation and theorisation regarding TSR, and for strategic planning and development of policy and practice for transformative services, SDG, and individual and societal good health and well-being.

Findings support significant well-being outcomes of volunteering in gardens and as a result we encourage a holistic, ecosystemic approach to service management and marketing. Participation in volunteering activities across Botanic Gardens and other novel service settings as part of health and well-being related policy could be established as part of a social prescription effort for older aged people among others. Opportunities of such policy and related transformative service can be co-created between key actors and agents across service ecosystems. Service management and marketing pertaining to recruitment, engagement and retention, and innovation leading to individual and societal health and well-being can be further explored. Botanic Garden' service settings, and their contribution to SDG are worthy of ongoing TSR to consider ongoing transformative value, service innovation and the vitality and viability of the Sector.

KEYWORDS

Transformative Service Research (TSR), Volunteers, Well-being outcomes, Transformative Charity Experience (TCE), Sustainable Development Goals (SDG).

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