

SEARCH AND RESCUE NGO VOLUNTEERS' PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF VOLUNTEERING: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the volunteering perceptions and experiences of non-governmental organisation (NGO) volunteers operating in the field of search and rescue. A qualitative method was employed in the study, and a phenomenological design was adopted. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine participants working as volunteers in the field of search and rescue in İzmir, and the data obtained were evaluated using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that the primary motivations of the volunteers arose from factors such as the desire to be useful to society, previous disaster experiences, and the aspiration for self-improvement. It was determined that the volunteering experience enhanced empathy and sensitivity, reduced prejudices, and strengthened awareness of social solidarity. Additionally, volunteers highlighted positive experiences such as life-saving moments, the gratitude of disaster victims, and the sense of team spirit. However, negative experiences, including physical and emotional challenges as well as logistical and organisational problems, were also reported. The study demonstrates that volunteering significantly contributes to personal development and strengthens social resilience. To enhance the effectiveness of NGOs, it is recommended to increase training opportunities, address equipment deficiencies, and improve public awareness. In conclusion, it is emphasised that search and rescue volunteering has positive impacts on both individual development and societal resilience, making it an essential component of disaster management policies.

Keywords: *Volunteering, Disaster Volunteering, Perception of Volunteering, Volunteering Experience.*

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ARAMA KURTARMA STK GÖNÜLLÜLERİNİN GÖNÜLLÜLÜK ALGILARI VE DENEYİMLERİ: NİTEL BİR ÇALIŞMA

Öz

Bu çalışma, arama kurtarma alanında faaliyet gösteren sivil toplum kuruluşu (STK) gönüllülerinin gönüllülük algılarını ve deneyimlerini incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Araştırmada nitel yöntem kullanılmış ve fenomenolojik desen benimsenmiştir. İzmir’de arama kurtarma alanında gönüllü olarak çalışan 9 katılımcıyla yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler gerçekleştirilmiş, elde edilen veriler tematik analizi yöntemi ile değerlendirilmiştir. Bulgular, gönüllülerin temel motivasyonlarının topluma faydalı olma isteği, afet deneyimleri ve kendini geliştirme arzusu gibi faktörlerden kaynaklandığını ortaya koymuştur. Gönüllülük deneyiminin bireylerde empati ve duyarlılığı artırdığı, önyargıları azalttığı ve toplumsal dayanışma farkındalığını güçlendirdiği tespit edilmiştir. Ayrıca gönüllüler, hayat kurtarma anları, afet mağdurlarının minnettarlığı ve ekip ruhu gibi olumlu deneyimlerini vurgulamışlardır. Ancak, fiziksel ve duygusal zorluklar ile lojistik ve organizasyonel sorunlar gibi olumsuz deneyimler de belirtilmiştir. Çalışma, gönüllülüğün bireylerin kişisel gelişimine ve toplumsal dayanıklılığa önemli katkılar sunduğunu göstermektedir. STK’ların daha etkili olabilmesi için eğitimlerin artırılması, ekipman eksikliklerinin giderilmesi ve toplumsal farkındalığın geliştirilmesi önerilmektedir. Sonuç olarak, arama kurtarma gönüllülüğünün birey ve toplum üzerinde olumlu etkiler yarattığı ve afet yönetimi politikalarının önemli bir unsuru olduğu vurgulanmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Gönüllülük, Afet Gönüllülüğü, Gönüllülük Algısı, Gönüllülük Deneyimi.

Introduction

Indeed, in today's societies, the frequency and impact of disasters and emergencies are increasing. In such situations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and volunteers play a crucial role in disaster management and response, alongside professional response teams. Particularly in search and rescue (SAR) operations, the contribution and sacrifices of volunteers have become significant factors in enhancing social resilience and mitigating the impact of disasters. In this context, a detailed examination of the concept of volunteerism and the experiences of volunteers, especially in the field of search and rescue, holds great theoretical and practical importance.

Furthermore, as a key indicator of social solidarity and civic engagement, volunteering is becoming increasingly vital in modern societies. The United Nations Volunteer Programme (UNV, 2011) defines volunteering as 'activities undertaken of one's own free will, with a general idea of public benefit and without expectation of financial reward'. Similarly, Wilson (2000) describes volunteering as 'giving time to help others, to support a cause or an

organisation'. Volunteering fosters social cohesion, promotes civic awareness, and helps address social challenges (Musick & Wilson, 2008).

On the other hand, Türkiye is a country frequently exposed to natural disasters due to its geographical location and geological structure. Recent earthquakes, floods, and forest fires have once again underscored the importance of SAR activities (Kadioğlu, 2011). In particular, during large-scale disasters, volunteer SAR teams provide critical support to professional teams (Brennan et al., 2005). These activities encompass preparation, response, search and rescue, as well as assessment and reporting phases (INSARAG, 2020), and demand a high level of commitment, sacrifice, and continuous learning (Sauer et al., 2014).

In other words, volunteering is a form of social participation that can manifest in various areas and through different means. According to the classification proposed by Clary and Snyder (1999), the motivations for volunteering can be analysed in six core categories. These include: the *values* category, which involves expressing personal values and humanitarian concerns; the *understanding* category, which focuses on gaining new learning experiences and applying skills; the *social* category, which involves building and strengthening relationships with others; the *career* category, which centres on gaining career-related experience; the *protective* category, which includes escaping personal problems or reducing feelings of guilt; and the *enhancement* category, which aims at psychological growth and personal development. These motivations provide a comprehensive framework for understanding why individuals engage in volunteering.

In this context, volunteering has multidimensional social benefits. As noted by Musick and Wilson (2008), volunteering strengthens social cohesion, enhances civic awareness, contributes to solving social problems, and complements public services. Beyond these general characteristics, volunteering in the field of SAR emerges as a specific type of volunteering that involves heightened risk and responsibility. As emphasised by Sauer et al. (2014), volunteers in this field undergo extensive training, maintain continuous preparation, and actively intervene to save lives during disasters and emergencies. This form of volunteering is distinct from other types due to its requirement for a high level of commitment, sacrifice, and ongoing learning.

Volunteerism in search and rescue has been addressed in various dimensions in the literature. Köçer and Aslan (2023) examined the experiences of volunteer teams working in forest fires and found that citizens' spatial loyalty and economic concerns complicated the evacuation process. Yükseler, Yazgan, and Tenikler (2024) analysed the phenomenon of spontaneous volunteering and highlighted the inadequacy of legal regulations. Süngü (2022) emphasised the importance of digital solutions in disaster logistics. However, comprehensive research on the experiences, motivations, and challenges of NGO volunteers involved in search and rescue is limited in

the literature. Particularly in the Turkish context, the lack of studies exploring in depth the subjective experiences of volunteers in this field is noteworthy.

In this context, the research seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the motivations of volunteers in search and rescue NGOs?
2. What are the volunteers' experiences in this field?
3. What challenges do volunteers face, and how do they cope with them?

Within this framework, the research employed qualitative methods and a phenomenological design. This approach allows for an in-depth exploration of the subjective nature of volunteers' experiences and the meanings they attach to these experiences (Van Manen, 1990). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine participants working as volunteers in the field of search and rescue in İzmir, and the data obtained were analysed using thematic analysis.

The findings of the study reveal the motivations, experiences, and challenges of NGO volunteers working in the field of search and rescue in a multidimensional manner. The findings indicate that volunteers enter the field with fundamental motivations such as the desire to contribute to society, personal disaster experiences, and the aspiration for self-improvement. It was found that the experience of volunteering enhances empathy and sensitivity in individuals, reduces prejudice, and strengthens the sense of social solidarity. Furthermore, volunteers reported positive experiences such as life-saving moments, gratitude from disaster victims, and team spirit, while also facing physical and emotional challenges, as well as logistical and organisational problems.

In this context, the research findings are expected to contribute to strengthening the institutional capacities of civil society organisations, improving volunteer management systems, and developing disaster management policies.

1. METHOD

This section outlines the methodology of the study. The research design, data collection tools, and analysis procedures are described in detail.

1.1. Research Design

In this study, a qualitative research method was employed to gain an in-depth understanding of the perceptions and experiences of volunteering among NGO volunteers working in the field of search and rescue. Qualitative research is an approach that focuses on understanding and interpreting social phenomena within their context (Creswell, 2013). This approach facilitates the exploration of participants' experiences, perceptions, and the meanings they ascribe to these experiences.

The phenomenological design is particularly well-suited to investigating a complex and multidimensional phenomenon such as volunteering. This design enables the essence of volunteers' experiences to be captured and the identification of common themes underlying these experiences (Van Manen, 1990). Moreover, the phenomenological approach requires the researcher to bracket their own assumptions and biases, allowing them to attempt to understand participants' experiences as they truly are (Husserl, 1970).

In this context, the phenomenological design was chosen for this study to explore in depth the subjective nature of search and rescue volunteers' experiences and the meanings they attach to these experiences. This design facilitated a holistic understanding of the volunteers' motivations, the challenges they encountered, the benefits they gained, and the overall impact of the volunteering experience on their lives.

1.2. Sampling and Data Collection

Purposive sampling was employed in this study in alignment with the purpose of the research. Purposive sampling is a method that enables the selection of experienced participants who possess in-depth knowledge of the research topic (Patton, 2002).

The sample for this study consisted of nine participants volunteering in NGOs operating in the field of search and rescue in İzmir. The purposive sampling method was applied to identify the participants, and a multistage selection strategy was adopted. In the first stage, search and rescue NGOs in İzmir were contacted and informed about the purpose of the study. In the second stage, volunteers who had been actively involved in these NGOs for at least one year were identified. In the final stage, participants were selected based on their level of experience (1–2 years and over 2 years), age (22–64 years), gender (4 women, 5 men), and professional diversity. This strategic approach facilitated a comprehensive analysis of the diverse dimensions of the volunteering experience and offered a variety of perspectives. Selection criteria also included the level of active participation, disaster experience, and educational background. Table 1 provides detailed demographic information about the participants.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews. In-depth interviews are a data collection method that enables participants to articulate their experiences, thoughts, and feelings in detail (Kvale, 1996). This method is particularly well-suited for obtaining the depth and richness of data required by a phenomenological design.

A semi-structured interview form was used during the interviews. The semi-structured interview form is a tool based on predetermined main themes and questions, while offering the flexibility to pose additional questions according to the flow of the interview (Bryman, 2016).

The interviews were conducted face-to-face at a time and place chosen by the participants. Each interview lasted an average of 45–90 minutes. With the permission of the participants, the interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

The data collection process adhered to ethical principles. Participants were informed about the study’s purpose, scope, and confidentiality policies of the research, and their consent for voluntary participation was obtained. Additionally, participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the interview at any time or to retract the information they had provided.

Table 1. Demographic Information of Participants

Participants	Age	Gender	Profession	Experience
Participant 1	45	Female	Self-employed	2 years and more
Participant 2	40	Female	Nurse	2 years and more
Participant 3	40	Male	Engineer	2 years and more
Participant 4	43	Male	Disaster management technician	2 years and more
Participant 5	43	Male	Teacher	2 years and more
Participant 6	28	Female	Accountant	2 years and more
Participant 7	48	Female	Medical laboratory technician	1-2 years
Participant 8	22	Male	Apprentice	1-2 years
Participant 9	64	Male	Retired civil servant	2 years and more

1.3. Validity and Reliability of the Study

Several strategies were employed in this study to ensure the validity and reliability of the research. Firstly, the research questions were formulated based on an extensive literature review to strengthen content validity. Semi-structured interview questions were presented to two independent experts to enhance construct validity. During the data collection process, audio recordings of the interviews were taken and carefully transcribed. To increase reliability and ensure participant endorsement, the transcribed texts were shared with the participants, and their approval was obtained. This practice aimed to ensure the accuracy and integrity of the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Additionally, inter-coder reliability was assessed during the data analysis process, and an agreement rate of over 85% was achieved using the formula proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994). To enhance the transferability of the study, the research process and context were described in detail (Shenton, 2004). The implementation of these strategies was intended to strengthen the validity and reliability of the research.

1.4. Data Analysis

In this study, the thematic analysis method was employed in line with the qualitative phenomenological research design. The analysis process aimed to capture the essence of the participants' volunteering experiences and to uncover the meanings they attributed to these experiences. During the analysis process, the interview recordings were first transcribed with great care. Then, in accordance with the phenomenological approach, the researcher repeatedly read the transcripts and coded meaningful units while bracketing her own assumptions and biases.

After the coding phase, similar and distinct codes were grouped together to form categories. By analysing the relationships between these categories, broader themes were identified. At this stage, the focus was on uncovering the fundamental structures of the phenomenon. Using the identified themes and categories, the essence of the volunteering experience was described, and direct quotations from the participants were included in this descriptive process. Finally, the findings were interpreted in the context of the relevant literature and theoretical framework.

MAXQDA 2020 qualitative data analysis software was utilised during the data analysis process. To enhance the reliability of the analysis, the themes and categories were reviewed by an expert, and necessary adjustments were made. Additionally, the transparency of the analysis process was ensured by incorporating direct statements from the participants into the presentation of the findings. This systematic and in-depth analysis process aimed to comprehensively reveal the experiences of search and rescue volunteers and the meanings they attributed to these experiences.

2. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

The research findings are organised around two main themes reflecting the experiences and perceptions of NGO volunteers working in search and rescue: *'Perceptions of Volunteering'* and *'Experiences of Volunteering'*. These themes encompass various categories and codes that comprehensively reflect the views of the participants.

Under the theme *'Perceptions of Volunteering'*, three categories are identified: motivations for volunteering in NGOs, the meaning of volunteering in the field of search and rescue, and impact on social problems. The theme *'Experiences of Volunteering'* includes three categories: positive experiences of volunteers, challenges and negative experiences, and areas for NGO improvement. The themes, categories, and codes are summarised in Table 2.

While these findings emphasise the impact of volunteering on individual and societal levels, they also underscore the challenges and areas for improvement faced by NGOs in this domain. In the following sections, the main findings under each theme and category are analysed in detail and discussed in relation to the relevant literature.

Table 2. Table Of Themes, Categories and Codes

Theme	Category	Code	Frequency	Participants
Volunteering Perception	Motivations for Volunteering in NGOs	Disaster experience	4	P3, P4, P6, P8
		Desire to be useful to society	7	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P7, P9
		Desire to help people/living beings	5	P2, P4, P5, P6, P8
		Self-improvement	3	P2, P7, P8
		Being a role model	1	P4
	The Meaning of Volunteering in the Field of Search and Rescue	Touching lives	3	P4, P5, P6
		Service to society	6	P1, P2, P3, P4, P7, P9
		Personal satisfaction/happiness	3	P2, P6, P8
	Impact on Social Problems	Increase in empathy and sensitivity	5	P3, P4, P5, P7, P8
		Decrease in prejudices	2	P4, P5
		Awareness of social solidarity	4	P1, P4, P4, P6, P9
Volunteering Experience	Positive Experiences	The moment of saving lives	2	P4, P5
		Gratitude of disaster victims	2	P2, P4
		Team spirit/solidarity	4	P1, P3, P4, P6, P9
		Sense of social unity	4	P3, P4, P5, P7
	Challenges and Negative Experiences	Physical challenges	5	P3, P4, P5, P6, P7
		Emotional challenges	3	P3, P4, P6
		Logistics/organisational problems	3	P6, P8
	Areas for NGO Improvement	Lack of training and drills	4	P1, P3, P5, P9
		Equipment and coordination problems	3	P2, P5, P6
		Lack of social awareness and support	5	P3, P5, P6, P7, P8

2.1. Perceptions of Volunteering Theme

Under this theme, a total of 3 categories and 11 codes were analyzed.

2.1.1. Motivations for Volunteering in NGOs

The first category of the *Perception of Volunteering* theme, *Motivations for Volunteering* with search and rescue NGOs stem from various factors that

attract individuals to this challenging and self-sacrificing field. The research findings indicate that volunteers' motivations are shaped around five main codes: *disaster experience*, *desire to be useful to society*, *desire to help people/living beings*, *self-improvement*, and *being a role model*.

These codes suggest that volunteers' motivations arise from both personal experiences and a sense of social responsibility. Individual experiences, such as surviving disasters, play a significant role in encouraging people to volunteer in this area. Simultaneously, altruistic motivations, such as the desire to contribute to society and assist others, also emerge prominently. Moreover, the desire for self-improvement and the aspiration to set an example for others are additional driving forces behind volunteering.

Personal *disaster experiences* are a powerful motivator for many individuals. Participants shared how their own encounters with disasters shaped their decision to volunteer. The participants articulated their views within this code through the following representative excerpts:

"My first reason is that I have experienced an earthquake before. I was trapped under the rubble." (P4)

"I lost many friends in the Izmir earthquake. Since I couldn't help them at that moment, I wanted to become a member of an NGO and help those I don't know after that time." (P6)

"I started during the Izmir earthquake. When the Izmir earthquake happened, I had gathered my own family and so on, and I had no idea that something like this had happened before." (P8)

The *desire to be useful to society* is another core motivation. Participants highlighted their inner drive to help others and be useful to their community. The following quotes from participants illustrate this code:

"In other words, I started volunteering at a very young age because I felt that I could be useful to people outside myself, or because of such a feeling that comes from within me." (P3)

"The second reason is that I want to progress towards becoming a useful individual for society." (P4)

Altruistic motivations, such as *the desire to help people and living beings*, also play a significant role. Participants emphasised the personal satisfaction they derived from helping others. Some participant expressions within this code are as follows:

"So this is the benefit. I think it is good for me and good for people." (P2)

"I think this is how it feels to me, i.e., volunteering is helping people. It's about helping people in need." (P5)

"I wanted to touch a life. People I don't know." (P6)

The motivation for *self-improvement* highlights the individual benefits volunteers gain from their involvement. Participants shared how volunteering helped them discover themselves, expand their boundaries, and overcome

personal fears. Participants expressed their perspectives on this code as demonstrated in these excerpts:

"We are discovering ourselves. Meanwhile, of course, you can do things that you cannot do where we are, by taking a step there. In other words, you also expand your own boundaries." (P2)

"Because I don't want it to be easy and I think I'm in a very good place." (P7)

"They have contributed a lot to me. Search and rescue has helped me to overcome many of my fears." (P8)

Being a role model reflects the social impact of volunteering. Participants expressed their desire to inspire others and serve as positive examples for society. Below were key statements from participants that exemplified the themes identified in this code:

"In my opinion, being a volunteer here means being a role model for society. I am an AFAD volunteer." (P4)

In conclusion, the motivations for volunteering in search and rescue lie at the intersection of individual psychological needs and social norms and expectations. These motivations highlight the connection individuals make between personal growth and social contribution, reflecting how they position themselves within modern societies.

2.1.2. The Meaning of Volunteering in the Field of Search and Rescue

The second category of the *Perception of Volunteering* theme, "*The Meaning of Volunteering in Search and Rescue*", reflects the meanings and values that participants associate with volunteering in this specific field. Three main codes emerged under this category: *touching lives*, *service to society*, and *personal satisfaction/happiness*.

These codes reveal how volunteers interpret their roles in search and rescue activities and what these experiences mean to them. The *touching lives* code highlights volunteers' direct efforts to save or improve human or animal lives. The *service to society* code demonstrates a broader understanding of social responsibility and collective benefit. Meanwhile, the *personal satisfaction/happiness* code focuses on the emotional and psychological rewards volunteers experience through their work.

Although these codes are closely linked to the motivations discussed in the previous category, they provide a deeper and more experiential understanding. For instance, the motivation to "be useful to society" is further expanded by the meaning of "serving society." Similarly, the motivation to "help people/lives" becomes more tangible and emotionally charged with the meaning of "touching lives."

The meaning of volunteering in search and rescue is thus seen as a multidimensional concept, deeply rooted in participants' experiences. While this structure is tied to their initial motivations, it reflects a more profound and

experiential level of significance. In particular, the *touching lives* code encapsulates the empathy and compassion that lie at the heart of volunteering.

The *touching lives* code reflects the emotional and empathetic aspects of volunteering, where participants emphasise the profound impact of saving or positively affecting lives. Participants expressed their perspectives on this code as demonstrated in these excerpts:

“Touching a life, whether it's human or animal, it doesn't matter, touching a life.” (P6)

“All your efforts are for that look. For the moment of rescue. You've seen in the case of baby Ayla – she raised her hand and made this sign, a sign meaning gratitude. That affected me a lot.” (P4)

The *service to society* code highlights the broader societal meaning of volunteering, where individuals perceive their efforts as contributing to the welfare and cohesion of their communities. Some participant statements under this code include:

“Well, when we think about it socially, I actually had a few overseas experiences. In those early years, my first trip abroad was in ninety-seven. I was very surprised when I heard there that a person is a member of at least four associations. Years later, I heard this from many of my friends and shared it. If a person is a part of society, if they feel a responsibility, they should definitely be involved in social life in several associations, whether it's art, search and rescue, or sports.” (P9)

“We have supported social projects. Well, what do we do? We have support campaigns for village schools. Because it's an established organisation, when you call out, you get a response. A meeting can be held immediately. A contribution can be made in a social sense as well.” (P1)

The *personal satisfaction/happiness* code explores the psychological benefits of volunteering, such as feelings of fulfilment, contentment, and emotional well-being. To exemplify this code, several participant statements were selected and presented below:

“When I go there and see that mood in their eyes, I feel good. This makes me feel good. So this is the benefit. I think I'm good for myself and for people.” (P6)

“Well, being able to help people, being able to touch people, knowing that you have a benefit, or even the gratitude of the people you help is enough.” (P8)

As evidenced by participants' statements, the motivations for volunteering overlap significantly with the meanings they attribute to their work. This overlap demonstrates that search and rescue volunteering is a deeply integrated and evolving experience for participants. Volunteers' initial motivations often grow and transform as they gain experience, shaping and strengthening the meanings they attach to their roles.

For example, a volunteer who begins with the motivation of “wanting to be useful to society” may gradually interpret this activity as “serving society” and establish a meaningful connection between these two concepts. Over time, volunteering becomes not just an activity but also an identity and a life philosophy for many participants.

This close relationship between motivations and meanings suggests that volunteers continuously reinterpret their experiences. These reinterpretations, in turn, reinforce their desire to remain engaged in volunteering. In conclusion, this overlap reveals that search and rescue volunteering plays a deep, dynamic, and continuously evolving role in participants’ lives, integrating personal growth with collective benefit and fostering a profound sense of purpose.

2.1.3. Impact on Social Problems

The third category of the *Perception of Volunteering* theme, “*Impact on Social Problems*”, examines the broader societal effects of volunteering activities in the field of search and rescue. This category highlights how volunteering transcends individual contributions to create a wider social impact. Through the analysis, three main codes were identified under this category: *increase in empathy and sensitivity*, *decrease in prejudices*, and *awareness of social solidarity*.

These codes illustrate how volunteering activities shape participants’ worldviews and social perceptions. The *increase in empathy and sensitivity* code reflects volunteers’ heightened awareness of others’ experiences and needs. The *decrease in prejudices* code emphasises the positive outcomes of interacting with diverse groups. Finally, the *awareness of social solidarity* code underscores the potential of volunteering to foster collective responsibility and togetherness.

Volunteering activities often lead to a shift in participants’ perspectives, enabling them to develop greater empathy and sensitivity. This code, *increase in empathy and sensitivity*, reflects how volunteers become more mindful of the struggles and needs of others, fostering a sense of responsibility as active citizens. The participants’ perspectives encompassing this code are highlighted in the following quotations:

“It’s not just about criticising, not having a malevolent view of things around you, but also about how I can put my hand under the stone as a responsible citizen.” (P3)

“Well, I already protected nature. I have rubbish, a rubbish bag in my car. I put all my rubbish in the car.” (P5)

The *decrease in prejudices* code explores how volunteering activities help participants overcome biases and stereotypes. By working with individuals from different backgrounds, volunteers gain a better understanding of diverse cultures and perspectives, leading to reduced

prejudices. This code was reflected in participant narratives, as evidenced by the following statements:

“Let me put it this way, for example, I had been to Marmaris before, but for a holiday. During these fires, it caused me to get to know the people in Marmaris, or rather the people of Muğla, more. I loved the people there more.” (P4)

“For example, I worked with people from a culture I had never known before. This caused me to understand them better and question my prejudices.” (P5)

The *awareness of social solidarity* code emphasises how volunteering strengthens social ties and brings people together around common goals, especially during times of crisis. Participants’ experiences reveal that volunteering fosters a sense of unity and shared responsibility. Some participant statements within this code include:

“Of course, when there’s a disaster, there’s no politics. I mean, when there’s a disaster, everyone tries to meet on a common ground.” (P4)

“I saw that humanity is not dead in disasters. I saw everyone’s effort to do something.” (P6)

These statements demonstrate how volunteering enhances empathy and sensitivity, reduces prejudices, and strengthens social solidarity. These effects suggest that volunteering can play a crucial role in addressing social problems. While volunteering activities encourage individuals to become more active and responsible citizens, they also contribute to social cohesion and solidarity.

By fostering mutual understanding and collective action, volunteering not only helps solve immediate challenges but also strengthens the social fabric, enabling communities to tackle larger societal issues. This dynamic demonstrates that volunteering is more than an individual act—it is a powerful tool for driving positive social change.

2.2. Volunteering Experience Theme

Under this theme, a total of 3 categories and 10 codes were analyzed.

2.2.1. Positive Experiences

The first category of the *Volunteering Experience* theme, “*Positive Experiences*”, encompasses the uplifting and motivating moments that search and rescue volunteers have experienced during their activities. This category highlights the positive effects of the volunteering process on participants and how these experiences have influenced them personally and socially. As a result of the analysis, four main codes were identified under this category: *the moment of saving lives*, *the sense of gratitude of disaster victims*, *team spirit/solidarity*, and *the sense of social unity*.

These codes reflect the multidimensional nature of volunteering. The *sense of gratitude of disaster victims* code underscores the emotional impact

of disaster victims' reactions on volunteers. The *team spirit/solidarity* code highlights the strong bonds and collaboration among volunteers, while the *sense of social unity* code illustrates the unifying effect of volunteering within the broader social context.

The *moment of saving lives* is one of the most intense and emotional experiences for volunteers. It represents the essence of their efforts and provides a profound sense of purpose and fulfilment. The participants' experiences related to this code were captured in these representative quotes:

"I think all your efforts are for that look. For the moment of rescue, you may have seen baby Ayla raise her hand and make this sign – a sign that means gratitude – it affected me a lot." (P4)

"The feeling I had when we saved a baby and gave it to the mother of that baby... I can say it was the most beautiful moment of my life." (P5)

The *sense of gratitude of disaster victims* emerges as a powerful factor that reinforces the value and importance of volunteers' work. Participants described how the gratitude expressed by those they helped gave them a deep sense of satisfaction and emotional reward. Some participant statements within this code are:

"When I see that mood in those eyes when I go, I feel good, it feels good for me. So, that is the benefit. I think I am good for myself and for the people." (P2)

"The expression of gratitude in the eyes of the people we rescue, the way they hug us..." (P4)

The *team spirit/solidarity* code reflects the collective and collaborative aspects of the volunteering experience. Participants emphasised the importance of trust, cooperation, and shared purpose among team members. Some of their statements include:

"The solidarity we experience with my team members in the field, the trust we have in each other... This is one of the best aspects of volunteering." (P1)

"Working for the same purpose with people from different backgrounds, that bond formed between us... It's an incredible experience." (P3)

"We cling to each other as a team. This spirit of solidarity affects me every time." (P9)

The *sense of social unity* code highlights the broader societal impact of volunteering, where differences among individuals dissolve in pursuit of a common goal. Participants described how volunteering fosters a spirit of togetherness and collective action that extends beyond individual efforts. The participants' perspectives encompassing this code were highlighted in the following quotations:

"That spirit of unity and togetherness we see in the disaster area... Everyone helping and sharing with each other... This shows how strong society can be." (P3)

“Working together with volunteers from different cities, even countries... At that moment, all differences disappear, we unite for a single purpose.” (P5)

These statements demonstrate that positive volunteering experiences provide individuals with a profound sense of meaning and fulfilment. They strengthen volunteers’ self-efficacy beliefs, foster a positive social identity, and enhance social solidarity. These positive experiences not only increase the motivation and commitment of volunteers but also ensure the sustainability of volunteering activities, maximising their social benefits.

2.2.2. Challenges and Negative Experiences

The second category of the *Volunteering Experience* theme, “*Challenges and Negative Experiences*”, explores the difficulties and negative experiences faced by search and rescue volunteers during their activities. This category sheds light on the challenging aspects of the volunteering process and how participants cope with these obstacles. As a result of the analysis, three fundamental codes were identified under this category: *physical challenges*, *emotional challenges*, and *logistics/organisational problems*.

These codes highlight the physical, emotional, and operational difficulties encountered by volunteers. While physical challenges refer to the demanding nature of the work, emotional challenges reflect the psychological toll of traumatic situations and negative behaviours. Logistics and organisational problems, on the other hand, pertain to operational inefficiencies that hinder the effectiveness of volunteering efforts.

The *physical challenges* code refers to the physical effort and fatigue that volunteers endure during their activities. Search and rescue work often involves long hours in difficult conditions, pushing volunteers to their physical limits. Several illustrative statements from participants that embodied this code are provided below:

“Working under the rubble for hours, constantly bending and standing up... It's a physically very tiring job.” (P3)

“Of course, for example, I interrupted you, we were fed with cold sandwiches for five days during the Marmaris fire. We ate cold sandwiches for five days. And we had difficulty going to the toilet because of that.” (P5)

The *emotional challenges* code reflects the psychological effects of traumatic situations and negative human behaviours that volunteers encounter in disaster zones. These experiences can leave lasting emotional scars, affecting the mental well-being of volunteers. Some participant statements within this code include:

“We saw it in our friends, it happened to me too, in the Soma disaster, you know, we couldn't get people out there, we only got out the corpses. We had taken out 301 miners there.” (P3)

“The negative experience was this, unfortunately, I saw this in the Izmir earthquake too, people taking photos in front of the rubble. It affected me very negatively, I even sent them all away from the area.” (P4)

The *logistics/organisational problems* code refers to the operational difficulties that volunteers face during their activities. Issues such as lack of resources, inadequate preparation, and mismanagement can hinder the efficiency and safety of rescue efforts. This thematic code was illustrated through these selected verbatim accounts from participants:

“We were left without water. We were left without water and food while on the mountain during the Aydın Çine fire. Did anyone provide water? No. We have to go prepared for ourselves because.” (P6)

These statements reveal that the volunteering experience is fraught with physical, emotional, and operational challenges. Physical difficulties, such as extreme fatigue and insufficient access to basic needs, can strain volunteers’ stamina. Emotional challenges, including exposure to trauma and negative behaviours, can impact volunteers’ psychological well-being. Additionally, logistical and organisational issues, such as a lack of proper coordination, can reduce the overall effectiveness of volunteering efforts.

Despite these challenges, recognising and addressing them is crucial for the sustainability and effectiveness of volunteering activities. Providing adequate support, such as physical resources, emotional counselling, and improved organisational structures, can help mitigate the negative effects of these experiences. Developing strategies to manage such challenges will not only improve the well-being of volunteers but also enhance the impact of their work in disaster zones.

2.2.3. Areas for NGO Improvement

The third category of the *Volunteering Experience* theme, “*Areas for NGO Improvement*”, focuses on the challenges faced by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) operating in the field of search and rescue, as well as the areas requiring improvement. This category reveals the changes deemed necessary, from the perspective of volunteers, for NGOs to operate more effectively and efficiently. As a result of the analysis, three fundamental codes were identified under this category: *lack of training and drills*, *equipment and coordination problems*, and *lack of social awareness and support*.

The *lack of training and drills* code emphasises the need for NGOs to increase the competencies of their volunteers through both theoretical and practical training. Participants expressed that more frequent and hands-on training sessions are essential for improving their preparedness and operational effectiveness. The essence of this code was revealed through these selected participant testimonies:

“I think practical training should be increased as much as theoretical training.” (P1)

“Well, the training could be a bit more frequent. Because I think the more training we get, the better it will be.” (P5)

The *equipment and coordination problems* code reflects the operational challenges faced by NGOs, including insufficient resources and inadequate coordination with other organisations. Participants highlighted the need for better resource planning and collaboration to improve their operational capacity. Some of the participant statements within this code include:

“The Red Crescent didn’t bring cold water. It’s what we need most because we’re already working in heat, on burned areas of forty-five to fifty degrees. Our boots are burning.” (P5)

“AFAD – Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency of Türkiye – experienced the same problem as us. Because we go there. How many people are you? We’re fourteen, twenty people. Okay, take twenty bottles of water. Brother, I said, I already drink four bottles of water in one sitting. I get very thirsty, and I have the effect of that smoke in my throat. I need to drink ayran, I need to drink cola, juice, something, I need to constantly replenish water.” (P5)

“We were thirsty. In the Aydın Çine fire, we were thirsty and hungry in the mountains. Did anyone get water out? No. Because we have to go prepared for ourselves.” (P6)

The *lack of social awareness and support* code highlights the difficulties NGOs face in engaging the public and maintaining consistent support from society. Participants noted that public interest in volunteering often diminishes after disasters, and societal awareness of disaster preparedness remains low. The following participant narratives were identified as characteristic examples of this code:

“Our people, even during a disaster, everyone joins associations to help with something. I mean, at that moment, everyone gets enthusiastic, gets excited like this, but after that disaster passes, there’s a big drop in people. It turns into the mentality of ‘there’s no disaster anyway, so there’s no need.’” (P5)

“But in the places I go, I see this: no one is aware in our society. We don’t understand anything until it happens to us. I mean, we need to be prepared for things, we need to be aware. Yes, we are an earthquake country, we all know this, but we have no preparation.” (P6)

These statements indicate that the areas requiring improvement in NGOs are multidimensional. First, increasing the frequency and practicality of training sessions is essential to enhance the skills and preparedness of volunteers. Second, addressing equipment shortages and improving coordination among organisations will significantly boost operational efficiency. Lastly, raising public awareness and ensuring sustained societal support are critical for the long-term effectiveness and sustainability of NGOs.

By addressing these areas, NGOs will be better equipped to fulfil their roles in disaster management and contribute to building social resilience. Implementing these improvements will not only enhance the operational capacity of NGOs but also strengthen their ability to mobilise and engage communities in disaster preparedness and response.

Conclusion

This qualitative phenomenological study, which examined the perceptions and experiences of NGO volunteers in search and rescue operations, provides significant insights into volunteer motivations, experiences, challenges, and the broader social impacts of volunteering in disaster response. Through an in-depth analysis of participant interviews, the findings reveal that volunteer motivations are shaped by a complex interplay of personal experiences—particularly previous disaster exposure—altruistic desires to serve society, and aspirations for self-development. This multifaceted motivational framework aligns with existing theories while highlighting unique factors specific to search and rescue volunteering.

One of the key findings is the strong influence of previous disaster experiences on volunteer motivation, which underscores the importance of transforming post-disaster community engagement into sustained volunteer participation. By creating structured pathways for disaster survivors to become trained volunteers, NGOs can help individuals transform potentially traumatic experiences into opportunities for personal growth and meaningful societal contributions. Additionally, the research demonstrates that volunteering fosters significant personal development outcomes, such as increased empathy, reduced prejudices, and enhanced social solidarity. These findings suggest that search and rescue volunteering not only serves as a mechanism for disaster response but also as a transformative tool for cultivating socially conscious and emotionally resilient individuals.

The study also identified several critical challenges faced by search and rescue NGOs, including insufficient training opportunities, equipment shortages, logistical difficulties, and coordination problems with other organisations. Volunteers themselves encounter significant physical and emotional challenges, while NGOs struggle with inconsistent levels of public awareness and support. Addressing these issues through systematic improvements in volunteer management and organisational practices is essential for enhancing the sustainability and effectiveness of search and rescue operations.

Volunteering positively influences both social capital and community resilience. Volunteers consistently reported strengthened social bonds, heightened community awareness, and enhanced collective response capabilities. These findings align with existing disaster management literature, which emphasises the importance of community-based approaches to disaster preparedness and response. The study also extends existing theories of volunteer motivation by accounting for the high-risk and high-commitment nature of disaster response volunteering, suggesting that traditional motivation frameworks may require adaptation to reflect the unique context of this work.

The documented changes in empathy, prejudice reduction, and social solidarity provide valuable insights into the role of volunteering in fostering stronger social cohesion. Moreover, the findings contribute to the literature on

volunteer management in high-stress environments by identifying specific challenges and proposing solutions for organisations in this field. Practical implications for NGOs include the development of structured training programs, improved operational systems, and comprehensive volunteer support mechanisms to ensure the well-being and effectiveness of volunteers.

To implement these improvements effectively, organisations should focus on establishing regular training programs that integrate theoretical and practical components, creating specialised modules for different types of disasters, and defining clear competency frameworks. Enhancing operational systems requires better equipment management, clearly defined inter-organisational coordination protocols, and formal psychological support services for volunteers. Supporting volunteers further through comprehensive insurance coverage, clear role definitions, and career development pathways can also improve retention and satisfaction.

The policy implications of this research are significant. There is a pressing need for comprehensive legal frameworks for disaster response volunteering, including protection mechanisms for volunteers and standards for training and certification. Increased funding for volunteer training programs, tax incentives for supporting organisations, and investments in equipment and infrastructure are essential for building organisational capacity. Additionally, public awareness campaigns, platforms for sharing volunteer experiences, and community-based disaster response initiatives should be prioritised to foster sustained engagement and support.

Looking ahead, several research directions emerge from this study. Longitudinal studies are needed to track the long-term impacts of volunteering on individual development, retention, and commitment. Comparative research across different types of disasters and cultural contexts would provide deeper insights into volunteer experiences, while studies focusing on organisational effectiveness and social impact assessment could quantify the broader value of volunteer contributions.

The critical role of search and rescue volunteers in disaster management is well-established and increasingly vital. This research highlights that volunteering in this field goes beyond emergency service provision—it actively contributes to building stronger, more resilient communities and fostering socially conscious individuals. While the challenges identified are significant, they also present opportunities for innovation and improvement in volunteer management and disaster response practices.

As the frequency and severity of natural disasters continue to rise due to climate change and other factors, the importance of well-trained and effectively managed volunteer forces will become even more critical. This research offers valuable insights for developing more robust and sustainable volunteer programs that can meet these growing challenges while continuing to provide meaningful experiences for volunteers and essential services to communities in need. The transformative power of search and rescue

volunteering lies not only in its immediate benefits during crises but also in its long-term contributions to fostering more empathetic, connected, and resilient societies.

In conclusion, as environmental and social challenges intensify, the role of volunteers in strengthening community resilience will be vital. The findings of this study provide a foundation for understanding and improving volunteer programs while highlighting the profound personal and social transformations that occur through search and rescue volunteering. By addressing the challenges identified and building on the positive aspects revealed in this research, NGOs and policymakers can work together to create more effective, sustainable, and impactful volunteer systems that benefit both individuals and communities in times of crisis.

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