

## **When Helping Brings Happiness: Changes in Psychological Well-being and Life Satisfaction and the Motivation to Help in Participatory Volunteering**

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**Summary.** Research suggests that helping others contributes to happiness; however, this relationship is not straightforward. This study fills the gaps in previous research by integrating two constructs - life satisfaction and psychological well-being - with volunteerism. By investigating how they interact with motivations, the research advances understanding of why and how helping influences happiness. 806 volunteers participated in long-term assistance programs, completed pre- and post-tests, and 20 individuals took part in interviews. The results indicate that while volunteering can enhance life satisfaction by fostering a sense of purpose and connection, it can decrease psychological well-being due to the emotional burden of empathizing with those in distress. However, altruistic motivations can prevent a decrease in well-being, whereas self-centered ones may contribute to its decline. The awareness that not all volunteer experiences are beneficial can lead to improved volunteer management practices, such as recruitment strategies that align individual motivations with the appropriate roles.

### **KEYWORDS**

Psychological well-being, life satisfaction, motivation to help, volunteering

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## INTRODUCTION

Helping is related to the social nature of human beings. Not only do people assist others, but a growing body of research indicates that they may derive pleasure from doing so, which contributes to their well-being (Curry et al., 2018). The interest in the relationship between helping and well-being is justified, given that individuals who experience higher levels of satisfaction enjoy good health, the affection of others, and better relationships with loved ones (Kushlev et al., 2020). This simple, yet repeatedly confirmed correlation may lead us to consider helping as an antidote to lack of happiness. However, drawing simplistic conclusions from research on the relationship between well-being and helping can be deceptive. A deeper analysis reveals that this relationship is not straightforward and depends on how it is analyzed and how well-being is defined.

Studies utilizing a correlational model and comparing the well-being of helpers and non-helpers demonstrate higher levels of happiness in the former (Nichol, 2024). However, this observation does not indicate whether helping increases happiness or whether happier individuals are simply more inclined to help. A meta-analysis conducted by Jenkinson et al. (2013) did not support the direct hypothesis that volunteering improves well-being. For example, in one study, students who volunteered did not experience greater well-being than those who were placed on a waiting list and did not become active (Whillans et al., 2016). This suggests that not all types of volunteer work increase well-being. Research into the mechanisms underlying helping has also yielded inconclusive data (Dunn et al., 2014). Individuals who spend money on others or make donations report higher levels of satisfaction. However, when donations are structured within an experimental setting and the participants are obliged to give a certain amount, they report significantly lower levels of happiness compared to those who have the autonomy to decide (Weinstein & Ryan, 2010). In an attempt to clarify these ambiguities, Aknin and Whillans (2021) relied on the self-determination

theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) to identify three factors that contribute to experiencing happiness in helping: a sense of autonomy, competence, and belonging. They argued that helping increases well-being if it results from an autonomous choice rather than coercion, if it is provided directly rather than through others, which enables the helper to witness the improvement in people's lives, and if it promotes meaningful bonds rather than superficial contact.

The three conditions outlined suggest that a stronger personal commitment is associated with a greater increase in happiness derived from helping others. However, even when these conditions are met, helpers may still experience mixed feelings of happiness. For instance, volunteers who provide assistance to individuals facing extreme poverty and lacking basic necessities may experience ambivalence despite voluntarily engaging in such activities. These volunteers have the opportunity to witness the impact of their actions and establish a direct connection with those in need, fulfilling the necessary conditions for experiencing an increase in well-being. Nevertheless, this type of helping can exert a significant strain on the helpers' personal resources, including physical (e.g., time and travel costs), social (e.g., seeking assistance from friends), and emotional (e.g., empathy and concern for the challenging circumstances). Consequently, it is crucial to explore whether involvement in volunteering ultimately leads to happiness. This question holds theoretical relevance as it relates to the analysis of volunteering through the lens of self-determination theory. Furthermore, it has practical implications. The conditions under which participatory volunteering increases well-being should be identified to support volunteer recruitment and training.

### **What mechanisms regulate the motivation to help?**

Psychology highlights two main mechanisms that promote happiness in helping situations: specific motivation and the regulation of emotions when faced with unhappiness. Different motives can drive people to help. The level and type of motivation differ in volunteers seeking

to improve the well-being of others and those who focus on their own well-being. Some may want to help for altruistic reasons because they genuinely enjoy helping others or care about them, while others may have selfish motives and help others to derive personal gain (Batson et al., 2003). The motivation to volunteer stems from social influences that shape a sense of justice and altruistic attitudes in childhood. Both types of motivation can be people-oriented or self-oriented. For instance, the sense of unconditional justice, also known as 'inequality aversion' (Zalewska & Krzywosz-Rynkiewicz, 2010), is people-oriented because it involves concern for the welfare of others. In contrast, the need for reciprocal justice is self-oriented, because it relates to self-protection and is associated with fear of rejection (Bereby-Meyer & Fisk, 2012). Helping is also influenced by empathy. Generally, research suggests that empathy leads to altruistic, rather than selfish motivations to help. However, the context and the type of offered help are also important factors (Graziano et al., 2007). Individuals with egoistic attitudes may be driven by empathy only when they have no choice (for example, when withdrawal is difficult or impossible). On the other hand, individuals with altruistic attitudes are more likely to be driven by empathy, regardless of the difficulty of the situation. In low-cost helping situations, individuals with selfish motives may be able to manage negative emotions, whereas in high-cost helping situations, regulating negative affect may pose a greater challenge. Therefore, unlike individuals with egoistic motives, people with altruistic motives may experience an increase in well-being when helping comes at significant personal cost and strains their resources.

### **What types of happiness are generated through helping?**

The definition of happiness plays a crucial role in comprehending its association with helping. In this paper, happiness, satisfaction, and well-being are used interchangeably when referring to different studies. These terms are related to the two main philosophical concepts of happiness: hedonism and eudaimonism.

In hedonistic terms, happiness is defined as "life satisfaction" (Diener et al 2006). It involves the subjective experience of pleasure, satisfaction in achieving one's goals, and it is similar to the colloquial understanding of happiness. This perspective acknowledges that individuals experience different types of satisfaction while pursuing happiness, which can change in response to events. The eudaimonistic perspective of happiness (Ryff, 1989) refers to "psychological well-being" and emphasizes self-realization and personal development as the path to happiness.

The hedonistic concept of life satisfaction is more commonly used in research than the eudaimonistic notion of psychological well-being. An integrated approach can promote a comprehensive understanding of the quality of life of volunteers who are involved in complex helping actions.

In conclusion, the relationship between helping and happiness remains elusive due to the limited number of experimental studies, most of which focus on a single dimension of happiness. To better understand the types of help that promote happiness and the underlying motivational mechanisms, the volunteers' life satisfaction, psychological well-being, and motivation to help should be measured simultaneously, especially in actions that require a high commitment of personal resources. Our research addresses these needs.

This article analyzes volunteerism that involves long-term (lasting several weeks) commitment and engages personal resources. This type of volunteerism requires direct engagement to identify disadvantaged individuals' needs, strategize ways to address these needs, participate in fundraising activities, and ultimately provide support. Two main research questions have been formulated:

1. What is the relationship between life satisfaction and psychological well-being among individuals engaged in intensive volunteering activities that necessitate a substantial personal investment?

2. What are the key attributes of the motivation to assist exhibited by individuals involved in highly demanding volunteering endeavors, and how do these factors influence their levels of life satisfaction and psychological well-being?

There is a general scarcity of studies investigating the relationship between long-term help that strains personal resources and psychological well-being (cf. Elias et al 2016). In general, research suggests that long-term volunteering can improve well-being, primarily through increased social connectedness, a sense of purpose, and improved self-efficacy. However, more attention should be paid to volunteering intensity and the demands placed on volunteers to avoid potential negative effects, such as stress or burnout. In the described project, both dimensions of well-being were monitored. Quantitative methods, which support the identification of patterns, were combined with qualitative methods to explore the mechanisms that underly helping. A number of assumptions were made based on a review of the literature. Firstly, a correlation could be expected between the psychological well-being and life satisfaction of volunteers. A comparative study by Keyes et al. (2002) revealed some similarities between the two constructs, including a correlation with personality traits, but it also highlighted the specificity of these traits, as discussed above. It can be hypothesized that highly involved volunteers are likely to experience an increase in life satisfaction. This is because help is voluntary, and it enables volunteers to experience the outcomes of their actions and establish direct contact with the beneficiary (Aknin et al., 2021). Psychological well-being is a more complex and multidimensional phenomenon that is more closely linked to personal resources. Therefore, it can be assumed that changes in volunteering burden can induce complex changes in psychological well-being. Previous research has shown that volunteers experience greater psychological well-being than non-volunteers. However, those in helping professions experience the highest levels of burnout (cf. American Psychological Association's Workplace Mental Health & Well-Being, 2022,

<https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/workplace-mental-health-well-being.pdf>). Although volunteers do not help as much as professionals, they also do not have the same level of training. Therefore, it can be assumed that the psychological well-being of volunteers should generally increase, but certain dimensions of well-being may decrease. When helping individuals who are affected by long-term poverty due to life crises and accidents, volunteers may experience a sense of loss of control over their own lives and a decline in motivation to seek solutions to difficult situations.

Secondly, long-term volunteers can be driven by both altruistic and egoistic motivations, although altruistic motives can be more significant due to the very nature of volunteering. The research hypothesis posits that motivation plays a crucial role in the regulation of well-being. Individuals driven by altruistic motives may be more driven to invest personal resources in the act of helping, which can enhance both psychological well-being and life satisfaction. In turn, individuals who are motivated by egoistic reasons and experience difficulty in regulating empathy, may experience a decline in well-being and life satisfaction when faced with the challenges of continued engagement (Graziano et al., 2007).

## **METHOD**

### **Procedure**

*Description of the analyzed volunteering project.* A two-month study was conducted to analyze the well-being and life satisfaction of volunteers participating in the 'Szlachetna Paczka' [Noble Parcel] aid campaign which is organized in Poland by the 'Wiosna' [Spring] Association (<https://www.wiosna.org.pl/>). Each year, around 6,000 volunteers participate in the campaign. Volunteer work lasts approximately two months and includes the following tasks: (1) selecting families in need from a list of registered families, (2) identifying the beneficiaries' primary needs, (3) reaching donors who can make financial or material contributions; (4) buying, packing, transporting, and delivering goods. The campaign ends

with a 'Weekend of Miracles' that takes place before Christmas. In 2023, 17,000 Polish families received help as part of the project.

*Committed personal resources.* Each volunteer works an average of 50 hours during the campaign. In addition to personal time, volunteers also invest personal resources in building relationships with families, networking to organize assistance, and participating in teamwork.

*Procedure.* The study involved a quantitative survey, where all volunteers completed a pre-test and a post-test, as well as qualitative survey, where randomly selected volunteers completed an online survey on the Lime Survey platform. The participants were provided with a link to the survey platform by email. The survey was conducted twice: as a pre-test before the campaign and a post-test two weeks after the campaign. Personalized survey links were created to fit pre-test and post-test data for each individual. The qualitative survey involved thirty-minute structured Zoom interviews with randomly selected volunteers.

## **Study Group**

The pre-test and the post-test were administered to 11.6% of the total number of volunteers from all age groups ( $n = 876$ ). The participants' demographic characteristics were highly similar to the characteristics of the overall population examined in terms of gender (81% women), age (respectively years old: 8% >20; 12% 20-25, 12% 26-30, 57 31-50, 11 51-60, 0,2% <60), educational attainment (3.5% primary, 46% secondary, 49% tertiary), and employment status (60% employed, 11% working students, 10% students, 9% unemployed).

## **Research tools**

*Psychological well-being* was assessed using the Psychological Well-Being Scale questionnaire that was developed by Carol Ryff (1989) and adapted to Polish by Karaś and Cieciuch (2017). The scale is composed of six factors. The complete version includes 84 items that are rated on a six-point scale. An abridged methodologically verified (Karaś and



Cieciuch, 2017) 18-item version of the scale was used in the present study, with three items per subscale. This approach could explain the lower values of Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for each item. The following values were obtained: Self-acceptance – .61, Purpose in life – .35, Environmental mastery – .54, Positive relationships with others – .41, Personal growth – .46, Autonomy – .41, and General well-being – .77. Despite the fact that an abbreviated version of tool was used, the reliability of the overall scale was deemed acceptable, and the validity of the model was confirmed. However, the results for individual subscales should be interpreted with caution.

*Life satisfaction* was assessed using the SWLS life satisfaction scale (Diener et al., 1985) that was adapted to Polish by Juczyński (2001). The scale consists of five statements rated on a seven-point scale with a reliability of  $\alpha = .84$ .

*Motivation to help* was evaluated with the use of 12 items rated on a seven-point scale (from 1 -strongly disagree to 7 - strongly agree) that was designed for this study. The exploratory factor analysis revealed three categories of motivation: idealistic-supportive (5 items;  $\alpha = .83$ ) - volunteering makes a positive impact on the world and helps others (desire to bring about positive change); self-reinforcing (3 items;  $\alpha = .72$ ) - volunteering strengthens own status and security (by gaining recognition and support from others); and exploratory (4 items;  $\alpha = .83$ ) - volunteers are able to explore new opportunities (by acquiring new skills and experiences). The reliability of the overall,12-item, motivation factor reached  $\alpha = .85$ .

The following *personal and demographic* variables were examined: age, gender, education, employment status (working/studying/working students), job, financial status (financial dependence/independence), experience in helping (none/experience in other projects /experience in the same project), and place of residence.

### **Analyses conducted**

*Statistical analyses* were performed using SPSS 29.0 software. After removing outliers, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk distribution tests indicated non-significant results for all scales, with skewness and kurtosis values ranging from -1 to 1. All variables analyzed exhibited a distribution that was close to normal, thus allowing for the application of parametric tests. The conducted analyses encompassed exploratory factor analysis (EFA) for factor extraction, ANOVA to examine the significant associations between the explained and explanatory variables, k-means cluster analysis to identify distinct types of volunteers, independent t-tests to identify pre- and post-action changes, and regression analysis to examine the influence of individual variables.

*Analysis of interviews.* The objective of the conducted interviews was to confirm or refute the adopted hypotheses. To achieve this, an affirmative material analysis strategy (Silverman & Marvasti, 2008) was employed. This strategy involved segregating the data according to themes and examining the meaningful content related to specific issues.

## **RESULTS**

The results were analyzed in three steps. In the first step, the correlation between life satisfaction and personal well-being was examined by observing changes and mutual relationships between these variables during the project. The volunteers' motivation, changes in motivation, and its impact on psychological well-being and life satisfaction were analyzed in the second step. In the final step, volunteers' motivation was profiled, and the relationship between these profiles and personal well-being, life satisfaction, and changes in these variables was analyzed.

### **Relationship between life satisfaction and psychological well-being of volunteers**

*Changes in life satisfaction resulting from volunteering.* The results of Student's t-test for dependent variables revealed an increase in life satisfaction:  $t(871) = 2.37, p = 0.009, 95\%$

$CI[0.01; 0.10]$ ,  $d = 0.4$ . The score increased from  $M = 4.69$ ,  $SD = 1.01$  before the survey to  $M = 4.75$ ,  $SD = 1.03$  after the survey. The volunteers reported on two types of experiences that were particularly important for life satisfaction. The first category pertained to affective encounters that are specifically associated with empathy:

When we visited families during the 'Weekend of Miracles' and unwrapped parcels with them, the beneficiaries were incredibly happy. The women had tears in their eyes, and they were crying with joy. It was an incredible experience. It really lifted my spirits, especially since most of the gifts were basic necessities like food and clothes. (Female)

It was an amazing experience to see how happy these families were when they received the packages. It fills you with wonderful emotions, and I wish everyone could experience such happiness. (Female)

The second type of experience was cognitive in nature and entailed a transformative shift in perspective when evaluating one's own life:

I consider myself lucky to be able to volunteer and not to be in need of assistance. However, not everyone is as fortunate. (Male)

I learned to appreciate the fact that I'm healthy, that I have a job and people who love me. I always took these things for granted, but now I think that we should appreciate what we already have, rather than constantly search for an ideal life. (Male)

The quantitative survey provided empirical support for these findings, demonstrating a significant increase in item related to the idealization of one's life: "In many ways, my life is close to perfect" (from  $M = 3.75$ ,  $SD = 1.44$  before the survey to  $M = 3.92$ ,  $SD = 1.47$  after the survey;  $t(871) = 3.89$ ,  $p = 0.001$ , 95%  $CI [0.08, 0.25]$ ,  $d = 0.5$ ).

*Changes in psychological well-being resulting from volunteering.* The results of Student's  $t$ -test for dependent variables revealed a significant difference in well-being before ( $M = 7.75$ ,  $SD = 0.50$ ) and after ( $M = 4.71$ ,  $SD = 0.52$ ) the campaign ( $t(877) = -2.99$ ,  $p = 0.002$ , 95%  $CI [-0.07, -0.01]$ ,  $d = -0.3$ ). A significant decrease was noted in Environmental mastery ( $t(877) = -2.38$ ,  $p = 0.009$ , 95%  $CI [-0.10, -0.01]$ ,  $d = -0.3$ ) and Personal growth ( $t(877) = -2.63$ ,  $p = 0.004$ , 95%  $CI [-0.09, -0.01]$ ,  $d = -0.3$ ). Some volunteers experienced negative emotions and struggled to regulate them:

Some cases were so dramatic that we found it difficult to gather our thoughts or comment on what we had just seen. One person even cried. We needed some time before we could move on. For some of us, this level of human misery was a traumatic experience (Male 51-60)

I think I am more sensitive to other people's pain. I don't enjoy seeing others suffer [...], it makes me mentally exhausted. (Female)

Many volunteers reflected on existential matters and emphasized that the assistance given to those in need undermined their perceptions of having complete control over their lives:

I became more aware of the fact that some people genuinely live in terrible conditions and have endured unimaginable hardships. Many of these families had met with a terrible fate. I'm not talking about isolated incidents, but a series of sudden and unfortunate events. And now, they must cope with these challenges. (Female)

Volunteers were able to develop profound connections or even identify with the beneficiaries, which bolstered their motivation, but also placed a burden on their daily lives:

Regardless of whether a given family is included in our program, we become a part of that family's life during the campaign. If that family is included, the volunteers are willing to move mountains to help them. Sometimes, when people, young or old, lose their sense of purpose, feeling like they have no one to live for, we become their family and their reason to carry on. We develop a genuine sense of compassion. They become the center of our world. We work tirelessly to find a donor. At times, we prioritize the family's interests over our own daily concerns, even if it goes against our better judgment. They become more important to us than ourselves. (Male).

*The relationship between volunteers' life satisfaction and psychological well-being.* The aim of the study was to investigate the relationship between psychological well-being and life satisfaction. Theoretically, psychological well-being is a more stable construct that is linked to personality traits, whereas life satisfaction is more susceptible to external factors. We hypothesized that psychological well-being may have a regulatory function and may lead to changes in life satisfaction as a result of volunteer work. A regression analysis was conducted, where the change in life satisfaction (measured as the difference in life satisfaction before and after volunteering) was the dependent variable, and psychological well-being before volunteering was the independent variable.

The results suggest that baseline levels of psychological well-being is important for change of life satisfaction as a result of volunteering ( $F(1, 871) = 3.42, p = 0.01, R^2 = 0.09$ ). Furthermore, the analysis demonstrated that factor 'Environmental mastery' had a positive effect on change in life satisfaction ( $F(1, 828) = 10.01, p < 0.001, R^2 = 0.12$ ). Hence, individuals who have sense of control over their own lives experience a greater increase in life satisfaction as a result of volunteer work.

### **Volunteer motivation and its impact on life satisfaction and psychological well-being**

*Characteristics of volunteer motivations.* As previously mentioned, volunteer motivations can be divided into three main categories: idealistic-supportive, self-reinforcing, and exploratory. The first category is centered on the needs of the community or other individuals, and it can be classified as altruistic. The remaining two categories focus primarily on the volunteers' own needs, and they can be classified as egoistic. Self-reinforcing motives focus on protecting the ego, and they deal with personal security, receiving sympathy, or addressing personal issues. Exploratory motives emphasize the expressive aspects of the ego, and they provide novel experiences and opportunities. Although both categories address personal needs, they differ in content, which suggests that they can exert a different impact on subjective perceptions of quality of life in terms of both psychological well-being and life satisfaction.

The ANOVA revealed that the level of motivation was not determined by education ( $F(2, 863) = 1.28, p = 0.058, \eta^2 = 0.008$ ), or employment status ( $F(2, 862) = 2.35, p = 0.053, \eta^2 = 0.010$ ). However, ANOVA combined with the Games-Howell post-hoc analysis revealed that self-reinforcing motives ( $F(2, 861) = 4.60, p = 0.012, \eta^2 = 0.038$ ) were significantly higher in individuals with secondary education ( $M = 4.75, SD = 1.19$ ) compared to those with primary education ( $M = 4.64, SD = 1.41$ ) and higher education ( $M = 4.49, SD = 1.19$ ). Moreover, individuals who were not working or studying ( $M = 5.05, SD = 1.22$ ) exhibited significantly higher levels of self-reinforcing motives ( $F(3, 798) = 3.99, p = 0.003, \eta^2 = 0.034$ ) than those

who were employed ( $M = 4.52$ ,  $SD = 1.17$ ) or those who combined studying with work ( $M = 4.78$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ ). Finally, idealistic-supportive motives were associated with prior volunteering experience ( $F(2, 824) = 4.16$ ,  $p = 0.006$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.039$ ). Idealistic-supportive motives were more pronounced in individuals who had participated in other campaigns ( $M = 6.30$ ,  $SD = 0.57$ ) or the same campaign ( $M = 6.32$ ,  $SD = 0.64$ ) relative to subjects without such experiences ( $M = 6.14$ ,  $SD = 0.81$ ).

*Relationships between the motivation to help and psychological well-being and life satisfaction.* The correlation analysis (Table 1) revealed a positive correlation between all variables associated with the quality of life and types of motivation. General motivation and idealistic-supportive motives were most highly associated with psychological well-being.

**Table 1.** Relationships between psychological well-being and life satisfaction vs. general motivation and type of motivation (Pearson's correlation coefficient  $r$ )

Variables	GW	LS	GM	ISM	SRM	EM
General well-being (GW)	-	.514**	.221**	.317**	n.s.	.197**
Life satisfaction (LS)	.514**	-	.155**	.175**	n.s.	n.s.
General motivation (GM)	.221**	.155**	-	.769**	.706**	.776**
Idealistic-supportive motives (ISM)	.317**	.175**	.769**	-	.255**	.504**
Self-reinforcing motives (SRM)	n.s.	n.s.	.706**	.255**	-	.403**
Exploratory motives (EM)	.197**	n.s.	.776**	.504**	.403**	-

\*\* $p < 0.01$

*The impact of volunteer motivation on changes in life satisfaction and psychological well-being.* The impact of volunteer motivation was examined in a regression analysis, where differences in life satisfaction and psychological well-being before and after the campaign were the dependent variables, and general motivation and type of motivation before the campaign were the independent variables.

The analysis revealed that general motivation level slightly influenced the life satisfaction change after volunteering ( $F(1, 867) = 2.48$ ,  $p = 0.048$ ,  $R^2 = 0.07$ ). However, only idealistic-

supportive motivation exerted a significant influence on the perceived change in life satisfaction ( $F(1, 867) = 4.278, p < 0.001, R^2 = 0.12$ ). Similar observations were made in an analysis examining the impact of motivation on psychological well-being change. Volunteers generally experienced a decline in psychological well-being after participating in a project. The regression analysis revealed that only idealistic-supportive motivation slightly influenced the participants' psychological well-being increase ( $F(1, 867) = 4.31, p = 0.038, R^2 = 0.06$ ).

### **What is the regulatory impact of motivation on volunteers' psychological well-being and life satisfaction?**

An analysis of various motives for participating in volunteer work provides valuable insights about changes in life satisfaction and well-being. However, this is a somewhat simplistic approach. People engage in various behaviors to fulfill different needs; therefore, it can be assumed that various combinations of the motivation to volunteer are also possible. Therefore, the volunteers were divided into groups with different general motivation and different motivational profiles. The k-means cluster analysis procedure was used to identify four clusters with different profiles and three types of motivation (with a minimum distance of 4.946 between the initial cluster centers).

The first profile was labeled as Volunteer Activists, and it consisted of 27% of respondents who demonstrated high levels of both altruistic and egoistic motivations. The second profile (15%) consisted of volunteers who had low levels of both altruistic and egoistic motivations, and focused mainly on protecting their own interests and gaining recognition. This group was referred to as Conservative Volunteers to highlight their limited interest in new experiences and focus on personal security, without deeper commitment to genuine altruistic goals or personal development. The third profile (32%) comprised individuals with average levels of altruistic motivation and varying levels of egoistic motivation. They displayed high levels of protective ego-driven motivation (centering on own problems and social approval), but low

levels of expressive ego-driven motivation (which encourages new experiences and the development of new skills). This group was referred to as Compensating Volunteers to emphasize that these individuals become involved in volunteer work mainly to compensate for personal deficits, and are only moderately motivated to help others. The fourth group (26%) was characterized by moderate general motivation, high altruistic motivation, and different egoistic motives, with low levels of protective ego-driven motivation and high levels of expressive ego-driven motivation. This group was referred to as Aspirational Volunteers because these individuals were willing to help others while seeking personal growth and new experiences, with less emphasis on protecting their ego or gaining sympathy.

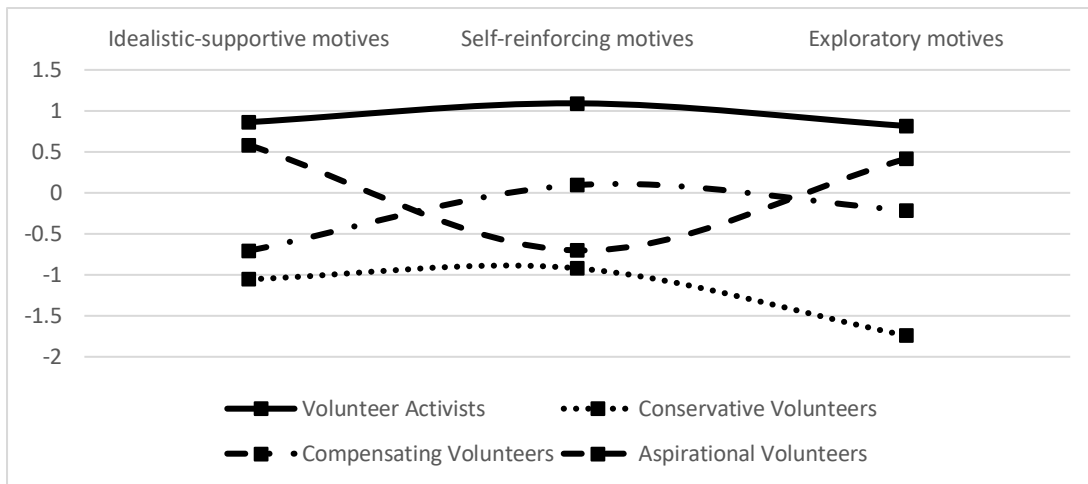
The results of the cluster analysis and ANOVA for each profile (mean scores and standard deviations) are presented in Table 2. The analyses revealed significant differences in motivation categories across the identified profiles. The volunteer motivation profiles of the final cluster centers (standardized scores) are presented in Figure 1.

**Table 2** *Characteristics of the identified volunteer motivation profiles – the results of ANOVA*

Type of motivation/profile	<i>Volunteer</i>		<i>Conservative</i>		<i>Compensating</i>		<i>Aspirational</i>		Error	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	Eta2
	<i>Activists (a)</i>		<i>Volunteers (b)</i>		<i>Volunteers (c)</i>		<i>Volunteers (d)</i>					
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD				
Idealistic-supportive	6.62bcd	0.55	5.83acd	0.67	6.02abd	0.62	6.45abc	0.63	0.38	<b>65.90</b>	<b>0.001</b>	0.191
Self-reinforcing	5.46bcd	1.02	3.89acd	1.05	4.65abd	1.06	4.11abc	1.06	1.10	<b>86.29</b>	<b>0.001</b>	0.236
Exploratory	6.62bcd	0.49	5.46acd	0.81	6.11abd	0.59	6.36abc	0.62	0.37	<b>103.50</b>	<b>0.001</b>	0.271

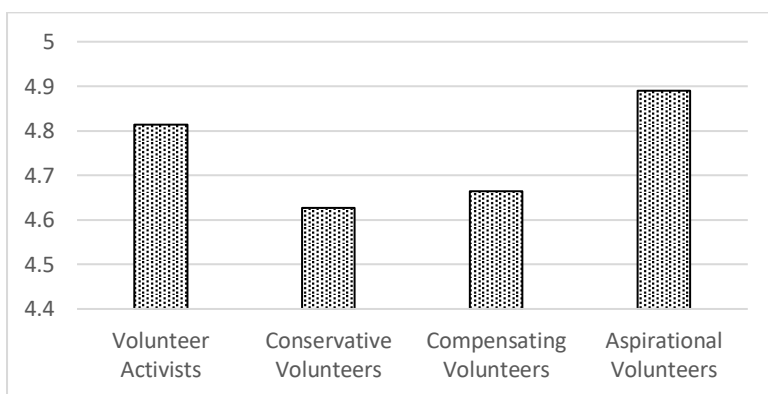
*Note:* *F*-statistic for univariate tests with *df*(3; 871) degrees of freedom; letters indicate groups that differ significantly at *p* < 0.001.



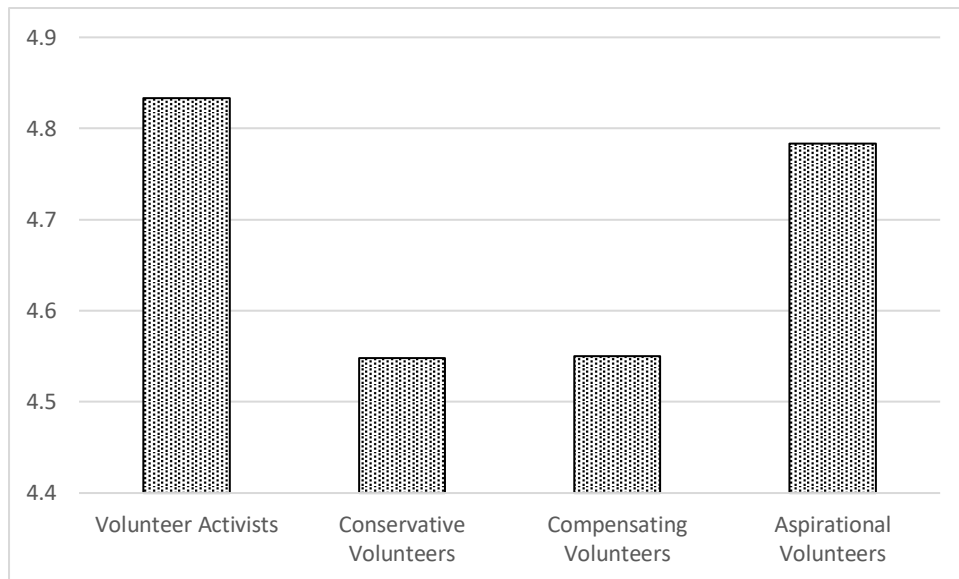


**Fig. 1** Motivational profiles in four clusters (standardized data)

Significant differences in psychological well-being ( $F(3, 859) = 12.69, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.432$ ) and life satisfaction ( $F(3, 850) = 4.76, p = 0.003, \eta^2 = 0.017$ ) were observed between volunteer profiles before the campaign. Volunteer Activists and Aspirational Volunteers were characterized by the highest values of both variables, which indicates that individuals with these motivational profiles experience higher levels of psychological well-being (see Figure 2) and life satisfaction (see Figure 3) when engaging in volunteer activities.



**Fig. 2** Experiences of well-being in different motivational profiles before the campaign



**Fig. 3** Experiences of life satisfaction in different motivational profiles before the campaign

The results of ANOVA indicate that changes in life satisfaction due to volunteering are not related to the volunteer's motivational profile  $F(3, 848) = 0.42, p = 0.739, \eta^2 = 0.001$ . However, the configuration of motives plays an important role in psychological well-being. The ANOVA revealed differences in the underlying factors across groups,  $F(3, 850) = 4.72, p = 0.003, \eta^2 = 0.016$ .

The post-hoc analysis (Table 3) demonstrated that the Activists were the only group to experience an increase in well-being. The Activists did not differ significantly from Aspirational Volunteers, but they differed from Conservative and Compensating Volunteers who experienced the most significant decrease in overall well-being and the underlying factors. Two factors associated with well-being induced the most significant changes across the studied groups: the attitude towards Personal growth, namely the use of own potential to help others, and a sense of Purpose in life. Both factors increased in Activists and Aspirational Volunteers, but decreased in Conservative and Compensating volunteers. This suggests that high motivation, particularly altruistic, prevents a decline in the sense of purpose in life and

contributes to the fulfillment of one's potential. The interviews conducted with the Activists confirmed that this group focuses on proactive measures and practical solutions:

When a single parent raising a four-year-old child shows us pictures of an apartment with no kitchen, with just a light bulb on a wire [...] and says: 'I'm not going to the social services because they will take my child away from me', I'm thinking, it's too late to recruit them, but we'll all chip in to get a washing machine, a fridge, furniture. We know someone who can lay tiles. It can be done. (Male 31-50, Activist profile)

The factors related to personal well-being, such as having a sense of purpose in life and pursuing personal growth, are most likely to decline in individuals who are driven primarily by self-interest. Individuals who do volunteer work to address their own problems may experience a profound sense of disillusionment in their quest for meaning and purpose in life:

I was depressed during the project, and I was reluctant to leave the house. The meetings gave me some motivation and a different perspective. But meeting people who were in dire straits was a sad and depressing experience, and it made me realize that some families have much greater problems. (Female 20-30, Conservatives profile).

I just felt sad and, I don't know... clumsy. I wanted to do everything I can to help this family, but, unfortunately, I can't do it myself... for financial reasons. I don't have a driving license, I don't have a way to get there, and there are many other factors that trigger depression. (Female 51-65, Compensators profile)

In conclusion, high motivation and altruistic motives can prevent a decrease in psychological well-being. These factors enable individuals to achieve goals and experience a sense of self-worth when helping others. Individuals with low motivation and predominantly egocentric disposition are less able to cope with negative emotions that are triggered by other people's problems.

**Table 3** *Changes in general well-being and the underlying factors across different motivational profiles – the results of ANOVA*

Well-being factors/ Profile	Volunteer Activists (a)		Conservative Volunteers (b)		Compensating Volunteers (c)		Aspirational Volunteers (d)		F (3,835)	p	Eta2
	Mpost/Mpre	SD	Mpost/Mpre	SD	Mpost/Mpre	SD	Mpost/Mpre	SD			
General	0.03bc	0.42	-0.12a	0.39	-0.06a	0.34	-0.02	0.41	<b>4.72</b>	<b>0.003</b>	0.016
Mastery	0.02	0.79	-0.08	0.60	-0.09	0.65	-0.06	0.71	1.40	0.242	0.005
Self-acceptance	0.06	0.83	-0.01	0.68	-0.03	0.64	-0.08	0.71	1.62	0.183	0.006

Relationships	0.07	0.67	-0.04	0.63	-0.06	0.56	-0.02	0.60	2.52	0.560	0.009
Growth	0.01bc	0.63	-0.19ad	0.61	-0.09ad	0.53	0.02bc	0.56	<b>5.10</b>	<b>0.002</b>	0.018
Purpose	0.01bc	0.91	-0.29ad	0.83	0.07ad	0.80	0.02bc	0.88	<b>5.81</b>	<b>0.001</b>	0.020
Autonomy	0.02	0.78	-0.07	0.69	-0.12	0.77	-0.04	0.75	1.63	0.181	0.006

*Note:* Letters denote significant differences ( $p < 0.01$ ) between groups based on the results of the Games-Howell post-hoc test; Mpost/Mpre - difference between mean values before and after volunteering.

## SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Research suggests that a positive association exists between helping and feelings of happiness, although this relationship is not straightforward (Jenkinson et al., 2013). Akinin and Whillans (2021) have argued that helping generates happiness when it fulfills the need for autonomy, competence, and belonging. To expand on these observations, the current study demonstrated that even if all of the above prerequisites are fulfilled through volunteer work, they may not be sufficient to augment happiness. By analyzing two dimensions of the quality of life - life satisfaction and psychological well-being - as well as the motivation to help, the study generated interesting insights about the complex effects of volunteering on happiness.

The observed correlation between life satisfaction and psychological well-being supports previous reports on how helping others affects happiness, but also reveals new associations.

The study confirmed that volunteering can lead to an increase in life satisfaction. These changes are driven by two mechanisms. The first mechanism is affective in nature: direct involvement and observation of the beneficiaries' happiness enables volunteers to experience positive emotions. The second mechanism is cognitive: by witnessing other people's struggles, volunteers begin to appreciate their own lives. These findings align with the theoretical assumptions of the life satisfaction construct (Diener, 1984) which posits that personal feelings of contentment or discontentment influence how people evaluate the quality of their lives.

However, an increase in life satisfaction resulting from volunteer work is accompanied by a decline in psychological well-being. This decline can be attributed to the challenges of

managing negative emotions when confronted with the suffering of others, as well as existential reflections that arise when faced with the fragility of one's own fate. This finding is consistent with the concept of psychological well-being which encompasses happiness from the perspective of self-actualization and personal potential.

It was found that volunteering led to a decline in two factors associated with well-being. The first factor is a sense of mastery. Volunteers who encounter disadvantaged individuals can feel limited in their ability to control their own fate, which decreases their self-efficacy. According to Bandura (1997), feelings of self-efficacy play a crucial role in regulating self-motivation. Additionally, prior research indicates that volunteers with higher levels of self-efficacy are more inclined to engage in volunteer work and experience greater life satisfaction (Turner et al., 2021). The second factor is the perception of limited resources and the capacity to fulfill one's own potential. The establishment of relationships with those in need strengthens volunteers' commitment, but it also presents challenges. Volunteers are faced with the harsh reality that not all problems can be solved and that not all lives can be improved.

The study contributes to the academic understanding of volunteers' well-being by examining the relationship between two dimensions of happiness: hedonistic (life satisfaction) and eudaimonistic (psychological well-being). These aspects have been rarely analyzed in combination in the existing literature. The present findings indicate that volunteers who have a strong sense of personal control and lack a sense of purpose in life experience increased life satisfaction at the end of the project. This supports the notion that individuals with a strong sense of self-efficacy are more likely to rely on volunteer work to build positive narratives about their lives. In addition, volunteering can help individuals find purpose in life and, subsequently, increase life satisfaction.

The study also demonstrated that the relationship between happiness and helping is governed by several motivational mechanisms. Two categories of volunteer motivations were identified.

The first category is altruistic in nature, and it was defined as idealistic-supportive. The second category is egoistic, and volunteers' ego-driven motives can be protective or expressive. Egoistic motivations were more prevalent among persons with secondary education, and individuals who were neither employed nor studying than who were university graduates, were employed, and were financially independent. Furthermore, egoistic motivations for volunteer work can also vary. Less educated and financially dependent individuals tend to have protective motivations. This suggests that individuals from various socioeconomic groups have different expectations regarding volunteer work, which can affect experiences of well-being at the end of the project.

Furthermore, volunteers with various types of motivation also differ in the extent to which they prioritize personal happiness. Specifically, individuals with strong idealistic-supportive motivations tend to experience higher levels of life satisfaction and psychological well-being. This observation confirms that altruistic motivations, which promote social connectedness, a sense of purpose, and efficacy, are closely linked to improved well-being (Ruggeri et al., 2020).

The study also analyzed the effects of various combinations of volunteer motivations on life satisfaction and psychological well-being. Volunteers who are driven primarily by altruistic motivations tend to experience an increase in well-being, whereas those who are motivated by more self-centered reasons may experience a decrease in well-being. This suggests that an altruistic motivation may serve as a regulatory mechanism for coping with the emotional burden of helping. The factors associated with psychological well-being, including attitudes towards personal growth and a sense of purpose in life, are most affected by volunteer work. These findings imply that individuals driven by altruistic motivations are better equipped to cope with the emotional burden of being exposed to suffering, whereas those driven by

egoistic motivations are more likely to experience greater depression and feelings of powerlessness in the face of suffering.

Long-term volunteer work requires significant personal commitment, involves emotional challenges and can potentially lead to a decline in volunteers' psychological well-being. This phenomenon is akin to burnout that is frequently experienced by people working in helping professions. Individuals who undertake volunteer work to solve their personal problems may lack inner strength to overcome all obstacles. These experiences may lead to confusion in the search for the meaning and purpose of life. However, the altruistic dimension of motivation can play an important role in safeguarding the psychological well-being of volunteers.

Intensive and long-term volunteer projects require careful recruitment and support for volunteers to mitigate potential stress and burnout. These factors must be taken into consideration when designing volunteer programs. The present study demonstrated that the type and intensity of motivation significantly influence volunteers' psychological well-being and life satisfaction. A comprehensive understanding of these dynamics can assist organizations in tailoring their volunteering programs to the participants' needs and expectations. This approach can optimize the effectiveness of outreach activities and enhance the satisfaction and overall well-being of volunteers.

## **LIMITATIONS**

The key limitations of the study that could affect the generalizability of the results were identified. Above all, the study was limited to a single volunteering campaign, which highlights the need for similar research involving volunteers from other initiatives. A non-volunteer control group could be included in the study to support a more objective assessment of the impact of volunteer work on well-being. Secondly, most of the participants were women, which potentially limits the representation of gender diversity among volunteers.

Gender was not correlated with the analyzed variables, but further research should strive for a more balanced gender distribution among the participants. Thirdly, the study ended on the last day of the volunteer campaign; therefore, the long-term effects of volunteer work on the quality of life were not comprehensively explored. Important knowledge about the long-term sustainability of the observed changes could have been gained by monitoring the volunteers' psychological and physical well-being for an extended period of time. Regrettably, such an approach was not possible due to the constraints imposed by volunteer contracts and stringent data protection regulations.

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**KIEDY POMAGANIE USZCZĘSLIWIA: ZMIANY W DOBROSTANIE PSYCHICZNYM I  
ZADOWOLENIU Z ŻYCIA A MOTYWACJA DO POMAGANIA W WOLONTARIACIE  
ANGAŻUJĄCYM ZASOBY OSOBISTE**

**Streszczenie.** Badania sugerują, że pomaganie innym może przyczyniać się do wzrostu szczęścia, choć związek ten nie jest jednoznaczny. Niniejsze badanie wypełnia luki w dotychczasowej literaturze, uwzględniając dwa kluczowe aspekty – satysfakcję z życia i dobrostan psychiczny – w kontekście wolontariatu. Analiza obejmuje również interakcję tych czynników z motywacją do pomagania, co pozwala lepiej zrozumieć, dlaczego i w jaki sposób pomaganie wpływa na szczęście. W badaniu uczestniczyło 806 wolontariuszy zaangażowanych w długoterminowe programy pomocowe, którzy wypełniali ankiety przed i po zakończeniu działań, oraz 20 osób, które udzieliły wywiadów. Wyniki wskazują, że choć wolontariat może zwiększać satysfakcję z życia poprzez wspieranie poczucia celu i więzi społecznych, jednocześnie może obniżać dobrostan psychiczny z powodu emocjonalnego obciążenia wynikającego z empatii wobec osób w trudnej sytuacji. Altruistyczne motywacje mogą przeciwdziałać spadkowi dobrostanu psychicznego, podczas gdy motywacje egocentryczne mogą go pogłębiać. Świadomość, że nie wszystkie doświadczenia związane z wolontariatem prowadzą do szczęścia, może przyczynić się do ulepszenia praktyk zarządzania wolontariuszami, w tym do tworzenia strategii rekrutacyjnych, które lepiej dopasowują indywidualne motywacje do odpowiednich ról.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Dobrostan psychiczny, satysfakcja z życia, motywacja do pomagania, wolontariat

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