Universiteit Utrecht

The Experience of Young Adult Former Volunteers

Within the Salesian Community in Malta

201600407: YES07 Thesis

submitted to the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences

at Utrecht University

in partial fulfilment of the requirements

for the degree of Master in the Pedagogical Sciences:

Youth, Education & Society 2022-2023

by

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June 23, 2023

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Volunteering changed my life.

It made me the person I am today.

Abstract

This study is about the experience of young adult former volunteers within the Maltese Salesian family. It aims to explore the changing life circumstances and new life-events which led these young adults to end their involvement in volunteering. It also seeks to find alternatives which would be more accessible to these young adults in their current life status.

This work indicates that volunteering in the Salesian style has a pedagogical character, helping young people grow and develop their skills and values. Priorities for young adult volunteers change throughout their life course, with family and work taking over their volunteering commitments. Some participants also mention not fitting in with the experience any longer due to new leadership, an age gap between them and new members, or other difficulties which had occurred. However, despite not being involved in volunteering any longer, participants still consider volunteering as an important value in their lives, and in the lives of their family, with most parents stating that they would like to see their children involved in the sector too in the future. Finally, participants describe experiences which would be more accessible to them, mainly episodic volunteering, family volunteering, online volunteering and volunteering related to their profession.

Key words: volunteering; Salesian community; former volunteers; life circumstances; life-events.

Samenvatting in het Nederlands

Dit onderzoek gaat over de ervaringen van jongvolwassen ex-vrijwilligers binnen de Maltese Salesianer gemeenschap. Het doel is om de veranderde levensomstandigheden en -gebeurtenissen te onderzoeken die ertoe hebben geleid dat deze jongvolwassenen hun betrokkenheid bij het vrijwilligerswerk hebben beëindigd. Er wordt ook gezocht naar alternatieven die toegankelijker zijn voor deze jongvolwassenen binnen hun huidige levenssituatie.

Dit onderzoek geeft aan dat vrijwilligerswerk in de Salesianer stijl een pedagogisch karakter heeft dat jonge mensen helpt om te groeien en hun vaardigheden en waarden ontwikkelt. Prioriteiten voor jongvolwassen vrijwilligers veranderen gedurende hun leven, het vrijwilligerswerk maakt plaats voor familie en werk. Sommige deelnemers benoemen ook dat de ervaring niet meer bij hen past vanwege nieuw leiderschap, een leeftijdsverschil tussen hen en nieuwe leden, of andere moeilijkheden die zich hebben voorgedaan. Ondanks dat ze niet langer betrokken zijn bij het vrijwilligerswerk, beschouwen de deelnemers vrijwilligerswerk nog steeds als een belangrijke waarde in hun leven en in het leven van hun gezin, waarbij de meeste ouders stellen dat ze wensen dat hun kinderen in de toekomst ook bij deze sector betrokken raken. Ten slotte beschrijven de deelnemers ervaringen die beter aansluiten bij hun huidige leven, met name incidenteel vrijwilligerswerk, gezinsvrijwilligerswerk, online vrijwilligerswerk en vrijwilligerswerk dat verband houdt met hun beroep.

Trefwoorden: vrijwilligerswerk; salesiaanse gemeenschap; voormalige vrijwilligers; levensomstandigheden; levensgebeurtenissen.

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Together with the immediate impact of the work being done, volunteering has numerous personal benefits for those involved, such as enhancing personal growth and developing new skills and a sense of self-validation (Dávila & Diaz-Morales, 2009). Therefore, it is of utmost importance to make it as accessible, meaningful, and enjoyable as possible to everyone (MCVS and Parliamentary Secretary for Youth, Sport, and VOs, 2020).

In Malta, voluntary work is an intrinsic part of the local communities (Azzopardi, 2011). According to a 2016 study, 19% of the adult Maltese population were involved in volunteering within various sectors (MCVS, 2016). To date, there are more than 1,800 voluntary organisations registered with the Maltese Council for the Voluntary Sector (MCVS), fourteen of which form part of the Salesian congregation (MCVS, n.d.). The Salesian congregation is a Roman Catholic order, founded by Saint John Bosco in 1859, "dedicated to apostolic and missionary activity […] at the service of young people, especially the poorest and the most abandoned" (SDB, n.d.). Today, the Salesian Family is a dynamic organisation encompassing various organisations and bodies world-wide (SDB Malta, n.d.).

The Salesians provide several opportunities for young people to participate in voluntary activities, both locally and internationally. However, according to the National Federation of Past-Pupils of Don Bosco (B. Magro, personal communication, Jan 05, 2023), it is observed that volunteers are not able to pursue their voluntary activities due to changing life circumstances or when specific life-events occur. Such events include starting a full-time job, committing to a relationship, becoming parents, or cases of sickness or demise of a family member, amongst others.

Young people who go through these experiences, might start losing contact with their respective Salesian communities. As a result, not only do the Salesian houses lose

valuable human resources, but also the opportunity to continue accompanying these young people (B. Magro, personal communication, Jan 05, 2023).

Therefore, the aim of this research is to gain insights into the impact these life circumstances and events are having on young adult volunteers' involvement within the Maltese Salesian family. The research also seeks to understand what the voluntary work experiences meant to the former volunteers, and which opportunities would be accessible to them should they be interested to involve themselves back in the future. This would give the Salesian houses in Malta a better understanding of the young people's experiences and what works for them. Eventually, this may lead the Salesian community to adapt or create new volunteering opportunities which can engage former volunteers back and retain current volunteers. If youth volunteering is seen as an investment in the future, then adult participation must be seen as a continuing return on this investment (Morrow-Howell & Tang, 2004).

1.1   The Salesian pedagogy

Don Bosco developed a pedagogy through his first Oratory in Valdocco, which until today serves as a model for all Salesian presences around the world (Petitclerc, 2016/2020). This model strives to provide children and young people with a home that welcomes them, a school that prepares them for life, a church that evangelises, and a playground where friends can meet and recreate together (DBYN, 2015).

In the following sections three central aspects of the Salesian pedagogy which are relevant to this study will be discussed in further detail, namely the Salesian educational approach, the Salesian accompaniment of young people and the Salesian style of voluntary work.

1.1.1 The Salesian educational approach

Based on loving-kindness, reason, and spirituality, the Salesian educational approach is an educational and pastoral charism developed by Don Bosco for the holistic development of youth (SYM Dept., 2014). Loving-kindness is an expression of a love that brings about a cordial relationship between the educator and the young person. Furthermore, the educator reasons with the young, has reasonable demands and rules, is flexible and patient, and enters in dialogue with them. Finally, the approach is based on faith, enabling young people to develop the sense of God that is inherent in them. The spirituality of the Salesian educational approach is simple and goes straight to the essential, that of love of God and neighbour (SYM Dept., 2014). More profoundly, it is a journey inviting young people to discern God's will and the signs of His presence in time (Petitclerc, 2016/2020). The latter is applicable to all cultures and can be adapted to non-Christian religions too (SDB, n.d.).

1.1.2 Salesian accompaniment of young people

Don Bosco emphasized the importance of building meaningful relationships with young people rather than simply providing them with material assistance or educational instruction (Grech, 2019). He believed that for a successful accompaniment of young people, they had to be convinced that they had found a 'friend', someone they could trust and whom they could open their hearts to (Pazzaglia, 1993).

Accompaniment is an educative and pastoral service Salesians are offering young people today. They provide a space where the young can question, exercise responsibility, and find the support they need in getting to know themselves and accept who they are (SYM Dept., 2014). The Salesian educator is therefore present in those environments where young people live and gather, establishing a relationship which is personal and at the same time challenging (Petitclerc, 2016/2020). For the Salesians today, one way of reaching this

aim is by engaging them in voluntary work (Dept. of Youth Ministry and Dept. of the Missions, 2019).

1.1.3 Voluntary work in the Salesian style

For Don Bosco, the possibility of being of service to others was a crucial part of the spiritual growth process of young people (Grech, 2019). Salesian voluntary service encourages young people to take upon themselves a vocational view of life, that is, as a gift which was freely given and so to be shared in service to others. Salesian voluntary service, in its various forms, is firstly a life project based on Gospel values, promoting human rights, justice, solidarity, and peace. Secondly it is animated by the Salesian spirit of community, interculturality, a clear and preferential option for the poor, and a critical and responsible involvement in society (SYM Dept., 2014).

1.2 Volunteering across the life-course

Volunteering is defined as any act that involves giving time and effort out of free will and for no financial gain, to provide for others beyond one's own close family (Rochester et al., 2011). Over time, individuals and households are continuously negotiating paid work and other commitments, whilst making decisions as to when and how to volunteer (Hogg, 2016).

Volunteers across different life stages differ in their motivations for volunteering, the impact of volunteering on their lives and the type of volunteering they perform (Dávila & Diaz Morales, 2009; Morrow-Howell & Tang, 2004; Gray et al., 2012). Literature discussing the differences across these three domains will be discussed in the following sections.

1.2.1 Motivations for volunteering

Much research has focused on understanding and measuring volunteer motives (Butt et al., 2017). Whilst volunteers may not receive monetary compensation for their time

and effort, they often have other motives or expected rewards, be it either personal, social, or career gains (Alfes et al., 2016). However, these motivations change along the life-course of an individual (Dávila and Diaz Morales, 2009).

According to socioemotional selectivity theory, volunteering behaviour is related to how individuals prioritize their time and energy, and what they value the most during each life stage (Yamashita et al., 2019). Younger adults tend to place more weight on matters pertaining to their careers and long-term objectives, whereas older adults tend to place more weight on emotionally significant activities.

Dávila and Diaz Morales (2009) state that this shift in priorities shapes the motivational factors that navigate volunteer engagement. Omoto et al. (2000) found that while younger volunteers tend to be generally motivated by interpersonal ties, older volunteers tend to be motivated by service or community obligation considerations. More recently, in their study of underlying motivations of volunteers in three major life phases, early, middle, and later adulthood, Yamashita et al. (2019) also concluded that the social networking motivational factor was associated with the younger and middle adulthood groups, whilst generativity was related to the later adulthood group.

Finally, together with the personal motivations, Nesbit (2012) refers also to the individual's surroundings. She concludes that individuals who reside with other volunteers are more likely to become involved in volunteering than their counterparts who do not, and this effect grows the higher the number of household members who volunteer.

1.2.2 Impact of volunteering

Van Willigen (2000) examined whether the impact of volunteering on the physical and psychological well-being differed between younger and older volunteers. He concluded

that the benefits individuals experience from volunteering depend on the types of

organisations, and the roles they take on, which usually change across the life course.

Morrow-Howell and Tang (2004) state that youth service increases maturity,

discipline, and personal autonomy, reduces risk behaviour, and helps young people to

practice and increase their skills, and to explore their career opportunities, amongst others.

In their review of the literature, Marta et al. (2006) describe that young volunteers show

higher levels of self-esteem, self-efficacy, and optimism, as compared to their non-volunteer

peers. Furthermore, they have greater motivations in their studies, better academic results,

and higher work aspirations, whilst demonstrating a higher disposition towards prosocial

behaviours and attitudes. Finally, Oesterle et al. (2004) state that being engaged in the

community and learning a sense of civic-mindedness results in young people developing

into active and responsible citizens.

1.2.3   Style of volunteering

Volunteering activities vary throughout the different life stages of an individual, in

terms of who takes on the volunteer role, the type of organisations that benefit, how much

time is committed, the type of service and the location of service (Van Willigen, 2000;

Morrow-Howell & Tang, 2004).

Gallagher (1994) states that younger volunteers typically invest less time into their

volunteer work than older volunteers who usually have more time available. Due to the

greater demands over people's lives in most Western societies, people are becoming more

inclined towards episodic volunteering, that is, committing to a single project at a time,

which has a definitive start and completion date (Cnaan and Handy, 2005). Macduff (2005)

created a classification to distinguish more accurately between styles of episodic

volunteering based on the duration of service; temporary, interim, and occasional. Temporary episodic volunteers participate in short one-time activities, and usually do not return to the organisation and are rarely members of it, whilst interim episodic volunteers are those who give service on a regular basis for a duration of less than six months. Finally occasional episodic volunteers are those giving service at regular intervals for short periods of time, on whom organisations can count year after year (Macduff, 2005).

Almong-Bar et al. (2022) found that whilst younger volunteers prefer one-time episodic volunteering over ongoing volunteering, a prior connection with an organisation may be crucial for recruitment purposes. This is in line with the findings of Hustinx et al. (2012) that young adult episodic volunteers are most likely to be repeat volunteers who join in for episodic tasks.

1.3   Current Study

Our understanding of how life stage related identities influence people's decisions on volunteering is hampered by gaps in the existing literature (Carr et al., 2015). Marta et al. (2006) acknowledge that adult and senior volunteering are the focus of most volunteer research, however, these results cannot be transferred to other generations, since the motivations and the impacts of voluntary work differ between every generation (Kirkpatrick Johnson et al., 1998).

In order to be able to explore the impact that work and familial roles have on volunteering involvement (Hogg, 2016), it needs to be understood as occurring as part of a lifelong process of decisions made among changing circumstances (Gray et al., 2012). However, most studies on volunteering have been static, studying who volunteers, for how long, with whom, and for which motivations (Lancee and Radl, 2014). Hogg (2016) agrees that most research, especially that focusing on quantitative methodologies, has been

limited in capturing the wider contexts that influence decisions to engage or disengage in volunteering. Recently, South et al. (2022) confirmed that whilst there is evidence of wellbeing benefits for volunteers, there is less evidence on how volunteering relates to the individuals' social context. Through the literature review conducted for this study, these claims were verified, with few alternative research being found.

Stuart et al. (2020) call for a shift towards question driven research rather than data driven research, and for "more complex empirical studies that explore the inter-relationships between individuals, their volunteering activities and wider personal and social contexts" (p. 8). This study aims to build on this trajectory whilst focusing on a specific age group of young adults, aged 25 to 35 years old, working within a specific organisation, the Maltese Salesian community. The aim of this study is to gain a comprehensive understanding of the changing life circumstances and new life-events this cohort of young adults are experiencing, and the way in which they impact choices on volunteering. Hereby it seeks to contribute towards adapting current volunteering opportunities or creating new ones, which are more accessible. This in turn will enable these young adults to remain engaged in the Salesian family and in contact with the Salesian accompaniment.

This 10-year age range was considered since life-events are not age specific. According to Hunt (2005), the nature and timing of life-events are neither linear nor predictable. Certain life-events may be planned while others might occur unexpectedly, and the order of life-events can differ from one individual to another. Furthermore, according to Grech (2019), most young people are making certain life commitments well into their adulthood.

In this light, the research evolves around the following two research questions:

1. How are changing life circumstances and occurring life-events impacting the involvement of young adults, aged 25 to 35 years old, in volunteering in the Salesian houses in Malta?

2. How can current voluntary work opportunities be adapted and what new opportunities can be created to encourage young adults, aged 25 to 35 years old, to engage back in voluntary work, and retain current volunteers within the Salesian community?

2 Methods

2.1 Research design

The research was qualitative and descriptive in nature, since its aim was to provide an in-depth understanding of the perspectives of young adult former volunteers about their experiences of volunteering in Salesian houses, and how these were impacted by changing life circumstances and events (Snape & Spencer, 2003). Rather than making broad generalizations about the prevalence of these phenomena, the focus is on highlighting their existence through the narratives provided.

2.2 Setting and Participants

A retrospective approach was taken; therefore, the participants were young adult former volunteers who had already gone through the changing life circumstances or events which ended their volunteering. Participants were aged between 25 and 35 years old.

25 former volunteers were invited to participate, out of whom 18 responded positively. Twelve participants took part in one-to-one interviews and another six participated in a focus group discussion. Ten participants were male, and eight participants

were female, with an average age of 30 years. A profile of these participants can be found in the Appendix.

In Malta, the Salesians operate in various environments, including residential homes, schools, churches, and youth centres. Additionally, they are actively engaged with the young through other outreach initiatives (SDB Malta, n.d.). For this research, three youth centres (Dingli, Sliema and Senglea oratories) and two outreach groups (SSY and SPYS) were considered, since they are the realities which offer the most volunteering opportunities, and further, their missions are rather alike.

Table 1

Number of participants from each Salesian house

Salesian House	Number of Participants
Dingli oratory	4
Sliema oratory	5
Senglea oratory	4
Savio Salesian Youth (SSY)	10
Salesian Pastoral Youth Service (SPYS)	5

The National Federation of Past-Pupils of Don Bosco played a part in connecting with the participants for this study. Table 1 indicates the number of participants from each house included in the study. Eight participants had volunteered in more than one Salesian house, six of whom had started in Savio College and then moved to another house later in their experience. This explains the higher representability of SSY.

Purposive sampling was used, where participants were chosen on the basis of the Salesian house they used to attend, with the knowledge of them experiencing a change in

their life circumstances or a new life-event. Currently there are around 170 volunteers, however there is no data available on the population size of former volunteers.

2.3   Research instruments

According to Hennink et al. (2017) code saturation can be achieved after nine interviews, by which the range of common thematic issues is identified. However, the author continues, for meaning saturation to be achieved, that is to fully understand issues rather than just identifying them, more interviews would be required, especially if the population is heterogenous and the sample is fixed, as in the case of this research.

In view of these recommendations, data was first collected through twelve semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews were chosen due to their allowance for flexibility in their open-ended character (Ritchie et al., 2014). In addition, one focus group discussion with six participants was conducted, using a similar interview guide. During the focus group, participants were asked to engage together and reveal how their experiences relate to one another, allowing them to generate insights and data which would otherwise have not been accessible to the researcher (Robinson, 2020). The participants could contribute to a fruitful discussion on their former volunteering experiences, which is a subject they share and can easily relate to (Gundumogula, 2022). More interviews or a second focus group were not possible for logistic reasons and low participant availability.

The interviews mainly focused on four topics: (1) the participants' former volunteering experiences, (2) the changing life circumstances or events and their impact on the participants' volunteering routines, (3) the participants' views on future volunteering opportunities and (4) the meaning of the Salesian accompaniment for the participants. An interview guide was developed and subjected to feedback by an expert in the field of volunteering and an expert in qualitative research design.

Originally the plan was to conduct a pilot interview with an eligible participant, to develop a suitable line of questions, as suggested by Yin (2009). Due to recruitment challenges, this was not implemented, however, the researcher made the necessary improvements progressively along the data collection process, as suggested by Van Teijlingen and Hundley (2001). Nevertheless, no major changes were ever made.

Participants could choose to speak in either Maltese or English. Only one participant chose to speak in English, while the other eleven interviews and the focus group were held in Maltese. Most interviews took place in person, however three of them were held online since that option was more practical for those participants, and one of them is currently residing abroad. The interviews did not take longer than 45 minutes, and all sessions were audio-recorded.

2.4   Data Analysis

Reflective thematic coding analysis was used to code and interpret the interviews and the focus group discussion, following the six-phase guide for thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006). The interviews were transcribed verbatim and translated to English by the researcher. Since the researcher conducted and transcribed the interviews, it helped to start familiarising with the data, create meanings and thus approach the analysis with prior knowledge of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). After noting recurrent patterns, initial codes were generated. Overarching themes were then formulated by combining similar codes. Themes were modified and reviewed as the analysis progressed, until a final saturated set of themes which are well-defined and named was achieved (Neuendorf, 2018). Finally, the researcher chose various exemplifying quotes which relate to each theme and provide sufficient evidence of those themes within the data.

An inductive approach was taken by identifying themes which were strongly related to the data itself, without attempting to fit them into any pre-defined coding frame (Nowell et al., 2017). According to Braun and Clarke (2006), language and human understanding are conditioned and influenced by prior structures, thus the inductive development of themes may be influenced by the researchers' presuppositions. Therefore, throughout the process, the researcher was aware of and continuously reflected on his assumptions of both his own and the participants' language to understand their lived experiences more fully (Ho et al., 2017).

2.5   Ethical Considerations

Before the data collection process started, all the participants were informed about the aims of the research, and how their responses will be used. They were also offered access to the final research report should they request it. Participation was voluntary, with participants giving written informed consent. Furthermore, participants were informed that they can refuse to answer or react to any question and leave the focus group or end the interview at any point should they wish. Anonymity and confidentiality of the collected data was guaranteed by destroying the recordings after transcription, storing the data in YODA, not using first names, and removing potentially identifying information.

The theme of the research is not a sensitive one, however whenever participants shared emotional personal experiences, the moderator maintained an empathic role. For the focus group, ground rules were set before the discussion started.

The researcher's positionality was considered throughout the research process, especially since the researcher himself is a current volunteer with the Salesian community. Finally, the research proposal was reviewed by the Faculty Ethics Review Committee of Utrecht University.

3   Results

In this chapter, the main themes and findings of the study will be presented. Three themes were identified with nine corresponding sub-themes, as presented in Table 2. The three themes were "*pedagogical aspects of volunteering*", *"priorities and decisions",* and *"volunteering stays",* which reflect the volunteering journey of the research participants; what volunteering meant for them, what impacted their involvement therein, and forward looking to new possibilities of engagement back in the sector.

Table 2

Themes and sub-themes

Pedagogical Aspects of Volunteering	Priorities and Decisions	Volunteering Stays
Home	Family	Family-centred
School	Study and work	Flexible and practical
Church	Fitting-in	
Playground		

3.1   Pedagogical aspects of volunteering

Prior to answering the research questions, it is helpful to put the participants' experiences into context to understand the value of volunteering for them and its impact on their lives. This will help the reader understand the participants' perspectives when talking about their experiences in volunteering.

The participants expressed that volunteering played an important role in their personal formation and development. In doing so, they repeatedly referred to one element or another from the four pillars of the Salesian model, that is, the Salesian house striving to

be a home that welcomes young people, a school that prepares them for life, a church that evangelises, and a playground where friends meet and grow together (Petitclerc, 2016/2020). Each pillar will be discussed in further detail below.

3.1.1 Home

For the participants, the Salesian house was a safe and healthy environment in which they could develop themselves and their talents, described by participant 1 as: *"a healthy environment where I could grow and explore healthily."*

Several participants referred to the Salesian house as their second family. There they found a welcoming environment, in which they used to feel comfortable and safe to express and discover their true selves. In fact, some participants recall attending frequently, and spending a large portion of their time.

There participants found persons who would listen to them and walk with them in their difficulties. Furthermore, they found people who believed in them, helping, and giving them the opportunity to further develop their personal qualities and skills. This sense of 'home' was not only adopted by the Salesians themselves but was also shared by the other members and leaders within the Salesian house.

3.1.2 School

These voluntary work experiences served also as a school, in which participants learned and strengthened certain skills and qualities. Participants feel that these experiences helped them develop their talents, their communication and teamwork skills, and qualities like creativity, responsibility, commitment and resolving conflict. Others recall being pushed out of their comfort zone and challenged towards their growth.

Like an internship experience, voluntary work helped some of the participants realise their future profession. This pedagogical aspect of 'school' can also be seen in the long-term impact of volunteering, with participants stating that they are still applying these skills and the Salesian pedagogy in their personal and professional lives today.

> *"So, as an impact, I think it gives you certain skills, because you're in a leadership role, from a very young age … Even the group, working as a team. These are all skills which I believe were the root of my skills today."*

Participant 4.

3.1.3 Church

Evangelisation of the Gospel is central to the Salesian congregation. However, participants repeatedly referred to the Salesians using a language which is understood by the young and is relevant to them. Participant 8 stated: *"At the same time, we used to have spiritual moments, but not too much, and it was adapted to our age."* Furthermore, participants referred to the Salesians' pastoral work as a practical one, performed through actions rather than through preaching. They recall the Salesians being present with them in the playgrounds and in other non-formal settings, making them more at reach.

> *"It's very easy for the Church to be on top and preach. But when you see someone playing with the children, he's in touch with their suffering. I always admired them for that, and they inspired me to be so myself."*

Participant 6.

In addition, they describe that through voluntary work they took upon themselves an evangelising role, becoming witnesses of the message they had received and passing it on to

others. Finally, they said that the Salesian house also served as a 'church', nourishing their life values and a social attitude.

3.1.4 Playground

Like the playground brings people together, participants describe the Salesian house as a place where they met new people and built meaningful friendships, some of which are still strong today. Relationships are a central aspect of the Salesian pedagogy, as participant 2 expressed: *"These were my group of friends at the time, we used to do everything together. It was a beautiful experience."*

Moreover, a recurring element was the sense of community they experienced, with people coming together and working together towards a common aim. In fact, it was stated that this feeling still manages to bring the group together today: *"And I think the sense of community was very beautiful … even today, when we meet together, we start talking as if we've just been out of the camp"* (Participant 14).

3.2 Priorities and decisions

After giving a background of the participants' views on the value and impact of volunteering, we now proceed to results related to the first research question, dealing with the changing life circumstances, and occurring life-events of the participants whilst volunteering. The emerging theme in this context was 'priorities and decisions'. At some point it was no longer possible for the participants to juggle volunteering with their personal and professional lives, therefore they had to choose between the two, eventually ending their involvement in volunteering. It was a question of priorities, deciding which activities will take priority in their current life state. Mostly these priorities were related to family, study and work, or a sense of fitting-in, which will be discussed next as sub-themes.

3.2.1 Family

As life progressed, family became the main priority for some of the participants. Some were committing to a serious relationship, others were getting married and finding a new home, and others had children. These changes in their life circumstances made the participants decide to shift their focus and dedicate their time completely to their families, as participant 4 shared: *"Then my son came, so even as a mother my shift changed on my family"*. In addition, other parent participants said that they would feel irresponsible towards their families or create added pressure if they continued volunteering. *"And the thing that to go volunteering I need to leave my children with my parents or my in laws, I don't feel it's viable, I feel it's unfair for them"* (Participant 5).

The family was further found to be a priority in two specific experiences. Participant 11 experienced the illness of a family member which required him to dedicate his time and energy to his family, whilst participant 5 experienced a personal conflict after meeting her partner who was not familiar with the Salesian environment.

3.2.2 Study and work

Another life-event which participants spoke about was their shift from student life to full-time employment. Participants shared that during their student years it was relatively easier for them to participate in volunteering, especially since the larger activities took place during summer, and they did not have many other commitments back then.

> *"For me I think back then it was much easier … my work hadn't yet become like today, you know when you're going in but not when you're going out. At the time I could plan much better."*

Participant 13.

Having said so, a few participants mentioned that even when they were younger, they had to make conscious decisions to reach a balance between volunteering and studying or working a part-time job. In fact, they recount that this balance was quite hard for them to reach, impacting their academic performance. *"When I was in the committee, I used to go there nearly every day. I'm not saying that I was doing the right thing you know because my marks were showing that"* (Participant 5).

Furthermore, when moving to full-time employment it had become harder for the participants to keep on volunteering. The main issue was time. Due to longer and fixed working hours, participants were not able to participate in the activities offered by the Salesian houses. As participant 7 shared: *"If you ask me whether I want to go back now, I will say no, because with my current life routine I can barely find time for myself, let alone for volunteering"*.

The theme of 'priorities and decisions' is also reflected in the experience of one participant who chose to end volunteering as a means of self-care. He mentioned that his current work life is very stressful, and therefore he needs his free time to rest: *"Whenever I have some quiet days, I use them to rest from work … usually volunteering means large groups, and after a day of work I don't feel like being in large groups of people."*

3.2.3 Fitting-in

Apart from personal changes, volunteers also encountered changes in the wider context, within the voluntary experiences themselves. They reflected that after years of service they started feeling like they had done their part and it was time to leave space for new people. Others explained that they felt an age gap between them and either the new volunteers, or the young people attending.

Two participants explained that the experience had become too fast-paced, with people changing frequently. Therefore, even by missing one week they were feeling left behind, and so they felt that this new environment did not fit in well with their lifestyle. Furthermore, participants described a change in the leadership of the house, as a factor which led them to not fit-in any longer.

> *"This style of leadership had made it a bit difficult for us. For example, on Friday evening this person would come and say we're going on a hike tomorrow are you coming? Well, no, I can't make this type of decisions. So then came a time where due to the new style of leadership it has become impossible for us to remain."*

Participant 15.

Finally, like in every other organisation or group, negative experiences and disputes occur in voluntary organisations too. Two participants described such instances which made it difficult for them to continue their involvement, and therefore they decided not to continue. This time, the theme of 'priorities and decisions' comes in as a means for the participants to protect themselves from heavy environments and difficult relationships.

> *"It wasn't healthy for me to remain there … because of how the situation ended, it keeps on bringing certain emotions, you keep on meeting certain people, and it becomes awkward."*

Participant 4.

3.3   Volunteering stays

Addressing the second research question, this concluding theme is a hopeful one. Even though the participants were not able to continue their own involvement in

volunteering, most of them do not close the door to this chapter in their lives. Most of the participants expressed their wish to volunteer again sometime in the future, however in different ways and formats. In their suggestions of new formats of volunteering two sub-themes were recognised: 'family-centred' and 'flexible and practical', which will be discussed next.

3.3.1 Family-centred

Family has been a strong theme throughout the research. Several participants shared that they learned the values of volunteering from their family, either through their social attitude or else since they used to attend the same Salesian house. Looking forward, all the participants who are parents said that likewise, they would like to pass on the value of volunteering to their children. According to participant 12:

> *"Now that I have a daughter, I hope that she would be willing, that she would want to attend these settings. Not that I am going to force her, but that she would wish it herself."*

Parent former volunteers said that they would feel more encouraged to participate in volunteering again if they were offered opportunities in which their children can be involved too, as participant 5 stated: *"Maybe if it's something where I can take my children with me and maybe the children have a small task to do."* Participant 4 gave an encouraging testimony of a similar experience she is currently living with another organisation. This organisation is open to young parents like them and caters for their needs, therefore they can journey together as a couple together with their daughter. In her words: *"It's not like you grew older so there's no more space for you. As a community it's growing with its members."* Similarly, three other participants are part of a couples' group within the

Salesian context. For them, this was also an opportunity to keep in contact with the Salesian accompaniment and fulfil an emptiness which they experienced after stopping volunteering.

The theme of 'volunteering stays' was not only found in the former formal settings, but also in the participants' social attitude, and in everyday contexts, particularly within the family unit itself. As participant 9 shared:

> *"Now I try to do good as much as possible even with the people around me … You see an old lady alone on a bus, or someone eating alone, you make eye-contact, and you smile … For example, I prefer to give a priority to my grandparents. Even if my father needs help in the fields, I go and I spend quality time with him."*

3.3.2 Flexible and practical

Together with more family-friendly opportunities, participants expressed their wish to have more experiences which are more flexible. Some participants shared that they would like to volunteer in a context related to their profession. Participants shared their experiences of volunteering in this setting, both within and outside the Salesian context, claiming that this made volunteering more accessible to them. Other participants however, argued that such an opportunity would blur the lines between formal and voluntary work.

Furthermore, the sub-theme of 'flexible and practical' came up in two participants' suggestions for opportunities which allow the work to be done remotely, however without removing the social aspect completely. According to them, this would be more practical, less time-consuming, and therefore more accessible. *"I believe that certain things can be done remotely. Nowadays there are tools that can help you organize whole agendas and plans"* (Participant 11).

Another common suggestion was to volunteer episodically. Participants said they would be willing to give a helping hand in one-off occasions whenever the need arises. Some participants specifically referred to a few possibilities which already exist within the Salesian context: organising an afternoon workshop with SPYS, cooking for the YES camp volunteers, or participating in the YES camp water games and cultural activity.

Having said so, the participants emphasised that for them, the concept of episodic volunteering depends on the type of work that would be required. They feel that this would make more sense on a practical level rather than on a social level. According to them, the latter calls more for continuation, a sense of journeying with the organisation and its beneficiaries, rather than just visiting occasionally. According to participant 15: *"I think we must consider what the target of the volunteering is. You can't build a relationship with the children if you're going there once every blue moon."*

Finally, it is interesting to note that the theme of 'volunteering stays' mostly came up with reference to the participants' previous experiences. It seems that their familiarity with the place and the people makes it easier for them to return. Furthermore, they are also familiar with the work, so it is also beneficial to the organisation itself, not having to go through the training process again. According to participant 18, it depends on the organisation itself to know how to make best use of the potential of each volunteer: *"It's good that the organization has these people, because they already know things and you kind of involve them again. I think that's the trick of it, knowing where to place people."*

4   Discussion

Volunteering does not happen in isolation, but rather, it takes place over time and within a series of other activities in one's life (Ellis, 2010). Whilst experiencing certain

changing life circumstances or new life-events, volunteers find it harder to juggle between them and their commitment to volunteering. The aim of this research was to learn about these circumstances and events young adult volunteers in the Maltese Salesian family experience and gain a deeper understanding of their impact on the volunteers' engagement therein. It is beneficial that the Salesian houses understand which types of experiences would be accessible to their volunteers to facilitate volunteer retention and accompaniment.

In the following sections, the findings of this study on the two research questions will be presented and discussed. Prior to this, the reader is given some contextual information on the participants' experiences in volunteering and its impact on their lives.

The Salesian voluntary experiences provide young people with opportunities to develop their skills and nurture their values. The impacts of volunteering described by the participants are in line with those mentioned by Morrow-Howell and Tang (2004) and Marta et al. (2006), mentioning amongst others a sense of commitment and responsibility, higher self-esteem, a reduction in risk-behaviour and an opportunity to explore their career possibilities. Some participants also mentioned that they were ready to respond to difficult situations which emerged in their families, confirming that volunteering helps the development of the emotional sphere of students, thereby manifesting support, responsiveness and attention to the joys and problems of others (Karkina & Abdirahman, 2017).

However, unlike the research by Oesterle et al. (2004), little has been found with regards to the volunteers' development into active citizens. Furthermore, in contrast to

Marta et al. (2006) not all volunteers experienced better academic results, due to challenges in reaching a balance between volunteering and their academic responsibilities at the time.

Participants make an experience of the Salesian educational approach, which is built upon meaningful relationships, with the Salesian being present amongst them (SYM Dept., 2014). Participants repeatedly refer to the Salesian houses as their second family, describing a welcoming environment where they could find people to talk to, and who challenged them towards their growth. Finally, they refer to the Salesian spirituality as one which is grounded, practical and adapt to their needs.

4.1   Discussion of main findings

Regarding the question on how changing life circumstances and occurring life-events are impacting their involvement in volunteering, participants revealed that in parallel to volunteering, they were negotiating several other commitments (Hogg, 2016). Whereas when they were younger, they were able to juggle between the two, and volunteering was a priority, when certain life circumstances changed or new life-events occurred, the volunteers shifted their priorities from volunteering towards their familiar and personal goals. As expected, the changes mentioned were starting full-time employment, committing to a relationship, getting married, finding a new home, having children or the illness of a family member. In agreement with socioemotional selectivity theory, clearly volunteers make their volunteering choices based on what they value and prioritize the most in their current life stage (Yamashita et al., 2019).

Even though the first research question is related to changing life circumstances and occurring life-events in the participants' lives, another change the participants recounted was not related to their personal life but to the Salesian house they were involved in. They

describe difficulties in getting used to new styles of leadership, the age-gap with the young people and new volunteers, and disagreements within the group. These changes led volunteers to feel that they do not any longer fit in the organisation, and considering how important the sense of community was for them, it eventually led them to stop their involvement therein.

Regarding the second research question, the participants made several suggestions on how volunteering opportunities can be more at reach in their current life stage. The main themes were the family and practicality.

In agreement with Nesbit (2012) it was found that a love for volunteering is induced in the children when their parents were involved in volunteering or showed social attitudes, which Bekkers (2007) refers to as an intergenerational transmission of volunteering. Looking forward, parent former volunteers wish that their children involve themselves in the sector too, as expected, given that research found that volunteering brings the family closer together and strengthens the children's value system (Littlepage et al., 2003). Moreover, given their experience of the pedagogical aspects of volunteering in their lives, it is not surprising that parents want their children to experience the same environments.

A common suggestion was to have volunteering opportunities in which the whole family can be involved, referred to in literature as family volunteering. Haski-Leventhal et al. (2016) confirm that family volunteering allows individuals to create a healthier balance between the demands of work, family, and leisure.

It was found that in their new life circumstances, participants tend to opt for episodic volunteering rather than their former full-scale commitment, in agreement with the research from Cnaan and Handy (2005). Referring to Macduff's (2005) classification of episodic volunteering, participants chose occasional episodic volunteering, rather than

temporary or interim episodic volunteering. This means that rather than just visiting to help get some job done, participants prefer to have a meaningful contact with the organisation, its beneficiaries, and other volunteers, in line with their experience of 'home' of the Salesian environment. Furthermore, this study found that these former volunteers would choose to volunteer in the Salesian context again in line with the findings of Almong-Bar et al. (2022) that a prior connection with the organisation is crucial for returning volunteers.

Another suggestion was to have voluntary work related to the individuals' profession, or even, incorporated in their work. According to Rodell (2013) this type of volunteering improves job performance and demonstrates that the employees are satisfied and inspired by their job. Moreover, it was found that the participants would also like to incorporate an online element in their volunteering, to maximise the use of time by reducing travel time and allowing volunteers to choose when to work, as confirmed by Seddighi and Salmani (2019). However, volunteers would still prefer an element of face-to-face volunteering in parallel to online volunteering, to keep contact alive, which contact was previously very meaningful to them, as presented earlier in the sub-theme of 'playground'.

Finally, the study confirms that former volunteers wish to keep in contact with the Salesian presence. This was true for all participants except for those who somehow had a negative experience. In their current life status, most of them try to keep friendships or connections with key persons related to the Salesian house, or by visiting activities organised by the respective houses. They feel the need to keep this contact alive which gives them a sense of connection with the world of volunteering, to which they somehow still feel they belong. In Kamerade's (2011) words, even though many individuals move in and out of volunteering, most return to it at some point "so they are committed to volunteering as an activity" (p. 20).

4.2 Strengths and limitations of the study

A strength of the study was that it views volunteering in the wider context of the volunteers' lives. This study confirms the value of qualitative research in reaching this aim. Another strength was the variation in the sample, including former volunteers who went through different changing life circumstances and life-events. Furthermore, the study was well-balanced with respect to the participants' ages and gender.

The first limitation of the research was that all participants, except one, spoke in Maltese, therefore the transcripts had to be translated into English for analysis purposes. In this process, some meanings as the participants intended them to be, might have been lost. Moreover, since the researcher is a current volunteer with the Salesian family, there was the risk that some of the participants might censor themselves or feel obliged to speak in a certain way. There were also recruitment challenges for individuals who are known to have had a negative experience in the Salesian house. This could be due to them feeling disconnected from the experience or to avoid bringing up certain emotions.

4.3 Recommendations for future research

In this study, only former volunteers were included. A recommendation for future research would be to also include the Salesians or the leaders of each volunteering opportunity, to listen to their experiences of volunteer retainment, and their perspectives on new volunteering opportunities.

This study researched the experience of young adult former volunteers. Future research can analyse the experience of former volunteers in their middle and later adulthood (Gray et al., 2012), and compare their experiences with these findings. It would be interesting to see whether individuals see things differently after more time has passed

since their new circumstances occurred. Moreover, this research focused on volunteering in five Salesian houses. Further research can be made on voluntary experiences within the other Salesian houses or other experiences outside the Salesian world. The results can then be compared accordingly.

4.4   Implications for practice

Participants expressed their wish to take part in experiences which involve the whole family. It was mentioned that the Salesians are already offering a couples' group, and some houses are also offering forms of episodic volunteering to former volunteers. This research calls for the development of more ideas of family and episodic volunteering, to keep former volunteers in contact with the Salesian presence and the world of volunteering. In this light, the Salesian community is encouraged to reach out to these former volunteers and together discover how they can be engaged back.

Based on the findings that participants would like to involve themselves in voluntary work opportunities related to their profession or directly linked with their workplace, the Salesian family is encouraged to explore the sector of corporate social responsibility or directly asking former volunteers to offer their professional services voluntarily.

Finally, the Salesian houses are encouraged to support their volunteers throughout their volunteering journey, namely in their challenges of balancing between volunteering and personal commitments, through their changing life circumstances, and in the issues which arise within the group.

4.5   Conclusion

In conclusion, the study highlights that volunteering has a pedagogical character, helping young people grow and develop their skills and values. However, the volunteering

journey of the participants had to re-route itself due to changing life circumstances and new life-events which occurred, making them prioritise family and work over their volunteering commitment. Some participants also talked about not fitting in with the experience any longer due to new leadership, an age gap between them and new members, or problems which arose. Participants shared that volunteering is still an important value in their lives, and in the lives of their family, with most parents stating that they would like to see their children involved in the sector too in the future. Finally, participants described that episodic, family, and online volunteering, and work which is related to their profession, would be more accessible to them in their current life state.

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Acknowledgements

Writing this thesis has been a journey, which would not have been the same without the help and presence of many people, to whom I would like to express my sincere gratitude.

First of all, I would like to thank Dr. Asia Sarti, my tutor, for her constant support and guidance throughout the process of this thesis. A special thanks goes to the coordinator of the YES master, the professors, assistant lecturers, and staff of the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences, for sustaining this academic journey with their knowledge and attention throughout the past year.

I would also like to thank Mr Bryan Magro, president of the Maltese National Federation of Past-Pupils & Friends of Don Bosco, for welcoming me as an intern in the Federation, for believing in me and for all the interesting discussions we have had together. A further thanks goes to all members and other interns within the Federation, and the Don Bosco Foundation, with whom I have worked for the past months. Thank you also to all participants who accepted to take part in this research, without whom this research would not have been possible. The research work disclosed in this publication is funded by the Tertiary Education Scholarship Scheme (Malta).

My family has always been a strong presence of support and inspiration. My parents whose humility and generosity were an example to me, my brother and his wife, and the latest addition to the family, their son, baby Matteo, whose presence has brought renewed joy and affection. A warm expression of gratitude goes to René, my partner, who would listen to me patiently and was always there whenever I needed a push forward. I thank my extended family, my in-laws, and friends, who were continuously asking about my progress

and checking whether I am doing well. Finally, thank you to Reny and Bert, and their family, who welcomed me fondly in their home, throughout my studies in the Netherlands.

Last but not least, I thank the school management team, colleagues, and students of Savio College, the SPYS team, all members of the Salesian family and all volunteers with whom I crossed paths in my life, for their example of giving without expecting anything in return.

I dedicate this thesis to the memory of the late Fr. Nicholas Cachia, whose devotion to Mother Teresa and love for the Missionaries of Charity were a great source of inspiration throughout my early adulthood years.

Appendix

Table 3

Participant profile

Participant Number	Interview / Focus Group	Gender	Age	Salesian House	Life Status	Employment Status
1	Interview	Female	33	SSY, Senglea Oratory	Married, parent	Parental leave
2	Interview	Male	27	Sliema Oratory	Committed relationship	Full-time
3	Interview	Male	32	SSY, Sliema Oratory	Committed relationship	Full-time
4	Interview	Female	30	SSY	Married, parent	Part-time
5	Interview	Female	26	Sliema Oratory	Committed relationship, parent	Full-time
6	Interview	Female	32	Dingli Oratory, SSY, SPYS	Single, parent	Full-time
7	Interview	Male	25	SSY	Single	Full-time

8	Interview	Female	30	Sliema Oratory, SSY	Married, parent	Full-time
9	Interview	Male	31	SSY, SPYS	Committed, relationship	Full-time
10	Interview	Male	27	Senglea Oratory	Single	Full-time
11	Interview	Male	34	SPYS	Single	Full-time
12	Interview	Male	34	SSY, Dingli Oratory, Sliema Oratory	Married, parent	Full-time
13	Focus group	Female	28	SPYS	Committed relationship	Full-time
14	Focus group	Female	31	Senglea Oratory	Married	Full-time
15	Focus group	Male	30	SSY, Dingli Oratory	Married	Full-time
16	Focus group	Female	30	SSY, Dingli Oratory	Married	Full-time
17	Focus group	Male	28	SPYS	Committed relationship	Full-time
18	Focus group	Male	29	Senglea Oratory	Single	Full-time