RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Volunteering in the community: Understanding personal experiences of South Asians in the United Kingdom

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## Abstract

Upstanding civic action is central to individual and community well-being, particularly when communities comprise rich and diverse membership. However, not all groups in society have the same opportunities and resources to volunteer. This is particularly true for South Asian people, who are often reported to be less likely to volunteer. Research into the experience and meanings that this ethnic group attributes to volunteering has been exceptionally scarce. Informed by a community psychology perspective, this qualitative study conducted nine semistructured interviews with British South Asians involved in formal volunteering activities. The aim was to explore their personal experiences and motivations regarding volunteering for their community of belonging. Results from reflexive thematic analysis were grouped under three themes. These were (1) volunteering cultivated individual well-being, (2) South Asians who volunteer often experience social injustice and marginalisation and (3) volunteering for South Asians is intrinsically tied to religious and cultural motivations. British South Asians faced personal and social obstacles in accessing fundamental health and social care in their communities of belonging. Religion, and community

social capital were positive volunteering strategies for British South Asians. Positive impacts of well-being included becoming closer to faith and increased sense of meaning/purpose and recognising of individual strengths. These findings offer valuable insights and recommendations for community organisations and governmental bodies to better promote volunteering for ethnic minorities. We suggest the adoption of cultural and religious sensitivity, along with strategies to remove barriers in access to opportunities and support for volunteering.

**KEYWORDS**

marginalisation, qualitative research, South Asians, volunteering, well-being

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Volunteering is broadly defined as 'any activity that involves spending time, unpaid, doing something that aims to benefit the environment or someone (individuals or groups) other than, or in addition to, close relatives' (The National Council for Voluntary Organisations, 2022). Recently in the United Kingdom (UK), there has been an increase in public policy initiatives to push the growth of the third sector and to mobilise active citizenship through volunteering. Volunteering is regarded as an integral part of the health and social care system to assist people in need and as a means of bolstering well-being (Naylor et al., 2013). The creation of the Council for Social Action and Civic Society Strategy aims to engage more volunteers and create opportunities for people and strengthen communities (Department for Digital Culture Media & Sport, 2016). These examples of voluntary action are part of a wider strategy to move to a community paradigm, which gives local people more power of decisions affecting their lives and the communities in which they live (Bennett et al., 2019). Although these initiatives have resulted in rapid growth of volunteerism and community activism, this may potentially misrepresent the values of social justice, inclusion and citizenship (Reis et al., 2022; Zlobina et al., 2020). In fact, many ethnic minority groups in the UK are disproportionately subjected to social exclusion, racial and economic disparities (The Centre for Social Justice, 2021). It is reported that British South Asians are less likely to volunteer than white or Black people (Zaidi & Pitt, 2022); notwithstanding that many South Asians are overtly committed to being part of the larger British community. Ethnic minorities in the UK are often faced with 'invisible boundaries', that is covert obstacles that impede access to public spaces, a condition that limits their willingness and capacity to participate in civic life (Zaidi & Pitt, 2022).

In addition, the experience of volunteering is often appropriated by dominant groups in society (Hustinx et al., 2022). This is reflected in the scientific literature, which has dedicated a wide representation of volunteerism to privileged groups in society, particularly white people (Lough & Carter-Black, 2015). On the other hand, it has produced scarce evidence of the experiences of ethnic minorities with regard to volunteering (Southby et al., 2019), despite a recognised need for supporting the civil uptake of ethnically diverse groups (Lessard-Phillips, 2017). South Asians may be unfamiliar with different types of volunteering, excluded from certain activities, and may require additional training and support needs (Tierney et al., 2022). Thus, engaging people from diverse ethnic groups in

community services becomes a challenge, by understanding the bases for community participation, the objective of this article is to explore contemporary experiences of volunteering for South Asians in the UK.

## 1.1 | The significance of volunteering for ethnic minorities

The Covid 19 pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on ethnic minorities, there are a plethora of community-based organisations in the UK working specifically with ethnic minorities to respond to the challenges faced pre- and post pandemic (The National Council for Voluntary Organisations, 2022). They tend to be small-scale and provide a varied range of services particularly to people with significant social and economic needs (Anguelovski et al., 2021). Most ethnic groups consist of long-term immigrants and recent immigrants who are likely to face adaptational challenges, alongside generational differences (Jivraj & Simpson, 2015). These include amongst others: language barriers, resettlement, inadequate resources, the experience of racism and exclusion (Delara, 2016). Focussing on the psychological impacts of volunteering more broadly, volunteering is recognised as a valuable means with which to develop identity, raise self-esteem and develop social contacts (Tierney et al., 2022).

Although studies suggest that ethnicity has some impact on satisfaction, the motives associated with individual ethnic backgrounds remain unclear (Lawton et al., 2020). Community, cultural and religious groups impact individuals' social identity and are important in how individuals understand themselves (Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Social identity provides the basis for a collective sense of self, a sense of agency and control through shared activities (Haslam et al., 2018; Jetten, 2020). South Asians tend to define themselves in relation to other members within their groups based on social and historical factors (e.g., as a minority, marginalised, South Asian), to form a sense of self. When members align themselves with others, this becomes a powerful resource for identity constructions which impact the social world and communities within which identities interact. The fundamental microlevel understanding and knowledge around this engagement, including how individuals act, interpret and make sense of volunteering are still largely misunderstood, particularly adapting culturally appropriate strategies to promote volunteering in minority groups. This study draws upon how South Asians feel about volunteering in the community and what drives them to continue to volunteer, increase social cohesion, and equal opportunities (The National Council for Voluntary Organisations, 2022).

## 1.2 | The concept of the 'Ethnic Community' and South Asians in the UK

Communities orient and structure our social lives, construct knowledge and ground the way in which members negotiate identity and a sense of self (Christens & Lin, 2014). However, the community is a complex notion, which can be used to refer to either psychological attachments or geographical boundaries (Prati et al., 2016; Rollero & De Piccoli, 2010). A community is identifiable as formal and informal networks of individuals who share a common association, practice together and develop relationships of mutuality of interest (Kagan, 2019). This article utilises the term 'ethnic community' to refer to the South Asian community which forms the location[1] for carrying out volunteering. Focussing on the characteristics of the South Asian community, it is important to note that South Asians are the largest ethnic minority population in the UK and are estimated to account for around 20% of the population in the UK (Office of National Statistics, 2022). South Asians in the UK include a variety of ethnic groups, the majority of which include Indians, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis. The grouping of these ethnicities under a collective term is highly contentious given the lack of homogeneity and generalisability across this population, which fails to account for differences within ethnic groups (Goh & McCue, 2021). The present research accepts the

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[1] A symbolic location rather than geographic.

inherent problem in the 'South Asian' label; however, follows pragmatic reasons for the use of this particular ethnic term (Niles et al., 2022). This includes the prevalent focus on commonalities within the South Asian experience within the UK, which includes components such as customs, religion, familial structure, language and experiences of dual heritage (Dey et al., 2017; Holland, 2017).

## 2 | METHODS

### 2.1 | Design

The aim of this study was to provide exploratory evidence for the role that volunteering plays in the lives of British South Asian citizens. A phenomenological qualitative approach was adopted using semi-structured interviews to provide a rich and detailed, yet complex account of the lived experience, opinions and meanings that our participants attached to volunteering (Giorgi, 1997; Karlsson, 1993). The study was guided by the following research objectives: (a) To explore British-based South Asians' experiences and meanings attached to volunteering for their communities and (b) to investigate the challenges and opportunities that ethnically diverse minority experience when volunteering.

### 2.2 | Recruitment, sampling and context

Participants were recruited through homogeneous convenience sampling, which is particularly suited to investigate the experience of underrepresented sociodemographic groups (see (Jager et al., 2017). A list of ethnically diverse community organisations was collated by the research lead (RL) who sent out initial emails to facilitate contact and establish coordination for recruitment. The coordinators sent out an invitation to their networks asking for South Asian volunteers to take part in an interview. The invitations were written in plain English and jargon-free—to reach the widest possible audience—presenting the contact details of RL, for those interested to make direct contact. All potential participants were sent a participant information sheet and consent form and given 1 week to ask any questions and to decide if they would like to take part in the study. The RL is a British Indian female researcher, at the time undertaking a PhD. The RL also belongs to a similar age to most participants and shares similar cultural beliefs. These characteristics facilitated the process of building rapport and trust, due to her insider status.

The study took place in Greater Manchester, UK, which is one of the largest urban areas in the UK with 17.1% of people belonging to the South Asian population (8.5% Pakistani, 2.3% Indian, 1.3% Bangladeshi and 5% other Asian).

A total of nine South Asian UK-based participants who were engaged in formal volunteering[2] took part in the study. Participants were involved in a range of volunteering organisations which differ in the support they provide and the groups they work with, however they had many commonalities of providing support and care with some receiving statutory funding from their local authority in Manchester, where the study was located. Broad examples of volunteering activities in this study included mental health awareness and support, illness and disability, and advice for welfare support services. Participants included both male ($n = 5$) and female ($n = 4$) volunteers, who ranged in age from 29 to 66 years and had at least 1 year of experience working in a volunteering organisation. Participants identified several religious affiliations within the South Asian community such as Muslim, Sikh and Hindu, they came from a diverse range of sub-groups within the South Asian community (see Table 1). After nine

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[2]Formal volunteering is any voluntary prosocial activity provided through or for an organisation, whereas informal volunteering corresponds to working outside an organisation.

**TABLE 1** Participants characteristics

| Participant | Gender | Religious affiliation | Age | Ethnic origin |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 1 | Female | Muslim | 33 | Pakistan |
| 2 | Female | Muslim | 35 | Pakistan |
| 3 | Male | Muslim | 42 | India |
| 4 | Female | Hindu | 29 | India |
| 5 | Male | Sikh | 36 | India |
| 6 | Male | Muslim | 56 | Bangladesh |
| 7 | Female | Sikh | 62 | India |
| 8 | Male | Hindu | 48 | India |
| 9 | Male | Muslim | 66 | Pakistan |

interviews were conducted, data saturation was achieved; therefore, the process of data collection was brought to an end. Table 1 below shows participant characteristics.

## 2.3 | Interviews

A series of semi-structured interviews were carried out either over the phone or in person, depending on participants' preference, then audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interviews took place in a private room in one of the community centres to ensure confidentiality and privacy. The interviews were guided by a schedule consisting of questions and prompts focussing on the participants' experiences of volunteering. The interview schedule was developed by the RL, and checked by the second author, to minimise researcher bias. The interview questions were open-ended to allow participants to communicate experiences and perspectives of volunteering; this also consisted of the following items: background information, including demographic and volunteering information, the reasons or motives behind volunteering in the community, and emotions associated with volunteering in community organisations. Notes were made during the interview, which was taken into consideration. The length of the interviews averaged 40 min.

## 2.4 | Data analysis

A reflexive thematic analysis approach with the aid of computer-assisted qualitative software (NVivo 11) was used in the analytical process. The reflexive thematic analysis emphasises the researcher's subjectivity and their reflexive engagement with theory, data and interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The choice of this method followed the results of a preliminary scoping exercise, which was undertaken with a voluntary community organisation to define the study's research priorities. The stages of analysis include familiarisation, generating initial codes, searching for themes, integrating them to make broader themes, defining themes and producing the report (Nowell et al., 2017). Reflexive thematic analysis is a useful method for examining the perspectives of different research participants, highlighting similarities and differences and generating unanticipated insights. An inductive and deductive process was employed to extract themes. The deductive process involved abstracting major domains across interviews whereas the inductive process captured the subtleties and differences between each participant and across the major domains (Nowell et al., 2017). The authors were

aware of potential research bias in the interpretation of the data. To minimise this, the RL had ongoing discussions with the coauthors who were not directly involved in the data collection and analysis. This ensured trustworthiness and credibility of the research findings. The authors went through a process of redefining core themes, which included the re-examination of several participants' transcripts. After multiple themes were produced for the entire dataset, similar themes were combined and related into central themes. The central themes were reviewed and catalogued into master and subthemes (Nowell et al., 2017).

## 2.5 | Ethical considerations

The study was approved by the Manchester Metropolitan Research Ethics Committee as part of a wider study. Written consent was obtained for all participants in the form of either a signed consent form or verbally recorded consent to take part in the study as the latter was adopted in cases where participants had limited technology skills and were less able to sign an electronic consent form but were able to provide consent verbally. All notes and audio recordings were anonymised and stored on a password-protected university server.

## 3 | FINDINGS

The thematic analysis yielded three master themes and subthemes, which are summarised in Table 2. Throughout the discussion of these findings, direct quotations from participants' accounts are presented.

## 3.1 | Theme 1: Cultivating well-being

A central theme, which arose from the participants' accounts, was the importance of how volunteering cultivated well-being. This was perceived to be a key factor in South Asian participants' experience of volunteering. Participants reported several reasons how volunteering contributed to their well-being, including increased meaning and purpose, learning through volunteering and personal benefits. Initially, volunteers were not aware of some of the benefits they could gain, however when they were asked to reflect on their experiences, they felt as they increased volunteering activities they discovered increasing positive elements associated with volunteering.

**TABLE 2** Master themes and subthemes

| Master themes | Subthemes |
| --- | --- |
| 1 Cultivating well-being | Meaning and purpose |
| | Positive learning through volunteering |
| | Personal benefits |
| 2 Marginalisation and social justice | Personal injustice as a driver to volunteer |
| | Culturally appropriate volunteering services |
| | Supporting our own community |
| 3 Culture and religious beliefs | Cultural and religious compatibility |
| | Religious fulfilment and volunteering |
| | Cultural and faith-based volunteering organisations |

For others, the experience of volunteering was an opportunity to reinforce the original motivators that drove them to volunteer.

### 3.1.1 | Meaning and purpose

When engaging in volunteering, South Asian participants began to consider the effects of their volunteering work and how it made them feel about themselves; being engaged in volunteering activities gave them a sense of resourcefulness, time well spent and felt they were making a difference in their communities. Participants attested that despite greater benefits that can be achieved from other types of activities, they felt a specific sense of purpose in life through volunteering:

> Once you start this work (volunteering), you see what you can do with your life, and that you feel it is an important way of life. You are getting much more in return, and you feel that you want to keep going. (Participant 3, Male, Age 42)

Interestingly, being relatively new to a host community can foster positive feelings through volunteering and a sense of physical and mental belonging. Active involvement in a community-based organisation invoked feelings of purpose and inclusion for participants, as such it is integral to ensure that volunteering does not result in excluding this diverse group:

> I have been living here, in the UK, for maybe less than two years, and I'm not one of them, you know, who has grown up here, it's not my home, but when I started to volunteer, I got this happiness, and you know that you are doing good for others, it made me passionate about what I can do... and I felt like this helped me to settle in. (Participant 5, Male, Age 36)

### 3.1.2 | Positive learning through volunteering

Several participants went through a process of learning through their engagement in a volunteering role. Participants described that they reflected upon their 'performance' and found their volunteering experience was valuable when evaluating what their personal strengths are, and more specifically what they need to do to maintain them. Engaging in volunteering regularly was an integral part of developing personal qualities such as kindness and perseverance.

> You start to think like, what contribution, and what differences you have made, and it makes you think about how much you have gained, and I don't think that you actually even realise what you have achieved. People volunteer because they want to make a difference to society, but you get that feedback when you start doing it. (Participant 4, Female, 29)

South Asians continued to volunteer by relating their personal strengths and attributes to their interactions with other people when volunteering, this was not an expected outcome when starting volunteering roles. Some participants were motivated through utilising their strength of justice and fairness which was considered an important value when volunteering. This can serve to deepen their volunteering experience:

> I have a sense of justice naturally, I don't really notice when I am doing it, but I will always push myself a little harder, I respect others and where they are coming from, and I try to do the right thing, but this became stronger in my mind once I started. (Participant 7, Female, Age 62)

### 3.1.3 | Personal benefits

All participants emphasised benefits such as making connections with others, recognition and pride. Making connections with others seemed to be facilitated during volunteering activities, which made it easier to be present with others. Participants described how volunteering made them feel known and recognised for their efforts. There was overall agreement that volunteering engendered a feeling and sense of accomplishment, and the ability to do well in their role:

> I started volunteering and it gave me such a strong sense and satisfaction, there's a rewarding feeling you get when you help others, it's something I'm honoured to feel a part of in the community. (Participant 1, Female, Age 33).

For some participants, it was believed that ethnically diverse community organisations had evolved and targeted specific needs which were deemed ideal to offer help and support to the local communities, which contributed to greater personal benefits:

> We are going through some changes, and we've spoken to the community to share with us what they think is important and were going to work on that. (Participant 8, Male, Age 48)

Volunteering in the community can create a greater sense of community cohesion, several participants described it as a means to socialise and make new friends and acquaintances, and ultimately community work can contribute to self-actualisation:

> I started to make lots of good friends, and I began to know about different events and groups that are run in the community. I haven't been in the UK for long, so I feel like I have a group I'm attached to and that I am actually part of a community. Otherwise, I would probably have felt more alone. Now I have that feeling of security here. (Participant 5, Male, Age 36)

### 3.2 | Theme 2: Marginalisation and social justice

The consensus of the participants was that marginalisation and injustice are important factors that significantly affect their reasons for and experiences of volunteering in the community. These were perceived by some as a barrier, in terms of a lack of access to resources and differences in treatment. Overcoming these barriers was a key factor in motivating those working with vulnerable people and in welfare charities, and volunteering was considered a natural response. However, there were some important barriers encountered when they were engaged in volunteering such as a lack of diversity within mainstream volunteering organisations which became a reason to diminish their motivation to volunteer.

### 3.2.1 | Personal injustice as a driver to volunteer

There was agreement from most participants that South Asian communities have been subject to inequalities and marginalisation such as lack of access to support and opportunities, negative public attitudes, racism and social positionality. For some participants, it was believed that volunteering helped achieve results in changing the treatment towards issues of marginalisation (e.g., disability):

> My son had learning difficulties. I saw that assessment of disabled people was not done in the right manner, I realised that the government and social services did not understand the needs that Asian carers or parents had. (Participant 9, Male, Age 66)

Some participants reported experiences of prejudice and discrimination, which made them feel that they were treated unfairly. To address some of these issues, participants built up their own core group of South Asian members, so they were able to, as one participant put it 'get the most out of their local community group' (Participant 7, Female, Age 62), to be able to help and make a difference.

> You're using the local community group in a way that you are mindful of issues like not being treated fairly, like inequalities, like you know, getting the support you need, all of the issues that exclude you. (Participant 7, Female, Age 62)

### 3.2.2 | Barriers to volunteering organisations

Participants believed that volunteering in mainstream groups was particularly challenging due to cultural differences. Participants described mainstream volunteering organisations as being predominantly 'white, middle class and educated' (Participant 6, Male, Age 56) and would value a wider range of diverse people:

> They need some different kinds of people, it's a big problem when you don't have people from all walks of life. (Participant 9, Male, Age 66)

Alongside this, participants felt they would not be able to meet requirements held by a particular mainstream charity as there were higher levels of bureaucracy which posed as a barrier, along with a cultural mismatch in the types of work they wished to engage in. Participants also noted the challenge of diversity with a lack of skills and training needs to undertake certain roles, realising they 'did not fit in' (Participant 3, Male, Age 42).

> I was in a group, and the lead was a volunteer, saying I had to combine a group of south Asian women and a group of men, it's like she had no idea about how that would be uncomfortable for the women and myself, I had to ask myself some questions about continuing on. (Participant 2, Female, Age 35)

### 3.2.3 | Supporting our own community

Participants described the importance of volunteering in their own cultural and faith-based organisations to restore power imbalances and promote social justice. Several participants were particularly receptive to supporting their

own community groups as it was felt that South Asians cannot access culturally appropriate community-based resources:

> Most organisations are not culturally aware of how others don't have the same opportunities, and so it's important to help our own communities. (Participant 6, Male, Age 56)

Participants tried to reduce inequalities through culturally appropriate and grass root initiatives such as sporting events, family-centric activities and free events funded by the centre in their locality:

> I wanted to sort of be more involved in volunteering within the South Asian community by organising activities for women, and their children, we organised trips to the beach and the aquarium as many women don't get to experience these. (Participant 1, Female, Age 33)

While a strong need to promote justice was important, it was especially important to volunteer within their own community as they were suspicious of mainstream organisations due to previous experiences of racism and exclusion.

> I experienced discrimination blatantly and indirectly, and it makes you lose trust in others to actually care about our needs met. (Participant 8, Male Age 42)

## 3.3 | Theme 3: Cultural and religious beliefs

The final theme that arose from the analysis of the transcripts is 'cultural and religious beliefs'. This theme explores how volunteering for South Asian people is often tied with and nurtured by cultural and religious teachings. Two interrelated aspects emerged, (1) volunteering fulfils one of the religious requirements for this group of people and (2) volunteering brings positive spiritual outcomes such as a sense of peace and spiritual fulfilment. To achieve successful outcomes South Asian volunteers preferred culturally adaptive volunteering organisations, that were responsive and aware of their cultural and religious needs.

### 3.3.1 | Cultural and religious compatibility

The majority of participants found it beneficial to explain their volunteering work or principles in relation to religious practices. Participants explained that volunteering was a god centred activity of sharing their time, wealth, and knowledge to help others:

> If you understand religion, you can see there is so many places where it's about doing good for others, community and service. (Participant 8, Male, Age 48)

Participants underscored that volunteering was utilised by South Asians to deliver culturally compatible engagement. Additionally this strategy can help allay the fear of not helping others effectively conceding that 'we should be generous and loving and helping others' (Participant 6, Male, Age 56). Participants were able to

adhere to their religious practices when volunteering in a culturally compatible way. In addition, some participants posited that cultural and religious beliefs support the key principles of volunteering:

> I feel a sense of satisfaction and I know that I am not doing something which is against my religion, I don't need to hide anything or act differently, I feel open and it's really easy to volunteer here [cultural community centre]. (Participant 2, Female, Age 35)

### 3.3.2 | Religious fulfilment and volunteering

Participants found it beneficial to explain their volunteering using principles of religious teachings and how it led to a feeling of peace and fulfilment. These perspectives highlight the fact that South Asians deem volunteering to be congruent with the religious beliefs and practices of the South Asian community. Some volunteers posited that religious teaching support several of the key volunteering principles:

> I can only say that volunteering helps you find peace, and I always think to the teachings "the best person is the one who benefits people" this is literally what makes me feel peaceful. (Participant 6, Male, Age 56)

Participants' insight into their religion is used to enhance their own understanding of their volunteering activities, in addition this led them to believe that volunteering is effectively an act of faith:

> We are taught to do it, it's an act of seva (selfless serving) and it provides you with a connection to others, you are helping others cope with difficulties. (Participant 5, Male, Age 36)

### 3.3.3 | Cultural and faith-based volunteering organisations

Some participants highlighted the importance of collaborating with cultural and faith-based volunteering organisations to volunteer in a way that meets the cultural needs of the South Asian community:

> People often don't understand the experiences of the Asian culture, I know the ways in how to approach people in the centre, for example how to speak to women and men you would not offer certain support to a woman if you were male as it would make them uncomfortable and would be frowned upon. (Participant 6, Male, 56)

It was especially important for South Asians to utilise shared cultural language and exhibiting and understanding of societal norms, this served to deepen their reasons for volunteering. Being from a similar cultural and religious background fits in with the norms of the community and can help frame civic practice:

> I think it's helpful and supportive if you have the similar background, because people can approach you, and ask you questions and we know when people are fasting, or when it's a sacred time for us. (Participant 1, Female, Age 33)

# 4 | DISCUSSION

In this study, we aimed to explore South Asian volunteers' experiences and attitudes toward volunteering, including the challenges they faced, and the strategies they used to address these. South Asian volunteers expressed a view that volunteering generates a positive impact in terms of personal well-being, similar to what has been reported in the literature (Naylor et al., 2013; Nichols & Ralston, 2011). Our study found volunteers experienced benefits across multiple life domains, including individual (i.e., learning and drawing upon strengths), cultural (i.e., religious, cultural adaptability) and community (i.e., increased sense of belonging, creating community change).

Participants described how volunteering within their local communities made them feel more part of that community. However, in the present study, there was a misalignment between how South Asians perceived marginalisation and injustice as reasons to volunteer, and how they described barriers when being involved in volunteering. Many of the participants described the need for culturally adaptive volunteering opportunities, where possible. While a sense of marginalisation and injustice occurred in the beginning stages of volunteering, the participants reflected on the lessons learned and stressed there was an important role on how their contributions were helpful for their own communities and individuals. These findings are supported by numerous studies, which have found a positive association between volunteering and well-being, life satisfaction, happiness, sense of purpose in life, and reduced symptoms of ill-being (Grotz et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2022).

Similar to other research on volunteering in ethnically diverse communities (Morris et al., 2013), we found that recruiting a diverse range of volunteers was a challenge and increasing diversity among volunteering organisations should not be done at the expense of those wishing to take part. Volunteering organisations need to support diversity recruitment with better processes for entry and culturally adaptive activities so that more ethnic minorities are able to participate. These findings also suggest that it is necessary that the promotion of volunteerism from ethnicities such as South Asians should take into consideration their specific cultural and religious needs. This was in fact one of the obstacles faced by the participants, which limited their involvement in organisations that did not share the same background as theirs.

Participants in this study felt volunteering is strongly tied to cultural and religious beliefs. Religious and cultural teachings corroborate volunteering ideals, including helping others, doing good deeds and charity work. This underscored how volunteering can be deliberate and goal-directed, to fulfil religious and cultural obligations and a way in which participants' cultural and religious beliefs were transferable into volunteering roles. The link between volunteering and religiosity is widely acknowledged across many countries and populations (M. R. Bennett, 2015; Paxton et al., 2014; Ruiter & De Graaf, 2006). We found that participants deemed volunteering as a requirement and expectation to fulfil religious obligations. For example, in this study, the Sikh and Muslim volunteers spoke of engaging in selfless service and how this can promote well-being (Kaur & Basra, 2022). However, it is important to note that although they may have religious beliefs they may not have the experiential knowledge to contribute to mainstream organisations. In addition, we found volunteers felt they would benefit from training to work in mainstream organisations, and lower barriers to entry such as bureaucracy and sensitivity to their background, beliefs, and experience.

It was found to be helpful for South Asians to collaborate with local community groups and organisations to increase civic practice. This finding is significant given the central role of religion and culture in the lives of South Asians (Lucas et al., 2013). As such, collaborating with culturally appropriate organisations was reported as key to successful volunteering. In Britain, it has been found that religious involvement, particularly amongst succeeding generations of ethnic minorities, is beneficial for civic involvement (McAndrew & Voas, 2014). By demonstrating cultural sensitivity and acceptance of religious teachings, volunteering can be facilitated to produce more positive outcomes (Seabe & Burger, 2022). This strategy can help motivate South Asians to volunteer and effectively concede that volunteering is a 'good deed' which can allay the misconceptions that ethnic minorities are less likely to volunteer (Zaidi & Pitt, 2022).

This study has highlighted a strong link between volunteering, social justice and marginalisation within the South Asian community. This link depicts a complex picture in which social injustice and marginalisation are at the same time obstacles and drivers for volunteering. In the former case, the findings have shown that South Asian people are often susceptible to marginalisation and feeling of injustice when accessing cultural, state, and private spheres. Some of the obstacles reported by our participants, such as lack of access to opportunities and support, are also particularly aligned with what Southby et al. (2019) have found in a recent rapid review of barriers to volunteering for disadvantaged groups.

On the other hand, our findings also highlight that the very experience of social injustice and marginalisation could be a driver for people to take up volunteering to support their community of belonging. Volunteering has been found in previous literature as a means for individuals to express an affinity with their local communities (Wang et al., 2022). However, the experiences of volunteering within South Asian communities challenge the notions of social inclusion (Nichols & Ralston, 2011). Since they are prevented from full integration into society, the power of volunteering does not reach out to the wider community and it is instead channelled towards their own community of belonging, the latter being identified as more in need of help and support.

## 4.1 | Strengths and limitations

A key strength of this study was the diverse range of volunteers, in terms of their experiences, religions, and cultural affiliations. There were however some limitations to this study, given the considerable variation of South Asians within the UK, it is questionable to what extent these findings are applicable to South Asians on a wider level and if they are applicable outside of the locality of the study setting. It may be beneficial to focus on the specific subgroups within the broader South Asian community (Bhopal et al., 2021).

A second limitation of this research study is that only the perspectives of South Asian volunteers were explored. To produce evidence-based frameworks for the cultural appropriateness of volunteering, further research must study the perspectives of nonvolunteering community members, community organisation managers and staff, alongside volunteers. This study did not attempt to find out how South Asian people partake in the community in different types of volunteering roles that are conducive to well-being, including the intensity, and duration of these. It is not possible to conclude that volunteering in certain types of organisations, in certain sectors will have a stronger well-being impact. However, the experience of volunteering is important, including where roles are meaningful and purposeful.

## 5 | CONCLUSIONS

To our knowledge, this is one of the first studies that investigate the lived experiences of British-based South Asian volunteers. Therefore, our findings may lead to several key implications for civic policy to increase the uptake of South Asian volunteers. This assumes great topicality in a context like the UK, in which the Asian ethnic group has recently reported the lowest percentage of volunteering (14%) compared to other ethnic groups such as Black (23%) and White (18%) (Department for Digital Culture Media & Sport, 2021; The National Council for Voluntary Organisations, 2019).

It appears that dispositions to volunteer for South Asians are rooted in the pursuit of well-being, particularly with regard to sense-making and purpose of life; therefore, schools, governments and political bodies who wish to encourage the development of skills relevant to volunteering should lay emphasis on the personal and social benefits that volunteering can generate. There should be relevant support for young people and families to recognise the importance of their communities; such support may produce long-term benefits for society.

The results from this study also suggest that strategies aimed at promoting civic participation in community activism of ethnically diverse groups such as South Asians, should familiarise themselves with their cultural beliefs and religious practices. Furthermore, culturally appropriate community initiatives can modify activities to better integrate the religious and cultural practices of volunteers, while still being aware of the substantial variations within the South Asian community (Bhopal et al., 2021).

Lastly, it is also important for social policies to identify and tackle inequalities in access to resources and support. This study suggests that tackling marginalisation and injustice is essential to empower volunteers from an ethnic minority like South Asians to develop an identity that is constructed socially and extends from one's community of belonging to the wider community. We argue that volunteering in ethnic communities is central to the pragmatic approach towards a broader social theory of community psychology, which privileges ethnic minorities' ability to become agents of experience, critical of the wider context, and strive towards a just world (Dutta, 2018).

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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## PEER REVIEW

The peer review history for this article is available at https://publons.com/publon/10.1002/jcop.22992

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