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The contribution of charity shop volunteering to a positive experience of ageing

Rosie Jones (0000-0001-7782-839X) & Frances Reynolds (0000-0001-7228-6931)

Department of Clinical Sciences, Brunel University London, Uxbridge, England.

Rosie Jones

58 Dominion Avenue, Leeds, LS7 4NN.

E-mail: jones.rosie@gmail.com

Telephone: 07446847559 / 0113 2621525

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**Abstract:**

Introduction: UK charity shops are an established volunteer setting among older adults. However, charity shop volunteering has not yet been explored from an occupational perspective. This study aimed to provide a current insight into the occupation of charity shop volunteering and its perceived relationship with health and wellbeing among volunteers in their 60s. It is important to the growing occupational science literature relating to occupation and life transitions in ageing, and informs evidence on the connection between occupation and health.

Method: Six in-depth interviews were carried out with volunteers between the ages of 60 and 69 years. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was used to develop themes representing the participants’ reflections on their experiences of volunteering.

Findings: Charity shop volunteering was found to contribute to a positive perception of ageing in the context of challenging experiences of transition, such as bereavement and the cessation of work. It was valued for its role in coping with transition by providing perceived benefits of purpose, structure, agency and belonging. These benefits were found to depend upon the level of autonomy the participants associated with their volunteer role.

Conclusion: Charity shop volunteering can support positive ageing experiences by providing access to valued psychological and social resources for coping with transition. The relevance of autonomy to this benefit introduces a potential issue of occupational justice, indicating a new area for future volunteering research to define and promote occupational justice among ageing populations.

Keywords: transition; charity shop volunteering; ageing; human agency in occupation; occupational justice

# Introduction

The work of charity shops, also known as thrift shops and op-shops, is an international activity defined by community-based charitable fundraising predominantly through the donation and sale of second-hand goods. In the UK, their rapid growth has led to volunteer opportunities for over 200,000 people each year (Harrison-Evans, 2016, p. 31). Although there is limited empirical evidence regarding the prevalence of charity shop volunteering among older adults, reports suggest that nearly a third of people aged between 65 and 74 volunteer on a regular basis in the UK (Cabinet Office, 2016) and charity shop volunteering is the most popular type of volunteering among retirees (Aviva, 2012). The occupational science literature identifies volunteering in general as a valued occupation among people over the age of 60 (Knight et al., 2007). However there has been limited research into the role that charity shop volunteering, as a meaningful occupation, plays in people’s experiences of ageing. Occupational science theory on the relationship between occupation and health in ageing would be strengthened by further exploration into the meanings attached to charity shop volunteering.

The qualitative study reported in this paper provides insight into the perspectives of volunteers in their 60s. The World Health Organization (2015) highlights that although people entering their 60s today can expect to live longer than previous generations, chronic illness and quality of life nonetheless represent a global public health challenge for ageing populations. An “occupational perspective of health” (Wilcock, 2006, p. 3) facilitates understanding of the ageing process by looking beyond biomedical classifications of illness and disability, to consider how perceived health might be shaped by daily experiences of participating in occupations (Stanley & Cheek, 2003). The findings of the current study illuminate the value of charity shop volunteering as an occupation supporting positive perceptions of ageing during common transitions, such as bereavement and retirement.

# Literature review

## Volunteering and health

The literature on volunteering encompasses a variety of roles, for example personal and social care (Principi, Chiatti, & Giovanni, 2012) and supporting religious causes (Musick & Wilson, 2003), and its value has been widely researched in terms of the health and wellbeing benefits to volunteers. There is extensive evidence to support the link between volunteering in general and improved health, including reduced mortality, lower rates of depression, less frequent hospitalisation, greater function in activities of daily living, and higher levels of physical activity (see overview of literature in Casiday, Kinsman, Fisher, & Bambra, 2008).

Although quantitative measures provide useful evidence of the benefits of volunteering, health outcomes can be influenced by contextual factors such as the activities involved (Brown, 2010). Occupational science research has contributed important insights into the nature of the relationship between occupation and health in ageing (see for example, Arola, Dellenborg, & Häggblom-Kronlöf, 2018; Odawara 2010; Wright-St Clair, 2017). Self-esteem, agency and purpose have previously been identified as important to the perceived health benefits of volunteering (Warburton, 2006). This indicates that further research into specific volunteer settings, from an occupational perspective, would inform understandings of how volunteering relates to health and wellbeing.

## The motivations of volunteers

An important way of determining the value of volunteering is to explore the reasons people give for doing it. Although “helping others” is particularly important to older volunteers (Principi et al., 2012, p. 92)*,* such acts have also been shown to serve a psychological function for the volunteer. Callow (2004) observed that the motivation to engage in altruistic acts of volunteering can in itself be driven by a desire to feel good about oneself.

One of the most consistent themes in the literature is social motivation (Callow, 2004). Loneliness is believed to be harmful to health and has been associated with increased mortality risk among older people (Tilvis, Laitala, Routasalo, & Pitkala, 2011). Not only does volunteering provide access to social opportunities among older populations, but Musick and Wilson (2003) found that this type of social interaction had a more significant effect on reported depressive symptoms than informal socialising.

Nonetheless, volunteering may hold different meanings and rewards for different cohorts of older people. There is debate about whether the post-war *Baby Boomer* generation (born 1945-63, according to Culp, 2009) engages differently with volunteering compared with their parents and grandparents. Einolf (2009) reports that this generation is more willing to volunteer but Culp (2009) reviewed evidence suggesting that Baby Boomers are more likely to exercise choice about which volunteer roles they wish to take part in, wishing to capitalise on their skills and interests.

## Charity shop volunteering

A typical charity shop in the UK might have one or more paid members of staff running a team of volunteers who tend to work regular, pre-agreed hours. Activities will vary between shops and depending on the volunteer’s skills, preferences and availability, but most volunteers will do one or more of the activities listed in Table 1. Despite extensive literature on volunteering, research into the charity shop setting is limited. Expansion of the charity retail sector in the 1990s sparked academic interest, mainly from a business and management perspective (Parsons, 2002). Few studies have developed this work further over the past decade.

A recent large-scale study and update have provided evidence that health outcomes identified in the wider volunteering literature are replicated in the specific context of charity shop volunteering. Of the volunteers surveyed, 73% agreed that their voluntary work was linked to their health (Harrison-Evans, 2016, p. 29). However, the accuracy with which these findings represent the perspectives of older volunteers is unclear owing to the original study’s use of closed questions and categories predetermined by focus groups that did not include volunteers (Paget & Birdwell, 2013). Although the updated study provides useful analysis differentiating between age groups (Harrison-Evans, 2016), continued reliance on the same answer categories calls for further qualitative research to confirm the validity of these benefits among older charity shop volunteers.

One benefit the above studies found to be particularly relevant to older charity shop volunteers was the opportunity to socialise, which is a strong theme in the historic literature (Broadbridge & Horne, 1994; Whithear, 1999). However, findings differ on whether volunteering offers a means of forming new relationships or maintaining existing networks. Flores (2013) looked more closely at social interactions in charity shops, finding they supported wellbeing following life events such as retirement and bereavement. There is precedent for investigating common transitions of ageing from an occupational perspective (Crider, Calder, Bunting, & Forwell, 2015), but this topic has not yet been explored in relation to the occupation of charity shop volunteering.

The charity retail literature instead has largely focused on the impact of professionalisation in the sector. Fitton (2013) defined this process as involving an increase in commercially oriented values, for example fixed pricing. Previously presented as a negative change, devaluing volunteer skills (Whithear, 1999), this continues to be a relevant issue (Liu & Ko, 2014). Nonetheless, there is a lack of research exploring the lived experiences of volunteers themselves, which forms the focus of this study’s research question: “What is the value of charity shop volunteering to volunteers in their 60s”?

# Method

A qualitative methodology using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was adopted owing to the limited theoretical grounding relating to charity shop volunteering, and the precedence in IPA for generating new knowledge in occupational science (Bruyn & Cameron, 2017; Jennings & Cronin-Davis, 2016; McGrath & McGonagle, 2016).

Ethical approval was granted by the host university’s Research Ethics Committee. Informed consent was gained through the provision of a participant information sheet, topic guide and consent form, and confidentiality has been protected through the use of secure data storage and pseudonyms as well as the masking of any other potentially identifying information.

## Participants

In accordance with the idiographic tradition of IPA, a small sample of six participants was used enabling in-depth analysis of lived experience (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Volunteers were recruited through purposive sampling to achieve a homogenous sample regarding key factors, such as age and location (see Table 2). Participants were aged between 60-69 years and volunteered in a single charity shop in Yorkshire, England.

Notable variations in the sample were sex, marital status and employment. One participant in particular was unique in that he was the only male and was volunteering as part of a government scheme to support people receiving unemployment benefits to return to work. Although such factors arguably reduce the homogeneity of the sample, prioritisation of key contextual characteristics is accepted practice in IPA (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). The mutual experience of volunteering at the same shop (and thereby supporting the same charity in a distinct geographical location) achieves an acceptable homogeneity of volunteering experience, which the researchers considered paramount as volunteering was the occupation being studied.

## Data collection and analysis

Semi-structured audio-recorded interviews lasting 50 to 90 minutes were used to obtain detailed accounts from each participant. Two pilot interviews helped to develop an interview schedule that promoted rich data generation through question clarity, minimising presumption, and encouraging reflective thinking, and the second of these pilot interviews was included in the final analysis because no further changes were made to the interview schedule (see Table 3). Although guided by these questions, the researchers were flexible to the concerns of the participant in order to focus as much as possible on their ‘lifeworld’ as opposed to the priorities of the schedule and the researchers’ agenda.

The data were analysed according to IPA guidelines following an iterative-inductive cycle (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). After the researchers familiarised themselves with each interview separately, close reading led to the noting of significant content and initial interpretations. This involved annotating in the transcript margins to summarise experiential elements that appeared to carry meaning. This ranged from primarily descriptive summaries to more interpretative comments drawing, for example, on linguistic representations (such as metaphor) and wider theoretical concepts.

The additional data created by the process described above were used to identify emerging themes. Themes were first considered for each case individually to ensure the analysis remained grounded in each participant’s own experiences and concerns. A final level of interpretation looked at the themes from a group perspective, capturing convergences of experience whilst also seeking to represent idiosyncrasies between cases. The resulting gestalt is considered in IPA research to represent the interpretations of the researcher and the experience of the participant (both *etic* and *emic* positions, or the *double hermeneutic*). The equal importance of these dual positions is necessitated by IPA’s subscription to taking both an empathic and questioning approach to the recounted experience to achieve a deeper understanding (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). In practice, this required consideration of wider psychological and occupational science constructs, such as identity formation and occupational justice, along with frequent returning to the original interview recordings to check interpretations against participants’ own words.

## Rigour

This study upheld the interpretative principles of IPA throughout data collection and analysis with the use of a reflective diary and peer review. These are key markers of rigour in the reporting of IPA research (Brocki & Wearden, 2006) and promote general qualitative research standards, such as transparency and sensitivity to context. Although both authors and a third peer researcher reviewed the data and findings, to promote reflexivity and enrich interpretations, no other triangulation methods were used in this study.

# Findings

Volunteering was found to be a meaningful part of all the participants’ lives. This meaning was captured in four themes and further sub-themes (see Table 4). At a fundamental level, the very decision to volunteer was found to affirm a desired identity associated with the participants’ sense of agency, and tangible benefits included perceived purpose, structure and belonging. The productive nature of volunteering was represented as a re-imagined concept of work, which accommodated new needs and desires the participants associated with this stage in their lives, and was found to support a positive experience of ageing in the context of transition.

## Choosing to be well – “I do it because I want to do it”

Repeated and spontaneous reference to their initial decision to volunteer, and the challenging events predicating this, highlighted the importance of their decision as a turning point in all the participants’ lives. The circumstances of transition described were diverse, including retirement, redundancy, family moving away and bereavement. However, all presented their subsequent volunteering as a positive choice in which they took assertive action over their own lives:

I think you miss the social side of it once you retire and then I'm a widow … my daughter had left home, I'm getting emotional now … I didn't have much social life, but I've made up for it the last two years [time spent volunteering] … making up for lost time (Vicky).

Continued commitment to volunteering was also found to affirm participants’ perceptions of themselves as active people, both physically and mentally:

I'm keeping active so I feel better in myself, making your brain work isn't it? … you look at life differently, you just thank the Lord [for] what you've got … you feel younger as well, you know what I mean, and you're mobile aren't you … I just couldn't do with staying at home all the time (Vicky).

The value of this active identity to the participants’ wellbeing can be seen in Margaret’s contrasting descriptions of herself as a volunteer and as a grieving widow prior to volunteering:

I sat for 18 months and did nothing and I was getting worse and worse and worse … so I just thought to myself one day, you can't - I went nearly a week without even getting dressed at one point (Margaret).

[Volunteering] you can be on the go all day … but I get bored if I'm sitting on the till and not doing anything if we're quiet, so I look for things to do on the shop floor … I'm one of these people that can't stay still (Margaret).

The volunteer identity was valued not only as an indicator of wellness, but as a contributing factor – for instance, an interesting choice of words by one participant suggested being unwell as a consequence, rather than a cause, of being off work:

I haven’t had time off to be ill (John).

All participants presented volunteering as an active means of rebuilding a positive sense of self following negative life experiences. Even John, whose volunteering was a condition of his Jobseeker’s Allowance, expressed a desire to reclaim the pride he associated with his previous worker role:

I jumped before I was pushed, I'd heard about the scheme and I knew how frantic Iain Duncan Smith [former UK Secretary of State for Work and Pensions] was about getting me off the books [welfare benefits] somehow … but I was absolutely sick to death of not having something to work, something to do (John).

John’s reference to Ian Duncan Smith denoted a sense of coercion related to the former Secretary of State’s widely recognised role in welfare reforms that advocated more restrictive rules on people receiving unemployment benefits. The common idiom “jumped before I was pushed” emphasised the value of agency in John’s need to resist perceived control by the state, and his volunteer role is presented as a desirable alternative to this stigmatised inactive identity.

## Fulfilling Time – “It fills a gap … it keeps you going”

All participants described a need to fill time meaningfully:

It fills a gap, you're doing, it keeps you going … you haven't got time to get bored (Vicky).

This need was directly associated with the participants’ emotional wellbeing. Empty time was seen to proliferate negative thoughts and feelings, a threat articulated by Margaret as “gremlins … chelping in my ear”. Volunteering was seen as a positive distraction giving daily routines a sense of structure, and functioning in some ways as paid work had done:

If you’re working you’ve got a reason to get up, to motivate yourself to go out and it gives you some shape to your week (Carole).

However, this benefit cannot be explained by the simple filling of empty hours, as some participants described busy schedules outside their volunteering. Sheila demonstrated that her time could be occupied whilst still being perceived as empty:

It’s about five years now since I retired, and for a couple of years my husband was still working so I could potter about doing what I wanted to do, go where I wanted to go, and then [husband] retired and … seven days a week, both of you together … I needed to find something for me to do on my own (Sheila).

Even the participants who had not struggled with reduced activity found that volunteering provided more meaning to their use of time, and a sense of purpose that leisure interests did not necessarily provide:

I've got interests that, you know can fill a day … it's interesting to me, but I was going nowhere (John).

For all participants this need for meaning arose from various experiences of loss, which were described as leading to a lack of purpose:

[Volunteering takes] some weight off me constantly thinking about [mother’s death] … [thinking that] this time on a Saturday I'd be going down to Mum’s and I’d have been doing Mum’s shopping and I’d have been making Mum’s tea … I just needed something to fill the void and stop me looking back in time at what had been that was never ever going to be again (Jean).

This new sense of structure and purpose appeared to foster a more positive experience of time as a whole, enabling greater enjoyment of leisure time. No longer a defining quality of her bereavement, Margaret described how volunteering had encouraged a newfound appreciation of her time at home alone:

I like spending time in the flat, I love my weekends too and I have Wednesdays off (Margaret).

## Belonging – “I had no place in society”

Socialising was one of the primary reasons given for volunteering. Although some participants described gaining new friendships, these were recognised as transient:

I just like the, how can I put it, the company … interaction with other people, not relationships, interaction with other people as opposed to just what would amount to spending quite a few days a week just on my own at home (Carole).

More important than individual relationships was the experience of being part of a team. Participants described a sense of belonging based on the work they shared in the shop:

It’s like a team, everybody works for the same thing, everybody works for the good of the shop (Margaret).

The public-facing nature of volunteering was also valued as a source of social connection. Most of the participants worked on the shop floor, that is, at the front of the premises where goods are displayed for sale and customers engage with them. This volunteer role contrasts with other jobs, for example sorting and preparing donations, which would be carried out in a back room away from customers. The participants portrayed this as an important way of opening themselves up to the wider community following isolating life events. Vicky began volunteering at a time in her life when she found herself retired, widowed and with children moving away:

You’ve just got to put yourself out there, haven't you (Vicky).

The participants who worked on the shop floor frequently referenced customer feedback and enjoyed feeling that they were intrinsic to the customers’ experience of the shop:

Well, the customers themselves say it’s nice to come into a cheerful shop, and a clean and tidy shop so, that says it all, doesn’t it? (Sheila).

Thus, being visibly connected with the shop appeared to provide an opportunity for validation from the local community:

Psychologically you’re accepted … you’ve still got a sort of toe in society really as opposed to just being at home and no sort of place out in the community (Carole).

## Productivity – “She’s old, what’s she going to do now?”

A revealing contradiction was that the participants expressed their volunteering in work terms, through vocabulary use and the emphasis of obligation, whilst also asserting its difference from formal work. All except John presented their volunteering as an active rejection of the stress associated with their adult careers:

That’s another reason why volunteering appeals, well it works for me, because you don't have to take it home with you like a normal job, a normal job you worry about when you're at home (Sheila).

John, on the other hand, experienced not being paid as undermining his satisfaction with volunteering at a time in his life when he expected to still be employed:

The labourer is worthy of his hire and … I'm going to waste, and I have got another 5 or 6 years [until retirement] (John).

This diverging perspective arises from John’s unique circumstances among the participants, as an unemployed older man still seeking paid work. This serves to highlight that charity shop volunteering satisfies a set of needs that are distinct from those associated with paid employment. The majority of participants described payment for their commitment as no longer a priority, instead taking pride in their contribution to the success of the shop:

[The manager] said, ‘I’d just like to say a big thank you … I couldn’t have done it without all of you …’ it was really nice … I must have told 30 people since then (Jean).

The participants also portrayed charity shop volunteering as more accessible than traditional work environments, describing how it accommodated their age. Carole described physical limitations that forced her to discontinue other voluntary roles, and Margaret expressed the perceived benefit of working with people who were “more [her] age”, as this environment enabled her to avoid ageist stereotyping:

As you get older, you are frightened of your own age, you’re frightened that when you go somewhere somebody’s going to think ‘well she’s old, what’s she going to do now?’ but I just felt confident [volunteering] (Jean).

Despite these distinctions between paid employment and volunteering, all the participants used employment-specific language in relation to their volunteering, for example “job” (Jean), “bosses” (Vicky) and “day off” (Margaret). This suggested that participants may associate, or wish others to associate, their volunteering with common understandings of work:

My brother says, why don’t you come over on … a Thursday and have a long [weekend], but I can’t because I’m working on Friday, because I’ve committed to that so, unless I take holiday, which I only take holiday for my [genuine] holidays (Sheila).

Even John found that volunteering provided a valued experience of work, maintaining his self-esteem:

At least I'm working for my Jobseeker’s Allowance - I'm being given money but I'm working for it … I'm not just sitting there and getting a hand-out (John).

Both Sheila’s assertion of her commitment to her schedule within the shop and John’s mirroring of language that stigmatises unemployment benefits, suggest that expressing volunteering as a work obligation provided a sense of social worth. Specifically, it appeared to provide an experience of being needed in later life when paid work had been discontinued:

Obviously I’ve got hobbies and the garden and pets and that, but … it’s nice to get out and feel useful and maybe needed (Carole).

# Discussion

Each participant brought to this study a unique story. What these stories shared was a single charity shop, and reflection revealed the relevance of this charity shop to their experience of health and wellbeing as they aged. Fundamental to each narrative were descriptions of significant life-events, including retirement, redundancy, family moving away and bereavement. These events were presented as challenging processes of change and loss, which came with the experience of ageing. The relationship between occupation and transition has been widely explored (Crider et al., 2015; Jonsson, Borell, & Sadlo, 2000; Odawara, 2010; Wiseman, & Whiteford, 2009). Meaningful activity can be a means of coping with the stress associated with common life transitions (Blair, 2000) and maintaining a sense of continuity amidst loss (Tatzer, van Nes, & Jonsson, 2012). The findings of this study demonstrate some ways in which charity shop volunteering contributes to the coping-resources of volunteers in their 60s experiencing transition, and thus supports a more positive experience of the ageing self.

Human development theories frame the life events described above as integral to ageing, advocating adaptation for wellbeing (Clarke & Warren, 2007), which is supported by the finding that charity shop volunteering was an active means of filling time to avoid negative thoughts and feelings (see theme, *Fulfilling Time*). However, the heterogeneity of ageing experiences identified in the current study challenges the normative assumptions of life-span models. Schoklitsch and Baumann (2012) have already questioned the continuing relevance of Erikson’s traditionally defined stage of generativity, demarcating middle age as the focal point for contributing to society and future generations, in light of increases in life expectancy and vitality. Framing transition by its nature rather than age category provides a new perspective enabling us to understand how the change to Sheila’s daily routine brought about by her husband’s retirement can be likened to Vicky’s and Carole’s very different accounts of retirement, as well as John’s redundancy and Margaret’s and Jean’s bereavements.

One way to understand these transitions is as a disruption of time. Although research has highlighted “anomie” as a motivator for charity shop volunteering (Flores, 2013, p. 383), its temporal dimensions have not yet been discussed. Participants in the current study shared a sense of loss related to their transition into older adulthood. These losses were found to threaten their sense of self through a perceived lack of purpose, which has previously been identified as important to wellbeing among older volunteers (Warburton, 2006). The concept of temporality has been used by Farnworth (2003) to describe the influence of what we do on our perception of self in relation to our past, present and future, and continuity theory has been used to demonstrate how the *doing* of occupations can serve as a “litmus-test” of the ageing self (Tatzer, van Nes & Jonsson, 2012, p. 145). Charity shop volunteering appeared to provide participants with renewed purpose, and in doing so was valued as a means of maintaining a positive identity in their ageing narratives.

The pace of time was also found to be disrupted by transition. Pemberton and Cox (2015) argue that the rhythm of a person’s daily activities, and its synchronicity with internal physiological and psychological processes, is important to health. This theory is pertinent to the disrupted routines experienced with ageing highlighted in the current study. Research has already demonstrated the loss of meaningful occupations that can occur as a result of transitions in later life, indicating a need to establish occupational balance (Jonsson, 2011; Pettican & Prior, 2011). The participants in this study valued the structure that volunteering re-introduced to their lives, in contrast to a sense of boundary-less time that had come to characterise their experience of ageing. This benefit has been recognised in the recruitment of retiree volunteers (Callow, 2004) and is relevant to health, as both excessive and insufficient levels of time pressure can negatively affect mood (Teuchmann, Totterdell, & Parker, 1999).

Another key aspect of the ageing transitions highlighted in this study was their involuntary nature. Mirroring the motivations indicated in this study’s theme *Choosing to be Well*, volunteers interviewed by Flores (2013) expressed a desire to assert agency in response to changes over which they lacked control. Autonomy is identified by older people as a key aspect of wellbeing (Stenner, McFarquhar, & Bowling, 2011) and an internal locus of control has been associated with more positive transition experiences (Crider et al., 2015). Nyman, Josephsson and Isaksson (2014) provide an example of agency being enacted through the daily occupations of an older woman throughout the process of transition, and the current study demonstrates how charity shop volunteering can also be a means of maintaining this important sense of agency.

A final feature of transition in ageing highlighted in this study was its impact on the meanings associated with productive occupation. In the theme *Productivity,* participants revealed volunteering to be a form of negotiation in which they accessed valued psychosocial benefits associated with productive activity whilst eliminating other aspects of work they no longer considered desirable at their age. The charity shop setting was considered more suitable because it accommodated their concerns at this particular stage of life, including physical limitations and a desire to avoid the stress they attributed to paid employment, which could even harm their lives outside of work. Although the historic literature has considered how this inclusivity might be threatened by new pressures and expectations introduced by professionalisation (Fitton, 2013), Harrison-Evans (2016) promoted the unique capacity of charity shops to support participation among people with ill-health or disability. This accessibility was shown in the current study to be highly valuable for facilitating productive occupation with ageing.

This opportunity, to participate in a recognised productive activity, was found to be especially valued for providing *Belonging* (see theme). The participants’ portrayal of their volunteering as an intrinsically social activity echoes the early charity shop literature, which often represented social motivations in terms of personal relationships, for instance Broadbridge and Horne’s (1994, p. 434) finding that people volunteer to “meet people/make friends”. However, such individual attachments did not represent the primary value of volunteering to participants in the current study. In line with more contemporary research (Harrison-Evans, 2016), the common purpose of the shop was found to provide participants with a valued sense of belonging. Formal work environments have been evidenced to promote wellbeing through perceived belonging among people living with mental health problems (Leufstadius, Eklund, & Erlandssonl, 2009) and the current study suggests that charity shop volunteering may likewise counter feelings of social isolation among volunteers in their 60s.

Furthermore, working on the shop floor was found to be of particular value in that it enabled the participants to contribute to a community in a way that made them feel more visible to wider society. Such desires among older volunteers have previously been highlighted as an indication of generativity in later life, but have focused on the value of passing on experience and stories (Clarke & Warren, 2007). This study’s focus on volunteers in their 60s instead emphasised the value of maintaining a more practical and socially valued role in society at a time when important sources of belonging such as work and family had been lost.

In summary, the findings of this study highlighted some important challenges of transition in ageing, including its impact on experiences of time, agency, and the meaning of productive occupations. This contributes to representations of volunteering among the Baby Boomer generation by identifying specific benefits that were important to the value of charity shop volunteering among a group of volunteers in their 60s. These benefits included perceived purpose, structure, agency and belonging, thus illuminating the relationship between volunteering occupations and health and wellbeing in ageing.

## Interpretations from an occupational justice perspective

Although not a focus of the original research question, the findings of this study suggest a potential for occupational injustice that is worth noting. John’s diverging narrative, resulting from the lesser degree of agency he associated with his decision to volunteer, represented an experience of perceived exploitation that could be understood as *occupational alienation*. Townsend and Wilcock (2004, p. 80) identified this injusticeas a lack of freedom to participate in occupations that provide “meaning and enrichment”. However, subsequent researchers have highlighted the lack of conceptual clarity underpinning such terminology (Durocher, Gibson, & Rappolt, 2014). The current study arguably demonstrates a connection between autonomy and identity in defining cases of alienation. This can be explained using the occupational constructs *doing*, *being* and *becoming* (Wilcock, 2006). Agency was found to be the essence of *being* a charity shop volunteer, providing an identity that was crucial to a positive perception of ageing. John’s lack of agency affected his experience of *doing* charity shop volunteering, diminishing its value as a meaningful occupation. The transformative power of volunteering, which most of the participants experienced as *becoming* more satisfied with their ageing self, therefore depends on an individual’s capacity to exercise autonomy in their decision to volunteer.

Furthermore, Gupta (2016) emphasised a need for occupational science research to acknowledge the wider social systems influencing issues of occupational justice from a population perspective. Although only based on one person’s experience, the finding that older people can feel coerced into volunteering occupations they do not find meaningful, and that this has a negative impact on the health and wellbeing benefits gained from volunteering, directs attention to wider criticisms surrounding *active* or *productive ageing* (Martinson & Halpern, 2011; Minkler & Holstein, 2008; Stephens, Breheny, & Mansvelt, 2015). Katz (2000, p. 139) emphasised the potentially pernicious influences of an “ideal of activity” in healthcare, which stems from activity theory’s focus on the health benefits of continuing to engage in activity later in life (D’Amico, 2014). Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to fairly represent the extent of this debate, the current study contributes to the discussion a more nuanced representation of *active ageing* by highlighting both positive and negative connotations of productive activity past the age of 60. The importance of choice in volunteering opportunities has been emphasised, which is concurrent with previously reviewed evidence regarding the Baby Boomer generation and volunteering more generally (Culp, 2009) and supports the relevance of autonomy to promoting occupational justice among ageing populations.

# Implications for further research

The methodological scope of this study was limited to the meanings of occupation in a specific context, and therefore should not be interpreted as generalisable evidence for the benefits of charity shop volunteering. Whilst participants largely recounted positive experiences of volunteering, it is acknowledged that the sample was confined to participants who felt able to volunteer, and had chosen to continue, therefore omitting the perspectives of those who may have found charity shop volunteering less accessible or positive. Further occupational science research on transition is needed to explore the relevance of the benefits found in this study in different contexts. Of particular interest would be how the identified themes apply to different forms of volunteering. For example, the relationship between volunteering and disrupted experiences of time during transition might be informed by insights from other types of volunteering that do not typically require a regular, structured time commitment such as fundraising and events.

Another limitation to the potential application of this study’s findings owes to the diversity characterising older populations making it difficult to delineate ageing based on chronological age. The researchers chose to sample a relatively small age range, between 60-69, to encompass the lower limits of generally accepted definitions of *old age* (World Health Organization, 2015) and capture the potentially distinct perspectives of Baby Boomers. A strength of this choice was that it facilitated insights into a single decade that represents some important initial experiences of ageing, for example retirement. A weakness was that even a narrow age category produced a sample with considerable variation in factors such as employment and marital status (see Table 2). Further research with inclusion criteria based on specific ageing circumstances, rather than chronological age, would provide more depth to the findings of this study. Specifically, concepts of occupational justice would be strengthened by further research into autonomy among Baby Boomer volunteers who are also seeking employment.

# Conclusion

This study contributes to occupational science in two important ways. Firstly, it informs the development of an “occupation-based theory of transition” (Crider et al., 2015, p. 316) by demonstrating the role of charity shop volunteering in coping with challenging life-events associated with ageing, such as bereavement and retirement. The participants’ lived experience of health was found to be enhanced by meaningful occupation, which they valued for providing purpose, structure, agency and belonging. These findings substantiate the connection between meaningful occupation and health and wellbeing during common transitions of ageing, and could direct future transition research into volunteering more generally.

Secondly, this study highlights a need to clarify concepts of occupational justice in relation to volunteering among the ageing Baby Boomer generation. The health and wellbeing benefits of productive activity in later life have been shown to depend upon meaningful engagement involving all elements of *doing*, *being*, *becoming* and *belonging*. Therefore, autonomy in the decision to volunteer seems crucial to the potential benefits of charity shop volunteering, in particular its positive influence over personal and social identity. This presents wider implications for public debate and policy relating to healthy ageing and the researchers suggest that further exploration of volunteering occupations from an occupational justice perspective would help define potential issues of occupational alienation among Baby Boomer volunteers.

The evolving charity retail sector presents both opportunity and caution; the sector’s continued growth not only establishes its potential as a resource for community-based health promotion, but has also fostered new forms of charity shop volunteering that have the potential to undermine generally accepted benefits of volunteering in ageing. The findings of this study therefore highlight the importance of older people’s perspectives for promoting effective and ethical health promotion policy, whilst demonstrating the profound role of meaningful occupation in coping with transition to facilitate positive experiences of ageing:

It really gave me my life back (Margaret).

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**Table 1. Example charity shop volunteering activities**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Activity | Description |
| Donation processing | Sorting donations and preparing for sale. Can include cleaning, organising stock for specialist sections (e.g. vintage), hanging clothing and pricing. |
| Customer service | Primarily involves making sales and handling money. Can also include registering donations and managing changing rooms. |
| Merchendising | Typically includes replenishing stock, organising themed areas, dressing mannequins and creating window displays. |
| Housekeeping | For example general cleaning, providing refreshments for staff and volunteers, opening and closing shop, counting money taken and banking. |
| Income support | Volunteers can also participate in additional activities outside of the day-to-day running of the shop. For example fundraising and events, generating stock, collecting donations and online selling. |

**Table 2. Participant details.**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Name**[[1]](#footnote-1)** | Age | Experience | Volunteer commitment (days per week) | Employment status | Marital status |
| Margaret | 69 | 4 years | 4 | Retired | Widowed |
| Sheila | 64 | 1 year | 2 | Retired | Married |
| Carole | 67 | 11 years | 2-3 | Retired | Widowed |
| Jean | 63 | 1 year | 1 | Working (part-time) | Married |
| Vicky | 68 | 2 years | 2 | Retired | Widowed |
| John | 60 | 5 months | 4 | Unemployed (volunteering as a condition of Jobseeker’s Allowance) | Single |

**Table 3. Interview topic guide.**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Question | Prompts |
| I’d like you to imagine a typical day of volunteering at the shop, could you describe it to me, starting right at the beginning | Can you tell me about the work you do/ the customers/ the people you work with |
| Can you tell me about how you came to be a volunteer at [shop] | Why did you decide to start volunteering? |
| What do you think is important for you to do your volunteer work? | Is there anything that you find helps you/makes it harder for you to volunteer?  What motivates you to go into the shop?  How do you feel at the end of the day? |
| How do you think your life would be different if you didn’t volunteer? | What would your life be like if you did not go into the shop? |
| What do you think your volunteer work means for your health? | Has your volunteering affected your physical health/ your mood/ how you feel generally? |
| Can you tell me how you feel about your work at [shop] when you think about the future? | How do you imagine the shop will be in 5/10/15 years time?  How would you feel if you had to stop volunteering? |

**Table 4. Meanings of volunteering: Themes and subthemes.**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Main themes | Sub-themes |
| “I do it because I want to do it”  – Choosing to be well | A positive choice  Staying active |
| “It fills a gap … it keeps you going”  - Fulfilling time | A need to fill empty time  Finding a purpose for time  Structuring time |
| “I had no place in society”  – Belonging | Not being alone  Being part of a team  Having a role in the community |
| “She’s old, what’s she going to do now?”  – Productivity | A time to stop working  An opportunity to feel productive  Work obligation as social worth |

1. Pseudonym. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)