MuseumsForward

Understanding the impact of COVID-19 on the mental health and well-being of museum volunteers

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound and multidimensional impact on museums in the United States, but there has been little research into the perspectives of volunteers during this crisis, and less into the impacts it has had on their mental health. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the experiences of volunteers working in small history museums during the pandemic and to examine the impacts on their mental health and well-being. Participants included nine adult volunteers who were recruited from three small history museums in Washington state. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, informed by the PERMA model of workplace well-being. Findings suggest that volunteers regarded their work in museums as having both positive and negative impacts on their well-being during the pandemic. Participants felt that volunteering provided them with needed mental stimulation, social connection, and presented an opportunity for museum leadership to focus on regrouping and strategic planning; volunteers also reported feeling burned out from the stress of increased workload and pressure to rapidly recover amidst a global pandemic.

Keywords

COVID-19; museum volunteers; mental health; well-being

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a profound and multidimensional impact on museums and other cultural organizations. Museum volunteer programs are no exception, as the pandemic has driven many organizations to completely change their day-to-day management of volunteers. In the face of barriers like museum closures and social distancing measures, many museums adapted and innovated by providing more digital content, including virtual public programming (Ennes, 2021), which required their volunteers to transition to these new platforms accordingly. For many organizations—especially small museums who rely principally on volunteers—the last two years have been a disruptive period of change with many tests of resiliency, and the fact that multiple research studies have observed increases in anxiety, depression, and psychological distress during COVID-19 (McGinty et al., 2022; Vizard et al., 2021; Daly et al., 2021) suggests that this has affected staff and volunteers on multiple levels, including their mental health. However, research on the resulting impacts of this crisis on volunteers' emotional well-being and relationship to their work is largely missing. Overall, keeping volunteers feeling engaged, valued, and safe is a chief concern for museums that want to retain the service and loyalty their volunteer workers provide, and gathering the stories and perspectives of volunteers themselves is valuable to the field as a whole. This article describes a study that explored the ways public-facing volunteers at small history museums have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Motivations: Volunteering as leisure and enrichment

For museums and other organizations that rely on volunteer work, understanding the motivations of their volunteer population is crucial to making decisions about how to best recruit new volunteers and support existing ones. Knowing why volunteers choose to stay and engage with nonprofits differs fundamentally from knowing the motivations of paid staff, due to the presence of extrinsic motivators like monetary payment. Much of the existing literature indicates that, while there is a population of younger museum volunteers whose main driver is career development, the main volunteer demographic is middle-aged and older people who cite motives that primarily fit into the "leisure" category—such as interest in social interaction or in exploring a particular subject (Holmes, 2003). Volunteers at heritage organizations like museums can also be considered as belonging to the

museum's audience and there is support for the idea that some volunteers are motivated to work with the museums they like to visit in order to deepen their connection and "extend their use and enjoyment of the site" (Orr, 2006).

Deery (2011), in a study of the motivations of volunteers, identified three possible categories of leisure-seeking volunteers: "enthusiasts" whose reasons are based on their existing interest and specific skills; "opportunists" who volunteer because it's relevant to their existing work or studies; and "enhancers" who describe a desire to keep their minds and bodies active and to stay useful in retirement (p. 320-321). Though simplified, these categories give a useful starting point for understanding why people volunteer and how institutions can increase retention. Extending this research, Graves (2019) found that volunteer retention was significantly connected to intrinsic factors such as enrichment and engagement opportunities, personal sense of doing something worthwhile, and the work itself. Among these, enrichment and engagement were found to be the most common sources of motivation and experiencing them was likely to increase volunteer retention for organizations.

Benefits of volunteering

Volunteer work is considered a common example of civic engagement and a prosocial behavior, i.e., activity that is intended to promote social acceptance and benefit other people, groups, or causes (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987), and accumulated research has provided some evidence for a positive link between prosocial activities such as volunteering and physical and psychological well-being in middle-aged and older adults (Anderson, 2014; Burr et al., 2016; Chan, 2021; Li et al., 2013). Specifically, volunteers in past studies have self-reported higher satisfaction with life than do non-volunteers (Meier & Stutzer, 2008), as well as increased self-confidence and engagement with lifelong learning (Dahl 2018). Volunteering has also been identified as beneficial to older peoples' feelings of reduced sense of purpose in life (Greenfield & Marks, 2004). Though there are a host of surrounding factors, like location, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity that complicate this conclusion (Lawton, 2021), the literature on this topic indicates that volunteering is an activity that, overall, has positive effects on participants' mental health and is generally recommended as a way for older adults to stay actively participating in their lives and communities.

Professional health and well-being

What is at the core of well-being? Abraham Maslow (1963), borrowing much from the knowledge and lifeways of Blackfoot (Siksika) communities, was one of the first in the psychology field to describe the concept of well-being as manifested in a self-actualized person; a self-actualized person being one who desires to be the most that one can be. In this model, an individual requires fulfillment of their other needs: physiological, safety, interpersonal bonds, and self-esteem to achieve an ideal result of self-actualization and transcendence that epitomizes what it means to "be well." From another viewpoint, the Blackfoot conception of well-being, as presented by Cindy Blackstock (2014), pulls back to look at the larger picture, describing a foundation of individual self-actualization that supports "community actualization" in a non-linear manner, rather than Maslow's highly individual-focused model. Where these approaches mainly overlap is their acknowledgement of the human need for community and recognition of social bonds as being essential to well-being. Taking root in these models, Butler and Kern (2016) developed the PERMA profiler for understanding workplace well-being as defined by six dimensions: positive emotion, engagement, positive relationships, meaning, and accomplishments.

In recent years the health and well-being of professionals and, more specifically, the rise in burnout stemming from chronic mismanagement of workplace stress (Thistle, 2020) has increasingly become a focus for museums. Originally described by Freudenberger (1974) to explain reasons for deterioration of care from social and health care workers over time, the understanding of burnout in the professional realm has expanded and become societally relevant and is now known to manifest as mental and physical fatigue, feelings of powerlessness, and loss of motivation (Moreno-Jiménez & Villodres, 2010). Museum workers, like those in many other fields, are now struggling with rising expectations to work longer, harder hours and facing "task saturation" i.e., workers being pressured to carry out a larger number of tasks than they have the time, tools, or resources to sustainably handle (Thistle, 2017). To exacerbate this, workplace stress can also come from perceived lack of supervisor support, role ambiguity, and organizational change (Schultz & Schultz, 2006).

Virtual programming during COVID-19

Due to lockdowns and stay at home orders implemented during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, around 90% of museums closed worldwide, with some expressing doubt that they would ever open again (UNESCO, 2020). Consequently, in-person volunteering activities were also halted, and organizations began to shift en masse to virtual spaces. Museums adapted and innovated in myriad ways: from social media utilization to creating special digital activities for audiences isolated in lockdown to providing educational programming like virtual museum gallery visits (UNESCO, 2020). Though these creative solutions were effective for increasing accessibility and demonstrated the resilience of many institutions, this crisis also raised the question as to how museums could reach those audiences who were unwilling or unable to engage with the museum digitally.

One element of the "digital divide" in museums making this shift to online activities is the resulting exclusion of audiences like low-income communities and older, not technologically savvy adults (Zollinger & DiCindio, 2021). Many seniors either lack digital literacy, do not have the necessary devices or connectivity, or simply prefer not to use the Internet and other types of digital communication technologies; this resulted in this population potentially experiencing a "double burden" of being socially and digitally isolated during the COVID-19 pandemic when access to the digital space became critical for social interaction, events, and other services (Seifert et al., 2021). However, there is nuance in this conclusion as well, as some research indicates that an increasing number of older adults demonstrate comfort with virtual volunteering as a viable alternative and can engage effectively with volunteering because of communication technologies (Mukherjee, 2011).

Study purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore the ways in which public programming volunteers at small history museums have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. It aimed to answer the following research questions:

In what ways has the COVID-19 pandemic affected public programming volunteers' perceptions of their work?

In what ways has volunteering during the COVID-19 pandemic affected the mental well-being of volunteers?

Methods

This study took a phenomenological approach to describe the lived experiences of a population of museum workers who had commonalities in facing the specific phenomenon that was volunteering in museums during COVID-19 (Creswell, 1998). Phenomenology emphasizes the attempt to describe phenomena and to get to the truth of how it appears to the experiencer (Moran, 2000, p. 4). Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with professional museum volunteers whose work involved interacting with the public (see Appendix A for interview guide). The interview guide was created using the PERMA model as a guiding framework; this model identifies five key domains of professional well-being, including positive and negative emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishments.

Sampling

The researcher contacted several small, regional history museums in Washington state and asked to recruit participants from the museum's pool of volunteers. During this process, the researcher's personal connections were sometimes used to distribute materials related to this research study. In coordination with the museums' executive directors and volunteer coordinators, recruitment emails were sent to the museum's volunteers introducing the researcher and the study—including its purpose and data collection methods—and inviting volunteers to respond if they would like to participate by being interviewed. Approximately twenty volunteers were contacted.

Participants

Nine volunteers whose roles included interacting with the public at three small history museums in Washington state were recruited to be interviewed for this study. To participate in the study, individuals had to be adults whose volunteering at their small history museum began before or during the COVID-19 pandemic and who were still current volunteers at their organization.

All participants were of U.S. retirement age (62+ years old). Three participants solely had docent-type roles, and the remaining six participants served both public-facing roles and served as volunteer officers or members of their museum's board of directors. Four participants had been volunteering with their organization for two to five years, two participants for six to nine years, and two participants

from twenty-two to twenty-three years. Five of the volunteers were women and four were men.

Data collection

Data were collected by way of semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately 30 to 40 minutes, with participants over video call using Zoom conferencing software. Audio and video of the interviews was recorded and transcribed when verbal consent was obtained from the participant to do so, and interview transcriptions were generated using Descript. All data were stored on a secure, password-protected server and only accessed by the researcher.

Positionality

With this research being grounded in qualitative data, the identity and position of the researcher are therefore relevant and should be disclosed with transparency. As a white, cisgender woman, I acknowledge that my position affects not only how the participants and I carry out this research but that it also impacts how the audience perceives the research. I am experienced with volunteering in museums in the Seattle area and have done so in roles both public-facing and otherwise for several years. I understand how this personal interest can affect how I present this research.

Land Acknowledgement

This research study was designed and implemented on the lands of the Coast Salish peoples, whose ancestors have resided here since Time Immemorial. Many Indigenous peoples thrive in this place — alive and strong.

Results

To report study results, stories are told from the data relative to four aspects of the PERMA model: a) positive emotions and negative emotions, b) social connection, c) engagement in work, and d) fulfillment and meaning in work.

For context, all the museums where participants volunteered were closed for a period in 2020-2021 as a part of widespread COVID-19 lockdowns, but for many of the volunteers participating in this study, their work did not stop. Those that also had volunteering

responsibilities apart from docenting, such as working on their organizational board, continued to work remotely and meet over video call: attending webinars, running virtual public programs, and enacting strategic planning measures.

During COVID, many museums experienced changes in staff – some were laid off, others quit or retired early, and that was true for the museums where the study participants worked as well. Some of them experienced critical leadership changes, while others experienced rapid financial growth coming from sources such as COVID relief funds and grants. When interviewed, many of the participants cited these recent changes in the leadership and/or financial scale of their museums as being more impactful on their mental health than the initial museum closures and lockdown period.

a) Positive and negative emotions

The majority of volunteers expressed feeling positive emotions toward their museum volunteer work—mentioning feelings like joy, energy, and fulfillment. When asked if these emotions changed during the pandemic, however, the answer was slightly more complex. Some of the participants described feeling somewhat relieved by the museum closures and lockdown period. For these volunteers, this time, though stressful and isolated, also provided a respite for them to be able to take a break from working at the museum to rest and pursue other interests, as one such volunteer expressed:

> "I have volunteered for a long time now, probably 15 years. So, I have to say the pandemic provided a relief. I have hobbies and I have things I like to do, and honestly, I could do those things, and that was peaceful to me."

However, this volunteer went on to add that while they enjoyed the break, they felt it was important that they return to their volunteering when it became possible, as it was something they regarded as enriching to their life: "It was peaceful, but it's a different experience from the museum. I suppose if I were to not work at the museum at all, there would be a loss in my life or an absence of something that I believe is important."

In a similar vein, another participant reflected on feeling content to stay home during the lockdown period, given their natural introversion, but also realized they would feel a loss of the happiness and energy that they experienced from volunteering at the museum if they did not return:

> "I mean, I have lots of interests and hobbies. Especially during the, the main part of COVID, I had no problem staying home because I do genealogy or read or sew or do whatever and I have lots of reasons to stay home. But, you know, it's probably good that I don't stay home all the time because I'm kind of an introvert. But like I say, the museum is one of my happy places, and I get energized by being there."

Conversely, several volunteers described the impacts on their mental health as more complex, that they felt conflicted, and that they were still reckoning with both the positives and negatives of their work. Some described being on the verge of burning out from the increase in pressure and because of their personal investment in their volunteering and in the museum succeeding. Many of these feelings emerged in response to the combination of museum closures and other sources of rapid change and growth within their organizations—such as staffing shortages and influxes of funding from sources such as grants or COVID-19 relief.

When asked about the impact their volunteering had had on their mental health, one participant described the pride they felt for the accomplishments attained by them and their colleagues, "Depends on what day you're talking to me. Depends on the day. For the vast majority, yes, it has very, very positive effects for me as a person and my sense of self-worth and intentionality and productivity,"

This volunteer went on to show that they held no illusions about both the personal and widespread difficulties brought about by the pressure, and that they knew that the burden to keep up with the high expectations and rapid pace of change was damaging:

> "...But it's like any organization. We're human beings and we live in the real world. It's like we've been moving at the speed of light with our hair on fire and being shoved into the maelstrom. Fortunately, we've had a lot of really good people and we've been able to do that. But the truth of the matter is we've burned people, and there's moments when I've felt on the verge of it."

Others reflected on their feeling of being mentally worn-down, and described some of the wider-reaching consequences of the constant stress that has come with being in an environment that has pushed volunteer workers to reach higher and higher standards of work:

> "There are moments when I'm feeling sorry for myself, and the pressure's on, and there's been a lot of pressure...Do I have the physical strength to keep doing this? And the mental balance?

> There is a huge potential for burnout. Just the level of constant activity in everybody needing to be constantly upping their game. There is no rest time. There are things happening so fast and they're such big things."

Continuing, this participant recounted seeing, over the course of the pandemic, other volunteers overwork themselves beyond their capacity and leave the museum, saying,

> "We were doing all of this stuff purely with volunteers and we were expecting volunteers to function at professional levels. And they had the ability to do it, but they're retired, they've worked their whole life. They're trying to get some rest, and if it gets too much, they drop out. We lost a bunch of docents over the period."

Others described their investment in their museum as becoming almost too taxing to be fully positive but still wanting to stick with it out of a desire to support their colleagues and growth of the organization as a whole:

> "I guess I have to say yes it has because I care about the museum, and sometimes I really want to quit because I feel so impacted. The thing that's stopping me is that I care about the museum. It has something, it provides something, whether it's the people there or…I just think it's a very fine museum. It has grown so much and changed so much. Over the course of four years that I've worked. It makes me feel like I want to support it, because they're working hard to make it grow."

b) Engagement in work

Participants overall described becoming more actively engaged with their work at the museum over the course of the pandemic. Because of COVID-19, major shifts in day-to-day operation and in leadership occurred: as museum staff and volunteers shifted to mostly virtual activities for both public programming and other volunteering tasks, staff and volunteer capacity was spread increasingly thin. Staff and volunteers were laid off, resigned, or did not feel safe enough with COVID transmission rates to return to volunteering immediately. To add another layer, some volunteers felt uncomfortable shifting to online activities and were unable to adjust.

As understaffed museums tried to quickly get back on their feet, many of the volunteers that remained had to fill in the gaps and so were able

to acquire new skills—taking on tasks completely new to them, ranging from collections work, to sales, to scheduling and staff coordination. One such volunteer described having to essentially teach themselves these new skills, saying,

> "We recruited so many new docents and I trained them. And at the desk we have a computer with PastPerfect that we use to access different parts of the exhibit. We also have to make sales and things like that. We've had to learn all of that stuff, and I didn't know how to do that before COVID. I just made myself learn how to do all that."

For some of the remaining volunteers, they felt this situation, though stressful and traumatic in many ways, also presented them with opportunities to improve, and challenged them to "step up" and take on a more active, expansive role in their organization. One such volunteer expressed:

> "I think I feel more responsible for more things. Someone isn't just going to tell me to go do something. I think I pretty much kind of have taken on things and I can direct things so that they run smoothly and that the visitors have an enjoyable visit with us."

Others keenly felt the increase in responsibilities and took the initiative to transition the museum to virtual public programming activities and meetings over Zoom. They cited a notable increase in their workload but described the outcomes as being beneficial, with the upshot that museum staff were pushed to become more connected and engaged in working with one another, as one participant said, "I think the pandemic helped in a lot of ways for us to become more cohesive and more participative." Echoing this sentiment, one volunteer reflected that their perspective on their role had changed during COVID—that they noticed a marked increase in their level of engagement correlating with feeling like they were able to enact real change in their organization:

> "I wasn't all that involved before we closed, before the pandemic. I just felt like I was just another board member trying to effect some change but didn't feel like I could do much because the leadership wasn't into changing much. But when the pandemic hit and we started doing a lot of meetings and talking a lot with each other, I felt like I could make a difference."

Continuing in this vein, another volunteer described having to change priorities due to the lockdowns and shifting their effort into planning and executing programs as a member of the museum's board:

> "My job has been, if anything, more challenging and more full during the COVID period because we were very actively developing programs and developing fundraising programs and that sort of thing. Even though we didn't have visitors coming through the door, the organization was moving forward on a number of fronts constantly. … We were doing talks all the time. Zoom talks, talks at the senior center. So, we shifted gears very nicely. We were able to stay focused."

One angle that frequently emerged in discussions with volunteers was the role that the larger changes in leadership structures had played in changing their emotional mindset and level of engagement. In some museums, a number of volunteer board members resigned or chose not to return to their roles for a variety of reasons. For several volunteers in the study, the combination of halting in-person operations and having a change in makeup of the board led to noticeable differences in their day-to-day feelings about their work.

One participant spoke candidly about the ways their museum board had changed in composition and the resulting consequences. Specifically, the pandemic catalyzed the departure of an "old guard" of board members—generally characterized by other volunteers as less willing to accept new ideas or adapt to change—and facilitated an opportunity for the remaining members to refocus on matters of planning for the future:

> "We closed down just like everybody else in March 2020, so there wasn't much to do except for try to decide, going forward, what we wanted to do when we opened back up. To decide how we wanted to look and how we wanted present ourselves. When the old guard realized that they couldn't keep up, they couldn't understand what was going on in the strategic plan, they weren't computer people or technologically savvy, they just kind of fell away. The pandemic really was a lot of bad, but for us it really provided a window of opportunity, and we really took advantage of it for organizational development."

Another volunteer board member felt that that the upheaval in organization leadership allowed them to change perspective on what was possible for them to achieve in the process of reimagining their

museum, and how they felt empowered to become more engaged in decision-making:

> "So, one of the good things that came from the pandemic, if you're looking for some pluses, was because we had some changes in the board. Because of the board, because the museum was closed, we were able to reimagine to a certain extent. Okay, here is our museum. What is it going to look like? What do we want it to look like? When we do finally open up, even if people have been here before three years ago, what will they find different? What will excite them? What will cause them to think?"

Participants generally talked about this time as being "breathing space" for the board to step back and do the long-term planning that this volunteer felt would be central to future success of the museum:

> "With the strategic planning, we could do that all on Zoom, thank goodness for Zoom. We spent hours and hours and hours on the strategic plan. So, I think the critical piece for us is that COVID gave us a breathing space where we could get organized for the next 25 years of our existence. There were so many things we couldn't do, but we could do planning, and I think that was critical to what I think is going to be a really successful next 25 years."

Continuing, this volunteer described the positive change in their emotional state that occurred as the board became more unified and they began to look toward goalsetting:

> "The first eight months, I would leave our meetings feeling very frustrated and that we just weren't getting stuff done. And then once we really got our teeth into the strategic planning and started hiring people, then it was fun. Now we're having retreats where we make goals."

In a similar vein, another volunteer talked about the emotional experience of seeing their board change so drastically, describing the shift from associating meetings with anxiety and frustration to optimism:

> "Before, at board meetings, I had always had this heavy feeling, this dread of the meeting because some of the people were rude and were taking us down rabbit holes. I always had this dread feeling, this heaviness…And these last few board meetings I've noticed I have a hopeful feeling. I have a good feeling, like getting together with friends. We're doing some

important stuff, and I can anticipate that it's going to feel good, whereas before it was 'this is going to be a fight.'"

c) Social connection and mental stimulation

Many of the participants cited the support of meaningful relationships and connection with community as a key reason they found motivation and enjoyment in their volunteer work, both before and during COVID. Volunteers wanted to stay active at the museum to stay in contact with friends and colleagues, and this became even more important during COVID when most opportunities to do so essentially disappeared.

Multiple volunteers mentioned feeling the draw of the social aspect of volunteering, and highlighted the importance of interpersonal connection for both them and others, especially considering the gradually increasing isolation that aging brings, as one volunteer reflected:

> "I'm retired, but I'm not retired from life, you know. I go to the museum, I'm there several days a week basically. There's always something going on, and I really enjoy that. Part of it is kind of a social life, I suppose. And that is for some of the retired people they've told me they don't have a much of a social network. You know, as people get older, they lose people through death and other things, and they just don't have the connections."

One major thread that emerged was that several participants thought of their volunteering work as an activity helping to "keep them sane" in their day-to-day retired life and especially during the pandemic. For them, their volunteering provided much-needed mental, emotional, and social stimulation and helped to physically get them out of the house once in-person activities were feasible:

> "If I hadn't been volunteering during COVID, I might have gone crazy. I had some personal upset, and it's been very, very difficult. I thought COVID was really difficult to manage, but I had tasks to do. I had people I was talking to, even though they were via Zoom. I went to the museum often enough that I had a small social life. It might have saved my sanity, and it's interesting work. I think it's important work, and I felt that they needed me, that I had something to contribute."

Another participant felt that volunteering remotely via Zoom—doing tasks like hosting virtual public programs, attending webinars, or engaging in strategic planning with the board—during the period of

museum closure imparted important feelings of connection, of being needed, and was emotionally buoying in a time of isolation:

"I think we all struggled with isolation, and to me [volunteering] was the bright spot. It kept me sane in some ways. It kept me from being depressed, from doing the old 'poor me' stuff because I can't go anywhere. … I was pretty much stuck at home, but it afforded me the ability to relate to people and connect. … I felt like I really was making a difference and I really was stepping up."

Multiple participants regarded their volunteering as playing a significant role in maintaining their mental acuity and staying physically active in their retirement, as one such participant said:

"Volunteering in a holistic sense, that's what, overall, keeps my mind sharp. …You're always on the goal. So, as busy as I can get, I think it helps my mental health. Because it keeps me sharp. It keeps me going. It gives me purpose, you know?"

d) Meaning and fulfillment

Many of the participants described how they were able to find meaning in their work before and during COVID. Some gave additional perspectives on how their volunteering had given them a renewed sense of identity:

"You know, I'm not done living. I still want to be part of society and what can I do to help? There's still a lot in me. I was never a group 'belonger', but I feel like I have a purpose there and I'm helping. I'm a helper person, so I enjoy that aspect of it."

This participant discussed feeling the need to separate their sense of self from their volunteer work, expressing that their volunteering had essentially become a post-retirement career that they were concerned would wear them down eventually, especially given the stress of the pandemic:

"I think it's not who I am, but it's a part of who I am, and it's an important part of who I am. I'm at the point where I retired from teaching almost 10 years ago and I need to retire from this, in the sense that you just can't keep that level of engagement up. Just because there's other things, other demands, you know? … So how do you balance your life in a way that's satisfying and yet at the same time is enriching?"

Discussion

Given these responses, it can be inferred that the matter of relying on work for meaning and identity became even more relevant during COVID, when the possibility of burnout was such that some volunteers were reconsidering the importance of their volunteering work to their life, and whether it was better for their mental health to stop completely.

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the ways in which volunteering during the COVID-19 pandemic affected the mental well-being of volunteers in small history museums. The data point to three key findings.

Burning out

When asked about how volunteering had impacted their mental health, many of the volunteers were upfront about feeling the effects of burnout while working over the course of the pandemic. Each participant's experience with burnout differed depending on their role and personality, however, across these interviews a few narrative similarities presented themselves. For some, their increased mental fatigue stemmed from a strong sense of personal responsibility for their work at the museum which in turn increased the pressure to rise to the occasion by taking on more tasks, sometimes overworking themselves in the process. Others felt minimal burnout themselves but observed it in their colleagues. These volunteers expressed concern over the fact that—largely due to the struggle to recover from the pandemic—their museums were requiring volunteers to take on an amount of work that seemed perhaps more suitable for paid professionals to handle.

As much of the existing literature on workplace burnout focuses on paid workers, these results add an important angle to the research surrounding the mental health of museum workers by including volunteer perspectives and describing the unique experience of burnout during COVID-19. These data fit with Thistle's (2011) observation that rapidly increasing expectations is a major driver of burnout in museum workers.

When asked about their emotional changes during the pandemic, several of the volunteers who mentioned feeling burnt out elaborated further on their strong sense of personal responsibility. These volunteers reported feeling emotionally conflicted because their mental fatigue was clashing with their long-held desire to see their museums

grow and thrive. While their original motivations for volunteering, like wanting to give back to their community, remained, their perspective of how much work they could mentally handle had changed during COVID. Consequently, some participants concluded that their ability to balance their workload with other responsibilities in their life was approaching unsustainability.

Keeping busy and staying connected

A strong thread running through the results of this study was that volunteers who shifted to volunteering remotely via Zoom or other means during the pandemic felt that their work kept them both mentally stimulated and socially connected to their museum community. Volunteers felt that continuing to work remotely during the pandemic helped them stay active in maintaining their mental acuity, managing their emotions, and feeling connected to community in a time of isolation. Additionally, participants expressed that volunteering during this time gave them a buoying sense of being needed and that they were doing work that mattered. Lastly, for some study participants, simply having a weekly or monthly activity to commit to helped distract from the difficulty of their daily lives, especially during the initial lockdowns and social distancing measures.

Overall, these perspectives extend the findings of Deery et al. (2011) that categorized a certain population of volunteers by their motivations, naming them “enhancers” because their primary incentive to volunteer came from wanting to stay mentally sharp and be “useful” in their retirement. In this case, enhancer-type volunteers appeared to find solace in these motivations amidst the stress and isolation of the pandemic.

Though many of these participants had to learn how to use technology in ways new to them to keep volunteering remotely, none of them reported feeling overly stressed or uncomfortable with this adjustment. Rather, most touted the positive end results of using technology to successfully complete their volunteering tasks and to stay in contact with their colleagues at the museum. With all participants of this study being of U.S. retirement age, this finding fits in with the results of Mukherjee’s (2011) research which observed that the number of older adults who are comfortable volunteering virtually may be increasing and that the portrayal of technology as solely a “barrier-creating mechanism against older persons” (p. 262) may not be entirely accurate.

Room to breathe and rethinking engagement

Many of the volunteers whose responsibilities included work on their organization's governing board thought of the span of time when museums were closed to the public as providing a needed respite—allowing museum leadership a chance to reflect, regroup, and reexamine if, and how, they were fulfilling their museum's mission and serving their community. Apart from causing widespread museum closures and preventing in-person operations, the ripple effects of COVID-19 resulted in shaking up the leadership in many small museums as staff and volunteers were laid off, resigned, or did not return. In some of these organizations, these changes led to a subsequent refocusing of the viewpoints of the remaining staff and volunteers, who had now gained an opening to reimagine what they wanted their organization to look like. Volunteer board members grabbed onto the opportunity presented by not having to manage in-person operations and turned their efforts elsewhere—working on tasks ranging from grant writing and redoing bylaws to creating virtual programming. When asked about how their mental health had been impacted by these changes, many of these volunteers responded positively and reported feeling a renewed sense of optimism, engagement, and confidence in effecting change in their organization.

This finding, that workers who perceived that their work could make a concrete difference felt positive effects on their mental and emotional well-being, extends Graves' (2019) research of volunteer motivations which found that the "sense of worthwhileness of an activity resulted in motivation and satisfaction, especially when volunteers directly experienced the positive impact in their community and felt they were making a difference" (p. 88).

Another notable consequence of the pandemic was that some small museums learned that they had an audience who was interested in their digital content. For one museum in the study, shifting to online programming had the result of attracting higher attendance than the museum's in-person events had seen before the pandemic, and though the exact causes are unknown, some volunteers believed that as these programs had become more accessible, museum visitors who had faced attendance obstacles from age, disability, and physical distance in the past were thus able to engage more safely, therefore more readily. Furthermore, after this museum made the shift to digital events, volunteers were surprised to learn that more of their audience than previously thought did not have physical ties to the museum's immediate community, but nevertheless showed interest in engaging with the museum online. These observations align with Ennes et al.'s

(2021) study of other museums who had pivoted to online programming during COVID-19, which found that workers felt that the transition experience had been "eye-opening" (p. 474) and had allowed them to increase the accessibility of museum content and expand their audience.

Limitations

Some limitations may have come from a lack of diversity – age, race, class, gender identity, physical and mental ability, etc. – in the pool of volunteers whose data were collected; the exact nature of these limiting factors is not known, as participants were not explicitly asked to disclose demographic information by the researcher.

The self-selected nature of the participant pool also has an inherent bias, as individuals who were more willing to voice opinions and recount their experiences were more likely to respond and participate. Also, given that the interviews for this study centered around discussing personal experiences surrounding mental health and well-being, recruitment may have excluded individuals who did not feel comfortable sharing their perspectives on these somewhat sensitive topics.

Implications

For research

The purpose of this study was to examine the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the mental health and well-being of volunteers in small history museums. The significance of this research to the literature lies in gaining an understanding of the state of mind of a small, specific group of volunteers working amidst a global pandemic.

One limitation of this study was its incidental focus on older volunteers. Because of this, the issues raised by participants tended to be more specific to retirement-age adults, such as wanting to maintain mental "sharpness" or finding a renewed sense of purpose and identity after leaving the professional realm. Following this, a second major limitation of this study was the lack of BIPOC experiences shared, as only one of the participating volunteers communicated that they identified as non-white. The next iteration of this research would ideally include the perspectives of volunteers of a larger range of ages and races to include more voices and gain a fuller picture.

The narratives presented in this study also paint a very specific picture of volunteering in small, majority-volunteer-run history museums. A similar study done in museums of other sizes or types—for example, a large art museum—may yield differing results. Finally, future research in this area could perhaps explore the experiences of volunteers who made the choice to stop working at their museums at some point over the course of the pandemic instead of only those who stayed.

For practice

The results of this study could be helpful to those in the museum field—especially to those in small, majority-volunteer-led museums. Getting candid, in-depth viewpoints can help uncover what is most important to museum volunteers on multiple levels—such as how they do or don't feel appreciated or supported and more complex feelings they might have about changes and dynamics in their workplace. These findings contribute one small piece to furthering the understanding of the deeper psychological impacts of the pandemic. A major takeaway for museum professionals to consider is that the psychological experiences of these volunteers were equally impacted by more delayed consequences of COVID—like sweeping changes in staffing levels, leadership, and financial growth—as they were by the isolation of the initial lockdowns. Thus, it's also important to acknowledge that the effects of the pandemic are extremely varied as well as still ongoing, and that the larger museum field has yet to fully grasp the impacts COVID has had on their workers' mental and emotional health.

While many volunteers found motivation and positive support in their volunteering during the pandemic, others reported a rise in feeling burned out by having to both rapidly recover from a traumatic global crisis and work towards creating a "new normal" that would benefit the museum and its community. Because it was a major theme in this study that volunteers mentioned feeling overburdened with work beyond a healthy capacity, this suggests that it is imperative for museums, especially those that rely heavily on volunteers, to pay attention to how much is being asked of volunteers and consider solutions in cooperation with their workers.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Instrument

Interview Guide

Introductory Information:

The purpose of my study is to gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which volunteers in small museums and cultural organizations were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Thank you for agreeing to speak with me today.

Are you comfortable with me taking an audio recording of this interview?

Do you have any questions about this study?

General Info

How long have you been volunteering at your organization?

What volunteer position(s) have you held at your organization? What are your roles and responsibilities now?

Relationship to Volunteering

Why did you start volunteering at your organization? What motivates you to volunteer?

How has your role at your organization been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic? In your view, what have been some of the largest or most impactful changes?

In your opinion, has your perspective of your volunteering work changed over the course of the pandemic?

How important is volunteering to you? For example, in your day-to-day, in your long-term life plans and goals, etc.

Do you find purpose and meaning in your work? In what ways?

What are some accomplishments you're most proud of? Do you currently have any personal goals?

Has the importance of volunteering in your life changed since the pandemic? More so, less so, or about the same?

Mental Well-being: The next few questions will be on the topic of mental health and well-being, please let me know if you need to take a pause or break from answering at any point.

How does your volunteer work make you feel? Can you name some emotions you associate with your work?

What do you enjoy most about your work? What do you find most challenging?

Has volunteering had an impact on your personal relationships? How so?

Overall, do you believe volunteering has a positive impact on your mental health? How so?

In your opinion, have the feelings and emotions you associate with your volunteering changed over the course of the pandemic? If yes, how so?

Closing: Thank you for your time and thoughtfulness in answering my questions.