

Perspective article

## VOLUNTEERISM ACROSS INSTITUTIONALIZATION, SPACE AND TIME: THE THREE-DIMENSIONAL FRAMEWORK AND A MULTILEVEL RESEARCH AGENDA FOR COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY

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*The present paper articulates a vision of community psychology of volunteerism drawing upon existing and developing research on volunteerism. It identifies the changing nature of volunteerism and the gap in research of a unifying framework of the different forms of volunteerism (e.g., online vs. offline, continuous vs. episodic, informal vs. formal). In doing so, the paper presents both traditional forms of in-presence volunteerism and the emerging new forms of volunteerism and builds upon their dimensions (i.e., institutional, spatial, and temporal) to gather the disparate and different forms of volunteerism into a unique integrated framework. The Three-Dimensional Framework is used to move on with a multilevel research agenda for community psychology to situate the variability of the new forms of volunteerism. Notably, the paper shows how the Three-Dimensional Framework can provide a thorough basis for understanding volunteerism in community psychology and enable community psychology to operate in modern communities and contexts of volunteerism, properly addressing their peculiarities. The paper concludes with new theoretical and practical implications for community psychologists.*

**Keywords:** *volunteerism, emerging forms of volunteerism, Three-Dimensional Framework, community psychology, research agenda.*

### 1. Introduction

Volunteerism has long been a topic of interest in social and community psychology. In the last decades, scholars in the field have long sought to understand why and how people engage in voluntary activities (Lee & Brudney, 2012; Mannino et al., 2011; Snyder & Omoto, 2008; Wilson, 2012), as well as the series of benefits that volunteerism brings to communities (Mannarini et al., 2018; 2023). In Omoto and Snyder's (2002) seminal work, volunteerism appears as fundamentally relevant for community psychology as "considerations of the interplay between community context and volunteer activities are especially important to investigate, both theoretically and empirically" (p. 848). This is due to reciprocal relations between community and volunteers. On the one hand, volunteers operate based on given standards, norms, institutions and resources of the community. On the other hand, their activities often change and define, directly or not, the community itself. As other forms of civic participation, volunteerism represents an activator of

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individual and social empowerment. Ultimately, understanding and sustaining volunteerism has been part of the agenda of many communities' psychologists' works as a means for sustaining individuals, organizations and communities (Christens et al., 2011; Pozzi et al., 2021; Wandersman & Florin, 2000).

While the growing interest in volunteerism can be appreciated, the subject is also characterized by complexities and the extent approaches on volunteerism for research and practice's purposes encounter a series of difficulties. The variability of the activities that might be classified as volunteerism challenge the possibility to refer to a comprehensive description that can help to target community-level programs (Duckett, 2002; Penner, 2002; Schroeder & Graziano, 2015; Zlobina et al., 2021). In parallel, emerging forms of volunteerism (e.g., micro-volunteering, Aiken & Taylor 2019; online volunteering, formal and informal, Amichai-Hamburger, 2008; Carson, 1999) are becoming increasingly common in communities on a global level. Voluntary activity takes place in forms that can vary due to their configuration (e.g., from structured to informal activities), spatiality (e.g., from in-presence to online) and temporality (e.g., from continuous to occasional engagement) (UNV, 2021). International surveys evidenced the large amount of people engaged in less traditional forms of volunteerism, e.g., informal volunteering (UNV, 2022). What is more, complexity around the topic of volunteerism is also due to the attention received by various academics, including scholars from psychology, management studies, political theory and philosophy. This attention comes with little consensus over a common definition of volunteerism and how to distinguish theoretically or empirically its different forms (Ackermann, 2019; Macduff, 2005). There seems to remain a certain degree of contestation which raise questions on how community psychology can fit into this evolving arena, and how community psychology can find a space for intellectual and practical engagement aimed at promoting individual wellbeing as well as community-development and resilience.

Taking up these challenges, in the present paper that includes contributions from a broad spectrum of literature, we will try to wave the different current forms of volunteerism, using a Three-Dimensional Framework of volunteerism, i.e., *Institutionalization, Space & Spatiality and Time & Temporality*. We draw on this conceptualization to return to core issues of community psychology of volunteerism and set a multilevel research agenda focusing on the individual, relational-community, and cultural-social levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; MacLachlan & McVeigh, 2021).

To our knowledge, existing studies on new forms of volunteerism tend to take into account one dimension at a time when it comes to explain the complexity of voluntary activity (Aiken & Taylor, 2019; Dunn et al., 2016; Kragt & Holtrop, 2019). For example, studies on online volunteering often focus on experiences that are entirely online or hybrid, whereas the dimensions of time and temporality or institutionalization are only sometimes taken into account. In parallel with the growth in its complexity, volunteerism has garnered attention across various academic fields, including psychology and management studies, political theory and philosophy, ethics, theology, and sociology. This has contributed to a substantial increase in publications on such different forms of volunteerism which have appeared in various volunteer academic journals (e.g., *Voluntas*, *Voluntary Sector Review*) and other sources from different fields (e.g., human-computer interaction, sociology, philosophy). In this context, offering an integrated view of volunteerism implies an intellectual exercise meant to highlight the

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multifacility and complexity while valuing the particularism of the plural forms of volunteering (Eliasoph, 2009; Hustinx, 2010; Wilson, 2012). We conducted a narrative review and surveyed the state of research to theorize the position of social and community psychology research on volunteerism. The emphasis is thus on works that represent a possibility for cross-fertilization of insights for reading different forms of voluntary activity from different psychological perspectives of social and community psychology, hoping to offer a fruitful vision for future research and practice.

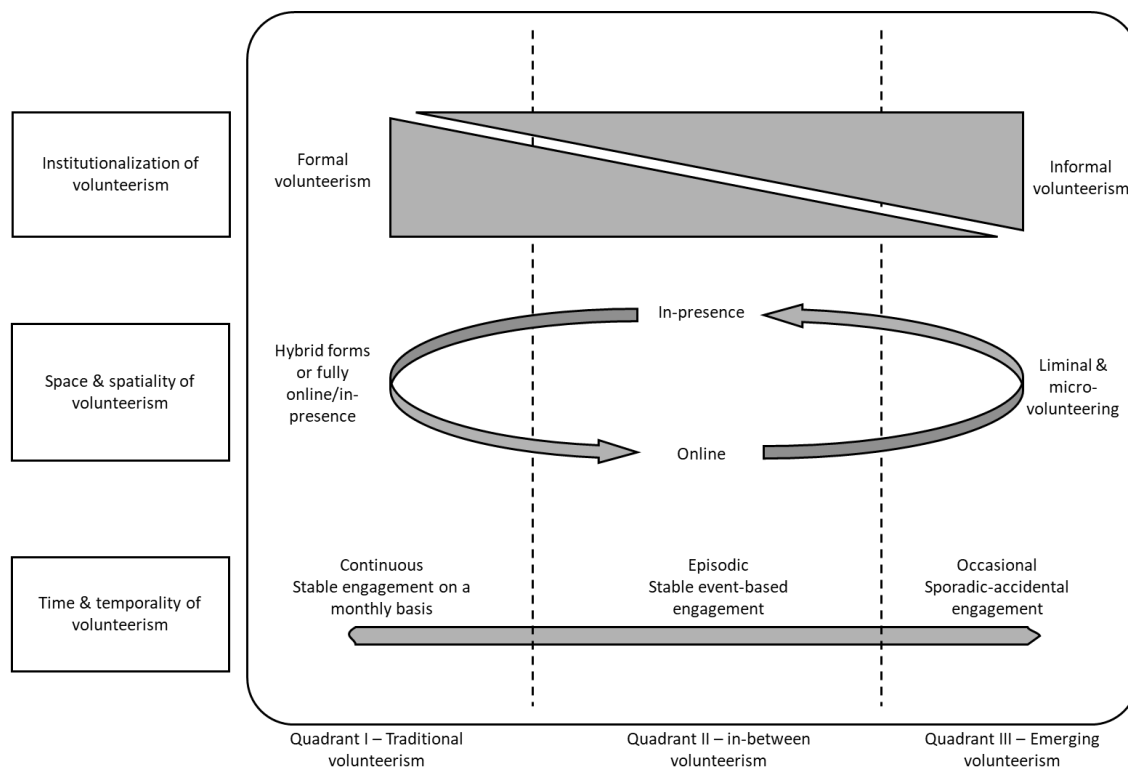
Our narrative review includes a number of contributions to the literature. We provide an integrated framework to map forms of volunteerism and particularly to offer an initial account of the emerging forms of volunteerism. We argue that forms of volunteerism can be best understood via a Three-Dimensional Framework considering the myriads of forms of volunteerism in terms of institutionalization, space and spatiality and time and temporality of voluntary activity. Our integrated framework offers a basis for surveying the existing perspectives in social and community psychology and theorizing their positions. Notably, we advance a developing research agenda for the study of volunteerism at the individual, relational-community, and cultural-social levels to nurture the ongoing interest in social and community psychology. To this end, we discuss avenues for research and practice.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. First, we encompass the dimensions characterizing volunteerism (i.e., *Institutionalization, Space & Spatiality, and Time & Temporality* of voluntary activity). We do so by referring to international efforts to define volunteerism (e.g., UNV, 2022) and existing literature on the different forms of volunteerism to offer a comprehensive view and a *stretchable* definition. Second, we draw on this integrated framework to analyse volunteerism in a multilevel perspective. In this, we sample traditional psychology topics in volunteerism research and focus on the role of psychological theory-building, research conducting, and practice in voluntary activity. The final section discusses implications for the field.

## **2. Defining forms of volunteerism: an integrative approach**

Traditionally, volunteerism is understood as an action of help/service, implying in-person relationships, directed towards people to whom one has no obligations (i.e., non-family members, non-friends), “often provided on a sustained and ongoing basis” (Snyder & Omoto, 2008, p. 2) and involving membership to an organization (Penner, 2002). However, ongoing societal changes reveal that volunteerism occurs in different and many ways (Macduff, 2005) that sometimes seem to violate the three dimensions considered as defining elements of volunteerism itself. On the surface, we can easily note the plethora of terms used by scholars to refer to different forms of volunteerism (e.g., traditional, formal, episodic, sporadic, interim, emerging volunteerism). In this, scholars struggle to find a shared agreement, which ultimately makes it difficult for community psychology to understand and situate volunteerism. On the other hand, both new terms and new practices call for a review and broadening how it can be described (Aiken & Taylor, 2019; Dunn et al., 2016) grasping the global variety of volunteerism and acknowledging all the different dimensions of institutionalization, space and time of the

voluntary activity. For example, how do we acknowledge the differences between online occasional vs in-presence episodic voluntary activities? How do we distinguish formal episodic vs informal occasional volunteers? Questions like these invite us to reflect on the definition of volunteerism to create a space where academics and practitioners can situate their research and practice.



**Figure 1. Graphical depiction of forms of volunteerism through the Three-Dimensional Framework of volunteerism across *Institutionalization*, *Space & Spatiality*, and *Time & Temporality*.**

### 2.1 Dimensions of volunteerism

The myriads of ways in which volunteerism unfolds in practice, and the sparse literature on its definition, call for an approach that recognizes its multiformity and complexity. Following UNV (2022) and other insights from academic literature (e.g., Aiken & Taylor, 2019; Macduff, 2005; Hustinx & Meijs, 2011; Steffen & Fothergill, 2009), it is perhaps worth agreeing that forms of today’s volunteering depend on primary dimensions of time and space as well as on different levels of institutionalization of the Nonprofit and Voluntary Organizations (NPVOs) under which the voluntary activity is realized. Then, given the breadth of the examples that we can bring together from the literature on the various forms of volunteering previously mentioned (e.g., online vs offline volunteering, Amichai-Hamburger, 2008; formal and informal, Carson, 1999; Lee & Brudney, 2012, continuous vs episodic volunteering, Pozzi et al., 2019), it is perhaps worth imagining these three dimensions in an integrative framework of forms of volunteering. The Three-Dimensional Framework can help with a broader view than any given polarized-unitarist

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model or typology, as it can encompass all the critical dimensions of each level of interest in volunteerism. This can be depicted visually (see Figure 1) to show how all the different forms of volunteering can fit together. Although this view can still be approximated, it appears less prescriptive on how volunteerism can be understood and more descriptive on its varied forms.

### **2.1.1 Institutionalization of Volunteerism**

In Figure 1, the two opposite triangles on the top, one over the other, represent the dimension of *Institutionalization* of volunteerism (Carson, 1999; Mukherjee, 2011; Lee & Brudney, 2012). As noted, the literature typically opts for distinguishing formal and informal volunteerism. This distinction is simple and implicit, as formal volunteerism involves activities carried out within the organizational structures of a club or association, i.e., an institutionalized NPVO. Informal volunteerism instead refers to volunteerism taking place outside of these formal structures (Trautwein et al., 2020). That is, actions are unmediated by any formal organization and are more spontaneous and self-organized. This can be the case of helping neighbours in one community spontaneously (e.g., shopping for an elderly neighbour who cannot leave the house). However, informal volunteerism refers also to those actions occurring when a one-time and short-term response to emergencies, disasters and sociopolitical crises is followed by volunteers not affiliated to a particular organization reacting ad hoc without necessarily organizational guidance or context (Smith et al., 2010a-b).

### **2.1.2 Space & Spatiality of Volunteerism**

Figure 1 also depicts the *Space & Spatiality* level, which is used to describe the degree to which volunteerism can involve activities entirely online, in-person, or hybrid (Ackermann, 2019; Ackermann & Manatschal, 2018). While in-person volunteerism involves activities that are carried out in specific spaces with or without the presence of beneficiaries, online volunteerism refers to all the activities that are performed digitally (WhatsApp, Zoom, etc.; Kulik, 2021) “using the Internet either from their home or other offsite locations” (Mukherjee, 2011, p. 253). Due to its virtual nature, online volunteerism can also occur without face-to-face activities, direct interaction, or communication, as evidenced by examples such as contributing to Wikipedia, developing nonprofit tutorials for YouTube, or administering a club’s website (Amichai-Hamburger, 2008).

The in-presence space of traditional volunteering is less flexible than online volunteerism because volunteers have to respond to the timetable of the organization of which they are members (Ackermann, 2019). However, while some volunteering activities only take place online (e.g., contributing to Wikipedia), and others only in-person, these two polarities are not necessarily in opposition: there can be also hybrid forms of voluntary action in which individuals combine both online with their in-person actions (Ackermann & Manatschal, 2018; Rotolo & Berg, 2011). Scholars reported how during the COVID-19, NPVOs organized their in-presence work online in order to ensure the performance of their activities independently of the pandemic restrictions (Aresi et al., 2022; de-Miguel-Molina et al., 2023; Xie et al., 2020). For example, this is the case of NPVOs devoted to respond to educational needs who offered possibility for distant

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training and education. While this shift was forced for some organizations, opening to the online modality remained even after the pandemic with an increase of online volunteers globally (Upvall et al., 2024).

### **2.1.3 Time & Temporality of Volunteerism**

Typically, scholars refer to volunteerism as “any activity in which time is given freely to benefit another person, group or organization” (Wilson, 2012, p. 215). Beyond the concept of gratuitousness implied in this declination of the use of time, volunteering has traditionally always referred to an ongoing commitment. In Figure 1, the level of *Time & Temporality* emphasizes the disparate forms of volunteerism whose occurrence-unfolding is relevant in terms of definition of volunteerism over time. Continuous volunteerism represents the more traditional and implicit view of volunteering, with long-term recurring activities (Smith et al., 2010a). Scholars refer to these forms of volunteerism as traditional volunteering, i.e. activities in which the timing is defined by the type and the purpose of the organization the volunteer joins. Sporadic or occasional activities are not contemplated (Macduff, 2005).

At the opposite end of the level of *Time & Temporality*, occasional volunteerism refers to all those activities that are sparse, irregular, happening sporadically, and for limited duration (Beder & Fast, 2008), such as that of community members involved in the reconstruction of spaces after disasters (Smith et al., 2010b), or other one-off voluntary activities, such as tourism activities (Holmes, 2016), helping to shovel snow (Smith et al., 2010b) or participation in green infrastructure (e.g., planting trees) (Jerome et al., 2017). That is, individuals seek to contribute on impulse to offer their assistance, without necessarily having relevant training, skills or experiences. Despite its potential improvise nature, occasional volunteers have real time “views of the issues and problems people face and can configure themselves and their responses to meet local needs” (Whittaker et al., 2015, p. 362). Such a phenomenon has been widely discussed in the literature and particularly concerning emergencies and disasters. Collective trauma fosters solidarity, civic participation, and prosocial behaviours in the community leading several volunteers to establish initiatives to respond to citizens’ needs (Cottrell, 2010; Gaboardi et al., 2024).

Lastly, features of episodic volunteerism represent a nexus between those of continuous and occasional volunteerism. As argued by Cnaan and colleagues (2021), episodic volunteerism is nestled between micro-volunteering (i.e., occasional) and ongoing volunteering (i.e., continuous). This category covers examples often described with terms such as event-based volunteerism, interim volunteerism, or bite-size volunteerism (Mackay et al., 2016; Pozzi et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2010a). In these cases, there is no commitment to repeat, the voluntary activity is more flexible since volunteers can decide if, and when to engage in such actions which are short and specific but for a defined period, for example, lasting the duration for a project or a festival (Bryen & Madden, 2006).

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### 2.1.4 Volunteerism across its dimensions

Despite these dimensions being separate (*Institutionalization, Space & Spatiality, and Time & Temporality*), Figure 1 is structured to show their interrelatedness, allowing the reader to grasp how these dimensions vary along all the different forms of volunteering. Three separated quadrants (Quadrant I – Traditional volunteerism, Quadrant II – *in-between* volunteerism and Quadrant III – Emerging volunteerism) are reported at the bottom of the figure. However, these quadrants imply that rather than imagining all the dimensions as separate spheres, they should be considered analytically separated only for illustrative purposes, since their relative differentiation is subject to change across disparate and different experiences of volunteering.

Traditional volunteerism is represented in Quadrant I and covers the intersection between a) continuous volunteering, b) hybrid forms of volunteering or fully online/in-person volunteering, and c) the major proportion of the triangle of formal volunteering. Volunteer experiences that have the characteristics described in this quadrant refers to the most classic definition of volunteerism in institutionalized NPVOs. Examples are organizations providing first aid in a specific area: their service comes daily (continuously), can be reinforced by the combination of online and offline activities, and is institutionalized. The same applies to the fully online volunteering activities of Wikipedians (i.e., active members of Wikipedia) who are constantly involved in managing the online encyclopaedia and internationally recognized. However, the traditional volunteering quadrant also shows a small proportion of informal volunteering that can be continuous, online/in-presence but not institutionalized. For example, managing a Facebook group or an online independent reading club implies continuous engagement, but the volunteer is not affiliated with or recognized as a member of a formal organisation. Lastly, traditional volunteerism also covers forms of hybrid volunteerism in which volunteers' actions span from being fully online to in-person. The two forms (online and in-presence) are not mutually exclusive, but rather they can contribute to reinforcing volunteering hybrid engagement. Accordingly, Ackermann & Manatschal (2018) showed how the spatial dimension of volunteering can also be understood using two mechanisms that work simultaneously: mobilization and reinforcement. In these terms, we refer to hybrid forms of online/in-presence volunteering, which are opposite to pure-fully online/in-presence volunteering. Notably, mobilization refers to the idea that specific forms of volunteerism (i.e., online volunteerism) can be more attractive or approachable for individuals yet engaging in these forms can make individuals also to engage in other forms of volunteerism (i.e., in-presence volunteerism). Conversely, reinforcement refers to the idea that volunteers can *reinforce* their engagement in volunteerism thanks to the possibility of performing in additional ways (e.g., online). This is because online volunteering “seems to be [...] a way to reinforce existing patterns of social participation in increasingly digitized societies.” (Ackermann & Manatschal, 2018, p. 4453). In parallel, online activities can be more attractive for individuals who can later engage also in in-person activities.

The *in-between* volunteering (Quadrant II) covers the intersection between a) episodic, b) online/in-presence, and c) formal/informal volunteering. Episodic volunteering can refer to the engagement of in-person activities (e.g., event-based volunteering for international expositions, Pozzi et al., 2019, helping visitors of tourist areas at specific times of the year, Holmes, 2016) or

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online activities (e.g., project-based online volunteering, Atkins & Thompson, 2012 or conducting online mentoring and tutoring, preparing tax returns, translating, Ihm & Shumate, 2022) for institutionalized organizations. Simultaneously, these activities can also occur in a non-institutionalized manner, which recalls informal voluntary activities where the NPVO is not recognizable (e.g., spontaneous help for strangers organized through online volunteering platforms matching helpers and people in need, Trautwein et al., 2020 or when individuals choose to use their leisure time to contribute to short-term, often one-off projects, Wilks, 2016).

Finally, Quadrant III represents all the emerging forms of volunteering that cover the intersection between a) occasional, b) liminal & micro-volunteering and c) informal/formal volunteering. These forms of volunteering are exceptional, sometimes difficult to explore by researchers, or investigated approximately as their activities *escape* the unitarist-polarized modelling of volunteering. At this level, volunteers are embedded in an immediate liminal context in which they engage in occasional actions, and whose normative dimension is impossible to recognize or define. As for the previous forms, volunteerism in the third Quadrant covers activities with no obligations toward an external direct or indirect beneficiary. For example, operating after a disaster to help the recovery process or occasionally offering legal support to people in need (Amichai-Hamburger, 2008; Cox et al., 2018; Ihm, 2017; Whittaker et al., 2015). Notably, these activities are carried out in impermanent, *in-between* times and spaces. These forms of volunteerism question and challenge traditional forms of volunteering, exposing conceptual tensions and opening the possibility for a broader understanding of volunteering. Intriguingly, Quadrant III suggests that certain forms of volunteering reflect how individuals draw on temporal and spatial resources to generate and sustain nonnormative actions. Finally, although there might be examples of occasional volunteering that falls within a form of institutionalization (e.g., occasional review of a Wikipedia entry), Quadrant III includes all those forms of volunteering that lie beyond normative attributes of volunteerism.

The proposed Three-Dimensional Framework, while certainly not exhaustive in capturing all the peculiarities of the varied forms of volunteering that we observe in the reality, is an attempt to systematize the variability of the new forms of volunteerism that have not yet been sufficiently explored. It is important to note that there are nevertheless some elements characterizing volunteering that remain transversal with respect to the quadrants. Certain requirements remain firm, for example that of gratuitousness insofar as volunteering, in all facets, is a form of unpaid work that can be situated in public and private spheres and that, regardless of a person's gender, age and level of education, is guided by ideals and values that differ from those for which individuals engage in work activities (O'Toole & Grey, 2016; Taylor, 2004). Accordingly, Snyder and Omoto (2008, p. 3) claimed that a volunteer activity involves a "certain degree of processes of choice, active decision-making" with no expectation of reward. A further element that differentiates work from volunteering is not only the fact that volunteers do not receive remuneration for their work, as not everything that is unpaid can be classified as volunteering, but the fact that voluntary work is carried out on behalf of a social cause (Penner, 2002; Snyder & Omoto, 2008; Wilson, 2012).



### 3. Community psychology of volunteerism: A multilevel research agenda

The Three-Dimensional Framework described above can also help develop a research agenda for community psychology that takes into account both the different levels of analysis (individual, relational-community and cultural-social) of the ecological approach considering the three quadrants of volunteering. As a conceptual work, this can be done by combining classic psychological themes, empirical evidence from the literature, and a heuristic approach to sample how community psychology can position in the study of volunteerism. In our research agenda, we endorse the seminal contribution by Snyder and Omoto (2008) and take inspiration from their Volunteer Process Model. This model merges psychological-behavioural features (antecedents, experiences, and consequences of voluntary activities) and refers to multiple levels of analysis (i.e., the individual, the interpersonal, the organizational, and the social system). In these terms, our work complements the Volunteer Process Model by advancing a research agenda in which we field traditional themes and theories but also introduce novel potential areas of investigation. The picture that emerges is represented through three levels of psychological aspects (individual, relational-community and cultural-social) to account for the particularistic nature of new forms of volunteering.

In what follows, we discuss existing evidence and specify new vistas for research and practice focusing on psychological-behavioural aspects at the individual, relational-community, and cultural-social levels per each identified quadrant. We give ample space concerning forms of volunteerism falling into Quadrant II and III, namely *in-between* and emerging volunteering. For example, we include both current and potential themes across the three quadrants. Potential themes are the series of topics which are part of the research agenda on traditional volunteerism, yet their considerations are still absent in the literature (see Table 1). Lastly, along with the descriptions of existing evidence and vistas for research, we summarize topics and areas of interest for community psychologists.

**Table 1. Current and potential themes across the three Quadrants.**

Levels	Quadrants		
	<i>I – traditional volunteerism</i>	<i>II – in-between volunteerism</i>	<i>III – emerging volunteerism</i>
<i>Intra-psychological processes</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sustained motivation</li> <li>• Structured activities</li> <li>• Sense of belonging (community, NPVO)</li> <li>• Humanitarian values</li> <li>• Role-identity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ad hoc motivations and sustained motivation</li> <li>• Structured activities for specific events but flexible</li> <li>• <b>Variations of sense of belonging (community, NPVOs)</b></li> <li>• Humanitarian values (e.g., transcendental) &amp; interests (the will for experience)</li> <li>• <b>Variations of identity</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Variations of motivation</li> <li>• Unstructured activities; spontaneous activities &amp; freedom of expression</li> <li>• Momentary experiences of belonging to a community</li> <li>• <b>Values depend on the action</b></li> <li>• <b>Variations of meaning and identity</b></li> </ul>

Levels	Quadrants		
	<i>I – traditional volunteerism</i>	<i>II – in-between volunteerism</i>	<i>III – emerging volunteerism</i>
<i>Relational processes- community level processes</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community and participation</li> <li>• Internal and external relationships</li> <li>• Recognized and established within the community</li> <li>• Organization of the volunteerism</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community service non-continuous</li> <li>• <b>Relationships</b></li> <li>• Recognized and established within the community</li> <li>• Organization of the volunteerism but no will for sustaining the organization</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community and participation</li> <li>• <b>Internal and external relationships</b></li> <li>• No formal recognition but presence within the community</li> <li>• <b>Absence of involvement in/belonging to NPVOs</b></li> </ul>
<i>Cultural-social level processes</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ideals and culture of volunteerism;</li> <li>• Administrative barriers;</li> <li>• Formalization and institutionalization of the volunteerism</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Ideology oriented: seen as a service and not for the NPVO</b></li> <li>• Limited administrative barriers</li> <li>• Limited formalization and institutionalization of the volunteerism</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Various and novel deals and culture of volunteerism</b></li> <li>• Non-Administrative barriers</li> <li>• Non-formalization and non-institutionalization of the volunteerism</li> </ul>

*Note. Potential themes are in bold. These refer to themes that are not present in the existing literature on in-between and emerging forms of volunteerism. However, these are part of the agenda of research on traditional forms of volunteerism. Notwithstanding the lack of evidence, potential themes represent areas of interest for future research. NPVO = Nonprofit and Voluntary Organization.*

### **3.1 Intra-psychological processes: individual level and volunteerism**

Psychologists have been intrigued by intra-psychological aspects that relate to volunteerism. Perhaps the most investigated topics by scholars are motivation (i.e., motivation to volunteer, Clary et al., 1996; Snyder & Omoto, 2008; Millette & Gagné, 2008), personality (i.e., who volunteers, Ackerman, 2019; Wymer et al., 1997) and collective engagement (i.e., individual, organizational and social identity as means for volunteerism, Grube & Piliavin, 2000; Simon et al., 2000; Tajfel, 1978; Turner & Onorato, 2014). From the perspective of the experiences and consequences of volunteering, psychologists have also been intrigued by understanding what volunteerism brings to the volunteer. This is the case of studies on satisfaction with the volunteering experience (Vecina et al., 2012), and benefits of volunteerism (e.g., volunteers wellbeing, Lawton et al., 2021; Meneghini & Colledani, 2024; relational benefits, Mannarini et al., 2018). Further intra-psychological processes considered which have not received a lot of attention are shown in Table 1.

In traditional volunteering, motivation, personality, identity, and satisfaction have long been the core of scholars' interests. The functionalist approach (Clary et al., 1996) and the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Ryan & Deci, 2000) are the most applied classifications of motivation employed in the study of institutionalized, long-term, and in-presence volunteerism. This is the same for the study of personality with the traditional taxonomy of the Big 5

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(Ackermann, 2019), the Theory of Prosocial Behaviour (TPB) for understanding the drivers of volunteerism (Brayley et al., 2015), and general model of identity (e.g., Social Identity Theory, Tajfel, 1978; Turner & Onorato, 2014) with specific declinations for the volunteer role (Grube & Piliavin, 2000). As a defined, limited, and specified form, the traditional volunteerism reflects the utility of such explanatory models. This is why we also find the application of the same models in the study of traditional voluntary activities which are online or hybrid (e.g., Amichai-Hamburger, 2008; Cox et al., 2018; de-Miguel-Molina et al., 2023; Ihm & Shumate, 2022). As reported in Table 1, traditional volunteering reflects sustained motivation (Penner, 2002) and structured activities given the long-lasting engagement in the volunteerism and NPVOs. However, the use of these fruitful models should not hide that these intra-psychological dimensions are influenced by and affect relational, and community dimensions related to volunteerism. (e.g., NPVOs or the social context).

For *in-between* volunteering, we can apply the same models for exploring the intra-psychological processes of volunteering even though this occurs in a defined and limited time frame. The motivation of one's individual engaging in an episodic volunteerism, whether in-person or online, appears to be ad hoc and situated for that specific occasion, yet this does not mean that there might be novel types of motivation. For example, the qualitative study by Holmes (2016) revealed the potential applicability of the functionalist approach to explain episodic volunteerism. Therefore, we can conclude that there is a crosscutting specificity of volunteerism to episodic and continuous forms; hence, individuals who engage in episodic volunteering share the same motivation as traditional volunteerism. As Wilks (2016) noted, event-based volunteering can be an occasion for leisure for the volunteer while also reflecting specific personal values (Pozzi et al., 2019). We find the application of the functionalist approach, as well as the SDT and other similar general taxonomies, for understanding the intra-psychological aspects involved in *in-between* volunteering (e.g., SDT, Kramer et al., 2021, TPB, Mackay et al., 2016, Big 5, Ackermann, 2019; Ackermann & Manatschal, 2018). This is because event-based volunteering appears to be similar to traditional volunteering with the sole difference that event-based volunteering occurs in specific occasions over the year and for a limited time. In turn, event-based volunteers might share the same motivations of traditional volunteers, or they can also develop similar motivations, yet it is the nature of such volunteering marking the temporality of these motivations (Ambrosini, 2016).

However, while there might be an overlapping of the drivers of volunteerism between traditional and *in-between* volunteerism, the temporality of these actions suggests a different type of subjectification of the volunteerism (Hustinx, 2010; Hustinx et al., 2010; Wilks, 2016). Although the action is still with no obligation and moved by humanitarian values, motivations, and/or personality, the identity and sense of belonging to one's NPVOs or to the larger community become *hybrid*. It appears that *in-between* volunteerism challenges the understanding of volunteers' experience and, in particular, how they feel being part of the organisation, engaging with flexible activities, and creating meaningful relationships with other volunteers and beneficiaries. Moreover, volunteers might also have controversial experiences in which they realise a momentary sense of community and a sense of meaninglessness (Toraldó et al., 2019). Despite these initial insights, research on *in-between* volunteering is still developing, with episodic volunteering becoming the new era (Cnaan et al., 2021) and inviting community

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psychologists to reflect on which intra-psychological themes and dynamics can be involved in these processes. This can be also the case of the less-explored theme of emotions elicited by voluntary activities that could both influence the experience of volunteering and relate to the consequences of volunteering (Jiménez & Fuertes, 2005)

As emerging forms of volunteerism (Quadrant III), cases of volunteerism falling in this category are less explored, calling for particular attention from scholars. As noted, this category covers all those forms of volunteering that escape any institutional boundaries, as well as the dimensions of time and spatiality of the volunteerism. While these remain an act of volunteering due to actions with no obligation for direct and indirect beneficiaries, these acts are occasional, situated, informal, and varied. As such, there may be variations of the type of motivations with one-off actions which are unstructured, spontaneous, and characterized by freedom of expression as Ferreira and colleagues (2015, p. 76) highlighted: “occasional volunteers work for specific events on a sporadic basis, for a limited duration (Beder & Fast, 2008), and are involved on a less frequent basis, fluctuating from activities carried out every couple of months to one-time events (Hustinx et al., 2008)”. This suggests that emerging forms of volunteerism may struggle to classify into taxonomies of motivation, personality, and other drivers of the volunteerism using traditional patterns. Variations of the sense of belonging can be tied up at the community level or at other levels yet there is a dearth of research on this aspect. However, this does not imply that emerging forms of voluntary activities are less valuable than others. Observation of these suggests the presence of different values connected with the significance of the volunteerism, which might be programmatic, individually and socially engaging, and reflexive (Hustinx, 2010) for special occasions of unpaid actions without obligation. It is possible that novel approaches have to be considered for understanding and contributing to it via a community psychology perspective. For example, it is possible to have new forms of motivation, such as the need for civic engagement, but without formalization, which could be a crucial intra-psychological process.

### ***3.2 Relational processes-community level and volunteerism***

For community psychology, human processes are not solely reduced to psychological ones but extend to the community level and involve relational and psychosocial functioning (cf. ecological perspective, Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In the literature on volunteerism, it is easy to grasp the intertwining of psychological processes and social and contextual elements. That is, specific intra-psychological processes (motivations, identity, personality, and emotions) relate to or derive from external elements such as the membership to a NPVO, sense of belonging to the community, and the relationships between volunteers and beneficiaries (Omoto & Snyder, 2002). This interdependence has already highlighted by works on how volunteering, within one's community, produces well-being, strengthening community ties and capacity building (Mannarini et al., 2023; Putnam, 2000). Intriguingly, it is interesting to recall the effect of groups (i.e., relational processes) on individual attitudes toward volunteerism. In this latter sense, the interest in community capacity building of voluntary work still confronts the unresolved scholarly tension on whether it is the voluntary work that creates the social capital of a community or it is the social capital of one community that motivates individuals to volunteer and support

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community's capacity building (Putnam, 2000; Rothstein & Stolle, 2008; Wollebaek & Selle, 2002).

Independently of its spatial nature (in-person, online, or hybrid), in traditional volunteerism, relational aspects are always present with a) participation in structured and organized NPVO activities, b) internal and external relationships, c) and the recognition by the community as social entities providing services and benefits (Mannarini et al., 2018, 2023). Sense of belonging to the community (Mannarini et al., 2023), contribution to the community (Fombrun, 2005), quality of public relations (Hon & Grunig, 1999), and aspects of moral identity and social self (Loacker & Muhr, 2009) are elements of interest in understanding the relational and community level processes. This is also the case for community participation (Parsons, 2007), the theory of political participation (Vissers & Stolle, 2014; Ackermann & Manatschal, 2018), the creation of social capital and community resilience (King et al., 2022) and active involvement (Hsiao & Dillahunt, 2018; Gatti & Procentese, 2022).

At the moment, to our knowledge there is insufficient evidence, yet relational and community-level processes of *in-between* volunteerism can be similar to those of the traditional volunteerism. The exception is that *in-between* forms depend on the nature on the temporality of the voluntary action. Scholars have investigated how episodic online volunteers contract their activities with organizations and how they perceive their fit with the volunteerism (Atkins & Thompson, 2012; Casselden & Dason, 2019). However, applying such organizational dimensions reduced at the individual level does not offer a clear idea of the relational and community-level processes for *in-between* volunteerism. It is worth admitting that much has to be done in this direction. For example, given the characteristics of ad hoc motivation and subjective experience, relationships with the volunteers and beneficiaries might have a positive and negative valence for an *in-between* volunteer. In addition, the fragmented and episodic nature of the volunteerism might require an NPVO to organize and optimize the work of the volunteers, which can result in bureaucratic and managerial models that volunteers negatively perceive (Toraldo et al., 2019). Conversely, there is evidence that positive experiences can motivate future engagement of individuals for *in-between* volunteerism (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2018; Holmes, 2016). With empirical investigations of *in-between* forms of volunteering being scarce (Hyde et al. 2014; Wilson, 2012), it is possible to make suggestions based on the literature on traditional volunteerism, yet more is needed to posit concrete direction. Recognizing these forms of volunteering is of particular importance as they can represent and support the community social capital and socializing citizens in the sense of community. In parallel, community and relational processes are fundamental to understanding these forms of volunteering, particularly how the community can create many more opportunities and support the experience of these ever-expanding volunteers.

The same scholarly uncertainty for *in-between* volunteering applies to emerging forms of volunteering. However, such a dearth of knowledge does not imply a lack of community and relational-level processes. For example, this is the case of the simultaneous engagement within the community without the involvement in an institutionalized NPVO. These volunteers are not interested in being part of NPVOs, nor in the social and community recognition of the NPVOs. This does not exclude that, they want to feel connected to and part of their local on-site or virtual community. It is the case of an edit of an entry on Wikipedia (Amichai-Hamburger, 2008), a one-

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off activity cleaning beaches from plastic while on vacation (Jorgensen et al., 2021) or giving support online to people in need (Trautwein et al., 2020). Depicted as such, emerging forms of volunteering might experience positive internal and external relationships given the spontaneity of the action, which does not require formal recognition.

### **3.3 Cultural-social level and volunteerism**

According to the ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) individual and interpersonal processes are framed by and express themselves in a macro context (MacLachlan & McVeigh, 2021). Snyder and Omoto (2008) claimed that “there does seem to be meaningful variation across cultures and countries in the meanings and manifestations of volunteerism and other forms of helping” (p. 20). However, it is not only the culture or the ideology of one country but also the socio-economic and political conditions that can frame the morality/ideal of volunteerism, volunteers’ motivations, experiences, and, above all, the forms of volunteers’ actions (Macduff, 2005).

Different contexts imply different ways of volunteering, practices, and regulations (Curtis et al., 1992), which implies that there are different ways of intending, practicing, and experiencing volunteerism on a global scale. In short, it is not just a question of constructing a general view of the volunteering phenomenon, an attempt that could end up flattening the differences, but rather it means considering that societies have specific needs, and volunteering can be a solution in different ways. To take into account that volunteers are motivated by these needs (Ganesh & McCallum, 2009), implies to consider volunteerism as a global phenomenon, in which and for which, however, individuals operate differently. Therefore, the different intra-psychological and relational processes described above are intertwined with more extensive processes in terms of society and cultural processes. Concepts such as motivation, identity, emotion, cooperation-community participation, and proactive behaviour can assume various features according to a) the meaning of volunteerism as a social construct in one specific area (von Essen, 2016), b) cross-cultural differences in volunteering motivation (Georgeou, 2012), and values (Grönlund, 2013), and c) how volunteerism is hindered or facilitated by public discourses and ideologies (Ganesh & McCallum, 2009). Moreover, psychological investigations on the social added value by Mannarini and colleagues (2018; 2023) suggested that psychological processes can be considered as entities acting in one society in parallel to culture and social dynamics. The social-added value of NPVOs is that they bring tangible and intangible benefits to the members of the NPVOs and the overall society and community. This is to say that the social added value corresponds to the degree to which NPVOs contribute to developing the social capital of one community but also providing additional services and resources for community resilience.

While macro-context dynamics have been extensively discussed in the literature about traditional volunteerism, additional knowledge concerning *in-between* and emerging forms of volunteering is needed, especially aiming to understand how social and cultural aspects might hinder or facilitate engagement in episodic and occasional, liminal, and informal volunteering. These forms of volunteering extend the prejudice that individuals can be classified between those who volunteer and those who do not (Walzer, 2009) as these novel forms offer the opportunity for engaging in volunteerism despite possible barriers (e.g., space Mackay et al., 2016, and

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temporal barriers, Pozzi et al., 2019). For example, social aspects such as the uncertainty of work and employment, and labour flexibilization (Rydzik & Bal, 2023) can make individuals opt for more restricted volunteerism (Bauman, 2016). Similarly, event-based volunteering can be motivated by the wish to increase the resumé with some experiences related to a certain field (Pozzi et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2010a), or because it is the only way to have a volunteer experience due to restricted time and economic resources (Keleman et al., 2017). However, the lack of longitudinal studies of these forms of volunteering leaves questions on whether *in-between* and emerging forms of volunteering can predict future engagement and civic participation. Moreover, these novel forms of volunteering indicate resistance to being supportive and/or associated with an NPVO (Treuren, 2014). Reasons can be different, such as differences in values and orientation between one individual and the NPVO but also the extra work required for full engagement within an organization with bureaucratic and performative work required by local regulations (Cnaan et al., 2021). These considerations strongly support the idea that these new forms of volunteering imply psychological processes that are affected by the social and cultural context but which in turn can affect the whole society and the culture of volunteering. Notably, looking at episodic, occasional, liminal, and informal volunteering reminds us of how volunteering is changing, and that its social and cultural meaning is dynamic and complex.

#### **4. Conclusions**

In this paper, we articulated a vision of volunteerism, considering the ever-changing and dynamic nature of volunteerism. We began by realizing the Three-Dimensional Framework of different forms of volunteering. We created three categories of volunteerism (i.e., traditional, *in-between*, and emerging volunteerism) to gather the disparate and different forms. Subsequently, we considered, from the community psychology perspective, intra-psychological and individual, community-relational, and social-cultural processes related to each category. We did so by considering the studies on the psychology of volunteerism, which led us to think about possible trajectories in scholarship and community psychology practice.

We can indicate some final points to explain our Three-Dimensional Framework. First, opportunities for community psychologists interested in volunteerism abound, and particularly in terms of collective reflections that our work brings to the field on a global scale. In principle, our work follows Omoto and Snyder (2002) call for considerations of community. To frame volunteerism and sample potential psychological topics, our review represents a step forward in the understanding of volunteerism but also for other forms of individual and collective action and societal participation. Intriguingly, our integrated framework invites scholars and practitioners to renovate the understanding of social participations taking into account the ever-expanding of new forms of volunteering. In parallel, following McMillan and Chavis (1986) seminal depiction of what community means, one first contribution stands in amplifying possibilities of the study of volunteerism and virtual communities but also the changing nature of communities in which these phenomena come to life (Talò et al., 2014). Our integrated framework offers a basis for the evolution of territorial and non-territorial communities. For

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example, the inclusion of the various forms of volunteering, e.g., emerging-informal and liminal voluntary activities, indicate that communities witness changes of forms of social participation, social supports and social networks. *In-between* and emerging forms of volunteerism bring a series of new spatial (physical and virtual), social and symbolic characters of contemporary communities with possible different forms of social participation and differences in community functioning, boundaries and needs.

Second, the changing nature of communities brought by new forms of volunteering indicates possibilities for theoretical and methodological vistas of community psychology. In our research agenda, we employed a multilevel-ecological approach to group all the various elements that might characterize a community psychology of volunteerism. However, our Three-Dimensional Framework reminds to the changing nature of volunteerism and contemporary communities. Such changes warrant community psychologists on the application of traditional theories and methods to understand novel forms of volunteerism. This is particularly important for forms of volunteering occurring online where research on online community is still at its infancy (Talò, 2016). In the absence of extensive studies, we limited to point possible trajectories on what we can observe but there might be also other avenues of research. For example, *in-between* and emerging forms of volunteering share the absence of interest and/or intention in sustaining and adhering on long term basis to NPVOs. Studying this tendency may reveal new forms of resistance to bureaucratic models of organizing of NPVOs. In turn, the exploration of these forms of resistance may broaden the understanding of this type of volunteerism but also the changing ideology of volunteerism.

Third, we proposed a multilevel perspective of new forms of volunteering, pointing out how there may be some challenges in understanding the interrelatedness of the dimensions between the various levels. The risk stands in reducing social aspects to an individual-level phenomena or vice versa. Methodologically, this risk could be avoided by resorting to the researcher who want to shed light on the phenomenon of volunteering, reflexive and collaborative action-research and mixed-method project approaches for understanding the lived experiences of volunteers. Potential insights on the changing nature of communities can be also gain by more radical, and untraditional approaches (i.e., critical perspectives) for unravelling the role of power and social factors (Kagan et al., 2020). Moreover, quantitative approaches involving epidemiological and multilevel designs can help to reach analytical distinct examinations of the various elements involved (Rappaport & Seidman, 2000).

Lastly, our integrated framework and descriptions of psychological topics in volunteerism offer advantages for the practice of social and community psychologists. First, our work offers indications on how recruitment, and placement of volunteers can be promoted. Attention to motivational pathways to engage and sustain volunteerism, as well as the lived experiences of individuals engaging in new forms of volunteerism can offer a rich basis for supporting NPVOs in their social mandates. What is more, the broad spectrum of topics at the different levels (individual, relational-community, and social) offers advantages to channel how developing relationality and building grassroots with local communities. This represents a strategic lynchpin for organizing initiatives such as community intervention (Christens, 2010). Psychologists can simply support the functioning of volunteers' actions and networks, by analysing existing patterns of actions or empowering their organizing capacities, yet they can also collaborate for



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the realization of joint projects (Martini & Sequi, 1995). Lastly, in principle, our work presents the advantage of cultivating imagination on how psychologists can best situate their work within communities. That is, our framework offers the opportunity to no longer interrogate the challenges of the new forms of volunteerism but rather to imagine ways of support for social action.

Volunteering in our time involves more questions than a single article can answer. In conclusion, we can say that our work is a simple attempt to place community psychology in this changing context. Nevertheless, we hope that our work can provide a stimulus to continue in this direction. Community psychology can continue to foster understanding of the world of volunteering, as volunteering is a resource and a vital component of communities, and community psychologists can contribute to this knowledge and to the dissemination of volunteering by creating and adapting the discipline's own practices, beyond the barriers of academic institutions, to the front lines of communities.

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