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## Volunteerism and community healing

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### ABSTRACT

It is acknowledged that volunteering may help a community heal when it faces a tragic event. The purpose of this study is to analyze the interplay between volunteerism and community healing. Our empirical study focuses on volunteering in the context of memorial playgrounds and is based on extensive secondary data collected from 63 memorial playgrounds. Our research adds renewal and resilience as components of community healing, demonstrates how volunteer orientation toward individual and collective healing changes over the course of the healing process, and emphasizes the significance of making volunteering visible for healing the community. Furthermore, by exploring children's volunteering and how it might aid in community reconciliation, our findings expand our understanding of inclusive volunteering.

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## Introduction

Every day, millions of people around the world voluntarily give their time and labor to benefit another person, group, or organization (cf. Wilson, 2000). Volunteering is embedded in communities, and it changes them both directly and indirectly (Jones, 2006; Omoto & Snyder, 2002). Furthermore, when a community faces a dramatic and tragic event, volunteering often plays an important role in helping community members cope in the traumatic situation (Brennan et al., 2005). Actually, it can help communities recover and heal (Ngwenya, 2018).

“Healing” is a contested term, often referring to a process of curing psychological or physical sickness on multiple levels (Hahn, 1995) or of making something right on a societal and/or religious level (Beeler & Jonker, 2019). Previous research has shown that community healing includes intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural changes (Mueller et al., 2021; Ngwenya, 2018; Zinner & Williams, 1999). Research on community healing has concentrated on traumatic events that hit many members of the same community, such as massacres (Ngwenya, 2018), the 9/11 attack (Boss et al., 2003), racial shootings (Grover, 2020), natural disasters (Kuriansky, 2012), and unemployment (Mueller et al., 2021). Most communities have prepared plans to address, for example, natural

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disasters, but community leaders in contemporary European or US contexts have little guidance on how to deal with psychological or emotional community trauma (Reilly, 2020). Furthermore, our knowledge of community healing is scarce regarding situations when personal traumatic events, such as suicide, violent crime, or the death of a child, shake the surrounding community (cf., Harvey et al., 2007).

It has been suggested that community healing is a complex multidimensional process in which both collective healing and healing of individuals take place, even though it is acknowledged that our knowledge of these healing processes is still limited (Mueller et al., 2021). Volunteering can play a multifaceted role in community healing, since volunteers represent community members who are both hurt and who heal as part of the community, and they also help others in the community to heal. Thus, they can be seen as both actors and objects in community healing.

Against this background, the purpose of this study is to analyze the interplay between volunteerism and community healing. In particular, we focus on volunteering in the context of memorial playgrounds. Memorial playgrounds are playgrounds built to honor the memory of a deceased child (Sandberg et al., 2023). The planning, fundraising, and building of a memorial playground typically takes years and involves both planned and ad hoc volunteering. It is acknowledged that when a surrounding community faces the death of a child, it may traumatize it widely: families, schools, neighborhoods, faith-based communities, and authorities feel injustice and helplessness when facing such an unexpected and incomprehensible loss (Delgado, 2003; Michelson et al., 2020). The death of a child can be seen as an existential threat to a community (Moodley & Costa, 2006; Prickett & Timmermans, 2022). As Bennett et al. (2005) stated, “when an adult dies, a piece of the past is lost; however, when an infant dies, a piece of the future is lost, or significantly changed forever” (p. 181). Thus, community healing seems to be an important aspect of memorial playgrounds.

This study makes three contributions to the research on community healing. First, it suggests adding renewal and resilience as components of community healing. Second, it shows how the orientation toward individual and collective healing among the volunteers changes along the healing process. Third, it notes the importance of making volunteering visible for the healing of the community. Furthermore, our study advances our understanding of inclusive volunteering by discussing children’s volunteering and how this can foster community healing.

This paper is organized as follows. The next section outlines the key literature that offers the conceptual building blocks for understanding the interplay between community healing and volunteering. The subsequent sections report on the empirical research that was conducted, and then the findings are elaborated. The final sections outline the study’s theoretical and practical implications.

## **Theoretical background**

### ***Community healing***

Community healing represents the idea of collective healing, where there is a joint process of recovery from a traumatic event that struck individuals and the community at large (see also Kleinman, 2020 for a perspective on the interwovenness of suffering and

healing as part of the human condition) and which starts from the premise that members of the community have been wounded (Thomson, 2021). According to Erikson (1976), they have faced “a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality” (p. 156). Thus, trauma impacts various levels (individual, family, community, and the larger society) (Theisen-Womersley, 2021). This view is in line with the ecological perspective of community psychology that recognizes the role of individual – community relationships in community healing, where individual healing is determined by complex interactions between persons, events, and environmental factors (Harvey, 1996).

According to Ginwright (2015), there are three important features in communities involved in collective healing: resistance, restoration, and reclamation. Resistance can be seen to include a disruption to and the rejection of prevalent practices that enabled the traumatic event, and it signals hope for change (Ginwright, 2015). It is acknowledged that sharing traumatic experiences fosters collective healing and that these experiences can unite all members of the community when there is collective resistance (Castrellón et al., 2021).

Restoration includes actions and activities that restore collective well-being, meaning, and purpose (Ginwright, 2015). Collective restoration focuses on the needs of the community and on individuals seeing themselves as members of the broader community. It requires time and space in which community members can share their affects and experiences (Castrellón et al., 2021).

Reclamation involves the ability of communities to reclaim and redefine a possible future (Ginwright, 2015). Instead of treating individual traumas, collective reclamation makes communities contemplate how hope, resistance, and actions are interlinked. Hence, instead of highlighting individual healing, it centers communities in the process of healing (Castrellón et al., 2021).

Studies on community healing largely focus on interventions undertaken by and with the affected community (e.g. DeLoach & Swaroop, 2014; Thurman et al., 2003) and highlight the need to combine the resources of individuals, groups, or organizations (e.g. Cowan et al., 2022; Kuriansky, 2012). One important resource is volunteers, and this is further discussed in the following section.

### ***Volunteering and community healing***

Volunteering can be defined as unpaid work with the intention of benefiting those who are not tied to the volunteer by legal, family, or friendship commitments (Van Willigen, 2000). It may range from short-term participation in one-time events to long-term regular involvement (Güntert et al., 2015; Penner, 2002). Volunteering takes place in socioemotionally and culturally specific volunteering economies and can also be interpreted, depending on the context, as repentance or politics (Brown & Prince, 2016; Kirsch, 2016). In whatever context it may take place, volunteering is usually supposed to create change and/or experiences of meaningfulness for the volunteers; “by participating in it, volunteers become committed to something larger than themselves” (Schnell & Hoof, 2012, p. 35).

Volunteering is embedded in a community context that both influences volunteering and can be the target of it; the norms, resources, and institutions of the community provide the circumstances of volunteering, and the community context is also often changed by volunteering. Furthermore, concerning the psychological sense of community, it has been

shown that concerns about the community, a sense of belonging, and strong social relations between community members may motivate and sustain volunteering (Gielsing et al., 2019; Omoto & Snyder, 2002).

Volunteering may play an important role in community healing. When community members experience joint traumatic events, they tend to group together and respond collectively to a collective threat (Collins, 2004). Volunteering provides an avenue for these reactive tendencies, as well as strengthening social relations that generate and sustain solidarity among community members (Hawdon & Ryan, 2011).

Past research has shown that volunteerism can also benefit volunteers in several ways, for example, by increasing their self-esteem, sense of purpose, and empowerment (Kim et al., 2020; Miller et al., 2002; Turk et al., 2022; Weinstein et al., 1995). Even though being a helper does not protect the individual from compassion fatigue or burnout (Adams et al., 2006), research on communities facing traumatic events shows that those community members who volunteered to help developed an increased identification with and affinity for members of their community (Steffen & Fothergill, 2009) and they benefited from their personal recovery (Yoder, 2008).

## Methods

To study the interplay between volunteerism and community healing in the context of memorial playgrounds, we utilized an inductive grounded theory approach, which is suitable for exploring complex and novel topics (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). We began the data collection by detecting existing memorial playgrounds using the Google search engine. By using keywords and phrases (in English, Swedish, Spanish, and Finnish, i.e. in the language mastered by the two researchers conducting the article search), such as “memorial playground,” “memorial park” & child, playground & memory & died, “memorial park” & child, and playground & memory & died, we detected 112 individual memorial playgrounds.

We gathered data on these playgrounds from the Internet and disregarded those playgrounds that did not offer sufficient public information (e.g. concerning the reasons why they were established and how the volunteers felt about them) from the analysis. Our sample included 63 memorial playgrounds after this initial screening phase, with 51 of them being in the United States, five in the United Kingdom, three in Australia, three in Canada, and one in Finland. The Supplementary Material contains the names of the playgrounds and the data related to each of them.

Following an ethical cost/risk analysis (cf. Hill, 1995), we decided to only examine publicly available material rather than carry out interviews because we did not want to bother people who were grieving the loss of a child. Public material was generally abundant because these playgrounds required publicity to acquire funding and other resources, and because the community found them to be interesting. Our dataset contained online press articles, YouTube videos, journalistic video interviews, and publicly accessible social media platforms, such as blogs, websites, and public Facebook profiles. Although we used publicly accessible research materials, we nonetheless asked individuals who had publicly accessible Facebook or personal blog content for research permission. Without their permission, we did not use any of the data in our analysis.

We sent the data, including video data that had been transcribed, to QSR NVivo. After reading the data, we generated a broad overview first. Next, we classified the textual data into emerging themes and subthemes using an inductive coding method with a qualitative content analysis (Brummett, 2018). We started by identifying the themes related to the behaviors of the volunteers, their affects and experiences related to the traumatic event, the memorial playground, and the community. We labeled those people as “volunteers” who engaged in unpaid and voluntary actions on behalf of the playgrounds and determined the community to be the group of people living in a certain area (e.g. in a village, city, or a city district).

The two researchers worked together to complete the coding, and they made changes to it when disagreements arose in order to ensure analytical robustness. Iteratively, we constructed and compared our interpretations in line with the theory. Progressively, it became clear that there were three stages in the playground establishment process: (1) the community’s need for healing and its members’ motives for volunteering, (2) the expression of volunteerism and community healing during the playground projects, and (3) the expression of volunteerism and community healing related to the finished playgrounds. Thus, the next section reports the results of the analysis, focusing on these stages. All playgrounds in the findings section were identified by numbers that were assigned to them in a random sequence in order to preserve the privacy of the bereaved community members.

## Findings

### *The community’s need for healing and motives for volunteering*

The death of a child touched community members who knew the bereaved family personally, or who had just been touched by the story of the loss of the child. The child’s death was called “a horrible tragedy for the community” (Volunteer, *Portland Tribune*, June 17, 2015, Nancy Townsley (ed.), Playground 22). The grieving spread throughout the community: “We may be the parents, but a lot of people were grieving through this whole thing. They were grieving for us and grieving at the thought of losing their own children” (Father of the deceased, *Lillie News*, November 14, 2013, Kaitlyn Roby (ed.), Playground 39).

Many volunteers reported that they felt helpless but just wanted to do something concrete to help the bereaved family. Participating in a memorial playground project (which was almost always initiated by the bereaved family) seemed to offer a way to support the family: “You have each of us, near and far, helping carry you through your grief” (Volunteer on a playground fundraising Internet page, Playground 17). Furthermore, some volunteers stated that they also hoped that the playground project would give them an opportunity to remember the deceased child and help them heal.

At this stage, the motives related to volunteers’ individual healing seemed to be emphasized, but some also mentioned community-related motives, such as making “the community better” (Volunteer, *CBS Local*, May 24, 2014, Rachel Slavik (ed.), Playground 39) and letting “the community heal” (Parks and Recreation Director, *Portland Tribune*, April 6, 2016, Nancy Townsley (ed.), Playground 22). Thus, the volunteers acknowledged that volunteering may contribute to the healing of the whole community, but it did not seem to have been the primary motive for them to volunteer.

## ***Volunteering and community healing during memorial playground planning and building***

### ***Diverse ways of volunteering***

Memorial playground projects required considerable funding (typically around \$100,000) and took several years. Volunteers played key roles in collecting funding in numerous ways, ranging from, for example, cash collections during a football game and online campaigns to competitions, concerts, and celebrity charity auctions. Often, the funds came from small income streams: "It was literally lemonade stands, kids doing bake sales, and selling bracelets . . . That's really what makes it so amazing" (Mother of the deceased on the playground's Internet page, Playground 44). The community was informed about the funding efforts and funding obtained via the Internet or, for example, by placing a fundraising thermometer in the window of the local store.

Volunteers also participated in design, governance, and communication tasks, but they were most visible in the construction and assembly work. They undertook sanding, painting, volunteer registration, food service, child care, and so forth. There was work for everyone: "Skilled volunteers pored over detailed plans and painstakingly constructed the playground equipment; less skilled but enthusiastic workers shoveled mulch" (Reporter for the local newspaper on the *Twin Cities News* channel, June 27, 2014, Debra O'Connor (ed.), Playground 39). Consequently, as the tasks were many, the volunteers were also very heterogeneous groups, ranging from friends and neighbors to baseball teams, bankers, and retired craftspeople. The whole community could participate, and inclusivity was emphasized: "Everybody has a role; everybody helps out" (Volunteer, *Times Union*, July 12, 2014, Robert Gavin (ed.), Playground 15).

It was noteworthy, how involved the children were in the voluntary activities. They participated in the design by ideating dream playgrounds and selecting the equipment for the playground. They left their footprints and fingerprints on the concrete and mosaic playground structures. In one school, the students created the playground entrance and fence decorations from recycled bottle tops, also engaging their families in saving bottle tops from household items for the project. In this way, the children in the community became part of the memorial playground.

### ***Community healing during the memorial playground planning and building phases***

For the community members, volunteering enabled sharing the grieving for and memories of the deceased child: "[He] was a great kid and very kind and never rude to anyone" (Volunteer, *Times Union*, July 12, 2014, Robert Gavin (ed.), Playground 15). One volunteer noted that the grief was not taken away through volunteering: "I wouldn't say nobody ever recovers from it; they just learn to cope with it" (Volunteer, *CBS Local*, June 27, 2015, Rachel Slavik (ed.) Playground 44). However, many also emphasized that by participating, they were not only remembering the death but celebrating the life of the deceased child and keeping his/her spirit alive.

Many volunteers said that they were honored to be able to participate and help and that they experienced strong affects: "This experience has been incredibly emotional, amazing, and therapeutic" (Pastor and volunteer, *Keep Me Current Newspaper*, September 2, 2010, Heidi MacVane (ed.), Playground 62). Another volunteer mentioned that volunteering in construction was the experience of a lifetime.

**Table 1.** Examples of quotations illustrating the positive affects evoked by volunteering.

Positive affect	Quotations
Happiness	<p>"All of us had input into the design [...] That part of it has really been fun." (Volunteer, playground's Internet page, Playground 51)</p> <p>"We were like, let's have fun with it, raise money for the park." (Volunteer, <i>LocalDVM</i>, May 3, 2013, Kirstin Garriss (ed.), Playground 23)</p> <p>"And for the small bit we can contribute, we're happy to be able to help." (Volunteer, <i>Morning Bulletin</i>, May 8, 2016, Playground 61)</p>
Contentment	<p>"It's just wonderful to see the teamwork that's happening today." (Volunteer, <i>CBS Local</i>, June 27, 2015, Rachel Slavik (ed.), Playground 44)</p> <p>"Amazing community day with an amazing group of people." (Volunteer, comment on the playground's Facebook site, Playground 16)</p> <p>"My family had a wonderful time under the tents – a great way to spend a rainy day while raising money for a wonderful cause!" (Volunteer, comment on the playground's Facebook site, Playground 16)</p>
Pride	<p>"So proud to be part of such an amazing tribute." (Volunteer, comment on the playground's Facebook site, Playground 26)</p> <p>"I am so, so proud of this town." (Volunteer, <i>CBS Local</i>, May 3, 2013, Kirstin Garriss (ed.), Playground 23)</p> <p>"So proud of our community for making this amazing tribute come to life!" (Community member, comment on the playground's Facebook site, Playground 44)</p>
Love	<p>"I really love that our community of [this town] is supporting the Playground!" (Community member, comment on the playground's Facebook site, Playground 44)</p>

Volunteering evoked diverse positive affects, such as happiness, contentment, pride, and love (Table 1). They were related to the work itself, the ability to help, and to the community. The positive affects were often bittersweet, as the following quotation shows: "We got to volunteer with hundreds of strangers from the community to create this beautiful place . . . . It was a great feeling working together as a team for such a happy project, even though our hearts were heavy with the loss of [her]" (Volunteer, playground's Internet page, Playground 5).

Many emphasized meeting and getting to know other volunteers, as one volunteer commented on after a construction day on a memorial playground's Facebook site: "What an amazing community. Met so many great people today. Proof that ordinary people can come together for a common cause and do something extraordinary" (Volunteer, comment on the playground's Facebook site, Playground 44).

Volunteers highlighted the positive aspects of their community: "What our community lacks in funds, they make up for in generosity and hard work" (Volunteer, *Twin Cities News*, June 27, 2014, Debra O'Connor (ed.), Playground 39). They also compared themselves to other communities where people talk about making places better, but how in their city, they "roll up their sleeves and work shoulder to shoulder to get things done" (Volunteer, Local Chamber of Commerce Internet page, Playground 43). Many volunteers mentioned that it was good to give back to the community and that they felt that they made the community better, stronger, and more united (Table 2). It was stated that the playground building project became the focus of community life and that it could teach the value of volunteerism when people participated and saw all kinds of people working together. As a coordinator of volunteers told the teams of students volunteering, "Hopefully, you as students have seen the power of giving back" (Coordinator of volunteers, *Frederick News-Post*, April 16, 2015, Danielle Gaines (ed.), Playground 23).

Furthermore, many volunteers mentioned the future aspect and described how they and their children looked forward to being able to use the playground: "I can't wait to

**Table 2.** Examples of quotations illustrating the contributions of volunteering for the community during the playground planning and building phases.

Contributions to the community	Quotations
Making the community better in the longer term	"Community-built projects inspire everyone who participates with a sense of ownership, so much so, that these projects become a focus of community life. [...] Families who helped build the playground will return for picnics and bring out-of-town guests to share what the community accomplished together." (Playground's Internet page, Playground 61) "It's a great testament to this community." (Volunteer, <i>CBS Local</i> , May 3, 2013, Kirstin Garriss (ed.), Playground 23)
Making the community stronger	"The best part in this process is not that we're going to have this wonderful playground, it's the people we've met in the progress of doing that. We've met neighbors, people who had no idea who [she] was . . . we've made new friends out of it. We've made a stronger community out of it." (Mother of the deceased on a YouTube video, Playground 39)
Making the community more united	"United an entire community through the fundraising efforts." (Editor of <i>Whitsunday News</i> , September 20, 2012, Playground 61) "It's exciting because it brings the whole neighborhood together." (Member of the Park Board on a YouTube video, Playground 39)

bring my kids here, tell them Daddy worked on this, Mommy worked on this" (Volunteer, *Twin Cities News*, June 27, 2014, Debra O'Connor (ed.), Playground 39). Some also mentioned that they were looking forward to the day their children would be old enough to realize that they also participated in volunteering and building the playground: "I think they'll be quite chuffed" (Volunteer and a mother of small volunteering children, *Morning Bulletin*, May 8, 2016, Playground 61).

Hence, many different ways of volunteering during the playground planning and building phases created possibilities for community healing. They also enabled the participation of all community members who were willing to volunteer. Volunteering brought along positive affects, seemed to make the community better, stronger, and more united, and sparked forward-looking statements.

### **Community healing related to the completed memorial playgrounds**

Impressive celebrations were organized for parties in the completed playgrounds. Celebrations included, for example, ribbon cuttings, speeches, concerts, celebrity events, and, above all, joyful play in the new playgrounds. Opening celebrations brought the community together and were also the culmination of the efforts by the volunteers: "This just brings tears of joy to my eyes to see so many people enjoying what love built" (Community member, comment on the playground's Facebook site, Playground 44). However, mixed affects were also present: "As I [...] watched [the children] joyfully explore the new play equipment, the happy tears flowed. I thought about the sad story behind the creation of the [playground] and I thought about how beautiful it was that strong people could turn tragedy into something amazing" (Volunteer, playground's Internet site, Playground 9).

It was also mentioned that besides the playground itself, the celebration was about the community and its accomplishments. In opening speeches, it was said that the playground "brought a community together" (Playground's Internet site, Playground 61), "will be a symbol of what a community can achieve when it pulls together" (Playground's

**Table 3.** Examples of quotations illustrating the contributions to the end result of volunteering for the community.

Contributions to the community	Quotations
Demonstrating that the community has the best people	<p>"[Our town] is a wonderful, wonderful community with an incredible heart for the community and the people in this community are the best anywhere you'll find in the world. . . . [The playground] is the perfect example of what we can do positively in our community when we put our minds to it." (PR Coordinator, <i>WMDT</i>, July 15, 2015, Michelle Mackonochie (ed.), Playground 49)</p> <p>"Can I just say, there's something very special about [our] community. It is absolutely in your DNA, in terms of what you do from your hearts for your whole community." (Mayor, <i>Bendigo Advertiser</i>, September 16, 2018, Natalie Croxon (ed.), Playground 8)</p>
Showing that the community supports its members	<p>"This playground will be in our community for years to come as a reminder that even in the face of tragedy we've come through to support an amazing mother and family." (Community member, comment on the playground's Facebook site, Playground 44)</p>
Securing the community to be safe for future children	<p>"This is what makes [our town] an incredible community to live, work, and play in when a community can come together for a love of a child to make sure children of the future always have a safe and inviting place to play." (Director of Township Parks, <i>Clarkston News</i>, May 18, 2017, Wendi Reardon (ed.), Playground 13)</p>

Internet site, Playground 61), "is a great community asset" (Mayor, *Salt Lake Tribune*, May 30, 2014, Pamela Manson (ed.), Playground 59), and "makes our community stronger" (Mayor, *New Haven Register*, March 16, 2014, Shahid Abdul-Karim (ed.), Playground 25). The playground was seen to represent various positive features of the community, such as the best people, supportiveness, and safety (see Table 3).

The playground also evoked positive comments related to the community later on, when it was an established, permanent element of the community. Volunteers who helped build the playground brought their children there to point out what they had helped construct and their out-of-town guests to share what their community had accomplished together. Volunteers also helped maintain the playground, some of them being there from the beginning. The following citation illustrates how volunteering and the memorial playground became part of the identity of a former member of the community: "When people ask about my former home town, I tell them the story of [the Playground] . . . proud to have been a very small part of this amazing project!" (Former volunteer, comment on the playground's Facebook site, Playground 49).

To conclude, completed memorial playgrounds seemed to support community healing. They evoked statements highlighting the different positive features of the communities. Furthermore, they were seen to represent community accomplishments and the spirit of the community and its members.

## Discussion

By analyzing the relationship between volunteerism and community healing in the context of memorial playgrounds, our study advances research on the diverse components of community healing and the role of volunteerism. Furthermore, the research adds to our understanding of processes of individual and community healing, and the relevance of inclusive volunteering, a rather under-recognized aspect of volunteering to date.

Research on community healing has focused on three features of community healing: resistance, restoration, and reclamation (e.g. Castellón et al., 2021; Ginwright, 2015). Our inductive analysis seems to support this view and shows that volunteering in the context of memorial playgrounds helped the communities to resist the shadow of the traumatic event on the community by evoking positive affects in individuals and by allowing them to “do something” to restore collective well-being and purpose, and to reclaim a better future for the community.

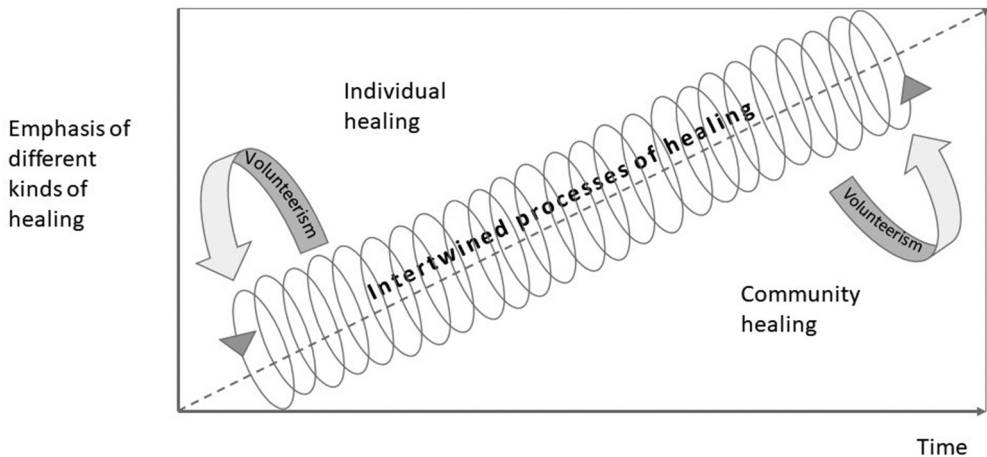
However, our findings highlight that, instead of returning to the old circumstances prior to the trauma, it was important for the community to move forward. This is in line with the idea and the narrative of a community bouncing forward (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006; Grover, 2020; Reilly, 2020) and indicates that we could add two forward-looking “R” words to the list for community healing: renewal and resilience. Renewal means striving for a given community to meet possible future traumas in a better way. It can be regarded as one step forward from reclaiming, as it leads to a concrete outcome: a renewed, better, and stronger community. Community engagement and participation play an important role in renewing affected communities (Harvey et al., 2007), and this role for a volunteer (i.e. an engaged community member showing that the community is not marked by the traumatic event but by the way in which it reacted to it) is important.

Renewal is closely related to community resilience – that is, the ability of the community to withstand and recover from trauma (Chandra et al., 2011). Volunteering to build the memorial playgrounds seemed to make the communities stronger and better prepared for future traumatic events. It also made the community members emphasize how, in the future, the community could come together and take care of its members.

Our research highlights the aspect of communal reactions toward trauma involved in seemingly individual traumatic events, such as the death of a child. Our findings reveal that at the beginning of the process, motives related to *individual healing* and attempts to heal *from* personal grief were of paramount importance in volunteering. However, during the process, it became evident that the personal grief of the volunteers remained, but in parallel, there was a collective healing process directed at healing *toward* a stronger community (see Figure 1). As the process advanced, the importance of *community healing* became more accentuated among the volunteers. The processes of individual and community healing were intertwined, and in this, volunteerism played an important role. It both enabled and promoted the healing of individuals and the community.

Delgado (2003) noted that public efforts (such as memorials and dedication ceremonies) to honor the dead are important steps in community healing. Our study extends this idea by also showing the importance of making volunteering visible in the healing of the community. Public notions and praise regarding the actions of the volunteers were important in strengthening the community and its identity as a survivor of a traumatic event.

Finally, our findings also shed light on the importance of inclusive volunteering for the community. It is widely acknowledged that communities become stronger when the efforts and assets of every member are utilized (e.g. Miller et al., 2002). Whereas past studies on inclusive volunteering largely focused on volunteers with disabilities, our research noted the role of young children as volunteers. In the playground building process, they played roles in collecting the funding, design, and construction, and it seemed very important to their parents and other community members to involve the



**Figure 1.** Volunteerism in the intertwined processes of individual and community healing.

children. However, the question remains as to whether we can talk about volunteerism when a parent engages a toddler in a playground project. While this is an under-researched and possibly under-debated question, extant research indicates that experiences in early childhood encourage voluntary behavior in adulthood (Jones, 2000), which suggests that volunteerism in early childhood at least makes a community more likely to benefit from volunteerism later on, when the same children have grown up, whether or not the first volunteering action was initiated by parents or by the children themselves. Our findings add to this by showing that children's engagement in voluntary behaviors seems to contribute substantially to community healing.

## Conclusion

By exploring the extensive data on memorial playgrounds, we analyzed the intertwining of volunteerism and community healing. Our analysis contributes to the research on community healing by adding renewal and resilience as components of community healing, by showing how the orientation toward individual and collective healing among the volunteers changes along the healing process, and by highlighting the importance of making volunteering visible for the healing of the community. Furthermore, our results advance our understanding of inclusive volunteering by discussing children's volunteering and how this can contribute to community healing.

The practical implications of the current study show that volunteering occupies an important place in community healing and thus deserves to be acknowledged and supported by community leaders. As the volunteering of children seems to have beneficial effects on the community at the time when they are volunteering, but also in the future, when people who volunteered as children were more likely to volunteer for the good of their community again (Jones, 2000), the involvement of children in volunteering seems to be an under-recognized yet highly rewarding step toward the increase of both the just-in-time and future well-being of communities.

The context of our study, memorial playgrounds, is in many ways exceptional. While the sensitivity of the subject restricted access to personal interviews, the multiplicity of secondary data enabled a broad view of the subject. Our findings call for future studies to investigate how volunteering and community healing are intertwined in other contexts. In this study, the trigger for the need for healing was one traumatic incident, but it would also be important to understand how volunteering and community healing intertwine during long-term trauma, such as, for example, during and after a war. Furthermore, the community healing process is influenced by cultural, social, and political factors (Adelson, 2001), and the volunteers' involvement in community healing may vary depending on the community. In our study, the majority of the analyzed playgrounds were located in the United States, where volunteer rates have traditionally been high (Chambré, 2020). It is thus desirable to conduct more research in communities where volunteering is less common. Furthermore, it is possible that a given community's religious and cultural background influence if and how the ideas of memorial playgrounds and volunteering are received in the respective communities, which also calls for further research.

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