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# Questing for meaningfulness through narrative identity work: The helpers, the heroes and the hurt

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**Sarah-Louise Weller** 

University of the West of England, UK

**Andrew D Brown** 

University of Bath, UK

**Caroline A Clarke** 

Open University, UK

## Abstract

What identity narratives do those engaged in dangerous volunteering fabricate and how do they help satisfy their quest for meaningful lives? Based on a three-year ethnographic study of QuakeRescue, a UK-based voluntary, search and rescue charity, we show that volunteers worked on identity narratives as helpers, heroes and hurt. The primary contribution we make is to analyse how meaningfulness (the sense of personal purpose and fulfilment) that people attribute to their lives is both developed through and a resource for individuals' narrative identity work. We show how organizationally-based actors attribute significance to their lives through authorship of desired identities that are sanctioned and supplied by societal (master) narratives embedded in and constitutive of local communities. In our case, the helper and hero identities dangerous volunteering offered members were seductive. However, their pursuit had ambiguous and sometimes, arguably, negative consequences for volunteers who had seen action overseas, and our study adds to understanding of how organizational members' quest for meaningful identities may falter and sometimes fail.

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## Corresponding author:

Sarah-Louise Weller, University of the West of England, Coldharbour Lane, Bristol BS16 1QY, UK.

Email: [sarah3.weller@uwe.ac.uk](mailto:sarah3.weller@uwe.ac.uk)

**Keywords**

desired identities, ethnography, identity narratives, identity work, meaningfulness, volunteers

**Introduction**

Why do people engage in dangerous volunteering? In this article, we show that people become search and rescue volunteers in a quest for meaningfulness (i.e. a sense that their lives are purposeful and worthwhile) (Florian et al., 2019; Frankl, 1959). Predicated on an understanding that identities need to be studied ‘in depth’ (Alvesson and Gjerde, 2020: 42), and that ‘*Narrative practice* lies at the heart of self construction’ (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000: 103 [emphasis in original]), our arguments are based on a three-year ethnographic study of QuakeRescue. We draw in particular on the literature concerned with narrative identity work (Ezzy, 1997; Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010; Watson, 2009) to analyse how volunteers engage in a project of the self (Giddens, 1991) in which they seek meaningfulness by authoring identity narratives as helpers and heroes. Those who experience overseas rescue missions, however, may author identities as hurt, suggesting that the pursuit of meaningfulness through dangerous volunteering has for some unexpected, arguably negative consequences. The narrative resources volunteers drew on were constitutive of both individual and collective identities, and in working on versions of their selves they also maintained and elaborated recursively the supply of narrative resources available to members.

This research builds on and contributes principally to the literature on identities and identity work and also that on volunteers and meaningfulness in work organizations. Our study adds to knowledge of how volunteers work strategically on desired identity narratives in efforts to forge, maintain and sometimes repair a personal sense of meaningfulness (Ezzy, 1997; Holstein and Gubrium, 2000; Thornborrow and Brown, 2009; Ybema et al., 2009). Voluntary sector organizations, especially volunteers themselves, are under-explored in management and organization research (Nickson et al., 2008). Indeed, although recently there has been interest in volunteers’ identities (Florian et al., 2019; O’Toole and Grey, 2016), yet still ‘the ways individual volunteers experience and associate volunteering with their personal identities has been little studied’ (Grönlund, 2011: 852). This research enriches the literature on volunteers in relation to their discursive communities, especially that on ‘heroic’ volunteering (Lois, 1999), ‘edgework’ (Lyng, 1990) and ‘thick volunteering’ (O’Toole and Grey, 2016). Moreover, while there is a rich literature on how those employed in organizations attempt to ‘find fulfilment in the job’ (Ezzy, 1997: 430), there is relatively little research on the meaningfulness of work in relation to individuals’ identity projects and their pursuit of ‘worthwhile’ lives. Furthermore, extant research has most often focused on employees whose work is mundane and repetitive, dirty or just uninspiring (Braverman, 1974; Heinsler et al., 1990) and less attention has been paid to volunteers (Florian et al., 2019).

Our study contributes to understanding how people quest for meaningfulness through their construction of desired identities. Most often, the identities literature accounts for people’s identity work in terms of motivations for self-esteem, uniqueness, belonging,

authenticity and coherence (Caza et al., 2018), implicating but not always focusing specifically on issues of individual purpose and significance. We argue that volunteers sought a personal sense that their lives were meaningful by authoring versions of their selves as helpers, heroes and, following troubling and sometimes traumatic overseas experiences, as hurt, and make three related contributions. First, we show that ‘meaningfulness’ was for volunteers a discursive resource that allowed them to talk about themselves as engaged in a self-project, one that for those who had been deployed on overseas missions was rarely fully satisfactory and for some problematic. Second, we add to theorizing focused on the distinctive cultural or ‘master narratives’ (Bamberg, 2004; Hammack, 2008) sometimes referred to as ‘prototypic storylines’ (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000) and ‘narrative prototypes’ (McAdams et al., 2001) relating to helping, heroism and hurt (Linde, 1993). These narrative identities are constituted within relations of power (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). Third, in working on their individual identities, volunteers also co-authored the collective narrative identities that constituted QuakeRescue, sustaining the narrative materials members, including new recruits, drew on to perpetuate the organization and dominant patterns of identity work.

Our article unfolds in four principal sections. Next, we provide an overview of relevant literature on narrative identities and identity work in relation to volunteers, meaningfulness and narratives centred on helping, heroism and hurt. We then give an account of our ethnographic research design, and the 48 semi-structured interviews, on which our analysis is based. The findings focus on volunteers’ quest for ‘purpose’ and efforts to ‘fill the void’ by constituting their selves as ‘helpers’ and ‘heroes’ and how those who had been deployed on overseas missions constructed ‘hurt’ identity narratives. Finally, we discuss the implications of our findings for our understanding of how meaningfulness is striven for – though not always sustained – through people’s construction of desired narrative identities.

## **Identities, meaningfulness and volunteers**

### *Narrative identities and identity work*

The identities and identity work literatures are substantial and diverse, featuring multiple perspectives (Brown, 2021; Caza et al., 2018). Adopting a narrative<sup>1</sup> approach, our primary interest is in people’s self-constructed identities, that is, the ‘meanings that people attach reflexively to themselves’ as they seek to answer existential questions about who they were, are and desire to become (Brown, 2015: 23). These linguistic constructions are organized by ‘the self as reflexively understood by the person’ (Giddens, 1991: 53). An identity narrative is a specific ‘emplotment’ (Ricoeur, 1991) of experience into a meaningful if always provisional pattern, which often features ‘triumphs and reversals, struggles and disappointments’ (Fraher and Gabriel, 2014: 929; cf. Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010; McAdams et al., 2001; Polkinghorne, 1988).

Identity narratives draw on and rely for their meaning on both meso-level organizational and what are sometimes referred to as ‘Big D’ discourses (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000) or ‘master narratives’ (Bamberg, 2004; Hammack, 2008) that comprise ‘collections of texts embodied in . . . practices of talking and writing as well as a wide variety

of visual representations and cultural artefacts' (Grant et al., 2004: 3; cf. Ezzy, 1998; Holstein and Gubrium, 2000; Learmonth and Griffin, 2020). They also utilize a rich variety of 'more personal sources of identity work' as spouses, parents, hobbyists and so forth (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003: 1168). These resources provide individuals and groups with a matrix of opportunities, but also impose constraints upon their identity work, narrative identities being 'improvised' or 'crafted' reflexively within 'spheres of prescribed action and expectation' (Cerulo, 1997: 388; see also Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). As Ezzy (1997: 433) states: 'The form or plot of a self-narrative is influenced by, and a reflection of, pre-existing narratives from a potentially wide range of sources including myths, movies and past conversations.' We show how volunteers in QuakeRescue drew on three distinctive sets of narrative resources associated with the 'helper', the 'hero' and the 'hurt'.

Building on Giddens' (1991: 54) argument that a person's identity is constituted by their 'capacity to keep a particular narrative going' [emphasis in original], we recognize that people fashion multiple identity narratives, which may be only somewhat consonant, and can be contradictory (Clarke et al., 2009). Narrative identities are, moreover, always 'in-process and unfinished, continuously made and remade as episodes happen' (Ezzy, 1998: 246–247). Importantly, narrative identities are negotiated and must mesh with those of other members of a person's community in order to be deemed plausible (Bruner, 1991) such that we are as 'knitted into' the constructions of others as they are into ours (Gergen and Gergen, 1988: 39). In adopting this approach, our study is embedded in an established tradition of empirical research that suggests that 'Through processes of identity work, people craft identity narratives . . . and these are both expressive and constitutive of individuals' identities' (Bardon et al., 2017: 942–943; Brown et al., 2021; Holstein and Gubrium, 2000; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Toyoki and Brown, 2014). We build also on an allied stream of research that recognizes 'volunteer work constitutes an important site for identity work' (Florian et al., 2019: 593) and the importance that long-term volunteers, especially those engaged in dangerous volunteering, attribute to their volunteer identities (Danson, 2003; O'Toole and Grey, 2016).

This study is embedded in and contributes to several strands of theorizing in the narrative identity literature. While it is firmly established that people attempt to author narrative identities that are 'ideal' (Gecas, 1982), 'desired' (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999) or 'aspirational' (Thornborrow and Brown, 2009) in which meaningfulness (a sense of existential purpose and significance) is clearly at stake, meaningfulness has not always been the explicit focus of identity work scholars attention. As Caza et al. (2018) have argued, identity work is generally accounted for in terms of people's motivations for self-enhancement, distinctiveness, individuality and belonging (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). Our research draws on interpretive sociological and socio-linguistic traditions that recognize that meaningfulness is bound-up in people's narrative identity work (Ezzy, 1997; Ricoeur, 1991) and that these efforts may often falter and sometimes fail (Knights and Clarke, 2014). Indeed, the redemptive self-narratives that people often cherish in which they account for themselves as 'delivered from suffering to occupy an enhanced status or position' (McAdams, 2006: 82) may not infrequently become contaminated with '[s]cenes in which a good or positive event turns dramatically bad' (McAdams and McLean, 2013: 234; Learmonth and Humphreys, 2011).

We demonstrate how desired identity narratives are central to participants' efforts to read meaning into their lives by providing a sense of purpose and also for impression management purposes (Goffman, 1959), that is, so that they 'can be appropriately appreciated, admired or valued by others' (Wolf, 2010: 32; see also Ekman, 2013). We argue also that volunteers' narratives of helping, heroism and hurt were constitutive not merely of individual but also collective identities (Gergen and Gergen, 1988; Humphreys and Brown, 2002). Through repeated 'adroitly crafted stories' people 'collectively represent who and what they are' (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000: 153, 118). The discursive resources and practices associated with an organization, in our case helping and heroism, both serve to attract new recruits keen to construct desired identities and also supply the narrative identity work of existing members. As they narrate their individual identities, members maintain and perpetuate the collective identity of an organization ensuring that it remains attractive to potential new recruits.<sup>2</sup>

### *Meaningfulness*

Meaningfulness has long been a major topic not just for scholars of work organizations (e.g. Ezzy, 1997; Florian et al., 2019), but across the social sciences. Frankl (1959: 115) theorized that '[m]an's main concern is not to gain pleasure or to avoid pain but rather to see a meaning in his life' and Terkel (1974: 1) that the act of '[w]orking is about the search for daily meaning'. As Rose (1989: 103) observed, in neoliberalism '[t]he worker is an individual in search of meaning, responsibility, a sense of personal achievement, a maximized "quality of life", and hence of work'. From this perspective, people are increasingly engaged in 'projects of the self' in which they are 'constituted' to assume responsibility for, create, modify and correct their selves (Giddens, 1991). In contemporary times, managers, workers and professionals are encouraged to 'find fulfilment in the job' (Ezzy, 1997), though such efforts may not always be successful not least because their work is often insecure, repetitive, under-compensated, dirty or just uninspiring (e.g. Braverman, 1974; Heinsler et al., 1990).

Rather than how employed individuals find meaning in their pursuit of financial rewards, career, power and status, our concern lies with volunteers. We contribute by analysing both how volunteers author identity narratives in pursuit of meaningfulness and also how 'meaningfulness' itself is a discursive resource (Kuhn et al., 2008: 163) that people deploy in their identity constructions, in this case as a rationale for engaging in a particular set of volunteer activities. 'Meaningfulness' is in this sense a discursive object that allows individuals to talk about themselves as engaged in a self-project that involves pursuing a particular goal, namely a purposeful life. As Ezzy (1997) argues, how people define their purpose and what constitutes fulfilment are developed in combination with the self-narratives they fabricate. These narrative identities are not 'free fictions' (Ezzy, 1997: 432) but framed, limited and enabled by the locally available repertoire of 'sanctioned stories' (Ezzy, 1997: 434) of an organization. That is, '[w]e come to be who we are (however ephemeral, multiple, and changing) by being located or locating ourselves (usually unconsciously) in social narratives rarely of our own making' (Somers, 1994: 606; see Bruner, 1991; Gergen and Gergen, 1988).

We focus on how, in their quest to read meaning into their lives, volunteers sought to author identities as helpers and heroes, and how these were often threatened by the hurt identities they constructed following their experiences volunteering in disaster zones. Each of these sets of cultural or ‘master’ narratives have received considerable scholarly attention. Helper identities are implicated in research on selfless action and pro-social activities (Dartington, 1998; Grodal et al., 2015), in particular as they relate to empathy (Redmond, 1989), charitable giving (Radley and Kennedy, 1995), organizational citizenship (Schnake, 1991) and gender (Butler, 1990). Hero identities have been employed within organization and management studies to analyse leaders (Schweiger et al., 2020) and entrepreneurs (Anderson and Warren, 2011) and in relation to phenomena such as loyalty, risk-taking and crisis-management (Cunliffe and Coupland, 2012; Franco et al., 2018; Wansink et al., 2008). Hurt identities in many forms – relating to trauma, despair, loss, vulnerability, pain, stigma and spoil – have been analysed across the social sciences (Moran and Britton, 1994; Palmer, 2007; Tal, 1995), for example (and with most relevance to our case) to show how ‘hurt’ can be used by people to represent their selves as self-sacrificing for the benefit of others (Grint, 2010; Monahan and Fisher, 2020). Importantly, these identities are not wholly distinct, with notional heroes often characterized as selfless, caring and empathetic, helpers as courageous and inspiring, and the hurt sometimes as casualties of heroic and/or altruistic actions (Campbell, 1949; Greimas, 1987; Sloan, 1996).

## Research design

### Context

Our focal interest is the identity work of volunteers – that is, people who had chosen to engage in work for the benefit of others without concern for financial gain – at QuakeRescue, a UK-based voluntary, charitable, organization. Following a merger with another (military veterans) charity in May 2014, the organization was formally headed by a Board of Trustees but effectively managed on a day-to-day basis by a management team, all of whom were volunteers, supported by a paid full-time General Manager. Founded in 1996, its mission was to deliver a professional emergency response service to those in need or at risk from disasters across the globe. Its capabilities spanned search and rescue (SAR), including urban search and rescue (USAR), flood rescue, specialist search dogs, incident command and control, relief team coordination, humanitarian needs assessment and training in disaster risk reduction.

Funded by public donations (and occasional Government grants for specific missions) in 2016 the organization relied on 110 volunteers aged between 21 and 65, of whom 75 were male. The volunteers had diverse occupational backgrounds, though there were large cadres with either emergency service or military training. Most were operational volunteers: an International Response Team (IRT), which had USAR capabilities, with 28 personnel who had completed a two-year training course and were eligible for international deployment; two Community Resilience Teams (CRT), which assisted local communities in the UK, for example at times of flood; and an eight-person Canine Search Team (CST). While the time commitment for volunteers was open-ended, at a minimum



IRT volunteers (such as the primary researcher who collected the data for this project and is the first author of this article) attended six training weekends each year and assisted with fund-raising and PR activities. Both IRT and CRT volunteers could be called upon 365 days a year to respond to a disaster. In the recent past, international deployments had taken place every two to five years. Once deployed, the potential risks to volunteers included being buried alive while searching and tunnelling in voids of partially collapsed buildings, becoming submerged and/or drowning in swift water during flood rescues, or serious injury while carrying out rope rescues at height.

Originally conceived as an in-depth case study, this project quickly evolved into a fully-fledged ethnography (Geertz, 1973). The decision to participate overtly in other people's daily lives (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 1) and to co-perform the phenomena studied (Wacquant, 2015) was made to offer an analysis sensitive to the 'thick texture of interconnections' (Fetterman, 1998: 5) in which volunteers were embedded. Ethnography has been the subject of claims it faces the 'double crisis' of representation and legitimation (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998), that there are dangers associated with 'going native' (Gold, 1958), and in particular that it privileges the voice of the ethnographer at the expense of those studied (Van Maanen, 2011). To mitigate concerns relating to over-identification, the primary researcher strove to retain a degree of critical self-reflexivity, and recorded thoughts in her diary. Any problems, challenges and alternative interpretations were discussed with her co-authors who had no direct contact with the organization. To avoid potential ethical concerns associated with covert ethnography, participants were aware throughout this study that the first author was a university-based researcher.

### *Data collection*

Unrestricted access to the organization was granted by the charity's Board of Trustees in August 2013 in return for the promise of 'findings' that would assist them in addressing QuakeRescue's 'problematically high' volunteer turnover. In May 2014, having passed an initial 'selection' weekend, the first author joined a cohort of 20 individuals (16 males and 4 females) on a two-year programme (one weekend per month) to become a member of the IRT. The training included classroom-based learning, the maintenance and practical use of specialist search and rescue equipment, USAR techniques, casualty handling and field-based rescue scenario exercises. Training, eating, sleeping and socializing with members of QuakeRescue for one weekend a month for more than two years meant that many colleagues became friends, providing ample opportunities to 'capture the nuances and meanings of each participant's life from the participant's point of view' (Janesick, 2000: 384). Ethnographic data were also collected as the researcher assisted with fund-raisers, attended Annual General Meetings and exchanged emails with other members. At convenient moments, snippets of conversations, anecdotes and observations of events and interactions of seeming importance were written as 'scratch notes' (Lofland and Lofland, 2006) and later compiled into extensive field notes. One important limitation of our data set at the time of writing was that the primary researcher, like three-quarters of the participants in this study, had not been deployed on an overseas mission.

Forty-eight semi-structured interviews with QuakeRescue members (see Table 1) were conducted. These purposeful conversations were undertaken in various locations



**Table 1.** Interview participants.

Pseudonym	Sex	Age	IRT/CRT/Canine/ Support member	Membership duration	Seen action/ deployed
Sam	M	36	IRT	> 10 years	Yes
Joshua	M	44	IRT trainee	< 1 year	No
Callum	M	35	IRT trainee	< 1 year	No
Rose	F	21	Canine	< 5 years	No
Luke	M	47	IRT	> 5 years	No
Nathan	M	37	IRT trainee	< 1 year	No
Jessica	F	32	IRT	< 5 years	No
Charlie	M	46	Support	< 5 years	No
Harry	M	30	IRT trainee	< 1 year	No
Megan	F	37	Support	< 1 year	No
Jake	M	33	IRT	< 5 years	No
Ivy	F	43	Canine	< 5 years	No
Aaron	M	50	Support	< 1 year	No
Kyle	M	35	IRT trainee	< 1 year	No
Billy	M	38	IRT Ops Director	> 10 years	Yes
Arthur	M	45	IRT trainee	< 1 year	No
Lewis	M	42	Canine	> 10 years	Yes
Owen	M	47	IRT	> 10 years	Yes
Reggie	M	55	CRT	< 1 year	No
Ryan	M	43	IRT trainee	< 1 year	No
Theo	M	45	IRT trainee	< 1 year	No
Jack	M	54	IRT Director	> 10 years	Yes
Robert	M	46	IRT	< 5 years	No
Bradley	M	41	IRT	> 10 years	Yes
Connor	M	30	IRT trainee	< 5 years	No
Logan	M	41	IRT	< 5 years	No
Lily	F	45	Canine	< 5 years	No
Daisy	F	44	Support	< 5 years	No
Max	M	35	IRT	< 5 years	No
Reece	M	40	CRT	< 1 year	No
George	M	38	CRT	< 1 year	No
Joseph	M	55	IRT trainee	< 5 years	No
Adam	M	47	IRT	< 5 years	No
Dylan	M	47	IRT	> 10 years	Yes
Amber	F	45	Support	< 5 years	No
Liam	M	35	IRT trainee	< 5 years	No
Jordan	M	32	IRT trainee	< 5 years	No
Jade	F	37	IRT	> 10 years	Yes
Poppy	F	32	CRT	< 1 year	No
Noah	M	54	CRT	< 1 year	No
Isabelle	F	30	CRT	< 1 year	No
Isaac	M	36	IRT trainee	< 5 years	No
Gavin	M	60	IRT	> 10 years	Yes
Cameron	M	49	IRT	< 10 years	Yes
Grace	F	39	Canine	> 10 years	No
Zac	M	35	IRT	> 10 years	Yes
Gabriel	M	37	IRT	> 5 years	Yes
Aidan	M	38	IRT	< 5 years	No

(participants' homes, cafes and training sites) between July 2014 and June 2015, ranged from 30 to 90 minutes in duration and were audio recorded. Interviewees, who self-selected in response to an initial email to all members, included 37 males and 11 females aged between 21 and 60 years old, and were a mix of new recruits and long servers. Full transcripts of all the interviews were produced by the first author, totalling 295,495 words. Further, a range of documents were collected, including press releases, website pages and minutes of meetings, policy documents, operational records and photographs from international deployments.

### *Data analysis*

While one major focus for our analysis were identity narratives, the ethnographic nature of this research allowed us to employ discursive data in combination with observations and intuitions gained from 'being there'. Data analysis, with the aim of generating 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) through iterative processes of evaluating and assimilating theory and empirical data (Putnam, 1983), was an emergent, multi-staged process. In the first instance, the primary researcher sought to make initial interpretations of the data more-or-less as they were collected, examining her 'own involvement in the framing of the interaction, and using [her] eyes as well as . . . ears' to 'kick-start . . . analysis' (Silverman, 2000: 128). Second, she produced a series of vignettes, that is, vivid portrayals 'of the conduct of an event of everyday life, in which the sights and sounds of what was being said and done are described in the natural sequence of their occurrence in real time' (Erickson, 1986: 149). Writing vignettes was a continuing reminder that the 'self is an integral part of the field, not easily separated from the analysis' (Coffey, 1999: 125), a means of enhancing researcher reflexivity, and also a vehicle that enabled 'a reflexive dialogue' (Humphreys, 2005: 852) between co-authors.

Third, all interview data were entered into NVIVO™ software and subject to thematic analysis. As codes were developed, modified, collapsed into each other and discarded, dozens of key themes – relating to such diverse topics as 'camaraderie', 'elitism', 'adventure', 'pro-sociality', 'meaningfulness', 'risk', 'gender', 'masculinity' and 'insecurity' – emerged. To cope with this complexity, we launched a further cycle of analysis in which surviving codes were increasingly linked together to flesh-out what we recognized to be major themes. Concomitantly, we began linking our data to extant theory. Lengthy written accounts based on these analyses were produced by the primary researcher and further refined through discussions with other members of the research team. While some of these accounts form the basis of the data sections in this article, others (for example, those relating to gender and masculinity), which make a distinct contribution, will (we hope) appear in other outlets. That is, this project, like many ethnographies, generated a substantial amount of data and only a small amount of these are presented here.

In this article, our focus is how volunteers' membership of QuakeRescue was connected to issues of personal *meaningfulness*, which was the most salient theme in our data and to which a substantial number of other codes related. Three (complex and internally differentiated) sets of narrative resources – those relating to helping, heroism and

hurt – were drawn on by members in this respect. Focusing on both overt identity talk and other kinds of talk and practices in which the self was (often tacitly or implicitly) constructed by the speaker, we present our findings in four main sub-sections. First, we show how volunteers talked about their quest for meaningful lives (for ‘purpose’ and to ‘fill a void’) and how this was (putatively) fulfilled through their volunteering. In the next two sections, we then analyse how QuakeRescue members drew on narrative resources associated with helping and heroism to construct desired identities. In the final section, we consider the hurt narratives of those who had experienced overseas missions, and which led one of our interviewees to exit the organization.

In presenting these data, we recognize that our ‘authorial personality’ (Alvesson et al., 2008: 484) is written-into our account of the research site, and that the analysis we offer is the result of multiple subjective ‘choices’ (Gergen and Gergen, 2000: 1027). We acknowledge also that our research efforts are both a form of identity work and, arguably, attempts to render our own lives as scholars meaningful (Brown et al., 2021; Knights and Clarke, 2014). Interpretive academic research is always personal and our identities as researchers implicated in our findings (Learmonth and Humphreys, 2012). This said, we believe our representations to be both plausible and generative.

## **Identities and meaningfulness: Helping, heroism and hurt**

### *The quest for meaningfulness*

Volunteers said that their volunteering was bound-up with existential concerns about the self and what they considered to be a meaningful life: ‘[volunteering is] . . . about being more than just “me” . . . it is a need, almost like a calling, you’ve got to be doing something of value because otherwise your life is meaningless’ (Reggie). Isabelle described it as ‘the best thing and most meaningful thing I’ve probably done in my life so far’. Volunteers talked in particular about their desire for purpose and the need to fill a void. They spoke of a ‘calling’, or need to ‘serve’ or to do ‘something that’s more spiritually rewarding’ (Callum):

I can be here doing something that really matters to me, because, why are we here? What’s our job? Our only purpose is to help other people, that nobody else can or will help, anywhere in the world, at any time, and if we don’t get [rescue] them, who’s going to?. (Jake)

Some participants’ volunteering was centred by a secular concern with ‘seeing that there’s something bigger and more important than your own little stuff’ (Billy), while for one person, helping others was an attempt to secure his post-mortal being by making a ‘deferred, self-interested investment’ (Maclean et al., 2015: 1627): ‘Obviously I’m a [specific religious faith] as well, so I’d feel quite, you know, that’s one for that token jar up there as well, you know what I mean, and my token jar up there is getting big’ (Luke).

Many described joining QuakeRescue as a ‘therapeutic experience’ (Callum) that provided them with both direction and the means to ‘fill the void’ (Sam):

I almost see this organization as . . . like a bit of [an organization] for lost soul[s] . . . I think QuakeRescue has kept me going . . . it's been a bit of a lifeline, really, to be honest with you . . . it kept me as a person, alive. (Connor)

I must admit from a personal point of view it's . . . it's like I'm trying to fill something – a gap in my life that I can't, that this seems to be the only way I can fill it. (Owen)

Another participant described volunteering as addressing the lack of meaning he experienced in his (well-paid and conventionally high status) day job:

My job can be described as sitting an exam every day, on a subject I know nothing about, written in a language I don't speak, for people who don't understand the answer . . . So that's why I like QuakeRescue and like the idea of volunteering. It 'feels' real, unlike the world of work, which in some respects could not be more fake. (Kyle, email 8 October 2014)

In pursuit of 'purpose' and to 'fill the void', volunteers' quest for meaning took two principal forms of identity work concerned with 'helping' and 'heroism'. While members often drew on both sets of discursive resources, as the ethnography progressed, it became clear that members who had been deployed on overseas missions were much less inclined than the inexperienced to engage in identity work drawing on heroic narrative resources, and more likely to author a third narrative in which they talked about themselves as changed, often hurt.

### *Helper identity narratives*

Prominent within QuakeRescue was an official narrative concerned with helping others, and 'giving back': '[The organization aims to] . . . engage, recruit and empower people from all walks of life, young people, long-term unemployed, ex-military and emergency services personnel but above all members of the public who want to help other people' (QuakeRescue, 2015, Internal document).

Participants in QuakeRescue drew frequently on the helper narrative in their identity work. Arthur spoke of his wish 'to be able to go and actually help people and children . . . to be able to save a few people' while Luke said: I just thought well it's actually it's one thing I can actually put my hand up and say I'm giving something back to life that I've got no, I've got no gain from it whatsoever' (Luke).

Much talk pertained to volunteers as a 'type' of person with a specific set of qualities that led them to want to engage in pro-social activities. Billy, for example, said that 'helping people . . . must just be in your make-up . . . it's part of who I am', a view articulated by significant numbers of others:

I am a volunteer in terms of my mentality and my persona, I like to help where things need doing. Yes, I think my underlying personality is one . . . of service' (Aaron).

There are people around that will always stand in front of the bullet. They're built in such a way that if someone needs help, they will always offer it, even at risk to themselves . . . I'm that type of character that is just built that way. (Jack)

Some who had been deployed in disaster zones used these experiences to bolster their helper identity narratives: 'I've gone to Pakistan and been part of seven rescues . . . and then to go to Haiti and it happens there, so, it's brilliant, it's so good to be able to save somebody's life' (Sam).

Notable in this respect was Zac, who told how being involved in the rescue of a young boy had led him to develop an ongoing personal relationship:

I've been out to see him . . . he's taller than me now, got a Master's degree . . . he's just like a good old friend . . . it's nice to see him growing up and being successful in life, actually shows you that even though, out of all the many people who died, you save one life and actually what a difference it can make and how important it is. (Zac)

These members spoke of their ongoing craving to complete more missions, not least because 'it quickly becomes personal' (Owen, Fieldnote: 5 April 2014). Others spoke of feeling compelled to continue:

. . . you have gone to disaster zones with thousands of people died, injured, families terribly bereft . . . the whole of society as we know it is destroyed; you can't help but say "if I've got something to give, I'm going to give it to you". So, once you've seen it, you have to keep doing it, it's part of it. (Jack)

The helper narrative was drawn on self-consciously by members who recognized that they were engaged in a quest for meaningfulness, and many commented explicitly on the self-enhancing nature of their volunteering. Individuals, including those who had been deployed, said that their 'charity work [was] so selfish' (Sam), and how the challenges they faced provided them with 'a bit of a buzz' (Callum), while acknowledging 'how much it's done for me' (Arthur), even to the point where 'I'm getting more out of this than I'm putting in' (Jake). They spoke of 'selfless commitment [as being] very good for the self' (Billy) and were adamant that 'It doesn't matter why you're helping . . . if you're also benefiting your own ego then that's ok' (Gabriel): . . . we went to Pakistan and did the first rescues there, that was an awesome feeling . . . the adrenalin rush. The whole thing was like "my God, this is fantastic". So, it makes you feel great about yourself' (Owen).

### *Heroic identity narratives*

QuakeRescue was characterized by narratives centred on heroism, much of which featured superheroes. Talking about initial selection, a participant said: 'I kind of thought everyone else would be superhuman' and described another individual as giving 'the

impression of being kind of indestructible' (Nathan). Rose said that 'I look at people like Luke or Billy, or something and they're just like Iron Man.' Such talk was pervasive across the organization and was drawn on by members with reference to both themselves and others:

*. . . there was one picture [of QuakeRescue personnel], I remember that, I never forget it . . . there was a line of about four of them and they were walking across the field and it looked like Top Gun and I was thinking they look . . . [like] superheroes. (Lily)*

Some were clear that they had been drawn to the organization because it provided opportunities to 'do something that is potentially quite heroic' (Connor), and that membership was a resource for working on hero identities:

*. . . if the old 'bat phone'<sup>3</sup> rings and we get deployed somewhere, we're going to be in the thick of it, and that's where I want to be, that's what I want to do . . . so whenever it came to it, you can, if someone was flooded and 'damsel in distress' you could get in that water, with the gear on, and go and save that damsel'. (Harry)*

According to Campbell's (1949) analysis of the hero 'monomyth' – the basic script evident in heroic narratives worldwide – the 'hero' is generally characterized as someone, who having first been selected and trained, engages in a quest ultimately to return in triumph. Consonant with this, people described their selves and their fellow members as special people who had undergone rigorous admittance procedures and subsequent training to prepare them for heroic adventures that had (or would in the future) prove them 'worthy'. Participants said that their peers – and by implication themselves – were 'incredible, brave, compassionate people' (Billy) able to 'overcome their fear and operate effectively' (Jake) owing to the unusual strength of character or other special qualities they possessed:

*I just thought 'cor these people' and that's how I feel about it really . . . the people, calibre's not the right word for this, it's the type of people that are doing this are, I just think, wonderful people, they're special. (Arthur)*

Members constituted themselves as an elite, what Connor described as 'the best pick', and spoke of the privilege they felt working with people they described as doing 'amazing' work: '*. . . you feel very privileged to be in their company, and that's everybody that you meet within the organization . . . It's everybody' (Daisy).*

Notions of heroic superiority were reinforced through official narratives. For example, at a screening event, potential recruits were told by a QuakeRescue Trustee 'The "Gucci" is within the people rather than the kit. It's all about you. You are the *Gucci*'<sup>4</sup> (Fieldnote: 15 February 2014). 'Specialness' and 'elitism' were perhaps most importantly cultivated through (and by continued subsequent reference to) the 'rigorous' selection procedures that regulated entry to the organization. For many, these constituted initiation rites that

were transformational and cathartic, leading them to construct themselves as having passed a series of tests to become a 'better' person:

I was trying to find myself again and it was that weekend that it happened – and it hasn't stopped happening since . . . I just think of that selection weekend, that weekend, that was it. That's what I've been looking for all my life, that one weekend. (Arthur)

Membership of QuakeRescue enabled participants to construct themselves as risk-taking hero-adventurers: It's more about action and adventure . . . I think that [volunteering] ticks more my adventure box' (Reece).

Such comments echo Bartley's account of disaster 'junkies' who go from incident to incident and 'seem to receive an incredible high from volunteering and an intense feeling of self-satisfaction' (2007: 13). Indeed, Owen who had deployed to multiple disasters, described the euphoria of volunteering as 'like a drug' (Fieldnote: 5 April 2014). This identity talk was accompanied by assertions of heroic achievement, what Ekman (2013) refers to as fantasized narratives of people's 'limitless potential'. Joshua spoke of his desire 'to go and do some great works, or whatever, or do something you feel really proud of', while Ryan said: ' . . . ain't nothing you can't do . . . failing is not on the menu today . . . so QuakeRescue, or my bit of it, is not going to not work' (Ryan).

This preoccupation with the self was, they said, a means of 'proving things to . . . other people' (Callum) and representing themselves strategically to others as individuals worthy of appreciation, admiration or value, and thus garner social esteem (Goffman, 1959; Wolf, 2010: 32):

. . . each time I tell someone [about QuakeRescue] . . . you can hear the interest in them, I think it's great; still get a buzz from telling people what we do, big time. (Amber)

. . . you don't want to make it sound like you're sort of a cross between David Hasselhoff and Superman, because I'm clearly not . . . although it all depends who I'm talking to. (Kyle)

Volunteers not infrequently drew seemingly self-consciously on narratives of heroism in the construction of desired identities. Adam described himself as living 'a bit of a Walter Mitty life at times'. Theo said that: 'Some people might do this because they like being "Action Men"'. Billy observed that: 'this type of work attracts in lots of areas, more of an alpha-male . . . often people who want to be . . . a hero in their own lifetime'. Others were adamant in their rejection of hero identities: I wouldn't want to be perceived as some kind of superman that's going out trying to save people, it's just something I'm interested in' (George).

Significant in this respect was that, as the primary researcher observed, individuals who engaged in more overt and extreme egotistical heroic identity construction were less likely to pass QuakeRescue's selection processes. That is, the organization's leaders sought actively to regulate the prominence of hero identity narratives by declining entry



to those who drew what they deemed to be too heavily and unreflexively on it. Yet, once admitted, experienced individuals made few efforts to ‘correct’ members hero-centric identity work, and on occasions appeared to encourage it.

### *Hurt identity narratives*

Notable in the talk of those who had been deployed overseas, and experienced what was popularly referred to as ‘ground truth’, was reference to various personal hurts and traumas they associated with those missions and from which they now said they strove for distance. Narratives of ‘hurt’ are key societal and more broadly cultural resources for identity construction (e.g. Rivera, 2008; Sloan, 1996). The hurt identity narratives of QuakeRescue volunteers had two principal components: accounts of people’s anxiety-inducing rescue experiences and talk about how these experiences had changed (most often damaged) them.

Billy described how he had been in a rescue situation with ‘quite a few buried people’ that was ‘quite traumatic’ involving ‘lots of pressure, lots of crowds, lots of tunnels, lots of aftershocks . . . dust, carnage, noise’ that had left him ‘emotionally battered’. Lewis talked about his memories of watching ‘kids playing with what they’ve got left’ following a disaster and of ‘giving the “disaster teddies” out and just seeing the joy on the kids face, just heart-wrenching, it really is’. Gavin talked at length about how he had gone back to visit a woman he had rescued in Turkey three years’ previously only for her to say ‘I wish you’d left me to die because I lost my family’ and how ‘that really hit home’ with him. Zac described as ‘one of the worst things’ seeing ‘a man crying all the time, holding a little girl . . . and wanting help, her leg was just hanging off’ (Zac). Sam told of being ‘under a building and you know, you’ve been in there for 16 hours or whatever, and there’s an aftershock, or dead bodies . . . ripped in half’. Almost everyone who had been deployed related one or more such stories:

. . . that particular rescue for me was quite traumatic . . . not the rescuing of her [casualty], that was lovely, but they all bugged off and we got left . . . to clear the hole, and it was very very grim, and her [dead] son and husband were still in there which I didn’t know and it was all bloody awful. I really don’t want to be reminded about that, I’ve enough memories of that I don’t particularly want to keep reliving. (Owen)

. . . there are hundreds and hundreds of families who all had a proper house and a job two days ago . . . and now they’ve got half a family left, no job, no house and they were all just living in a tent in a communal park. And that’s not easy to take, it’s not easy to process, and you just end up blocking it out. (Gabriel)

For these individuals, helping others in difficult and dangerous circumstances was, they said, associated with (apparently unexpected and often profound) identity change. Gabriel said ‘I had a big change when I came back from Nepal . . . it has really changed me’, while Zac commented that his rescue experiences had ‘sort of shaped who I am’ not merely because of what he had, but also what he had not done: One thing that still gets

me is that actually we left a building and hadn't found the body of a boy that was missing, that one still plays on me (Zac).

Billy said that while he had coped, some rescuers became unable to continue with their roles: 'Other people had had enough of certain things, couldn't go in holes (in collapsed buildings)'. Conversely, Jade, the only female with overseas rescue experience stated that she had not found being deployed the 'harrowing experience' others had, but that this itself was a cause for concern: 'it wasn't traumatic, I didn't find the experience traumatic and I was a bit worried about how unaffected I was by it'. Cameron said:

I came away from Haiti . . . with a lower tolerance to people back here . . . you come home and you're faced with people whinging about what we call nowadays 'first world problems' and they're just . . . it makes me rather annoyed . . . you just want to, you just think 'you don't know how lucky you are'. (Cameron)

Sam, who gave the most eloquent and disturbing accounts of the experiences he had endured as a member of QuakeRescue, subsequently exited the organization. He maintained that working on multiple overseas rescue missions meant that his 'emotions have been damaged' and that he was suffering from post-traumatic stress, as memories of deployments returned to haunt him:

Tell me what it's like to see a child cut in half. Well, you haven't got a clue. Or seeing a young boy cut sideways and then hearing about somebody with a child screaming miles away, or you know, deep down into a building, and it takes you two days to find them. (Sam)

. . . come back [home] and then it slowly unravels itself, and I can remember driving to [UK town] and I saw an arm hanging out of a bin and it's like 'what is that?', and it was just a piece of rubbish but it was maybe [the memory of] an arm which I'd saw hanging out of a piece of rubble. (Sam)

These troubling accounts resonate both with research on those who find meaning in self-sacrifice for the benefit of others (e.g. Monahan and Fisher, 2020) and the sensory memories reported by rescuers in mass casualty events (e.g. Marmar et al., 1996).

To summarize, in authoring their identities members of QuakeRescue drew on three principal sets of narrative resources centred on 'the hero', 'the helper' and 'the hurt'. In volunteers' talk about meaningfulness, their selves and the organization, the 'hero', 'helper' and 'hurt' narratives were sometimes not clearly distinguished; they described how heroes helped others, how helpers were engaged in selfish (though generally heroic) action, and how helping others (however heroically) could change, often damage, the self and undermine the heroic-helper identities they said they desired. In the narrative construction of their selves, individuals often drew on what they recognized to be dominant narratives within QuakeRescue generally to reject simplistic, totalizing identities as one kind of volunteer or another. That is, people's identity work was complex, most usually (though not always) nuanced and sometimes contradictory or confused (Clarke et al., 2009). Narrative identities are rarely

continuous or coherent, often tensional, and always in-process (Brown, 2015; Watson, 2009).

## Discussion and conclusions

This research contributes primarily by demonstrating how people quest for personal meaningfulness through the construction of multiple identity narratives and makes three interleaved corollary contributions. First, we argue that people may deploy articulations of their personal search for ‘meaningfulness’ as a resource for identity construction (Kuhn et al., 2008) and impression management (Goffman, 1959). Second, our elaboration of ‘helper’, ‘hero’ and ‘hurt’ identities supplements efforts across the social sciences to analyse ‘types’, ‘templates’, ‘scripts’ and ‘genres’ of individually authored identity narratives (Linde, 1993; McAdams et al., 2001). Individuals utilize locally available societally sanctioned narratives that not only enable but also shape and constrain their identity work (Ezzy, 1998; Learmonth and Griffin, 2020). Third, this study demonstrates how identity work is both a personal and social endeavour and that individual and collective identity narratives are authored and re-authored in tandem and mutually constitutive of people and organizations (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000; Humphreys and Brown, 2002). In our case, the helper and hero narratives served to attract and (generally though not always) retain members, allowing even experienced volunteers to read sufficient felicitous meaning into their lives despite the ‘hurt’ they endured as a result of the missions on which they had been deployed.

Drawing on a narrative approach, our study shows how ‘the discursive construction of meaningfulness is wrapped up in identity projects’ (Kuhn et al., 2008: 167), one aspect of which is the presentation of self (Goffman, 1959). We have illustrated that people both work on specific identity narratives in their quest for meaningfulness and employ the notion of ‘meaningfulness’ as a discursive resource to explain and to justify their narrative identity work. Theorizing meaningfulness in relation to continuously worked-on life narratives allows exploration of how people’s quest for meaning features across their life spans and is entangled in multiple plots: in this case, how volunteers past lives and sometimes their current paid work lacked meaning, how they discovered and cultivated meaningfulness through their volunteering, and the self-doubts and anxieties centred on their continuing (arguably, for many, always incomplete and sometimes failing) efforts to secure a personal sense of significance for their existence (Ezzy, 1997; Knights and Clarke, 2017; Linde, 1993). The helper, hero and hurt identity narratives constituted distinctive sets of efforts by members to read meaning into their volunteering, to ‘fill the void’ and to find ‘purpose’, concerned with assisting others, satisfying personal desires for adventure, satisfaction and esteem, and self-sacrifice.

The helper narrative was an attempt to achieve meaningfulness by constructing the self as morally good and socially worthy, whose existence had meaning because he or she worked to serve, promote and protect the well-being of others. It drew on societal (master) narratives that portray helpers as anonymous or self-effacing, who possess special qualities, and crucially are distinguished by an altruistic concern for others (Greimas, 1987; Propp, 1958). ‘Helper’ identity work aligns with previous research that has shown that pro-social impact may be a source of meaningfulness (Michaelson et al., 2014)

especially for those who have direct contact with the people whose lives are positively affected by their activities (Katz and Kahn, 1966). Our findings resonate with and extend Levy's (2005: 178) observation that a life is meaningful 'when it is oriented toward goals which transcend the limits of the individual, goals which are more valuable than the subjective concerns of any one person', and Raz's (2003: 20) assertion that being able to find meaning in one's existence 'is a precondition for life being either a success or a failure'. This study supports research on secular callings that 'people believe they must do to fulfil their unique purpose in life' (Rosso et al., 2010: 99), and shows how this stream of research may be enriched by attending to other – for example, the hurt and hero – identity narratives people author.

The hero narrative was a means for achieving meaningfulness by authoring a desired identity as someone who was 'special' in that they had singular skills and abilities, acquired through intensive training, that set them apart from most others and enabled them to engage in a socially-oriented but personal quest for fulfilment. Heroes and heroism are prominent master narratives (Carlyle, 2001 [1841]) that are 'closely tied to the origin and development of sociology', which, from the 1950s, has increasingly taken a democratic and inclusive approach (Frisk, 2019: 87). Indeed, 'hero' is an identity label both now commonly claimed and widely applied even to 'the *deeds of ordinary people*' (Oliner, 2002: 136 [emphasis in original]) and for many in and around organizations, the 'hero' is a 'seductive image' (Schweiger et al., 2020: 412). Our study contributes to other research on 'heroic' (Lois, 1999) and 'thick' volunteering that affords individuals 'a significant sense of identity' (O'Toole and Grey, 2016: 8) by demonstrating how this is accomplished through narrative processes. A specific point of interest here is that, arguably, volunteers' hero identity, narratives – which constituted them as self-confident, energetic, worthy and successful – might be regarded as 'a sort of narcissistic elitism' (Lair et al., 2008: 172). These claims are also susceptible to critiques that highlight how hero narratives serve as 'models for privileged masculine behaviour' (Boon, 2005: 303; Weller et al., 2021).

Although no one began their membership of QuakeRescue intending to author hurt identity narratives, following their deployment overseas many drew on narrative resources associated with damage to construct themselves as a particular kind of helper, that is, one who had (not always entirely willingly) self-sacrificed for the benefit of others. The idea that people may draw on notions of self-sacrifice as 'a trope for crafting the self' (Monahan and Fisher, 2020: 442; see also Grint, 2010) has usually been associated with 'hope labour' that (putatively) yields benefits for the individual (Mackenzie and McKinlay, 2020). In our case, for those who said that their helper identities had been strengthened by their experience of 'ground truth' it may have been that self-sacrifice was, in a sense, 'rewarding' or at least a price worth paying. However, for those such as Sam, our findings instead echo those of Monahan and Fisher (2020) who studied volunteers who suffered 'a sense of depression and dismay at who they have become' (p. 453). Sam's comments and subsequent exit, we suggest, may provide insight into QuakeRescue's 'high' turnover of experienced volunteers, investigation of which was the initial focus of this research. While some can live sufficiently comfortably drawing on a narrative of hurt, for others, over time, it contributes to 'narrative despair' and a self that is 'unmade or undone, a faltered narrative of vulnerability' (Palmer, 2007: 383; see Ekman, 2013).

Our findings illustrate the dynamic nature of meaningfulness and how traumatic experiences can change people's self-understandings such that 'it is at risk or even lost' (Florian et al., 2019: 591).

While for analytical purposes we have considered the helper, hero and hurt identity narratives separately, they are both conceptually and empirically (i.e. in people's accounts of their selves), often overlapping and interleaved. Narrative identity construction 'is part and parcel of the ubiquitous and mundane work we do to constitute and navigate our lives' (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000: 167), but the results are generally somewhat messy. For example, the hero identity narratives volunteers authored were often fabricated with reference to altruistic goals (e.g. saving lives), which meant that hero and helper identities were generally co-constructed in people's talk. Sometimes these narrativizations also implied the potential for self-sacrifice (e.g. Jack's assertion that he was the kind of person who 'will always stand in front of the bullet'), which connected metonymically to the hurt identity narratives of those who had been deployed on rescue missions. In our case, hurt identity narratives might be regarded as constructing a distinct form of enlightened hero who has returned from their travails having 'slain the dragon of self-delusion' and achieved a 'new consciousness . . . with awareness of the uncritical person that he [sic] used to be' (Kail, 1988: 185). Heroic identities that included 'rescue fantasies' may be understood not as admirable and pro-social but as a form of dangerous psychopathology that encouraged risky behaviour and were symptomatic of a hurt identity (Pallone and Hennessy, 1998). In identity matters few things are definitive, and a range of alternative interpretations of our volunteers' identity narratives are possible.

In their processes of helper, hero and hurt narrative identity work individuals utilized locally available societally embedded narratives that provided 'scripts' or 'plots' on which they drew to author versions of their selves (cf. Ezzy, 1998; Learmonth and Griffin, 2020; Ricoeur, 1991; Somers and Gibson, 1993). One reason this is noteworthy is because it underscores that identity work is not an expression of unfettered individual agency but constituted by identity choices made within relations of power (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). As recent critiques of the identities and identity work literature point out (Brown, 2015; Knights and Clarke, 2017), relatively few studies have widened their aperture sufficiently to analyse how those in organizations draw on extra-organizational resources in processes of self-construction. There is some work that analyses selves in relation to societal narratives such as neoliberalism, enterprising selves, and corporate social responsibility (du Gay, 1996; Fleming, 2017), but this has tended to focus mainly on the narratives per se rather than the micro-processes of identity work by which selves are formed. Our study demonstrates how a group of people mobilized specific sets of culturally rooted narrative resources to fashion identities they found personally and collectively meaningful. The detailed analysis we have made relating to helpers, heroes and hurt is, we suggest, a generative exemplar that scholars might look to replicate and extend with regard to other social narratives concerning, for instance, the 'sage', 'explorer', 'creator' and 'magician' (Jung, 1916).

This study of individual-level identity work is also important because it shows how micro identity work practices have macro consequences, in this instance patterning the organization's identity and the recruitment and socialization of new recruits. In formulating their identities, participants in QuakeRescue drew on culturally legitimated narrative

resources that were fed locally by stories of successful missions and supported by strong ties between likeminded individuals in what was a supportive and intimate storytelling system (Ezzy, 1997; Gergen and Gergen, 1988). That is, the widespread collective use of narratives relating to helping, heroism and to a lesser extent hurt, constituted centripetal processes that bound people together into a tightly knit storytelling community. Indeed, continued exposure to members' talk about their selves in relation to these key narratives ensured that the identities they referenced were always salient for both new recruits and old hands and over time they had come increasingly to discursively define QuakeRescue as an organization. Individual and collective narrative identities were thus intertwined, individual members and their organizations being dialogically constituted and sustained through interleaved processes of narrative identity construction that promoted social stability (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000; Humphreys and Brown, 2002).

Like all exploratory, inductive studies, our research has been constrained by our data set and theoretical framing and different analyses of these data may also be theoretically generative. We recognize that an 'identity work' approach is just one of many that may be adopted to study and to theorize aspects of meaningfulness at work, and that it has been the subject of considerable debate and critique (Brown, 2015; Knights and Clarke, 2017). Further, ours is largely a study of narrative identities. Others have argued that identity studies need to be concerned also with performative practices because identities are formed through 'iterative process[es] of self-narration and dramaturgical performance' that 'are almost seamlessly interwoven' (Down and Reveley, 2009: 379). Moreover, we have analysed volunteers' identity work mostly independent of the relations of disciplinary power and control in which they were enmeshed, and which meant that, at times, they were heavily surveilled and 'corrected'. Additional projects might usefully unpick these organizational practices of power to discover how participants were persuaded to regard them (and the identity work they licensed) not as forms of subjugation but as mechanisms for securing meaning and prestige. Further research on workers and professionals in other settings, both in the public and private sectors, would also reveal the extent to which unique features of our voluntary organization have shaped our findings and the scope that conventional employees have to author different types of narrative identities drawing on other master narratives.

In this article, we have shown how people train and participate in dangerous volunteering in efforts to read meaning into their lives by drawing on locally available societally sanctioned narratives in a project of the self (Giddens, 1991). An identity work perspective is valuable because it can focus attention on how desired narrative identities are authored by individuals to 'make livable the chaos of experience' (Kail, 1988: 185). QuakeRescue constituted a self-sustaining storytelling system that attracted new recruits by offering people the opportunity to work on individual and collective identities as helpers and heroes. Experienced members, however, often constructed narratives of hurt that sometimes made helper and hero identities unavailable to them and occasionally led them to exit the organization. The redemptive self that volunteers so frequently crave as their 'self-defining personal myth' (McAdams, 2006: 81–82) or fantasy (Ekman, 2013) may all too often become contaminated (McAdams and McLean, 2013). Volunteer identities, like



other desired identities, were alluring to those who sought them, but simultaneously replete with the potential for both danger and disappointment.

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### ORCID iDs

Sarah-Louise Weller  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8038-4950>

Andrew D Brown  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9233-087X>

Caroline A Clarke  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5737-2946>

### Notes

- 1 In keeping with scholars both in organization studies (e.g. Brown et al., 2008; Bryant and Cox, 2004), and across the arts, humanities and social sciences (Cronon, 1992; Lindemann and Nelson, 2001) who do not have a specific technical interest in the terms ‘narrative’ and ‘story’, we use these words interchangeably.
- 2 Hurt narratives, which might have repelled potential new recruits, were in our case less evident to outsiders.
- 3 The name derives from Commissioner Gordon’s secure line to the ‘Batphone’ in the *Batman* television show of 1966–1968.
- 4 Gucci is a luxury brand of fashion and leather goods. In the military it is slang for new or replaced kit.

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Sarah-Louise Weller is Associate Head of Department (Postgraduate HRM programmes) in the Faculty of Business and Law at the University of the West of England. She was awarded a PhD from the University of Bath in 2017. Her research interests focus on identity, narratives, gender, volunteers and ethnographic methods. Her most recent work exploring performative enactments of gender at work has been published in *Gender, Work & Organization*. [Email: sarah3.weller@uwe.ac.uk]

Andrew D Brown is Professor of Organization Studies at the University of Bath. He has previously held faculty positions at the universities of Manchester, Nottingham, Cambridge and Warwick. His primary research interests centre on issues of identity, especially as they relate to sensemaking, narrative and power. His work has been published in journals including *Academy of Management Review*, *Organization Studies*, *Journal of Management Studies* and *Human Relations*. He currently serves on the editorial boards of *Organization Studies*, *Journal of Management Studies* and *Organization*, and he is a Co-Editor for *Human Relations*. [Email: adb20@bath.ac.uk]

Caroline A Clarke is Senior Lecturer in Organization Studies at the Open University Business School. She has a variety of research interests located within Organization Studies, with a particular emphasis on identity, anxiety, insecurity, gender and emotions. Caroline’s research includes a focus on academics in business schools, first-opinion veterinary surgeons, and more recently, writing from the perspective of post humanism combined with critical animal studies. Her most recent work is around zoonotic disease, pandemics, and the organization of anthropocentrism. [Email: caroline.clarke@open.ac.uk]