

## Role-Identity Salience, Purpose and Meaning in Life, and Well-Being among Volunteers Peggy Thoits (2012)

**OVERVIEW:** This article addresses whether role identities shapes one’s sense of purpose and meaning, mediating the connection between role-identity and well-being. Thoits explores this by focusing on the role-identity of “volunteer”. The results suggest that the more time spent in volunteer activities, the more important the ‘volunteer’ identity becomes to those volunteers. Moreover, those volunteers with an enhanced sense of ‘volunteer’ identity, believe that identity matters more to other people.

**KEYWORDS:** Role-Identity, Identity Salience, Purpose and Meaning in Life, Well-Being, Volunteer Work

### **CONTEXT:**

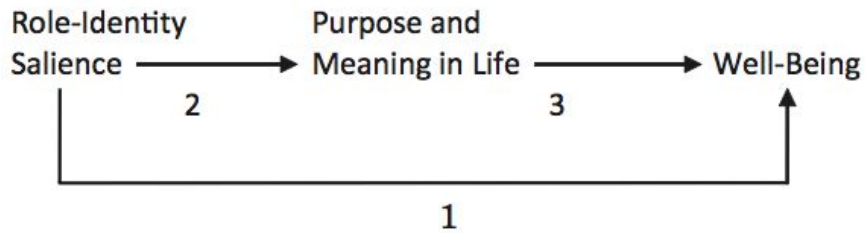
There have been studies that have consistently linked individuals with multiple roles to better physical and mental health. Thoits attempts to link role-identity *salience* (subjective value given to an identity-role) to a sense of purpose and meaning in life and tests whether this purpose serves as a mediator between identity salience and better health.

- According to **symbolic interactionist theory** role-identities answer the question, “*Who am I?*”
- **Roles** are positions and functions in society to which behavioural expectations are attached (i.e. spouse, parent, volunteer).
- **Role-identities** are how we define ourselves in terms of the social roles we enact.
- Individuals accept other’s classifications and evaluations of themselves as self-descriptive. These classifications are often associated with behavioural norms which can include expectations of responsible health behaviours, which in turn promotes positive physical health and leads to less anxiety.
- Positive role performance can enhance self-esteem, a sense of control over one’s life and life satisfaction, which are key to subjective well-being.

Thus, longitudinal research has supported the **role accumulation hypothesis** which argues that the more role-identities one holds, the more purpose and behavioural guidance they should attain, positively impacting their psychological and physical health.

Thoits further suggests that the more salient (important) role-identities should provide more purpose and meaning in one’s life and thus more beneficial effects on wellbeing.

**GUIDING THEORETICAL MODEL:**



- **Path 1:** There is mixed evidence linking role-identity salience with mental and physical well-being. The results are influenced by how salience is measured. Personal ratings of role identity salience are more likely to impact wellbeing than identity ranking which may be partial to cultural norms.
- **Path 2:** No studies have examined the link between role-identity salience and purpose in one’s life. One study has however found that individuals with over eight social roles experienced a more potent sense of purpose and meaning in their lives.
- **Path 3:** There is ample evidence that supports a connection between purpose and meaning in an individual’s life and better mental health.

Thoits focuses on the role-identity of **volunteer** because:

- There is strong support for positive health outcomes for voluntary rather than obligatory roles.
- Voluntary roles are adopted by choice and they are easy to withdraw from if costs exceed rewards and thus more likely be low in stress
- Studies have shown that performing more hours of volunteer work yields better well-being overtime.



*(via unsplash.com)*

## **METHODS AND MEASURES:**

The study distributed scaling questionnaires to 70 chapters of the Mended Hearts, an American non-profit organisation and received responses from 458 volunteers (with a response rate of 52%).

- **Dependent Variables:**
  - Wellbeing is measured by six variables: happiness, life satisfaction, self-esteem, a sense of mastery, psychological distress and physical health.
- **Independent Variables:**
  - The objective number of hours volunteers spend visiting.
  - The subjective time spent visiting (to indicate personal commitment to the role).
- **Intervening Variables:**
  - Purpose and meaning in life are assessed using two scaling methods - one measuring personal purpose and the other one's perception of significance to others.
- **Control Variables:**
  - Individual characteristics of the volunteers are controlled in the analyses, such as sex, age, educational level, ethnicity, financial difficulties as well as the number of social roles an individual holds.

## **RESULTS:**

The data tested supports all four hypotheses set by Thoits:

**Hypothesis 1: “The greater the salience of the volunteer role-identity, the better the individuals mental and physical health.”**

The results showed that the greater the visitor's subjective perceived time spent in the role, the greater reported mental health and physical well-being.

**Hypothesis 2: “The greater the salience of the volunteer role-identity, the more purpose and meaning in life the individual perceives.”**

The more importance respondents give to the volunteer identity, the more they believe they matter to other people and are living purposeful and meaningful lives.

**Hypothesis 3: “The more purpose and meaning in life perceived, the better the person's mental and physical health.”**

Belief that one matters to others and has direction in life are positively related to all six variables of well-being tested.

**Hypothesis 4: “A sense of purpose and meaning will mediate the relationship between visitor identity salience and well-being.”**

Purpose in life helps to explain how the salience of the volunteer role-identity is associated with better well-being.

### LIMITATIONS:

As this data is cross-sectional and only hints at the underlying processes it's important to note some of the limitations of the study:

- I. The correlations could be reversed, time-spent in a role could be the outcome of good health and general purpose in life.
- II. The characteristics of the respondents were overwhelmingly limited as most were older, white and middle-class males.
- III. There is probable selection bias in the sample, as those who were most likely to view their role as salient or purposeful were the ones who completed the questionnaire.
- IV. Further studies need to be done on other roles, including combined and obligatory identities.

### IN CLOSING:

**“The more actual hours spent visiting, the more one perceives that one’s time is spent in the visitor role. The more perceived time spent in the role, the more personal importance attached to the visitor role-identity. The more important the visitor role-identity, the more respondents believe they matter to other people. Strong belief that they matter to others in turn reinforces respondents’ sense that their lives are meaningful and purposeful. And the stronger the belief that they have purpose and meaning in life, the better respondents’ physical and psychological well-being.” (Thoits, p.377)**

The key mechanisms that explain the connection between time spent in role and positive health outcomes appears to be the salience of the role-identity and the belief one’s life is purposeful and meaningful.

### REFERENCE:

Thoits, P.A. (2012). Role-Identity Salience, Purpose and Meaning in Life, and Well-Being among Volunteers. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 75(4), pp.360–384.

**LINK:** <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0190272512459662>

### GLOSSARY:

**Symbolic interactionist theory:** Viewing society as made of symbols that people use to create meaning and communicate with each other. People act according to how they interpret situations.

Something else you would like included in this glossary? Let us know [here](#).