Emergency volunteer retention: can a culture of inclusiveness help?

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Abstract

Given increasingly diversified communities and the importance of attracting and retaining all volunteers irrespective of their demographic background, it is important to increase the representativeness of volunteers by promoting diversity. We surveyed emergency services volunteers from Western Australia to examine (a) whether and why culture of inclusiveness plays an important role for volunteer retention and (b) whether and why female volunteers have different perceptions of inclusivity culture in their units. Our findings demonstrated that climate for inclusion played a vital role for volunteer retention because in such climates they felt connected and related to others, and felt freedom to express themselves professionally. Despite the importance of climate for inclusion, male and female volunteers viewed this climate differently and experienced different outcomes. Female volunteers perceived marginally lower levels of climate of inclusion than men. As hypothesised, female volunteers felt more connected to their teammates in inclusive climates integrative of differences. Unexpectedly, female volunteers' relatedness needs were less likely to be fulfilled in inclusive climates where they were included into decision-making.

Keywords: volunteer retention; climate for inclusion; psychological needs; female volunteers

Introduction

Australian volunteers – people who willingly give time for the common good and without financial gain (PWC 2016) – contribute over 743 million hours of essential services a year (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2014). Volunteer-involving organisations, however, struggle to attract and retain volunteers (PWC 2016). Additionally, the Australian workforce is one of the most culturally and demographically diverse labour forces in the world with 50.6 per cent women and nearly 30 per cent foreign-born employees. Yet, the profile of emergency services volunteer is far less diverse with the majority of volunteers being White older men (Batty & Burchielli 2011). Coupling this with the fact that technology has made physically demanding tasks easier, the female population remains an untapped resource for emergency services.

Indeed, attracting and retaining women to emergency services remains a challenge for Australian emergency organisations (Huynh, Xanthopoulou & Winefield 2014). Stereotypes about how a prototypical emergency services volunteer should look like (Batty & Burchielli 2011), including the ability to engage in physically demanding tasks (Silk, Lenton, Savage & Aisbett 2018), and a lack of awareness of how technology could make it possible for them to partake in physically demanding tasks (e.g., using drones for search-and-rescue in hazardous areas; Camara 2014; Karaca et al. 2018), might stop women from considering involvement in emergency services. Women might also not be aware of the breadth of roles they can perform in emergency services, not all of which require the same level of physical strength. Furthermore, because women are typically described in communal terms (such as nice, accommodating), they may be deprived of tasks by men in their unit that are associated with agentic behaviours (e.g., risk-taking). Finally, stereotypes about emergency services culture, described by some female volunteers in our survey as being 'old boys' military,' may make prospective female volunteers feel unwelcomed in a group mostly constituted of men.

Climate for inclusion and female volunteers

One way of attracting and retaining more female volunteers to emergency services is to create a culture of inclusiveness wherein all volunteers, irrespective of their background, feel valued and respected. Researchers have argued that "to reduce problems associated with demographic diversity […], organisations need to proactively create inclusive environments that make it possible to leverage diversity's

potential benefits" (Nishii 2013, p. 1754). In an inclusive climate, all members are fairly treated, valued for who they are, and included in decision-making (Nishii 2013). In the context of our research of emergency services units run by volunteers, the last two aspects are particularly important. Firstly, the integration of differences describes workplaces where people feel valued, comfortable being themselves, and free to express what they need. The second is inclusion in decision-making, which portrays a work setting where everyone's inputs are actively sought and considered. The third, fairness, focuses on recruitment, selection, performance appraisal, and remuneration practices for which we could not get usable information. Thus, in our research we examined (1) how and why male and female volunteers may perceive the two aspects of climate for inclusiveness – integration of differences and inclusion in decision-making – differently; and (2) whether and why volunteer retention will be higher as a result of such inclusive climates (Figure 1). We expect that emergency service units that have a climate of inclusiveness will retain more female volunteers because women will feel valued and included in all volunteer activities. Such climates are helpful for minimizing conflicts, stereotypes, and misunderstandings that may arise in gender-diverse groups, which in turn results in lower turnover rates (Nishii 2013; Nishii & Mayer 2009).

For reasons mentioned in the previous section, we expect that emergency services female volunteers will perceive lower levels of climate of inclusion.

Psychological needs and volunteer retention

To better understand how and why a climate of inclusion would influence perceptions of fit in an emergency service unit, we appeal to self-determination theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci 2017). SDT proposes that people will have higher quality motivation (meaning and enjoyment) when they feel competent, autonomous, and related to others with whom they volunteer. Competence refers to the extent to which volunteers perceive they can have an effect on the environment and attain valued outcomes. Autonomy captures feelings of volition and authenticity. Relatedness refers to having meaningful connections to others, and to care for others and be cared for (Deci & Ryan 2000). For volunteers, the satisfaction of these needs will be important for their desire to continue their involvement. Research supports our assertions by showing the links between these needs and performance, retention, and wellbeing in the workplace (Van den Broeck, Ferris, Chang, & Rosen 2016) and volunteer work (Gagné 2003). Given the centrality of these needs for all employees irrespective of their background, the satisfaction of these needs would influence both men and women's intentions to continue volunteering.

Hypothesis 2: Psychological needs of (a) relatedness, (b) competence, and (c) autonomy are positively related to retention.

Hypothesis 1: Female volunteers perceive lower levels of climate of inclusion than men.
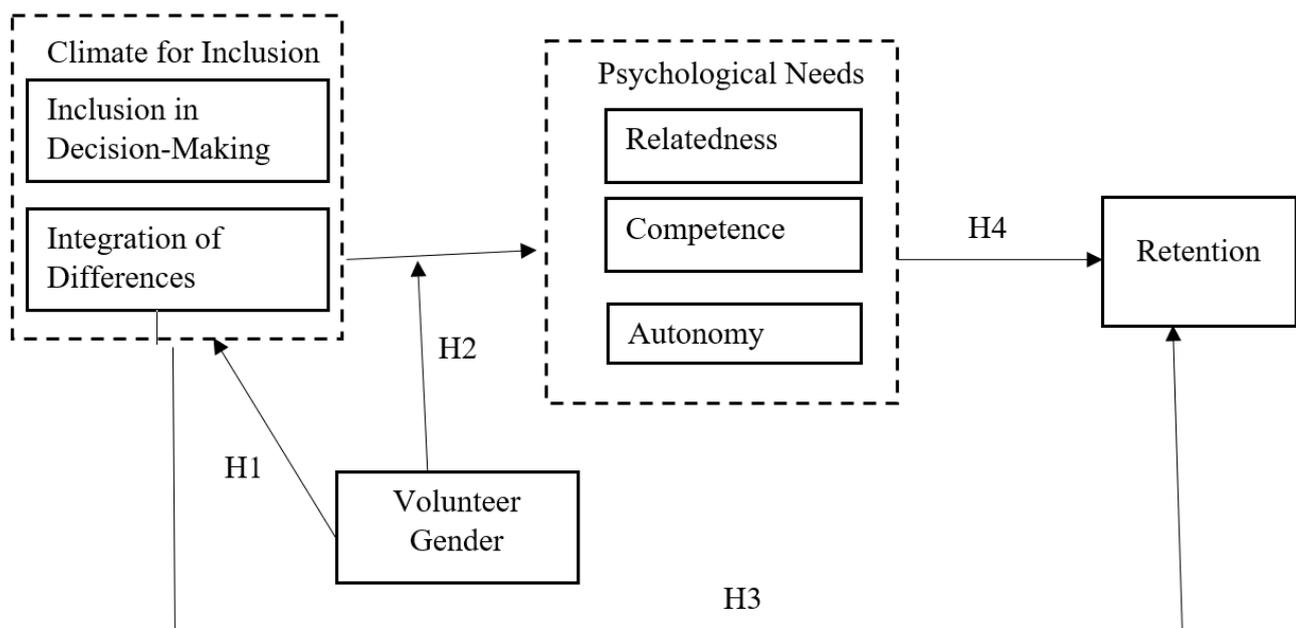

Figure 1: Conceptual model.

Table 1: Means, standard deviations, and correlations among all variables.

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Gender[a]	.38	.49	--						
Volunteer age	46.08	15.40	-.15**	--					
Integration of differences	4.25	.85	-.09	.08	--				
Inclusion in decision-making	4.03	1.00	-.07	.09	.82**	--			
Relatedness needs	4.06	.80	.00	.06	.46**	.37**	--		
Competence needs	4.09	.69	-.15**	.08	.27**	.18**	.41**	--	
Autonomy needs	3.11	.84	-.00	.08	.57**	.58**	.41**	.26**	--
Retention	4.11	.94	-.04	.07	.55**	.49**	.46**	.28**	.57**

Note. $N = 437$; [a]0 = male, 1 = female; $^*p < .05$; $^{**}p < .01$.

There are reasons why a climate of inclusiveness would promote the satisfaction of these needs, and consequently intent to remain in the unit. The integration of differences will influence the satisfaction of all three needs by making gender differences less salient or more embraced as valuable to the unit. This will make people feel safe to try things (competence), be authentic (autonomy), and feel valued and cared for (relatedness). Inclusion in decision-making will influence the needs by valuing what each volunteer can bring to the performance of the unit and by giving them voice. Need satisfaction would therefore explain why a climate of inclusiveness would favourably influence retention.

> Hypothesis 3: Psychological needs of (a) relatedness, (b) competence, and (c) autonomy mediate the relationship between inclusion climate and retention.

Volunteer gender, psychological needs and volunteer retention

We also propose that the beneficial role of climate for inclusion for the three psychological needs will be stronger for female than male volunteers. Female volunteers often face invisible barriers in emergency services, a typically male-dominated industry. They may be denied challenging tasks (e.g., cliff rescue, roof repair) due to benevolent sexism – wherein women receive less challenging tasks because they "deserve protection" or such decisions were made "in the women's best interests" (Hoobler, Lemmon & Wayne 2014). This effect was observed with female employees, who did not get developmental opportunities because managers perceived them as having lower career aspirations (Hoobler et al., 2014).

Manifestations of benevolent sexism may be minimised in an inclusive culture, wherein everyone is included, irrespective of gender. When female volunteers are included into decision-making and their input is considered, they feel competent, autonomous, and part of the group. Thus, the beneficial effects of climate for inclusion on these needs will be stronger for women than for men when they are not shielded away from challenging tasks.

> Hypothesis 4: Volunteer gender will moderate the positive relationship between inclusion climate and (a) relatedness, (b) competence, and (c) autonomy

Method

Procedure and participants

We invited emergency services volunteers from rural and urban units in Western Australia to participate in an on-line survey (N = 512); 50 per cent were men; 31 per cent were women and 19 per cent did not indicate gender (excluded from analyses); the mean age was 46 years (SD = 15.40). They came from both metropolitan (59 per cent) and rural (29 per cent) units with 12 per cent not revealing their unit. They have been volunteering with their organisation for nine years on average (SD = 9.72), seven years with their current unit (SD = 8.27).

Measures

All measures, if not indicated otherwise below, used a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

Culture of inclusiveness. We measured culture of inclusiveness with a measure (Nishii 2013) with two dimensions. We selected seven items for each dimension with the highest factor loadings that were relevant for volunteering. They were: (a) integration of differences (e.g., "Volunteers in this unit are valued for who they are as people, not just for the roles that they fill;" α = .93) and (b) inclusion in decision-making (e.g., "Volunteers in this unit engage in productive debates in an effort to improve decision making;" α = .95).

Psychological needs. We measured psychological needs with a measure of need satisfaction (Van den Broeck, Vansteenkiste, De Witte, Soenens & Lens 2010). For each of the three psychological needs, we chose four items most relevant to volunteering: (a) relatedness (e.g., "At [organisation name] I feel part of the group;" α = .72); (b) competence (e.g., "I am good at the things I do in my volunteer role at [organisation name];" α = .82); and (c) autonomy (e.g., "I feel free to do my volunteer work the way I think it could best be done;" α = .67).

Retention. We measured retention with four items of intention to remain (Meyer, Allen, & Smith 1993). Participants responded to three items (e.g., "How likely are you to be volunteering at your current unit in two years?") using a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = *very unlikely* to 5 = *very likely*. They also indicated "how frequently they think about leaving [organisation name]" using a 5-point frequency scale (1 = *never* to 5 = *everyday*). We reverse-coded this item and created a composite of four items (α = .85). Higher values indicated the greater volunteers' intention to remain at their organisation.

Volunteer gender. We asked participants whether they are men (coded as '0') or women (coded as '1').

Results

Table 1 contains descriptive statistics and correlations. Although we hypothesised the relationships between individual-level variables, participants were naturally assembled into workgroups because they volunteered in different units. Due to the nested nature of the data, we used an analysis of variance to calculate the intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC (1)) to determine whether this clustering would affect the results. The ICC (1) was .04 (σ = .84, p < .001; τ_{00} = .03, p = .19), suggesting that 4 per cent of variance in individual retention is explained by the unit membership. Thus, we used multilevel modelling to test the hypotheses.

Although women reported lower levels on both dimensions of inclusion climate – integration of differences (M_{female} = 4.21 vs M_{male} = 4.35, p = .10) and inclusion in decision-making (M_{female} = 4.00 vs M_{male} = 4.14, p = .13), these differences were not significant. Thus, Hypothesis 1 was not supported.

We tested Hypotheses 2-3 (mediation) with SPSS PROCESS macro (Model 4) which allows multiple simultaneous mediators (in our case three psychological needs). As shown in Table 2 and Figure 2, integration of differences and inclusion in decision-making were positively related to retention (B = .29, SE = .05, t = 5.55, p < .001; B = .18, SE = .04, t = 4.05, p < .001) and to all three needs, relatedness (B = .43, SE = .04, t = 10.63, p < .001; B = .29, SE = .04, t = 8.09, p < .001), competence (B = .21, SE = .04, t = 5.63, p < .001; B = .13, SE = .03, t = 3.88, p < .001), and autonomy (B = .58, SE = .04, t = 14.50, p < .001; B = .49, SE = .03, t = 14.53, p < .001) respectively. In turn, both relatedness (B = .22, SE = .05, t = 4.13, p < .001; B = .26, SE = .05, t = 4.85, p < .001) and autonomy (B = .37, SE = .05, t = 7.25, p < .001; B = .40, SE = .05, t = 7.48, p < .001) needs were positively related to retention (as predicted by Hypothesis 2); whereas, competence needs were not related to retention (B = .06, SE = .06, t = 1.06, p = .29; B = .08, SE = .06, t = 1.33, p = .18). Indirect effects were significant for both relatedness (.10, 95 per cent CI [.04; .15]; .07, 95 per cent CI [.04; .12]) and autonomy (.21, 95 per cent CI [.14; .30]; .20, 95 per cent CI [.13; .27]) needs as mediators, supporting Hypotheses 3a and 3c.
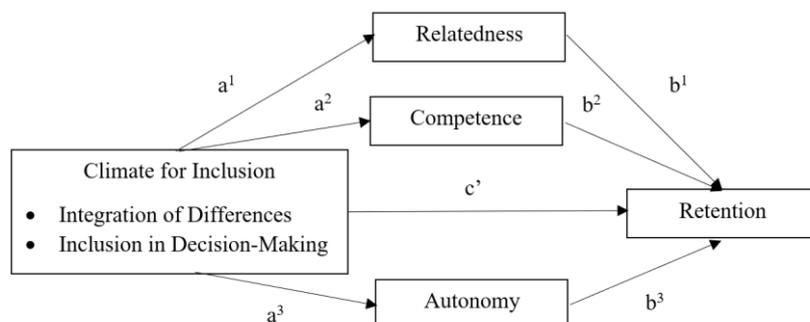

Figure 2: The relationships between variables in the mediation analysis.

Consistent with Hypothesis 4a (Table 3), gender moderated the relationship between both dimensions of inclusion climate and relatedness needs, namely, inclusion in decision-making (B = -.30, SE = .12, t = -2.53, p = .01) and integration of differences (B = .41, SE = .14, t = 2.88, p < .01). We plotted simple slope regression lines of inclusion in decision-making regressed on relatedness needs for male and female volunteers (Figure 3). The relationship between inclusion in decision-making and relatedness needs was unexpectedly negative and significant for women (B = -.21, p = .02; Figure 3); it was non-significant for men (B = .09, p = .26). The simple slope (Figure 4) between integration of differences and relatedness needs was stronger for women (B = .70, p < .001) then for men (B = .29, p < .001), as expected. Thus, Hypothesis 4a received mixed support.

Gender did not moderate the relationship between either dimension of inclusion climate and competence needs, namely, inclusion in decision-making (B = -.18, SE = .11, t = -1.63, p = .11) and integration of differences (B = .12, SE = .13, t = .91, p = .36). Likewise, gender did not moderate the linkages between inclusion in decision-making (B = .06, SE = .12, t = .51,

p = .61) or integration of differences (B = -.01, SE = .14, t = -.08, p = .93) and autonomy needs. Hence, Hypothesis 4b-c did not receive support.

Discussion

Given the importance of retaining all volunteers irrespective of their gender, emergency services strive to promote diversity (Batty & Burchielli 2011). We examined climate for inclusiveness as one such means of achieving this goal. As predicted, climate for inclusion was beneficial for volunteer retention because it made volunteers feel more competent, autonomous, and connected to others. Although female volunteers reported lower levels of inclusion climate, these differences were not statistically significant. Finally, female volunteers felt more connected with others than men when their differences were embraced. Yet, surprisingly, female volunteers also felt their relatedness needs were less fulfilled when there was a climate of involving them into decision-making.
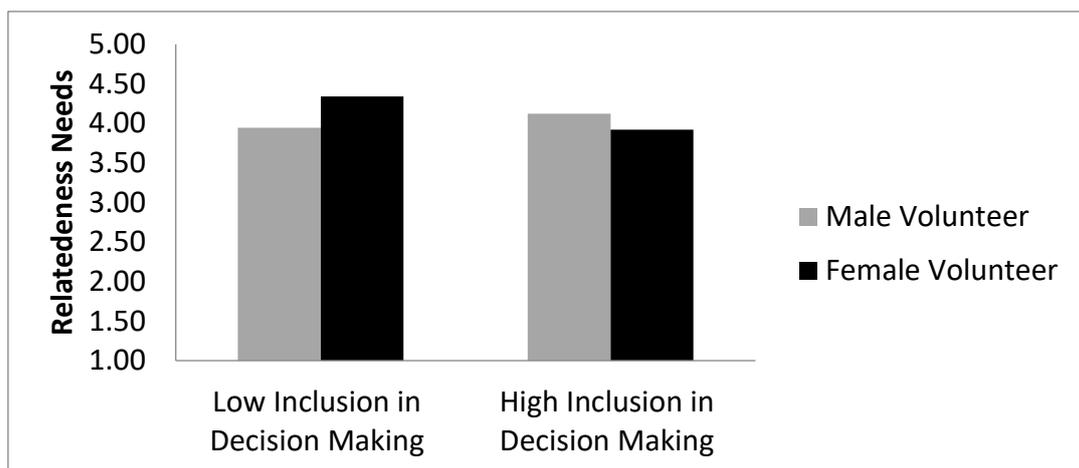

Figure 3: The interactive effects of inclusion climate (inclusion in decision-making) and relatedness needs for male and female volunteers.
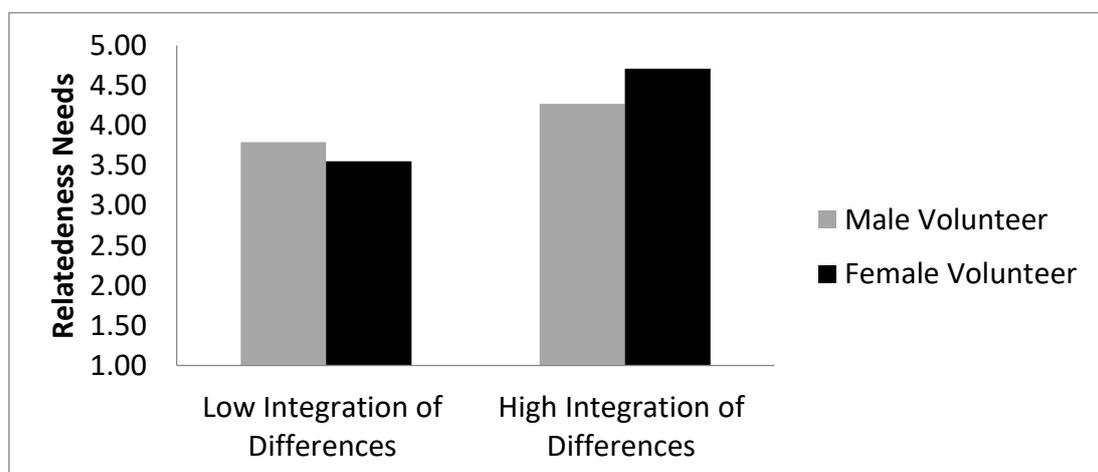

Figure 4: The interactive effects of inclusion climate (integration of differences) and relatedness needs for male and female volunteers.

Table 2: Total, direct, and indirect effects, and 95 per cent confidence interval predicting retention (N=422).

Variables	Effect	LLCI	ULCI	SE	t	*P*-value
IV: Integration of Differences						
Total effect (c)	.61	.52	.70	.05	13.57	.00
Direct effect (c')	.29	.19	.39	.05	5.55	.00
a^1	.43	.35	.51	.04	10.63	.00
a^2	.21	.14	.29	.04	5.63	.00
a^3	.58	.50	.66	.04	14.50	.00
b^1	.22	.11	.32	.05	4.13	.00
b^2	.06	-.05	.17	.06	1.06	.29
b^3	.37	.27	.47	.05	7.25	.00
Indirect effects						
Total indirect effect*	.32	.24	.41	.04	-	-
$a^1 b^1$	.10	.04	.15	.03	-	-
$a^2 b^2$	.01	-.01	.04	.01	-	-
$a^3 b^3$	.21	.14	.30	.04	-	-
IV: Inclusion in Decision-Making						
Total effect (c)	.46	.38	.54	.04	11.42	.00
Direct effect (c')	.18	.09	.27	.04	4.05	.00
a^1	.29	.22	.36	.04	8.09	.00
a^2	.13	.06	.19	.03	3.88	.00
a^3	.49	.43	.56	.03	14.53	.00
b^1	.26	.15	.36	.05	4.85	.00
b^2	.08	-.04	.19	.06	1.33	.18
b^3	.40	.29	.50	.05	7.48	.00
Indirect effects						
Total indirect effect*	.28	.21	.35	.04	-	-
$a^1 b^1$	.07	.04	.12	.02	-	-
$a^2 b^2$	.01	-.00	.03	.01	-	-
$a^3 b^3$	.20	.13	.27	.03	-	-

Abbreviations: IV, independent variable; LLCI, lower limit confidence interval; ULCI, upper limit confidence interval; SE, standard error.

*Note. A bootstrapped analysis (sample of N =5000) were conducted for the indirect effects shown in the table.

Theoretical implications

Our research has expanded the diversity literature by demonstrating the importance of climate for inclusion beyond employees (Nishii 2013; Nishii & Mayer 2009) to volunteers. Consistent with the general pattern of results found in the work context (Dwertmann, Nishii & van Knippenberg 2016), female volunteers perceived marginally lower levels of climate for inclusion than their male counterparts. This suggests that invisible barriers, stereotyping, glass ceiling effects, benevolent sexism that plague the work experiences of employed women (Heilman 2012) have similar detrimental effects for female volunteers. Given that both dimensions of inclusion climate were associated with feeling more competent, autonomous, and related to others, it is important to address this in female volunteers.

Results also showed, however, that involvement in decision-making made females feel less related to others in their units, relative to males. It is possible that inclusion into decision-making meant to voice one's ideas and engage in productive debates. Such behaviours are stereotypically associated with men but not women, who, by engaging in these behaviours, may violate behavioural gender norms (e.g., Luksyte,

Unsworth & Avery 2018; Proudfoot, Kay & Koval 2015). This, ironically, could result in them feeling less connected to their teammates, who might feel that such behaviours are incongruent with stereotypical gender behavioural norms. For example, one female volunteer shared with us that "Complaints to manager result in being targeted". Consequently, some women felt that they cannot raise issues [about not being invited to call-outs] because "this results in me not getting any call-outs at all".

Our findings also have implications for SDT by testing it in the volunteering context. Though prior research has examined how need satisfaction is related to volunteer retention (Gagné 2003), no research to date had examined how each need uniquely contributes to retention. We found that being connected and feeling volitional were crucial factors for volunteer retention. Feeling competent, however, was not as important in this context. This could be because emergency volunteers are typically very well-trained for their role (the mean for competence was 4 out of 5), and those who are unable to "pass the test" would be naturally sorted out. No research on SDT to date had examined how diversity and inclusion influence need satisfaction. This is thus a new application of SDT.

Implications for practice

Our findings provide guidance for organisations that are looking for ways to attract and retain more culturally and demographically diverse volunteers. First, our results highlighted the importance of promoting climate for inclusion, wherein volunteers of all backgrounds feel valued and respected. Given that female volunteers felt that ideas were judged based not on their qualities but who expressed them, units could use a system of anonymous suggestions and anonymous voting for ideas. Managers also need to encourage the submission of ideas from diverse people, and convey that differences are valued.

Second, organisations could emphasise how volunteering for emergency services fulfils people's relatedness needs. Volunteer recruitment messages could include examples of how volunteering for emergency services offer opportunities to "form friendships" and "find second family", and how it helps build deeper connections with one's community.

We note some potential limitations. First, all our measures were self-reported at one point in time, suggesting that common method variance could have influenced our results. Longitudinal research will be needed in the future. Second, we only examined volunteer gender; yet, other demographic factors may be of equal importance such as volunteer age, racioethnic background, and immigrant status. Our finding about the importance of climate of inclusion are likely to be applicable to these other demographic factors as well. Finally, we did not examine the demographic composition of each unit, and only looked at gender of individual volunteers. Theoretically, it is possible that in more gender-balanced units, female volunteers feel more integrated and included.

Table 3: Moderating effects of gender on the relationship between inclusion climate and psychological needs (i.e., relatedness, competence, and autonomy).

Variables	B	LLCI	ULCI	SE	t	P-value
Dependent variable: Relatedness needs						
Inclusion in decision-making (INC_DMC)	.09	-.07	.25	.08	1.13	.26
Integration of differences (INC_DIFC)	.29	.10	.48	.09	3.05	.00
Gender	.10	-.04	.24	.07	1.38	.17
INC_DMC * Gender	-.30	-.54	-.07	.12	-2.53	.01
INC_DIFC * Gender	.41	.13	.69	.14	2.88	.00
Dependent variable: Competence needs						
Inclusion in decision-making (INC_DMC)	.01	-.14	.15	.07	.10	.92
Integration of differences (INC_DIFC)	.23	.06	.41	.09	2.66	.01
Gender	-.19	-.32	-.05	.07	-2.79	.00
INC_DMC * Gender	-.18	-.41	.04	.11	-1.63	.11
INC_DIFC * Gender	.12	-.14	.38	.13	.91	.36
Dependent variable: Autonomy needs						
Inclusion in decision-making (INC_DMC)	.23	.08	.39	.08	2.98	.00
Integration of differences (INC_DIFC)	.34	.16	.52	.09	3.64	.00
Gender	.09	-.05	.22	.07	1.22	.22
INC_DMC * Gender	.06	-.18	.30	.12	.51	.61
INC_DIFC * Gender	-.01	-.29	.27	.14	-.08	.93

Limitations and future research

We note some potential limitations. First, all our measures were self-reported at one point in time, suggesting that common method variance could have influenced our results. Longitudinal research will be needed in the future. Second, we only examined volunteer gender; yet, other demographic factors may be of equal importance such as volunteer age, racioethnic background, and immigrant status. Our finding about the importance of climate of inclusion are likely to be applicable to these other demographic factors as well. Finally, we did not examine the demographic composition of each unit, and only looked at gender of individual volunteers. Theoretically, it is possible that in more gender-balanced units, female volunteers feel more integrated and included.

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