

Chapter 11

Arenas of Volunteering: Experiences, Practices and Conflicts of Voluntary Refugee Relief



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11.1 Introduction¹

Two key terms dominated media reports in Germany in the summer and early autumn of 2015: firstly, ‘refugee crisis’ (see for example Matissek and Reuber 2016; Fleischmann and Steinhilper 2017; Luft 2016)² discrediting the huge number of incoming refugees, and secondly, the appreciative term ‘welcome culture’ (Matissek and Reuber 2016; Sutter 2017).³ Some authors even speak of a ‘summer of welcome’ (e.g. Karakayali and Kleist 2016: 2) to describe people’s response to this ‘refugee crisis’ which manifested itself in a sudden increase in voluntary aid for refugees (Youkhana and Sutter 2017). Smaller and larger relief projects have emerged in many places in Germany and have occurred across a broad range of social classes, age and income groups, religious affiliations, and family statuses (Karakayali and Kleist 2016). A wide variety of aid services have been offered, communicated, and organised by individuals, loose, non-institutionalised groups and small or large associations, schools, churches, and municipalities (Karakayali and Kleist 2016). These have primarily been focused on providing practical and

¹ This chapter presents the first results of an ongoing study that is part of a doctoral thesis. I would like to thank the Hanns-Seidel Foundation for supporting this project.

² For a comprehensive analysis of the media discourses between 2015 and 2016, see Matissek and Reuber (2016).

³ Mutz and Wolff (2018: 12) explain this term as follows: ‘During the increasing migration of refugees and a more intensive examination of the subject of flight and migration, “welcome culture” is [...] now being taken up particularly in the media public and in so-called mood studies, to describe a positive attitude towards foreigners.’

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direct care for the refugees themselves: language teaching, translation activities, practical assistance, and the delivery of donations have been the main practices of volunteers (Karakayali and Kleist 2016; Sutter 2017). This focus on the needs and difficulties of affected migrants is reflected in the numerous academic publications that address this topic. These deal with questions such as ‘What refugees need’ (Bendel 2016) or ‘What is really important: Insights into the life situation of refugees’ (Schiefer 2017). Research has focused on refugees and asks for their intentions and regionally specific attitudes to stay in certain places (Brücker et al. 2016; ongoing project from Haug et al.).

In contrast, research on the volunteers, who are often some of the first people to develop close contact with the refugees, is increasing only slowly, even though in a statistical survey by the Social Science Institute of the Protestant Church in Germany of more than 1000 respondents, conducted at the end of August 2016, over 75% said they could imagine a personal involvement in refugee relief (Ahrens 2017). Moreover, a recent study conducted by the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs concludes that 19% of the German population are still providing active refugee assistance or helping in some other way (BMFSFJ 2017). Studies that have focused on volunteers and the practice of voluntary aid for refugees have mostly delivered a view ‘from the outside’ and have dealt with the challenges and possibilities of organising volunteer work and the interaction between voluntary and full-time positions (Karakayali and Kleist 2015, 2016; Hamann et al. 2016; Liebenberg et al. 2016; Speth and Becker 2016; Ahrens 2015, 2017; BMFSFJ 2017). A lack of research into the local practices of refugee accommodation and the relevant processes and dynamics of negotiation can be identified. In particular, geographical and ethnographic approaches to such practices, and the perspective of volunteers, are still very rarely found (exceptions include Sutter 2017; Fleischmann and Steinhilper 2017; Karakayali 2017). It is therefore important to focus more closely on practices of volunteering at a local level. In this context, the experience of volunteers must be considered, which, according to the theoretical assumption of this paper, arise and are imparted in and through the execution of practices. In order to display the internal dynamics and tensions in the field of volunteering it is necessary to regard the emerging (or ‘breaking’) practices of voluntary refugee relief. Furthermore, the associated, socially framed, and locally developed horizons of experience must be combined with an examination of the significance of local and communal contexts for these practices. What is of particular interest is how specific practices develop in this fluid field of voluntary refugee relief and how subjects⁴ become significant in this context. I argue that emotions play an important role in voluntary refugee relief and that therefore a conceptual approach that can grasp emotionality is necessary (Karakayali 2017; Youkhana and Sutter 2017; Fleischmann and Steinhilper 2017). Moreover, the spatial characteristics of voluntary refugee relief must also be taken into account, as these play an essential role in local configurations.

⁴In line with the pragmatist perspective discussed in more detail later, the present work assumes that subjects are not constituted as fixed, coherent units but are to be thought of as constantly evolving and ‘changing’. On this processual presentation of the emergence of subjects, see Sect. 11.6 and Dewey (1995).

Therefore, the paper is structured as follows. First, it compiles and analyses contemporary research concerning voluntary refugee relief in Germany. It then gives insights into the local field of research and provides some relevant context of volunteering in the Bavarian city studied. After statements concerning methodology, empirical examples show the relevance of a theoretically underpinned consideration of experience, especially in its emotional and spatial dimensions. With the help of the pragmatist concept of experience, both the development of practices and the emergence of conflicts and ruptures within voluntary work can be explained. Especially regarding conflicts with the administrative and bureaucratic asylum system, the emergence of the voluntary subject—whether political or decidedly unpolitical—becomes relevant.

11.2 Contemporary Research Concerning Voluntary Work in Germany

Even though research projects focusing on voluntary refugee relief increased in 2016 and 2017, the number of such projects is still relatively modest (Mutz and Wolff 2018). A number of large-scale studies (Karakayali and Kleist 2015, 2016; Hamann et al. 2016; Liebenberg et al. 2016; Speth and Becker 2016; Ahrens 2015, 2017; BMFSFJ 2017) have come to the following concordant conclusions on volunteers, their activities, and their forms of organisation: Since 2015, 55% of Germany's population has provided refugee assistance in one way or another, and 19% are currently still active (BMFSFJ 2017). Most of the volunteers are female, but there is a more equal distribution in terms of age and working status (Karakayali and Kleist 2016). Membership of a religious organisation is also roughly the same as the national average, whereas there is a slight overproportion of volunteers who are migrants. Involvement is seen more in very large cities, although an increase in voluntary work in rural areas and small towns and cities can be observed. The engagement was characterised in its beginning by spontaneity, a proactive character, and a high degree of initiative (ibd.). However, many of the initiatives underwent increasing professionalisation and formalisation after an informal start-up phase (Hamann et al. 2016). On average, refugee helpers currently spend around five-and-a-half hours per week on their activities (BMFSFJ 2017), and nearly a quarter stated that they were active for more than ten hours per week (Karakayali and Kleist 2016). Especially in coordination, a high number of hours of volunteer work is invested (Hamann et al. 2016). Nevertheless, despite these high workloads, over three quarters of participants were satisfied with their activities (Karakayali and Kleist 2016). The areas of activity focus on counselling, accompaniment, German language lessons, leisure activities, collection and distribution of donations, and coordination of activities (Hamann et al. 2016; BMFSFJ 2017). Most of the studies stressed that it was especially the first phase, the admission of refugees, that would not have been possible without the help of actively engaged people, and that the various assistance groups have meanwhile become an 'indispensable part of a liberal and helpful

society' (Speth and Becker 2016: 6). On a smaller scale, Liebenberg et al. (2016) present a local example of voluntary refugee relief and illustrate that, apart from general structural recommendations, each region and city offers its own approaches and challenges. In analogy to Hamann et al. (2016), Liebenberg et al. draw attention to the effects of voluntary refugee relief that go beyond direct aid: they recognize in it an important stabilising factor of municipal democracy and a building block against right-wing agitation (Liebenberg et al. 2016).

Regarding the motives of volunteers, the BMFSFJ study (2017: 26) gives the top three reasons as 'because I basically want to help others', 'because I enjoy it', and 'because I am convinced that it's important for Germany that the refugees are well integrated'. These statements show that emotional and political aspects play an important role in becoming a volunteer. Karakayali and Kleist (2016) see high political awareness amongst those involved in voluntary work since 2015 as they stated that they want to help shape society, at least on a small scale, through their activities. A research team from the University of Applied Sciences in Munich found volunteers being motivated by a socially oriented humanism and not for religious reasons (Mutz et al. 2015; Mutz and Wolff 2018). In addition to the desire to make up for social deficits and to make it easier for refugees to integrate, they also identify self-referential motives of the volunteers, such as the wish for recognition, being needed, and widening personal horizons; all statements indicate a great relevance of (positive) emotions for voluntary work.

Recently, a few works from sociologists and anthropologists have focused on the role of emotions in the context of voluntary refugee relief (Karakayali 2017; Sutter 2017) and the political aspects of volunteer work (Fleischmann and Steinhilper 2017). Sutter specifically speaks of emotional practices, which, according to his observations, play the central role in civil society engagement for refugees. Performative practices, media representations and the interaction with materialities enable an emotionalization of engagement and can explain how the surveyed volunteers use emotions to act politically. The close connection between voluntary refugee relief and emotional experiences is also the central aspect of this paper.

In summary, it can be concluded that the socio-politically relevant connection between voluntary refugee relief, its emotional and spatial dimensions, and the way in which people become politically involved and committed is largely unexplored. Only very few studies have researched this area in great depth and a theoretical framework is almost completely missing. Accordingly, I will present a notion of how individuals become subjects (as volunteers) in local fields of practice, assuming that these processes are grounded in experience. In the following section, I will present some of the contexts relevant for these experiences in order to provide a basis for introducing the empirical and theoretical considerations.

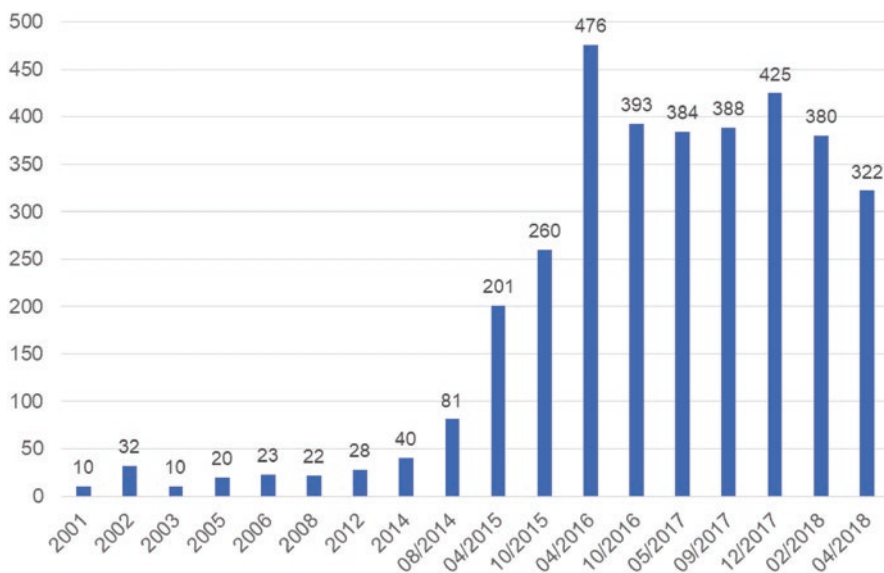


Fig. 11.1 Development of membership numbers. (Source: Membership administration of the organisation: own compilation)

11.3 The Local Context of Voluntary Refugee Relief

At the beginning of the research project in spring 2014, the decisive role that volunteers would play in the Bavarian city in the coming months and years could not yet be predicted. I was based in a local organisation for voluntary refugee relief, which was founded in 2002 and was well established in urban society. Through its long-lasting activities, members of the organisation had built up various connections with other actors relevant for the refugee work, and partly personal relations with representatives of the city administration. Therefore, the association appeared as an ideal door-opener to gain insight into the local conditions of voluntary refugee relief. Figure 11.1 illustrates the rapid increase in membership in the following years.

Since the membership lists were not consistently maintained until the end of 2014, the previous years are estimates based on participation in irregular exchange meetings (with the exception of 2002, where an exact figure is available). It becomes apparent that especially between the surveys in autumn 2014 and spring 2015, and between October 2015 and April 2016, there was a strong increase in the number of volunteer refugee helpers. The second increase reflects the development referred to as the “Summer of Welcome”⁵ which in autumn 2015, following the temporary suspension of the Dublin Regulation by German Chancellor Angela

⁵Karakayali and Kleist (2015, 2016).

Merkel,⁶ led to great attention to refugee relief in many places. The significantly increased number of members already in April 2015 can be traced back to a special incidence in the investigated city that occurred at the beginning of September 2014. Back then, the government of Middle Franconia gave the city administration two days to create an emergency admission facility for up to 300 refugees. This was achieved by the immediate closure of a local open-air swimming pool, on whose parking lot an infrastructure (sanitary facilities and sleeping accommodation, which was primarily tents) was set up, drawing on the capacities of the civil protection and social services. The following months were stressful and a burden on everyone involved, especially the refugees (who at times threatened to go on hunger strike because they no longer wanted to wait for their registration at the responsible initial reception facility), but also the municipal and charity workers and the many volunteers. Most of the volunteers were very spontaneously involved and mainly helped with the direct care and support of the refugees. The joint coping with this situation by volunteers and staff members resulted in a first wave of entries into the organisation and for many, even several years later, constitutes a positive experience.

There are no official figures regarding the further development of the refugees accommodated in the city area. A personal inquiry to the city revealed a rather vague picture of steadily growing numbers of refugees. According to this, the number of people with a refugee background more than quadrupled from approx. 500 at the end of 2014 to approx. 2300 in 2018. At the same time, the local organisation also grew as shown in Fig. 11.1. For the organisation, which had previously grown rather unplanned, this rapid increase of members initially meant a significant rise in workload in terms of organisation. At the same time, little political-administrative support was wanted and possible. For in addition to the generally accepted picture of relatively regulation-free voluntary work, which may and should exist independently of state institutions and controls, municipal and state authorities were overstrained by the very rapid increase in the number of asylum seekers in 2015.

The heavy workload took months but hardly ever led to volunteers terminating their involvement. Instead, various restructuring processes took place within the organisation, so that the tasks could be distributed more evenly. Those volunteers who were very dissatisfied with providing 40 to 60 hours of direct support and assistance a week reduced their activities rather than giving up their commitment completely. Many volunteers reported that they suffered exhaustion and overwork. On the sidelines of an event on the subject of “Protection from Burnout“, a volunteer told me analogously: ‘I already had that [occupational burnout]. [...] I lost ten kilo. But I’m alright now’ and then turned to an asylum seeker with whom she had agreed to practice German. Similar stories have been told often, especially since the noticeable reduction of relocations to the city. Moreover, they explain why the decline

⁶The statements of Chancellor Angela Merkel that “Asylum knows no upper limit” and “We can do it” led to a temporarily suspension of the Dublin Regulation on 31 August 2015 and thus enabled hundreds of thousands of asylum seekers who had not yet applied for asylum in their respective EU entry country to do so in Germany (Mushaben 2018: 14; Luft 2016: 68).

in the number of members of the organisation is relatively moderate compared to the previous increase. In particular, the latest drop in numbers is due to the fact that at certain intervals the list of members is cleaned up to remove those who no longer respond to member queries. However, it cannot be ruled out that these persons may nevertheless continue to help individual refugees or families outside the structure of the association, as I have been told several times in personal conversations. Such observations show that voluntary refugee aid, despite its often spontaneous character and with few or no institutionalised practices, tends towards a certain regularity and continuity of commitment.

This persistence of voluntary practices despite the sometimes burdensome contexts can be theoretically framed and made understandable with the pragmatist concept of experience. Experiences are conceived as embedded in social conditions and lead to a complex interplay of practical action, emotional experience, and intellectual reflection. This theoretical framework can grasp the emotional and strongly practice-oriented research field of ‘refugee care’ as arenas of volunteering. It points out how subjects emerge, are challenged and reconfigured in regard to various practical, emotional, and physical experiences. In Sects. 11.5 and 11.6 I provide a more detailed conceptualisation of the relevant concepts of ‘experience’, ‘arenas of volunteering’, and ‘becoming a subject’ based on empirical insights. However, some methodological considerations will be explained first.

11.4 Methodological Considerations

How do you explore experiences that, by their very nature, not only concern intellectual knowledge but have both practical and emotional components? The perspective of this paper assumes that situationally made experiences can either be observed in practical realisation, in other words while they are actually taking place, or can be interrogated in conversations as they can be intellectually reflected. The emotional dimension of experiences becomes visible with both methods: it can be observed in its bodily ‘suffering’ and becomes intersubjectively intelligible through communication.⁷ To capture practical doings and intellectual reflections of volunteers as well as those of the researcher, this work is based on the grounded theory methodology (Geiselhart et al. 2012; Wagenseil 2014; Strauss and Corbin 1996), which corresponds to Dewey’s understanding of research as a reciprocal process (Volbers 2015). This process is guided by ‘the basic principles of openness and the method of permanent comparison’ (Geiselhart et al. 2012: 85). Thus, the aims and guidelines of the research only emerge during the empirical process and need to be constantly reflected upon; moreover, the theory developed from this process can and must refer

⁷This translation of bodily experience into conventionalized language always leaves an untranslatable remnant which contains a certain amount of uncertainty and the possibility of failure. Due to limited space this cannot be expanded upon here, but several authors have discussed this to a larger extent (e.g. Berwing 2012; Hetzel 2008).

to the data and be measured against it. This close connection between theory and empiricism in the sense of grounded theory is also reflected in the structure of the paper.

The methods used in this study are mainly qualitative, open interviews and ethnographic studies through participatory observation in the form of action research⁸ (Chatterton et al. 2010; Brambilla 2012). Since the author of the article is herself active in several helper groups as well as at the organizational level of the investigated association, a deep and quite comprehensive insight into the structures, procedures, and negotiation processes was possible. Much of the data collected so far has been generated from observing various meetings and communication processes between volunteers and other people involved in the field of refugee relief. These include volunteer group meetings and working group meetings of the organisation for refugee relief, meetings with representatives of various interest groups (e.g. workers' welfare organisations, the city administration, or school representatives), public speeches, and panel discussions on the topic of refugees, round tables, and board meetings, but also everyday email correspondence, play groups with refugee children or joint leisure activities. In several interview phases between 2014 and 2017, more than 40 qualitative interviews were conducted with volunteers, full-time workers, refugees and city authorities. These came about through personal contacts and the snowball principle. The data pool also includes transcripts of various meetings and discussion forums, flyers, legislative texts, images, and audio recordings of the observations, as well as personal reflections on my own position in the research process, in the form of field diary entries. In the following sections, extracts of the empirical data are combined with theoretical considerations in order to gain a deeper understanding of the observed situations. Since the presented project is currently still being implemented and its methodology is designed for a cyclical research process with increasing 'saturation', only preliminary results can be presented here.

11.5 Experiences, Emotions and Emerging Practices

The following interview extract is a typical example of how a volunteer got engaged in refugee relief:

Then these containers came into my residential area and then, then somehow, yes, it was, not because I wanted to become a member of the association, or something like that, but I went by there several times a day and then I just, uh... in the bike basket I had street crayons and Frisbees and a jump rope and I was just there and we painted. [...] I'm kind of like that, I was in the neighbourhood, I drove by and I volunteered at the trade union and did youth work there, in my Frankfurt time, so I know that I have a connection to it ... and, yeah, and the kids, of course, the kids used to see my dog, and then they wanted to pet the dog and that was kinda, yeah, sweet (Volunteer, Interview 06, translated by author).

⁸For further examples regarding the implementation of participatory research, see Chaps. 9 and 12.

The dog plays an important role and was often mentioned in the further course of the interview. The practical doings of playing with the kids and letting them pet the dog is inseparably connected with accompanying emotions of kindness and joy. The statement: ‘and that was kinda, yeah, sweet’ clearly displays such positive feelings. The spatial proximity intertwined with previous experiences with volunteer work initially led to sporadic interactions. These moments are reported being full of emotions, whereby private interests mix with public concerns, so that the volunteer develops further commitment. This calls for an approach that can take the emotional dimension of experiences into account. I therefore adopt the pragmatist philosophy of practice developed by John Dewey.⁹

11.5.1 The Pragmatist Concept of Experience

Dewey’s focus was on the events of here and now. His goal was to redirect the philosophy of his time to practice and human experience. He saw experience as an emotionally charged, experimental, and creative process of exploring and acquiring the world (Cutchin 2008; Morgan 2014). Experiences are not only constitutional conditions of the social, material, geographical, political and historical contexts (i.e. the respective situation) but are also individually possessed as they are processed by human organisms. By means of conjoint dealings and associations, experiences intertwine individuals with their communities (McCormack 2010). ‘Associated or joint activity is a condition of the creation of a community. But association itself is physical and organic, while communal life is moral, that is emotionally, intellectually, consciously sustained’ (Dewey 1995: 151). Therefore, experiences are never to be understood as something purely individual (as mere one-experience making), but also as a social experience, only possible in the community and with the surrounding world.

Three aspects play a role in the process of making an experience and becoming experienced: experiences are (a) made ‘practically and physically’, (b) emotionally lived through, and (c) intellectually reflected upon and classified with reference to existing knowledge (McCormack 2010; Cutchin 2008). This perspective focuses on the intervening of emotions, practices, and knowledge of the research field and make it accessible for analysis. Thus, the approach chosen here can connect with debates on affects and emotions (Davidson et al. 2007; Smith et al. 2009, 2010; Schurr and Strüver 2016) and can add practical examples of socially relevant empirical research. Following the process perspective of many affective theories, which understand affects as relational and emerging phenomena, Dewey’s view of experience-based emotionalities can be added. In his terms, affects and emotions must be understood as processed (and above all communicated) by individu-

⁹For a first overview of Dewey’s life and work, see <http://dewey.pragmatism.org/>

als, but they are not inherent in them as intrinsic properties (Dewey 1995).¹⁰ Instead, the concept of experience sees emotionalities as inherent in social practice. Emotions are ‘supra-individual’ but Dewey’s particular contribution is that he does not only see the interpersonal dimension but also points out how emotions are lived through by individuals and how they contribute to societal development. Therefore, when they are researched and analysed, they cannot be detached from the singular situations, but rather must be viewed in context, with all accompanying social, material, and historical dimensions.

In the context of refugee relief, the consideration of the lived experiences shows that the motivation to engage in voluntary work and to continue with it is mainly based on emotions rather than intellectual reasons. Often, and with pleasure, volunteers report about small success experiences. A volunteer was uncertain ‘whether we could check on the BAMF¹¹ in any way concerning the progress of the asylum application’. Nevertheless, she familiarized herself with the administrative procedures and submitted a corresponding request. She was not just a little surprised when ‘only three weeks after this letter he [the asylum applicant] had his recognition. For THREE years. [Pause] And of course everyone was like ‘WHAAAT, you can do that?!?’ (Volunteer, Interview 07, translated by author). The pleasant surprise of success and the appreciation of refugees and other volunteers made her visibly proud. With the same pride, another volunteer spoke about a flat she found after a long search for a family of five. Another volunteer explained the relief he felt as a church asylum, usually combined with an extremely high expenditure of time, finally led to a positive result for the person being hosted and cared for. Often, volunteers discuss pleasant experiences: nice afternoons in an accommodation facility, kind and tasty dinner invitations, or playful encounters with the refugees’ children. Such reports are widely shared and the emotional character of different situations is often highlighted.

News easily spread through the network structure of the organisation. Rumours about troubles circulate fast between different helper circles, coordinators and board members due to regular meetings and intensive and fast email traffic. Problems are discussed quickly and supporters are found, so that in most cases rapid solutions are possible. Accordingly, positive experiences take place frequently. And even in frustrating or hopeless cases, in which for example anger arises about refugees, other volunteers, the operators of the accommodation facility, the government or the bureaucratic system, support from other volunteers or full-time staff often mitigates negative feelings. This confirms, especially in retrospect, the corresponding prac-

¹⁰ On this issue, Dewey (1995) asserts that feelings are indeed experienced by complex and active living beings, but they are not their own in an incorporated, physical sense. He writes: ‘The qualities [feelings] were never in the organism; they were always qualities of interactions involving both non-organic things and organisms.’ (249). It is only through language/communication that these qualities of interactions, i.e. the feelings, can become signs of objective differences, give meaning, report, and prophesy. ‘With language they [sensitivities, feelings, qualities] are clearly differentiated and identified. They are then >>objectified<<; [...]’ (249).

¹¹ Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, which is responsible for deciding on asylum applications.

tices and leads to continuous commitment. A detailed observation of existing voluntary practices must therefore take place with special attention to the emotional components in order to be able to understand how these emerged and why they have been consolidated.

The next section will link such emotionalities to spatial settings, collective memories and personal biographical experiences.

11.5.2 Material and Spatial Conditions of Volunteering

‘I went by there several times a day; I was in the neighbourhood’. This quotation indicates the connection that experience creates between an individual and its environment. According to Dewey, the individual transacts with the socio-material arrangements of space and thus becomes a socially and spatially situated subject. This central concept of ‘transactions’ needs some further clarification: ‘Transaction is distinct from interaction which implies communication between two fully formed organisms. In transactions, the environment and organism are co-constituted’ (Bridge 2008: 1580). According to Dewey the concept of transactions describes how, in everyday life situations, there are no fixed, fully developed subjects and objects that interact with each other; instead, all organisms realise just one of the possibilities of themselves in a specific situation as they establish relationships with one another (Geiselhart 2019). At the same time, the environment also becomes fixed in a way that facilitates the actual situation. Situations are always direct, immediate, new and different on every single occasion. Therefore, with transactions the organisms undergo different states of relatedness and thus different subjectivities (Bridge 2008). Accordingly, individuals only become a subject in situations.

Dewey names ‘situations’ as those moments and spatial localizations in which an over-individualized experiencing takes place (McCormack 2010; Morgan 2014). In order to emphasize the singularity of these situations and their transactional co-constituting character, the term ‘arenas of volunteering’ will be used below. One can conceptualize these processes of negotiation in the arenas of volunteering as based on overlapping, experience-based, and path-dependent worldviews that must be explored, negotiated, and conveyed at the local level (Bridge 2008; Cutchin 2008; Steiner 2014). The singular arenas of volunteering can therefore be thought of as situated and temporarily fixed negotiation spaces in which the participants are established as voluntary subjects and in which different experiences can be made, lived, and communicated (see also Massey 1994; Cutchin 2008; Jupp 2008; Conradson 2003). Spaces are conceived as intersections of heterogeneous lines of experience: on the one hand, they are only produced as significant in the social process of experiencing; and on the other hand, they make experiences understandable and comprehensible in the first place, whereby experiences are always also spatialized and materialized through them (Cutchin 2008; Bridge 2008). In the arenas of voluntary work, people meet each other with differing experience-based ideas about voluntary refugee relief in general, as well as about its actual practices and implementations.

The general material conditions of arenas of volunteering are characterised by a particularly high degree of fluidity and instability. This is largely due to the structure of voluntary relief for refugees. At least in its local organisational form, the investigated association does not have facilities of its own. Instead, external properties are used for the various meetings such as assistance or board meetings, information evenings or further training, consulting hours, German courses, and meetings with refugees, municipal employees or representatives of other organisations. These facilities include, for example, rooms in community centres, neighbourhood houses, schools, church parish halls, or the city hall, rooms in shared accommodation (for refugees) or of private individuals; even outdoor public places or theatres and cinemas are sometimes used. While not exhaustive, this list illustrates the diversity of the possible places in which volunteer refugee helpers meet. Some examples can serve to highlight the relation between different facilities and voluntary refugee relief practices.

A positive connotation with any ‘arena of volunteering’ due to its physical location in a familiar neighbourhood seems to clearly promote commitment and willingness to become a volunteer (see also Jupp 2008). For example, one volunteer told me:

The containers, which are now used as shared accommodation facilities for refugees, were formerly used as temporary rooms for my daughter’s kindergarten. Therefore, I knew the place and never felt uncomfortable when I walked by or in it. So, I thought I could help there, as I already knew a lot about the rooms (Volunteer, Interview 23, translated by author).

The interviewee felt familiar with the premises, she knew how it felt to go inside, to move things around in that place, to show people around, and to deliver collected donations to the accommodation facilities. She felt secure, the material objects were familiar, and thus she felt confident that she could support the refugees appropriately. Positive emotions create self-efficacy.

However, many of the structures used for refugee relief were originally intended for the local population. Refugee accommodation can be found in schools or gymnasiums which are then temporarily unusable for their original purpose. This fact is often exploited by the media and can be heard from administrators in charge:

So, for example the one in Wilhelm Street now with us in the city or the one in Main Street,¹² it’s a good thing that there is no one in there anymore, because these are not good places for living, and I told the government I would leave them on standby, because ... because what happens when the numbers start to rise again, then we’re back to gymnasiums and that’s the worst thing, um [...] in these other accommodation facilities we’ll at least have, uh, partitioned *compartments*, yes, they’re not rooms because there’s no ceiling over them, but at least compartments (Mayor, Interview 11, translated by author).

These examples also illustrate the path dependency of arenas based on previous experiences. While in the first example, positively connoted experiences led to the containers being perceived as a safe, comfortable place, statements in the latter quote refer to a very tense and negative context. This took place in the late summer

¹²Both large collective accommodation facilities, locations anonymized.

of 2015, when the Bavarian town was forced to accommodate a surplus of 100 refugees per week. The accommodation in various school gymnasiums provided a very tense atmosphere for the city's staff, refugees, volunteers, and the local population. The clearly negative evaluation of this period is reflected in the words 'that's the worst thing'.

The collective coping with this situation (as well as with the provisional tent camp in a swimming pool parking lot mentioned above) is recalled and emphasized repeatedly even several years later, for example on public occasions (such as a reception for volunteers, or the honouring of individual representatives of voluntary organisations), or at volunteer events (annual meetings, helper meetings) and in personal conversations. The evaluation of these experiences is thus quite ambivalent and straining, as recalling past feelings of stress and fear of an escalatory situation at that time mix with relief and pride in coping. This influences contemporary practices of dealing with current shared accommodation facilities and the way in which people interact, perceive, and argue in the various negotiating situations (e.g. city leaders and the state government, municipal employees and volunteers, or volunteers and refugees in the accommodation facilities concerned).

11.5.3 The Contribution of Idiosyncratic Biographies

In addition, experiences that at first sight have no direct relation (either spatially or temporally) to current situations can influence the practices and emotional experiences of voluntary subjects. This is illustrated in the following example:

I was abroad, did some voluntary work in an African country. When I first arrived, I felt very lonely and insecure. I was helpless cos I didn't understand the language and didn't know the country. But I was welcomed warmly and everyone was so kind. I was very grateful. So, when I was back in Germany, I thought: like it was for me back there, it's the same now for all the refugees who come to this country (Volunteer, Interview 22, translated by author).

The fact that the interviewed woman thought about her experiences abroad and transferred her experience in anticipation of the refugees' perspective—assuming they must feel the same or even worse than she did—created empathy and a readiness to engage in personal relationships with refugees. So, this led to her voluntary action for refugees in the current time and place and influenced her present experiences. Similarly, many people have experiences that they feel allow them to relate to the refugees' situations. In the statement above, the volunteer told me about going on a trip, arriving in a different place, meeting new people, fighting tooth and nail to communicate, doing voluntary work, taking pictures, etc. All these practical doings were accompanied by emotions: being nervous, excited, and curious; feeling insecure and lonely, then welcomed and happy. This generates the wish to recreate her altogether positive experiences for refugees. Similar motives are expressed by several volunteers and show that the consideration of current volunteer practices must always take into account their interdependence with past experiences and arenas.

11.6 Conflicts, Ruptures and the Examination of Political Voluntary Subjects

While the concept of experience with its emphasis on the emotional dimension can explain the emergence of practices, on the one hand, it can simultaneously help to understand their ruptures on the other. The previous examples have shown that individuals who become ‘refugee helpers’ come with different experiences and then transact accordingly. In Dewey’s approach, the individual is not to be understood as an autonomous actor, but as the ‘place’ where all the different and complex information of a situation is brought together. Based on individual dispositions and habits, this information is processed in order to develop subjectivity as an attitude within the given situation. This is a permanent process whereby the subject is always in the process of becoming (Geiselhart 2019). In its constant development and change, the voluntary subject also has to deal with unpleasant, challenging and even conflicting situations.

Several interviewees mentioned experiences that were particularly frustrating and hard. Some were annoyed with other volunteers or refugees who had not acted according to their expectations. For example, one volunteer reported disappointedly that a family she had cared for had not invited her since she found an apartment for them, though they had had very intensive contact before. She told me:

So that was a friendship for me, which I then brought back to the voluntary level. [Because] they have since moved out, I thought to myself, well, they will certainly invite me for coffee, but they have already lived there for two months and I have not heard a thing. So I think, ok, it was just, so, this was in any case not a long-term friendship (Volunteer, Interview 07, translated by author).

Much more frequently, frustration is derived from conflicts with the bureaucratic levels of the asylum procedure and the corresponding administrative offices. Once a woman spontaneously said to me ‘I wouldn’t do it again!’— ‘it’ meaning her voluntary help for refugees. This happened in a completely private situation where her frustration about the immigration authorities who refused to allow a young man from Azerbaijan to work boiled over. ‘I just don’t get it; it’s like they want us volunteers to give up’, she concluded, enraged.

Conflicts among volunteers are especially burdensome as they directly affect the working atmosphere. For example, one volunteer felt unfairly treated and not sufficiently supported by the board in forwarding her requests for help, and so complained to other volunteers, as well as to full-time and municipal employees. Another was annoyed that the notes she hung up in the accommodation facility were always disappearing. She was sure that another volunteer was responsible even though she couldn’t prove it. Such conflicts are often staged in digital spaces where no physical confrontation is necessary. In these cases, the conflicts can be carried out with changed transaction partners, and do not necessarily have to be resolved. Such conflicts often circle around opinions of how best to assist refugees or what alternative methods of action and self-initiatives are suitable.

However, conflicts in voluntary refugee work rarely cause volunteers to quit. Much more frequently, a change in practices can be observed, for example through a reduction in working hours, a move to another field of activity or a new composition of certain boards. When volunteers terminate their commitment entirely it is often due to changes and ruptures in other realms of their life. Some find new jobs, others move to another town, or their family situation changes. However, a major issue discussed in conflicting situations is the question of to what extent voluntary refugee work is political or even activism.

Fleischmann and Steinhilper (2017) argue that volunteering for refugees should not be understood as unpolitical, as often claimed by media or volunteers themselves. Even if they correctly discuss the forms of political subjectivation that take place and draw attention to the transformative potentials that result from it, they neglect the individual experiences and reflections of volunteers. Most volunteers are well aware of the politicization of ‘their’ field of activity and address and reflect on it in different ways.

It can be confirmed that many volunteers clearly reject politicization, as the following quote shows:

[audible inhalation] From my experience, it’s possible to be totally non-political, um ... yes, because I don’t really care [...]. You can stay out of it. That’s possible. [...] That doesn’t mean for me that I agree, but I *do not want* to get involved in politics; that was my premise from the beginning (Volunteer, Interview 07, translated by author).

Others regard themselves as unpolitical but recognize the political attributions within the arenas of volunteering and address them through reflection:

I would still describe myself as not being politically active, but ... yes, it’s just that it’s a little bit political when you just say I don’t agree with what everyone says—we can’t [help] everybody and there are too many and so on (Volunteer, Interview 02, translated by author).

And finally, a comparatively small number of respondents see themselves as being politically active in their practices, even though the transition to politically institutionalized arenas is usually absent. Since 2015 the researched association has had its own working group on politics. This working group addresses issues of local and national migration and integration policy. However, from currently more than 300 registered members, only five are in this group. Communal and integration politics have an ambivalent aftertaste, as one volunteer stated: ‘Actually, I see it as something political; definitely [...] it’s a political statement to get involved on a voluntary basis.’ The volunteer then reported that she once joined a meeting of activists against right-wing radicalism. ‘That was actually too political for me [...] [laughs] that was too much for me ... politically negative in the sense that politics often ... it’s unfortunately often just talk’ (Volunteer, Interview 05, translated by author). The volunteer differentiated between politics in terms of negotiating on a theoretical basis and being political in one’s practical doings and commitments. She also explained that she did not feel comfortable amongst the professional politicians who joined those activities.

Many volunteers insisted that they are not politically motivated or politically active, at least at the programmatic level, and they sometimes even clearly distinguished themselves from 'integration politics'. The field of voluntary refugee relief involves very different political concepts and understandings. This creates numerous tensions against the background of the strong processes of politicization in the fields of refugee care, integration, and migration. Conflicts arise around the question of the 'right' or 'necessary' degree of political activity of volunteer refugee helpers. Volunteers, who are unpolitical in their self-perception, therefore move and act in a highly politicized field. These tensions have decisive influences on the dynamics of voluntary organisations as they often provoke internal conflicts. In meetings or informal discussions, political programmatic questions are frequently raised and discussed.

11.7 Conclusion

This chapter has dealt with an established relief organisation for refugee help in a mid-sized Bavarian city and offers insights from the perspective of the pragmatist philosophy of praxis. The empirical data is interpreted with the help of the concept of experience, understood as a situational and supra-individual form of practical doings, emotional live-through, and intellectual reflection.

A close look at the spatial and material conditions, collective memories, idiosyncratic biographies and major lines of conflict revealed how volunteers emerge differently as subjects. It became clear that 'being a volunteer' becomes effective in particular through the personal relationships people establish through transactions amongst each other and with refugees. Furthermore, the path dependency and situational dependence of volunteers' experiences in and through their practices was illustrated. The emotionally pleasant and sometimes ambivalent moments were the ones that bound the volunteers to their work and the organisation. The negotiating spaces of voluntary refugee relief can be described as fluid and unstable and have great impact on the experiences of volunteers.

It was possible to show the contestation of volunteers induced by the increasing politicization of 'their' field of activity and to provide valuable new insights into the 'conflicting nature of volunteering' due to this politicization. As Kurt Lewin argues, "the so-called minority problems are in reality problems of the majority" (Lewin 1953: 295), meaning that experiences at the grassroots level of voluntary refugee relief reflect and concern processes of refugee integration as a whole. It is essential to see that for many volunteers, their work only becomes meaningful through experiences of togetherness and through the lived relationships. However, these are often prevented or hindered by the administrative side. Moreover, volunteers increasingly feel they are being used as service providers for the aim of maintaining the current asylum system, which pursues political interests they cannot share. Political authorities have made volunteer activities much more time-consuming and frustrating due to stricter laws. Simultaneously the current culture of appreciation only honours

volunteers for their activities but not for their personal commitment and emotional engagement. Yet the willingness to help and integrate refugees relies on the latter, not on formalities or duties, or on praise from management or full-time staff. The commitment of volunteers should be supported wisely by promoting existing relationships. Furthermore, cooperation between volunteers and administrative bodies should be experienced as a common interest in a shared goal.

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