

Who Deserves Compassion? The Moral and Emotional Dilemmas of Volunteering in the 'Refugee Crisis'

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Abstract

Since the 'refugee crisis' in 2015, civil society across Europe has participated in an unprecedented wave of support towards migrants. This article focuses on the volunteers engaged in this movement and explores how they relate emotions of compassion and evaluations about the 'deservingness' of refugees. We do so by analysing the moral dilemmas British volunteers face in their interaction with refugees, and the strategies they develop to avoid the difficulties that emerge when judging who the 'deserving' refugees are. We illustrate how these coping strategies lead them to emphasise the practicality of their role and to move beyond logics of deservingness. We argue that these dilemmatic situations reshape the meaning of compassionate acts in ambivalent ways: while reinforcing a tendency to create an emotional distance, they also allow volunteers to challenge idealised representations of refugees and foreground the political nature of their vulnerability.

Keywords

compassion, deservingness, emotions, innocence, 'refugee crisis', solidarity, volunteering, vulnerability

Introduction

Since the 'long summer of migration' in 2015, individuals and charities across Europe have participated in an unprecedented wave of support towards refugees.¹ In particular, the picture of Alan Kurdi, the Syrian boy who died attempting to cross the Mediterranean

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Sea in September 2015, laid bare the lack of compassion and care in government policies (Armbruster, 2019). As a reaction, individuals and charities started engaging in a broad and diverse volunteer-based movement epitomised by highly visible campaigns such as Refugees Welcome and the Twitter hashtag #CompassionCrisis. This response materialised into initiatives such as organised hosting networks, language courses, food and clothes donations, legal assistance or rescue missions at the European borders.

This article aims to explore this ‘compassionate’ response from the perspective of the volunteers engaged in these activities, looking specifically at how these actors construct and negotiate ideas about the ‘deservingness’ of refugees. Through the focus on how volunteers represent refugees as ‘deserving’ of their help, we aim to analyse how charity actors define and justify their engagement, and the moral values and emotions underpinning it. Also, more generally in a context in which an increasingly large proportion of refugees are left to rely on non-governmental and third sector organisations (APPG, 2017; Mayblin and James, 2019), we aim to gain a deeper understanding of this growing form of non-state welfare and of the services that shape migrants’ lives and opportunities (Feischmidt et al., 2019).

We pay particular attention to how volunteers deal with moral and emotional dilemmas around who deserves their support, which emerge when the perceived boundaries between representations of ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ refugees become blurred (see Eliasoph (2016) and Theodossopoulos (2016) for a similar focus on the dilemmas of volunteers and activists). As shown by Chauvin and Garcés-Mascareñas (2014), the notion of ‘deservingness’ is useful as it allows us to explore how migrants’ strategies intersect with state definitions of legal categories and how different agents (e.g. charities, street-level bureaucrats) define and implement processes of distinction between groups of migrants (Dhaliwal and Forkert, 2015; Menjivar and Lakhani, 2016; Monforte et al., 2019; Shiff, 2020; Tonkiss, 2018). However, only a few studies have explored this idea from the point of view of the individual actors who engage in volunteering.² Also, notions of compassion and humanitarianism have been largely investigated in relation to governing discourses and policies (Fassin, 2010; Sirriyeh, 2018; Ticktin, 2017) as well as charity or non-governmental organisation (NGO) discourses (Armbruster, 2019; Fassin and d’Halluin, 2005; Hyndman, 2000; Redfield, 2013). Nevertheless, they have remained relatively under-explored at the scale of personal engagement and practices (see Harrison, 2013), which instead constitute the subject of this article. As we will develop below, this focus is important because it shows how deservingness is endorsed, negotiated and sometimes subverted by those who directly construct and implement collective actions in support of refugees.

Our general argument is that established notions of deservingness are destabilised in the process of volunteering, hence shifting the meanings of compassion. We observed that the boundaries between ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ refugees become questioned especially when the roles and activities of volunteers and refugees are not clearly defined and in spaces in which these two groups experience the effects of state bordering processes. In these situations, volunteers are faced with moral and emotional dilemmas related to how lines are being drawn between who is included or excluded, accepted or not, deserving of their compassion or undeserving. We show that participants develop specific mechanisms to cope with these dilemmas: they focus on the execution of

practical tasks and they avoid making judgements about the deservingness of refugees. We argue that this leads them to negotiate the meaning given to their activities and re-evaluate compassion in seemingly divergent ways: on the one hand, they reinforce a tendency to create an emotional distance between themselves and the refugees but, on the other, they also potentially counter dominant discourses around compassion, in particular by challenging the very notion that their compassionate engagement should follow a logic of deservingness. More generally this article shows that, far from being stable over time, the moral values and emotions that underpin acts of compassion are constantly re-evaluated and re-interpreted throughout the experience in the field.

In the first section of the article, we link the literature on compassion and deservingness with that on the forms of refugee support that emerged after 2015. We then present the context of the empirical research and the methods that we used. Turning to our empirical findings, we illustrate how participants define different figures of ‘deserving’ refugees. In the two final sections, we explore the tensions around these representations during the experience of volunteering, which can lead to questioning notions of deservingness. We then analyse three coping mechanisms that our respondents articulate in order to overcome these dilemmas: shifting the responsibility to make judgement to external agencies; actively avoiding situations in which they should produce a judgement; portraying the situation of the refugees as too complex to make a judgement. Finally, we discuss the consequences of these processes, stressing the ambivalence of volunteers’ engagement.

Compassion, Deservingness and Refugee Support Volunteering

The vast movement of refugee support that has emerged across Europe as a result of the 2015 ‘refugee crisis’ has been the subject of growing scholarly attention (Agustín and Bak Jorgensen, 2019; Armbruster, 2019; Della Porta, 2018; Feischmidt et al., 2019; Fontanari and Borri, 2017; Youkhana and Sutter, 2017). The literature has focused on the emergence and nature of this volunteer-based movement (De Jong and Ataç, 2017; Sandri, 2018; Zamponi, 2017), its relationship to political action (Fleischmann and Steinhilper, 2017; Vandevoordt and Verschraegen, 2019) and the role of emotions in mobilising participants (Armbruster, 2019; Doidge and Sandri, 2018; Karakayali, 2017; Sirriyeh, 2018). In particular, these studies show how compassion is a central emotion that motivates a variety of actors to participate in the movement, as well as how this emotion shapes the nature of civil society response to the ‘refugee crisis’ (Armbruster, 2019; Kleres, 2018; Sirriyeh, 2018). Indeed, as Sirriyeh (2018: 4) argues, this movement was characterised by ‘an outpouring of expressions of compassion’. Compassion can be generally defined as a benevolent disposition, which is fundamentally other-regarding – as the Latin etymology of the word, ‘suffering with’, indicates (Williams, 2008). During the ‘refugee crisis’, charities and networks appealed to the compassion of citizens by asking them, as the name of certain organisations and campaigns evoke, to ‘Choose Love’ or to ‘Care for Calais’. As shown by Sirriyeh (2018), these compassionate responses were also triggered by media and political discourses that invoked the generosity of citizens. Following Hochschild (2012 [1983]), Kleres (2018) argues that compassion can be

regarded as a feeling rule in this sector, indicating how people should feel, as well as how they adapt to these rules, through emotion management.

The analysis of compassion as a 'feeling rule' in the Refugee Welcome movement resonates with the broader literature on volunteering and humanitarian action. This literature shows that emotions, such as compassion, are often strategically mobilised and built by NGOs and charities to optimise the recruitment, sustain the involvement and guide the actions of participants (Bornstein and Redfield, 2011; Fassin, 2010; Ticktin, 2017). Nevertheless, foregrounding the role of emotions in the refugee support sector should not lead us to overlook how it operates in practice at the individual level and within specific contexts (Whitebrook, 2002). As an 'emotion in operation' (Berlant, 2004: 4), compassion is indeed deeply connected to action, 'containing a directive to action to alleviate the suffering' (Sirriyeh, 2018: 10; see also Boltanski, 1993). Moreover, it is important to note that compassion is also intrinsically an ambiguous 'feeling rule' that can refer to a diverse range of emotions, from pity to solidarity (Sirriyeh, 2018; Theodossopoulos, 2016). The former is based on the objectification of the sufferer by someone who is not suffering, while the latter indicates co-suffering between equals (Hoggett, 2006; Kleres, 2018). We therefore need to analyse how this prominent 'feeling rule' is shaped and re-interpreted in and through the day-to-day actions of the volunteers, beyond the articulation of this emotion in policy and charity discourses.

More generally, it is important to stress that compassion, as an emotion that guides social relations, relates to specific moral evaluation processes about the suffering and deservingness of those who are perceived as in need of support (Nussbaum, 1996; Sznajder, 1998; Williams, 2008). As Nussbaum (1996: 28) suggests, far from being an 'irrational force in human affairs', compassion (or pity, which she uses to refer to the same emotion (1996: 29)) is based on three evaluative principles: (a) the acknowledgement of the other's suffering as serious; (b) the belief in the innocence of the sufferer – in the sense that they did not intentionally produce their own suffering; and (c) the perceived similarity between the helper and the sufferer. This view has been criticised for being idealistic and not capturing the way compassion works in real life. Whitebrook (2002), for instance, observes that it is virtually impossible to express a definite judgement about the innocence of the sufferers or to completely identify with them. Nevertheless, Nussbaum's critics still emphasise the centrality of evaluation processes, and in particular of the judgement about the 'deservingness' of people in need of compassion. For example, Berlant (2004) argues that compassion is based on a judgement by the 'spectator': 'since some pain is more compelling than other pain, we must make judgements about which cases deserve attention' (2004: 11).

Drawing on these ideas, we want to explore how judgements and evaluation processes about the 'deservingness' of refugees are constructed and negotiated by volunteers through their experience 'in the field'. We will show that, while volunteers often tend to endorse and reproduce charity, governmental and media discourses around deservingness, pro-refugee volunteering is often characterised by tensions and dilemmas. For example, they might experience emotional difficulties when dealing with the traumatic pasts and the suffering of migrants (Doidge and Sandri, 2018) or when witnessing behaviours they might disapprove of (Malkki, 2015; Willemez, 2002). In other cases, volunteers might also become uncomfortable with the increasingly disciplinary attitudes of certain NGOs

(Armbruster, 2019). Focusing on dilemmas, we aim to explore the ground for the re-negotiation of established notions of deservingness. Through coping strategies that often characterise the emotional work of charity workers and volunteers when faced with moral and emotional ‘impasses’ (see Malkki, 2015; Roth, 2015), we maintain that the meaning itself of compassion also changes in the process of supporting the refugees. We will show in particular how moral and emotional dilemmas lead volunteers to re-evaluate two predominant discourses that have strongly shaped notions of deservingness during the ‘refugee crisis’. The first relates to the governance of immigration and asylum issues through ‘humanitarian reason’ (Fassin, 2010; Ticktin, 2017), whereby the main criteria for the judgement of who can be granted a refugee status is vulnerability and suffering (Fassin and d’Halluin, 2005). The second centres around the neoliberal image of the ‘responsible’ and ‘proactive’ subject (Brown, 2003; Monforte et al., 2019). Within this form of government, deserving migrants are constructed as productive individuals who are keen to demonstrate their civic and economic integration into the ‘host society’.

We show that these representations are especially challenged by volunteers who engage in three types of activities: those who host refugees; those who do visits in immigration detention and removal centres; and those who volunteer in Calais and Dunkirk. We suggest that this is due to two main aspects. First, these three forms of volunteering are characterised by higher uncertainty compared to other forms of engagement that occur in more definite and regulated settings, like that of a charity office. In these situations, volunteers are faced with multiple and different needs of refugees. As a result, they often have to negotiate the boundaries of their roles and carefully manage the expectations of the beneficiaries. Second, the spaces where these three forms of volunteering take place are characterised by intense bordering processes (in the sense of social ordering and border-making practices, see Yuval-Davis et al., 2017) that produce lines between who is included and who is excluded in the everyday life (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2012; Yuval-Davis et al., 2017). Arguably, these bordering processes occur at different scales, including the physical frontier in Calais and the immigration removal centre but also the more intimate spaces of the home, where moral lines of inclusion and exclusion run through (Askins, 2014; Humphris, 2019).

Researching Compassion: Context and Methods

The analysis in this article draws on a comparative research that explores how volunteers based in the UK and France frame their commitment to the support of refugees. We draw on 72 in-depth interviews with volunteers involved in different British charities and networks active for the support of refugees. The interviews took place between May 2017 and November 2018 in London, Birmingham, Sheffield and the Midlands, and were conducted in a variety of local, national and transnational organisations. Some of these were active before the 2015 ‘refugee crisis’ and were recognised as established actors in the field, such as charities specialised in humanitarian aid, legal advice and those facilitating visits in detention centres. Others (e.g. those for hosting refugees and groups active in Calais) emerged more recently and operate at a more informal level. The participants in our sample dedicate themselves to different types of activities, including: legal advice; emotional and therapeutic support; donations of food and clothes in the Calais ‘jungle’;

hosting; and English language courses. Our sample comprises volunteers of different age, gender and socio-economic backgrounds. However, it should be noted that a large part of our participants are women and retired people (55 women and 28 retired). Also, in terms of ethnic and socio-economic background, most of our participants presented themselves as white and 'middle class' in the interviews. Charity representatives confirmed that these profiles are over-represented among volunteers engaged in this field. Finally, the vast majority of our participants started volunteering in the refugee support sector during or after the 2015 'refugee crisis', while only 19 participants started before 2015.

The participants were approached through gatekeepers (often charity representatives) or directly (in the case of informal networks) and through a snowball strategy. Our engagement, either through previous academic research or individual volunteering in charities supporting refugees or disadvantaged minorities in the UK and abroad, allowed us to quickly gain trust among representatives and volunteers. And, while we did not engage directly in the volunteering activities of the associations in the course of our empirical fieldwork, we observed some of the activities of the charities (for example drop-in sessions for legal and welfare advice), and we engaged in informal discussions with volunteers when possible. Our position between 'insiders' (i.e. expert and engaged in the refugee support sector) and 'outsiders' (i.e. not involved in the associations included in the research) enabled us to relate to the experiences of the participants while not making them feel judged when discussing about their moral dilemmas and the difficulties of their daily activities. To facilitate this discussion, our interviews included questions about, for example, the volunteers' personal trajectories, their relationship with refugees, their general experience of volunteering, including the dilemmas that they face and the values that motivate their engagement. The data collected were coded and analysed with NVivo, through which we identified the different representations of the refugees (positive and negative), the various reasons to act, the values and emotions shaping the experience of volunteering, as well as the potential transformations in the engagement of the participants. The representations of deserving refugees that we analyse in the next section – and the dilemmas and coping strategies they lead to – were identified inductively, focusing in particular on responses to questions related to the volunteers' personal difficulties and the description of concrete situations in which they critically reflected about their own engagement.

'Is Her Need Great Enough?': Deservingness, Moral Dilemmas and Emotional Unease in Volunteering with Refugees

During the interviews, we observed that volunteers developed three main representations of refugees that tend to reinforce governmental divisions between the desirable (and therefore deserving of compassion) and the undesirable ones (undeserving). The first representation aligns with humanitarianism and stresses suffering and helplessness as opposed to the idea of the refugee as a potentially threatening subject, represented by the figure of the invader or potential terrorist (Grohman et al., 2017; Rettberg and Gajjala, 2016). For instance, when asked to discuss whether she made a distinction between

helping refugees and British homeless people, a volunteer from a London-based hosting network argued that refugees are ‘more vulnerable’: ‘I know many homeless people have very little recourse to anybody else. But [refugees] specifically have less recourse to the other actors in the field, such as homeless charities. I think they are more vulnerable’ (Interview 3, woman, 58 years old). As this example shows, vulnerability is perceived as ‘situational’ (Armbruster, 2019: 2686) and can be produced by different circumstances at different moments of the lives of the refugees. From this perspective, the Home Office is frequently considered as the major source of refugee suffering once in the UK, both because of the uncertainty of the asylum process and because of the lack of support after getting the refugee status.

The second figure is that of the resilient agent, who withstood dreadful situations. This is for example illustrated by a volunteer in Sheffield, who insisted on the resilience of refugees, despite the challenges they face: ‘I’ve never ever heard one person moan, ever. No moaning, and the stoicism, and the courage, the resilience is phenomenal. It’s humbling to witness it’ (Interview 15, woman, 62 years old). Bravery is also often acknowledged as characterising the refugees, as a London-based volunteer highlighted:

If your house was burnt down, if you were in prison unjustly without trial [. . .] what would you be doing? [. . .] I know one thing, I don’t have half the courage of what the people I’ve got the privilege to help had to do. (Interview 9, woman, 70 years old)

In contrast with the image of the vulnerable refugee, in this case the difficulties are not used to depict refugees as victims but to show their remarkable determination and strength. Thus, the figure of the ‘resilient refugee’ starts from the same premises of vulnerability but stresses agency and exceptional courage rather than portraying refugees as victims.

The third articulation of deservingness that emerges from our interviews manifests even further the idea of neoliberal subjectivity and agency. It represents the ‘entrepreneurial refugee’, who counters the idea of the ‘scrounger’ or bogus asylum seeker (Banks, 2012). This was clearly stated by a London-based volunteer of a national charity: ‘They [the refugees] really want to assimilate and contribute to society and get on with their lives really [. . .], they don’t want to be a burden on society any more than anybody else’ (Interview 27, man, 69 years old). From the same perspective, another host stressed how pleased she was when her guest became a ‘British tax payer’ (Interview 1, woman, 61 years old, London). Within this type of deservingness, the refugees are seen as proactive and productive subjects that should be enabled to express their full potential as economic agents and the more general contribution they can make to society.

These illustrations of how participants talk about those they aim to support show that the portrayals of refugees as vulnerable, resilient and entrepreneurial counter various negative views, such as that of the ‘invader’, the ‘bogus’ refugee or the ‘scrounger’. The more positive images that participants put forward in their narratives resonate with a compassionate framework (close to pity) characterised by an objectification and idealisation of the sufferers, defined as ‘pure’ and ‘innocent’ (Hoggett, 2006; Sirriyeh, 2018; Ticktin, 2017). Our analysis, however, shows that these idealised representations and distinctions are questioned in the experience of volunteering.

Volunteers' dilemmas can be produced by questions emerging around the morals of the refugees they support. For instance, when asked about the challenges she faced when volunteering in detention centres, a London-based participant originally from Israel mentioned the case of a detainee who had a 'threatening' behaviour: 'The other thing has been working with . . . one person who was . . . unbelievably angry, threatening [. . .] not to me personally but came out with things that were really really (*sic*) worrying, aggressive, hugely anti-Israel' (Interview 44, woman, 71 years old). A similar tension was experienced by a volunteer who went to a camp in Dunkirk with a local group from the Midlands, and who underlined her feeling of 'confusion' and disappointment with a woman who pretended to be a victim of human trafficking: 'It turned out to be a complete lie, complete lie' (Interview 36, woman, 57 years old), she reiterated in the interview. These dilemmas are even stronger when volunteers interact with highly stigmatised figures, especially criminal offenders in detention or smugglers in the camps. A volunteer from the Midlands argued that the presence of 'bad people' was one of the most challenging aspects of volunteering:

We're quite aware that if we go into the camp, well not that there's many camps now in Northern France, but when we go into camps that there are the bad people there. There are people smugglers there. There are possibly maybe Taliban. Like you don't know. (Interview 57, woman, 38 years old)

In other cases, volunteers can also question the suffering of the people they support. For example, a host told us how she started asking herself whether her guest genuinely needed help or made a 'calculated decision' to access a service:

The thing I feel is challenging to myself is, is her need great enough? Like, because she has friends, she has family here, and she is gonna go into social services, and again, I don't know, is that a calculated decision that she's made? (Interview 32, woman, 32 years old, Birmingham)

Similarly, other volunteers mentioned the difficulty to engage in supporting refugees who are not as isolated or vulnerable as they initially thought. For instance, speaking of her guest, another host remarked how she had hoped they would spend more time together while 'he prefers to feed himself' and to spend time with his friends outside the house (Interview 13, woman, 78 years old, London). In contrast with the frustration of trying to help someone who appears less vulnerable than expected, others complained about the perceived lack of agency of their guest. For instance, a volunteer described one of her guests as 'too troubled' and complaining (Interview 12, woman, 52 years old, London). Similarly, a London-based host described his guest through the stereotype of the 'immigrant sponger' (a representation that, however, he dissociated himself from):

[GUEST NAME] said he would bring his family here and he thought the council would give him a flat. No, I said, it's not that simple, they might not give you a flat. This is like the *Daily Mail* idea of immigrants spongers. He worked in a car factory. I said you should get an Arab-English dictionary. . . how didn't he buy one? So I phoned up the Arabic shop and gave him the address to go and get it, but he didn't. (Interview 14, man, 88 years old)

As these examples illustrate, volunteers are often faced with ambiguous situations in which the person they are helping suddenly appears to them as not fully deserving their support, confirming negative stereotypes such as the ‘sponger’ or ‘Taliban’. In the most extreme cases, these dilemmas have led to periods of burnout, as several volunteers in Calais and Dunkirk reported.

The interviews we conducted have confirmed the troubling nature of compassionate acts. In these situations, the figures of the deserving refugees are challenged and contrasted with the re-emergence of negative representations to which they are initially opposed. These tensions generate moral dilemmas that have both a cognitive and an emotional dimension. Volunteers evoke a mismatch between certain expected conducts linked to their initial representations of the refugees and the actual behaviours of those who benefit from their support. In these cases, volunteers feel they have to make difficult judgement calls about who deserves their compassion and who does not. At the same time, they also experience an emotional unease (and sometimes distress) as they realise that they could reproduce negative stereotypes about ‘underserving migrants’, which would potentially undermine their compassionate acts. However, the re-evaluation of these disturbing situations allows the volunteers to recompose their action by dampening their potential negative judgements and appeasing their emotional distress.

The Reaffirmation of Volunteers’ Commitment: Focus on Action and Judgement Avoidance

In order to sustain their engagement over time, volunteers have to deal with the frustrations and negative representations generated by these ambiguous experiences, which potentially undermine their motivation, commitment and relationship with the beneficiaries of their activities. In their narratives, we observed three predominant coping strategies based on both emotional and cognitive labour, characterised by processes of reappraisal of their representations of refugees and, at a more general level, of compassion as a ‘feeling rule’ underpinning their role as volunteers.

The first strategy is to shift the responsibility to make a judgement about who is worthy of help (and who is not) to external agencies, such as the charity or the government. For instance, the Birmingham-based host mentioned above explained how she finds herself uncomfortable with not knowing the background and story of her guests, in particular because this leads her to question their suffering. At the same time, she also stressed that she trusts her charity made an informed decision about their needs:

I suppose what it is, is there’s a trust that I have to have with the charity that the people that are coming to me, you know, do need the space, and do need the room. And as long as that’s established, and they are happy with that, then it doesn’t, it shouldn’t matter to me why they’re there or why they’re not there. And if I can then provide a service and be helpful then that’s fine. (Interview 32, woman, 32 years old)

Other volunteers would invoke the state’s authority (like ‘the blessed Home Office’, Interview 44, woman, 71 years old, London) in making the judgement about who ‘deserves’ help and who does not, regardless of whether they agree with it or not. This

type of coping mechanism allows the volunteers to focus on the 'doing' ('You're just there to support the person', Interview 44, woman, 71 years old, London) and to externalise the responsibility of making a judgement about the 'deservingness' of refugees in ambiguous situations.

The second mechanism similarly enables volunteers to avoid situations in which they should produce a judgement on who deserves their help. However, it is different because it emphasises the urgency of the situation. As a volunteer who went to Dunkirk claimed, the focus on the 'mouths to feed' alleviates her anxiety about not knowing if her help went to the 'wrong people':

But we would end up helping people that we thought were maybe traffickers, and not nice people at all, and then how do you cope with that, you know, that your efforts go maybe to the wrong people? And you just couldn't, you just couldn't make that distinction, you couldn't make judgement calls. Just literally there's a mouth to feed, you feed it, full-stop. (Interview 36, woman, 57 years old, Midlands)

In certain cases, this coping strategy led to a reconversion of volunteering activities. For instance, a participant who went through a period of burnout after his first experience in Dunkirk, explained how he managed to commit himself again, by avoiding situations where he had to 'help everybody' in a 'generalised way':

I went back again this year for the re-build, but that was a whole different kind of mission because it was very mission-specific [. . .] We weren't there to try and help everybody in any kind of generalised way, we were there specifically to re-build this building. [. . .] And I found that a lot easier, because I could emotionally disengage from everything else going on, and just pour all my energy into doing the work that we were doing on that particular project. (Interview 40, man, 45 years old, Midlands)

Through this coping mechanism, the volunteers develop a discourse centred on the practice of support in order to justify their commitment to volunteering. As this last extract illustrates through the idea of 'emotional disengagement', focusing on a clear material and physical chore helps avoiding the moral dilemmas and negative feelings emerging when volunteers are led to assess the suffering and the morality of refugees.

The judgement of the 'merit' of the refugees is also at the core of the third and final coping mechanism. In this case, volunteers portray the situation in which refugees find themselves as too complex, to the point of not being able to fairly gauge their suffering or morality. One of these factors relates to cultural and religious differences. For example, a host explained how she felt uncomfortable towards her guest fasting during Ramadan. She said: 'I felt as a sort wishy-washy liberal because I was thinking "you have to get out and find a job!"' At the same time, she said:

But that wasn't negative. That was interesting to examine. It was interesting to think where do I stand on fasting for a month [. . .] it's about me really, the metropolitan life racing around and thinking how ridiculous and then needing to stop and thinking about it more carefully. (Interview 12, woman, 52 years old, London)

In this case, the idea of cultural differences was used to describe the situation as so complex that she could not clearly establish if her guest truly deserved her support (she defined the situation as ‘interesting’, avoiding judging it more clearly).

Another element raised as a source of complexity is the mental health of refugees, which is often presented as being linked to their traumatic past experiences. For instance, a volunteer explained that the bedroom she used to host a refugee was partly damaged by her guest, therefore raising a dilemma about how to judge the morality of this person. She then argued that this was due to what she perceived as mental health issues (mentioned here and discussed more explicitly later in the interview): ‘But increasingly I realise [GUEST NAME] is acting at the best of her capacity. That she, she can’t pull her act together much more really’ (Interview 30, woman, 48 years old, Birmingham).

Finally, to condone what are perceived to be reproachable conducts, volunteers also refer to the extreme destitution experienced by refugees. For example, a volunteer in Sheffield explained her frustration when refugees seemed to be taking advantage of the donations by selling them on eBay. She then evoked the idea that the difficult conditions they faced (they ‘have nothing’) makes the situation too complex for her to make a judgement on their ‘deservingness’. In fact, she added: ‘Good luck to them because I would do that if I had nothing!’ (Interview 15, woman, 62 years old).

On the whole, we observed that the tensions encountered in the interactions with refugees lead to foreground the practical aspect of volunteering. Indeed, through these three coping mechanisms, participants place action and practical tasks at the core of their engagement and in doing so they avoid making judgements: they delegate this responsibility to other actors; they avoid situations in which they have to make decisions on deservingness; they acknowledge their inability to fairly evaluate complex situations. This allows them to deal with their own negative emotions and to sustain their engagement over time.

Compassion in Action: Casting Deservingness Aside?

Rather than being exceptions, moral dilemmas are constitutive moments in the articulation of the commitment to refugee support, and more generally humanitarian aid (Armbruster, 2019; Malkki, 2015; Roth, 2015). We showed that these quandaries produce a stronger focus on executing practical tasks and a distancing from the moment of judgement about the deservingness of the refugee beneficiaries. As we mentioned above, compassion is an ‘emotion in operation’ (Berlant, 2004: 4) based on a complex evaluation of the sufferer (Nussbaum, 1996). As they aim to cope with the moral and emotional dilemmas that emerge in the course of their experience in the field, pro-refugee volunteers become more involved in the operational dimension of compassion and tend to avoid evaluative considerations. We argue that this shift can lead to change the meaning of compassion in two potentially diverging ways. On the one hand, it can buttress tendencies in the charity and humanitarian sector to disconnect the experience of volunteers from that of the refugees. On the other, it can open up new avenues towards more politicised forms of compassion, in particular through a solidarity framework.

By centring on the ‘doing’ and by withdrawing from the frustrating interactions with the beneficiaries, volunteers risk exacerbating the tendency to create an emotional

distance between the ‘helpers’ and the ‘helped’, often characterising the humanitarian and charity sector (Collovald, 2002). As discussed by Malkki (2015) and Willemez (2002), in many cases workers and volunteers in international humanitarian organisations experience emotional challenges as a result of their difficult interactions with members of the recipient groups. To cope with these situations, they retreat into the volunteers’ group, motivating themselves through the effectiveness of their actions, and try to develop an ‘affective neutrality’ (Malkki, 2015: 68) in their relations with those they aim to support (see also Roth, 2015). These coping strategies resonate with those developed by the volunteers we interviewed, for instance around the lack of gratitude and the doubts about the genuineness of refugees’ needs. More generally, as observed by Armbruster (2019: 2693), volunteers who focus on the execution of practical tasks risk becoming a “‘to-be-managed” group whose contact with refugees [is] subject to training and regulation’. By doing so, they might reinforce a view of charities as ‘agents of professionalism’ (Armbruster, 2019: 2693), that have the power to establish a moral economy of vulnerability and independence through which the refugees’ worth is assessed. Therefore, they risk leaving unchallenged the role of decision-makers (charities and the state more generally) that act as disciplining bodies both towards the volunteer population and the refugees (Armbruster, 2019: 2693; see also Fassin, 2010).

At the same time, our analysis shows that the emphasis placed on the ‘action’ of volunteering also potentially counters dominant discourses around compassion as pity, since it diverts their engagement from the centrality of deservingness. To cope with the frustration generated by witnessing unexpected conducts or situations, which might lead to negative representations, the volunteers feel that they need to stop asking themselves if the refugees are *truly* suffering, innocent and therefore worthy. ‘Deservingness’ thus appears no longer crucial to the sustainment of their engagement. But the volunteers also potentially unhinge the current dominant discourse around compassion as pity by decoupling compassionate acts from deservingness. In fact, they acknowledge the possibility that the refugees they are helping could be making ‘calculated decisions’ (as one of the hosts suspected), could lie to them (as in the case of the woman in Calais) or could exploit other refugees (as in the case of smugglers). Nevertheless, they continue to support them. Hoggett (2006: 156) argues that compassion, unlike pity, ‘requires patience, tolerance of frustration, the capacity to withstand disillusionment’. No longer in the space of purity and innocence of the idealised other, the volunteers are faced with ‘the space for culpability, ungratefulness, ugliness and bloody-mindedness’ where real-life refugees live. While the volunteers we interviewed do not explicitly enumerate solidarity among their motivations, the ‘simultaneous identification and dis-identification with the suffering of the other’ (Hoggett, 2006: 161) is necessary to start relinquishing a sentimental form of pity and to endorse a kind of compassion more oriented towards solidarity and social justice (Hoggett, 2006; Nussbaum, 1996; Sznajder, 1998; Theodossopoulos, 2016). As the former is exclusively focused on the alleviation of material suffering, the latter combines compassion towards suffering with anger at injustice (Kleres, 2018). Therefore, challenging an objectified and idealised notion of the refugees can help decentring the suffering of others and emphasising the (political) root causes of their vulnerability (Hoggett, 2006; Whitebrook, 2002).

Conclusion

In this article, we have explored the construction of compassion at the individual level of the volunteers operating in the refugee support sector in the UK. We have shown that pro-refugee volunteers do not completely adhere to mainstream understandings of deservingness and continually negotiate them in their interaction with the refugees, hence also reappraising the compassionate nature of their action. Throughout their engagement, volunteers are faced with the problematic nature of the idealised representations underpinning the 'feeling rule' of compassion, and therefore they experience moral and emotional dilemmas. In order to sustain their engagement over time they develop coping mechanisms, through which they focus on practical support tasks with no direct involvement in the judgement about who deserves their compassion. By doing so, they produce ambiguous effects with regard to their engagement in refugee support groups. On the one hand, volunteers tend to view their role as mere executors of tasks, hence strengthening the tendency to detach themselves emotionally from the experience of refugees. At the same time, however, they also unsettle the dominant compassionate response to the 'refugee crisis' by acknowledging the complex and political nature of refugees' vulnerability. This shows how, while compassion definitely shapes volunteers' responses to the 'refugee crisis', 'feeling rules' are not fixed nor simply strategically mobilised by movement organisers but evolve and are constantly negotiated 'from below'.

Overall, our analysis has shed light on how notions of deservingness (Chauvin and Garcés-Mascareñas, 2014) permeate society on the migration issue in ambivalent ways, especially in unsettled times (Shiff, 2020). Far from being consensual and stable over time, we have argued that deservingness – and the moral judgements it relates to – is constantly negotiated and re-interpreted not only by state, legal and charity actors (Chauvin and Garcés-Mascareñas, 2014; Shiff, 2020) but also by the individuals operating in the field. We have shown that the focus on how individual actors cope with moral and emotional dilemmas in the course of their engagement is crucial for the understanding of collective action, during which participants re-assess their motivations, their emotions and the meaning given to their practices. As Eliasoph (2016: 248) maintains, the focus on the 'puzzles', 'paradoxes' and 'contradictions' of collective action is a useful way to capture the complex processes of meaning-making among actors working with disadvantaged groups (see also Theodossopoulos, 2016). This article has illustrated how the meaning given by volunteers to their own engagement in compassionate acts is never fully settled but is continually shaped by unexpected interactions and situations that disrupt the logics of evaluation about the deservingness of beneficiaries, as well as the logic of compassion more generally.

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Notes

1. In this article, we use the term ‘refugee’ but acknowledge that the acts of compassion we observe are directed towards distinct legal categories such as asylum seekers, undocumented migrants, unaccompanied minors and vulnerable migrants more generally.
2. For exceptions see Darling (2009) and more recently Steinhilper and Karakayali (2018).

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