

# Between redemption and affirmation: German identity in affective narratives of the ‘refugee crisis’

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## Abstract

The German ‘refugee crisis’ produced formidable levels of civil society assistance, involving citizens and locations with no previous experience in refugee support. Grounded in research with citizen volunteers in a rural region in southern Germany conducted at a time when rightwing populism gained strength, this article explores how volunteers reflect on their relations with refugees while negotiating distinctly German identities. Scholarship on volunteering in refugee settings has looked at the emotional aspect of this work largely for its political import. This article expands attention to emotions in volunteering from a form of political practice on the ground to a practice of narrative reasoning. In a close reading of interview-derived narratives as affective practices the relevance of locality, identity and history for refugee reception comes to the fore. Deploying the notions of ‘redemptive’ and ‘affirmative’ Germanness the article shows how volunteers draw on specific historical trajectories to produce moral arguments about the support and incorporation of strangers. This article argues that volunteers’ affective involvement with history and locality needs unpacking if their relations of solidarity are to be understood.

## Keywords

German identity, refugees, volunteering, civil society, emotion and narrative, racialization, work ethic

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## Introduction

The growing refugee movement into Europe in the past decade has given rise to much noted pro-refugee civic engagement. This has been observable most recently in the welcoming response to fleeing Ukrainians as well as during the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ associated with the arrival of large numbers of Syrians at EU borders in 2015. In both cases citizen volunteers in different countries have mobilised significant resources of solidarity and assistance. My focus is on Germany, where both the ‘refugee crisis’ as well as civil society support became major subjects of the post-2015 public debate. In many ways, the events of 2015 are now readable as historic, in that they marked a juncture of events with significant repercussions. This included the admission of 890.000 asylum seekers in 2015 ([Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge 2016: 9](#)), a remarkable level of pro-refugee civic engagement optimistically dubbed ‘welcome culture’, as well as a populist backlash leading to the unprecedented success of the rightwing AFD party. The ‘refugee crisis’ exposed problems of political polarisation ([Bojadžijev 2018](#)) and energised anxieties about rightwing radicalism, not least in the face of an increase in racist attacks. This paper examines volunteer responses to these circumstances which were articulated in interviews and conversations between 2016 and 2018. This was at a time when large numbers of sanctuary seekers had been dispersed across the country, the AFD party entered the German parliament in 2017, and public ‘welcome culture’ was on the wane ([Borneman and Ghassem-Fachandi 2017](#); [Bräuer 2022](#)).

Much of the social science literature on these practices of volunteering explores the role volunteers assume in the politicised world of the refugee reception system. Research has shown that solidarity with refugees is grounded in a range of stances, including in activist opposition to state regimes of migration (e.g. [Rigby and Schlembach 2013](#); [Rozakou 2012, 2016](#); [Sandri 2018](#)), the desire to counter rightwing populism (e.g. [Schiffauer 2019](#)), ‘apolitical’ positions ([Fleischmann 2020](#)), disinterested forms of ‘professionalism’ (e.g. [Rozakou 2016](#)) or affective practices of ‘private hospitality’ ([Monforte et al. 2021](#)). Another observation that has been made about the refugee movements in 2015 is the emotively charged public momentum created in their configuration as a ‘crisis’, not least through a process of intensive mediatization in which expressions of moral outrage became attached to news about the trauma of war and flight (e.g. [Holmes and Castañeda 2016](#); [Karakayali 2017](#); [Kleres 2018](#); [Vollmer and Karakayali 2017](#)).

The following discussion takes inspiration from this recent literature on pro-refugee solidarities. It adds to the work scholars have produced on the ‘ambivalent and complex entanglements’ ([Fleischmann 2020: 29](#)) of these solidarities with power relations in immigration societies. In distinction to a prominent focus in the literature, though, it will not unpack the figure of the volunteer in their capacity to align with or disrupt the migration governance of the state. It will explore how citizen volunteers reflected on their role whilst negotiating distinctively German identities. In aiming to capture a historical moment when the initial public enthusiasm of welcome was transforming into modes of scepticism and uncertainty, this article asks two main questions: How do volunteers negotiate their roles as supporters of refugees who they perceive as vulnerable as well as

culturally different? And, secondly, how do they engage with being German and German identity in the process?

The migration scholar Klaus Bade suggested that the German ‘refugee crisis’ split the population into opposing camps of xenophobic ‘cultural pessimists’ and xenophile ‘cultural optimists’ (2018: 338-39). However, the material discussed here presents a more nuanced picture. Based on interviews with individuals situated in middle class and broadly politically centrist to liberal positions, there was an often pragmatic embrace of ethnic diversity as a fact. At the same time this was interjected by uncertainties and concerns about how the inclusion of these newcomers should unfold, and how a culturally diversifying society could be paired with staples of ‘German’ identity. I will show that these tensions between pragmatism and anxiety took shape as ‘affective practices’ (Wetherell 2012) in the interview settings.

In taking a focus on feeling-rich articulations in the collected material I employ two stances toward emotions. First, what sociologists and anthropologists call their relationality, that is the understanding that emotions are not optional extras but central perceptive instruments in how we relate to the world (Burkitt 2014: 13–16; Wetherell 2012). This implies that all social (inter)actions involve emotive elements or ‘feeling-thinking processes’ as James Jasper calls them (2019: 6). Secondly, and relatedely, I consider the narrative material below as part of a ‘feeling-thinking’ action in itself, which emerged from an interview dialogue and where spontaneous ways of emoting meshed with broader cultural scripts about immigrants and Germans.

In interpreting these narratives I focus in particular on what James Jasper calls ‘affective and moral commitments’ (2019) which are dimensions of emotionality attached to values, convictions and loyalties, and hence to social identities and cultural knowledge. In his study on the role of emotions in social movements, Jasper suggests that we engage our moral compass particularly through our emotions (2019: 127-29) and that emotive states such as solidarity or indignation can be relatively stable and often cognitively processed ‘background emotions’ (2019: 126), involving what might best be imagined as relatively enduring moral convictions. For instance, while the feeling of loyalty to a particular group or idea may be quite stable in a person’s life, the quality of that feeling will shape reactions in situations where that loyalty is considered violated or challenged (2019: 104; 126).

While it is debatable whether the citizen volunteers I met are part of a social movement, even though these claims have been made for the German case (Schiffauer 2019), their stories were nevertheless stories of moral commitment, in particular to refugees as people in need of support and, quite frequently understood as a civic effort in aid of a collective ‘we’ that would incorporate a large number of strangers. I suggest that anxiety permeated ‘moral commitment’ in these narratives, and that this is interwoven with German history just as much as with the socio-economic fabric of the region in which the research was conducted, and perceptions of race and culture. Anxiety draws energy not simply from the refugee and asylum seeker as an already established ‘fear object’ in German society (Biess 2020: 3), but from concerns around Germanness as a project of historical rehabilitation in a context of growing rightwing threats and worries about societal change. The focus is not on the emotional labour people perform on the ground but on emoting as part of a narrative practice of appraising and evaluating. This is important because it draws

attention to narration as a social practice in its own right and embeds civil society volunteering in forms of historical and cultural reasoning.

## Research context and approach

The strong civil society support for refugees in Germany in 2015 took many by surprise. As some observed, this shifted refugee solidarity ‘from the margin to the mainstream’ (Fleischmann and Steinhilper 2017: 18), bringing citizens from all walks of life into often first-time contact with refugees. Many felt emotionally rather than politically drawn to the subject (Karakayali and Kleist 2016: 20). In the media this demonstration of compassion was soon called ‘welcome culture’ (Hamann and Karakayali 2016; Mushaben 2017). The editor of *Die Zeit*, a liberal broadsheet, even suggested at the time that ‘welcome culture’ was a ‘German miracle’, demonstrating a new cosmopolitan spirit of nationhood (Joffe 2015). However, ‘welcome culture’ was not the only news about popular responses to the arrival of large numbers of refugees. A growing rightwing backlash against government policies quickly made clear that the spirit of welcome was partial and potentially fragile (also Jäckle and König 2017). Many observers saw the Cologne attacks in 2015/16<sup>1</sup> as a turning point in public attitude. Thereafter the ‘refugee crisis’ of 2015 began to assume the public significance of a historic event which was widely used to explain what followed: Islamist attacks in Bavaria and Berlin in 2016, the election success of the right wing AFD in 2017, violent anti-immigrant protests in Chemnitz and elsewhere in 2018, and even, as some pundits would have it, the beginning of the end of the era Merkel (e.g. Hockenos 2015).

This article is based on research conducted in a provincial region in southern Germany. While refugees are often imagined to reside in urban centres, the events of 2015 accelerated some substantial distribution of people to small towns and rural regions, a subject that has only recently drawn the attention of researchers (e.g. Bock 2018). The region is an attractive tourist destination as well as economically successful, featuring SMEs and large manufacturers. It has relatively low ethnic diversity. Most communities had taken obligatory quotas of refugees from September 2015, following a specific administrative distribution formula. While citizen volunteers proved essential in supporting overwhelmed local administrations, refugee numbers soon exhausted volunteering capacities, and some of the people I met were involved with several families or individuals. I conducted (in some cases multiple) interviews with 25 adult citizen volunteers who were recruited through snowballing. They lived in four neighbouring villages and small towns and were all novices in the refugee support system. All were white with mostly local family roots and middle class, with some being professionals or retired professionals (e.g. teachers) and between the ages of 40 and 70. About 70% were female. I also interviewed a number of local administrators, charity organisers and so-called integration commissioners who were tasked with refugee support in these communities from 2017. Having family origins in the region I was considered a returning ‘local’. I was able to benefit from the generosity shown to someone ‘familiar’ and from a high degree of cultural fluency. This gave me relatively easy access to social networks.

The volunteers reported modest beginnings, improvising and self-organising as they went along, and often being unable to rely on multicultural resources (e.g. translators) or guidance from more seasoned activists or authorities. In many cases, though, they were citizens already involved in local affairs, and many were able to mobilise local social and cultural capital to support the newcomers. The interviews were open and narrative, largely focusing on motivations, perceptions and experiences of volunteering. Most lasted between one and 2 hours and were tape-recorded. All were conducted in German. As in other German locations, people reported that it had become difficult to recruit new volunteers after 2016 (also Hamann and Karakayali 2016: 82). The novel presence of refugees in these rural communities was a ubiquitous topic of conversation amongst smaller and larger publics during the time I did my research. Humanitarian and civic sentiments had mobilised ‘welcome culture’, yet there was also anxiety in these small networks of solidarity.

### **Between critical humanitarianism and the power of emotions**

In interdisciplinary migration studies researchers have produced a rich literature on these new and varied civil society volunteerisms in refugee settings. Questions about practical and affective solidarities are frequently explored in relation to the unequal power relationships and charged public atmospheres within which civil society action takes place. The ethics of volunteering in which principles of solidarity inevitably meet the politics of immigration with its attendant principles of control and deterrence makes for a complex site of action, intensified by boundaries of citizenship, socio-economic status, ethnicity and culture across which volunteer-migrant relations are often bridged. Within the context of navigating such complex hierarchies volunteers’ moral and emotional involvement has attracted attention. Particularly the ‘moral’ (Jasper 2018: 4) or ‘humanising emotions’ (Sirriyeh 2018: 8) such as sympathy and compassion have been considered critically. Whether as a central virtue of ‘care ethics’ or as a driving force in humanitarianism some scholars have problematised compassion as the gift of the privileged. Often criticised as a ‘moral’ (rather than political) response towards the dependent and disadvantaged, sentiments of care and compassion have been seen as insufficient for challenging positions of marginality, such as those assumed by asylum seekers in Western societies (Darling 2011; see also Peterie 2019: 286–88; Beasley and Bacchi 2005). In a similar vein some observers have argued that ‘regimes of care’ (Ticktin 2011: 3) and humanitarian moralities have become vital instruments in the state management of immigration and asylum (Fassin 2005, 2012; Pallister-Wilkins 2020). In addition, as Ala Sirriyeh reminds us, political scripts of compassion in immigration contexts often contain historical traces of ‘benevolent colonialism’ (2018: 41) or other historically shaped patterns of racial othering and paternalist control (2018: 10–11; also 38–40).<sup>2</sup>

However, scholars have also argued that the ‘tropes of humanitarian compassion’ (Giudici 2021: 28) do not fully encompass affective relations in refugee support work, and moral emotions have also been shown to be enabling and anti-hierarchical. Frequently inspired by the social movement literature or the sociology of emotions, researchers have attested citizen activism’s significant potential in mobilising spaces of ‘grassroots’

(McGee and Pelham 2018) or ‘subversive humanitarianism’ (Vandevordt 2019) in which the politics of discrimination refugees routinely face is recognised and challenged. Here emotions are more than compassionate paternalisms. They energise relations of solidarity between citizen volunteers and migrants (e.g. Doidge and Sandri 2019; Peterie 2019; Phillimore et al. 2022; Sandri 2018), provide fuel for performing the labour at hand (ibid.), and sustain community among volunteers (Karakayali 2017; Sutter 2017).

While this body of literature offers different analytical lenses on affective solidarities it simultaneously captures the complex intersections between politics, ethics and emotionality in refugee reception as politicised spaces of encounter. In other words, while sentiments of care and compassion are shown to be influential in motivating this type of voluntary labour, they are necessarily engaged by differently positioned actors, within specific institutional, political and economic conditions and in highly localised contexts (e.g. Casati 2018; Fleischmann 2020; see also Berg and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2018). As such affective care practices might energise political critique, or, conversely, underpin problematic power structures. They might also, and possibly more likely, support a tentative combination of these (see also Maestri and Monforte 2020). What is more, caring sentiments may not be sustained over time, mesh with other emotions, turn into fatigue or more detached modes of engagement.

This ambivalent and fluid situation was present in the research data discussed here. The stories shared by volunteers resonated with emotions, both in how people spoke as well as in the subjects they talked about. For some, compassionate feelings had transformed into frustration and exhaustion over time, others had formed friendships with migrants they supported, many articulated worries about a changing political atmosphere in Germany and wanted to deflate anti-immigrant tensions and build a more inclusive society. Most described their relationships with migrants in idioms of care and support. Volunteers had self-organised as ‘Paten’ (godparent), ‘Alltagsbegleiter’ (daily companion) or ‘Flüchtlingshelfer’ (refugee helper), terms which accentuated the active role of the volunteer as care-giver and connote a certain relational asymmetry. Many explained that they wanted to ‘help people get on a path’ or guide them ‘along the way’ of managing life in Germany, enabling them to become both independent and familiar with German culture. At the level of moral reasoning, thus, caring often implied both, attitudes of empathy to refugees as well as the desire to help advance their ‘integration’. Implying a basic notion of care as the recognition of and responsiveness to a need (Tronto 1994: 106) I show how ‘caring’ could become entangled with kindness, as well as with expectations of reciprocity and conditionality and animate specific German subjectivities and perceptions of cultural difference. These entangled layers of care often emerged vividly in interview situations as embodied spaces of encounter and sense-making. To illustrate this and the ethnographic sensibility that is applied to interview narratives, a research encounter will be described next before addressing the analytical approach to interviews.

### **Affective sense-making**

‘I could have cried when I saw it [on TV], these poor people, how they were treated, what hardship they had to cope with, it shook me to my core.’ (Paul, aged 68)

There was a strong presence of emotional language in conversations and interviews with volunteers. Feelings of deep sympathy for war-traumatised Syrians were generally described as motivations for getting involved. The interview with Paul, who is cited above, and his wife Doris, is a case in point. In fact our meeting was a highly emotive affair. They took turns and frequently interrupted each other to describe their involvement with three refugee families and the exhaustion they felt from assisting with many daily challenges, such as dealing with the immigration and social welfare bureaucracy, liaising with schools over children, organising doctors' visits, helping with German and with accommodation and jobs. They confessed that their marriage had suffered from the sheer volume of responsibility they had 'naively' taken on and vowed to end their involvement in another year or so. To my surprise, they had invited Jazmin, a young Syrian widow, to be present at our meeting. Paul and Doris introduced her as a friend who, along with her three young children, had been adopted into their family. As Jazmin's German was limited and because we did not have another shared language, she was largely a silent presence at the table. Still, Doris continued to interact with her, occasionally encouraging her to speak, giving her little nudges on her arm, or consoling her about the German language exam that Jazmin had failed a couple of days before. As in the course of Doris' and Paul's collaborative narration relationships with other refugees were revealed to be less successful in yielding the fruits of their labour in the ways they had hoped, it became clear that Jazmin was also present as a 'success story' who was repaying their efforts in helping her to succeed.

While this conversation generated particularly strong emotions, there were semblances of other interview situations. Narrators brought to life relations they had formed with people they supported, often veering between emotional identification with some and more distance to others; they articulated sympathy for the hardship people they got to know had endured, yet also recounted their experiences of frustration with those who did not chime with their visions about how inductions into German life should proceed. Jazmin's presence also brought to the fore what held true for everyone I met at this juncture: the still limited ability to interact linguistically and a sense of mutual lack of cultural knowledge, sometimes expressed in speculations about culture and Islam. Paul, for instance, had strong views about the alleged cultural deficiencies of 'Arab men' which he offered during the conversation. These ambivalent shifts between compassionate concern and resolute practical help on the one hand and elements of paternalism and cultural objectification on the other were more widely present. They reflected the often ambivalent, entangled layers of care addressed above, yet also revealed anxieties around the incorporation of strangers into German society.

In what follows I interpret these interview narrations as reflections in which individuals negotiated their relationships with refugees whilst simultaneously assuming moral stances towards German history and being German. I draw on Margaret Wetherell's notion of 'affective discursive practice' (2012; [Wetherell et al. 2015](#)) to look at concrete expressions of affect and emotion in the interview material. Wetherell argues that there is no fundamental difference between emotion and affect, which she defines as 'embodied meaning-making' (2012: 4). Affective discursive practices are about how people construct relations, positions and identities through emoting and in ways that are both



personal and cultural. Following Wetherell's contention that this type of affective sense-making is often conducted communicatively and narratively (2012: 94) and involves cultural repertoires of emoting, my concern is with how people situate and evaluate their experience of volunteering narratively, and how this involves affective histories of nationhood, identity and locality.

In the analytical reading of these 'affective practices' I borrow the notion of 'positioning' from sociolinguists who relate the ways in which story-tellers assume viewpoints and moral stances to identity work (Deppermann 2015). This includes paying particular attention to how relations are constructed in narrative practice and interaction, both situationally and culturally. While positioning can involve multiple ways of story-ing relationships (see *ibid*; Bamberg 1997), specific analytical attention will be paid here to how speakers position themselves towards the listener or audience as well as ascribe positions to German compatriots and refugees as key characters in their stories. Two patterns of 'German' positioning will be described below. In each speakers assume different affective stances to the subject and negotiate emotively charged episodes of experience. Whereas in the first case desires for redemptive Germanness are troubled by the resurgence of a rightwing party, in the second Germanness becomes affirmed in the light of tropes about postwar economic achievement. Refugees are positioned through respective modes of concern and frustration, and as recipients of volunteers' care as well as their or other Germans' cultural instructions. I suggest that these constructions of immigrants' relatively passive agencies reveal deeper concerns about a diversifying society and appeal to integrationist discourses.

## Redemptive Germanness

The first historical reference people made between themselves as 'Germans' and their support for refugees related to Nazism as a shameful collective memory. As observers have noted, many of those who embraced 'welcome culture' as a commitment to support people fleeing war and trauma aligned their involvement with a moral responsibility of reconciliation with the Nazi past (cf. Bock and Macdonald 2019: 10). Anthropologists Borneman and Ghassem-Fachandi (2017) speak of refugees as 'transformational objects' (118) in a psychoanalytic sense, arguing that the arrival of Syrian refugees in 2015 offered Germans who welcomed them an opportunity to repair their historical guilt. Harry, one of my respondents, expressed a similar concern this way:

This is my personal driving force, I want that this thing succeeds. Frau Merkel said 'we can do it' and I want to contribute my share. I have put A LARGE AMOUNT of work and emotional energy into this, I want it to work. I never thought in such political terms before [laughs briefly] but I have immersed myself into local politics now, it exasperates me and it infuriates me, especially when I hear the simplistic arguments, I just can't understand why people react so positively to the banal statements of the AFD! I keep thinking, hello, what about our history!? I didn't experience it but I don't want it repeated for my children or grandchildren. You have to do something about it. And that's why I want that we succeed.<sup>3</sup>



Harry aligns himself with Angela Merkel's televised appeal to refugee integration as a collective national effort, interpreting it as a moral reminder of German historical responsibility. He mobilised this stance emotionally in our conversation, expressing anger with those who seemingly ignore this responsibility. Respondents' allusions to Nazism rarely evoked the 1930s. In most cases the subject was implicitly addressed in references to the rightwing AFD party. The AFD capitalises on fears around immigration, is known for its anti-Muslim stance and *völkisch* ideologists who repudiate Holocaust memory as a mainstay of Germany's 'political culture' (Biess 2020: 354). As will be illustrated below, the party was often used metonymically to voice concerns about racism or other Germans' illiberal disposition. Much anxious reasoning revolved around a recognition of social moods as shifting, demonstrated for many in the party's election success in 2017. In these instances of narrative 'the AFD' conjured Germany's burdened past and encoded a feeling of unease and a rather veiled 'racial semantics' (Taylor 2022: 35). In a typical expression of this, one of my respondents urged me to do a wider survey on 'what people in the area really think', anxious about deciphering a capricious public mood. Others sensed a barely disguised general disgruntlement that could tip into something more aggressive at any moment, and all detected shifts in public sentiment. Things were 'not as bad as in east Germany' some people suggested, but it was not difficult to imagine that refugees could become targets of attack. In this context of conversation refugees often appeared as visible if passive seismographs for German moods and the potential for public aggression. Some participants assumed the role of mediators who negotiated the presence of these foreigners with more concerned members of the community, would vouch for them or actively work to promote their 'integration'. Here, affective talk was less concerned with compassion for the vulnerable and more with the desire to help maintain harmony in the community: 'I wanted things to go right for the village', or 'we need to be the in-betweens between refugees and the population' were typical statements.<sup>4</sup> In these passages of conversation people often re-enacted evocative stories of encounter with less hospitable Germans. The following extracts demonstrate this.

Karin, a retired civil servant, used her social network to find work for a young African man.

I got him a holiday job because I said during the holidays I don't want him to just hang around in public spaces and he wanted to work anyway. And then I went to a business owner who is known for his total opposition against refugees, TOTALLY. But I thought I'd still try it. I went in, I know his attitude but thought I'd just try, so I went in and said 'do you need anyone'? I knew he was short of staff and he said to me 'yes you can start today', then I said, I hardly could get the words out, 'would you take a refugee too?' 'No', like from a pistol, 'NO! and I am going to tell you why', he explained he was totally against Frau Merkel's policy and on and on and gave me a right AFD lecture.

Paula, a retired teacher, was very concerned about a hostile public mood.

I don't know what happened to Michael [a young African man], initially he went to church with me but somehow he doesn't want to do it anymore. I haven't really found out why but I

would love for them to get in touch with our young people. But of course they also say that they are looked at in unfriendly ways because of their skin colour. Sometimes they laugh about it but one of them doesn't really want to do anything without me. But I can see it for myself when I am somewhere with them how people look at me. Around the time when the doctor was murdered<sup>5</sup> I sat with Michael in X [town] in a street café and when we walked down the street I could read it in people's faces 'how stupid are you', yes like that.

Carla, a social worker, was similarly concerned. The exchange below followed her account of a heated dialogue between herself and a known local business man who, intoxicated by alcohol, charged into a racist diatribe against young, mostly African males who had been settled in their town. This was an experience which shocked her:

I was so upset and went home and thank God I wasn't on my own, someone else was with me because I thought no one will believe me what happened. We went back to the town council and said: 'Listen folks you have to do something' and then things came to the surface more and more. When we met as volunteers and I said: 'Listen to what happened to me!' and suddenly someone else said: 'Shall I tell you what happened to me?' and suddenly you noticed there are tendencies in our town where people no longer hesitate to say what they think and we said: 'People we HAVE TO DO SOMETHING!' This really drives me, the incident that happened to me, we need to create more opportunities for people to meet refugees and do something against the Rechtsruck [lurch to the right] in Germany, even here in a small place.

Joachim, a retired teacher, initiated music making projects with Syrians.

In the beginning well there was a reason why the AFD garnered 20% here. In our two villages I think we had 270 people who voted AFD [in 2017], and there are many people who had partially justified fears about what was going to happen with so many Muslims in a Catholic community, headscarves, relations between men and women, all these stereotypes were activated, and we as volunteers are mediators between the fears of the population and the refugees but our backs aren't free either, any behaviour of the refugees that gets noted, we are the ones who are told to do something about it. There was a Hitler salute shown from the window of a house when we went to rehearse our music, without wanting to make a big deal out of this but that was the mood. But this is where my ambition comes in to persuade some of the Muslims to overcome their inhibitions and come with me to a Catholic church to participate in a concert. I felt that would be an important task to counter the headwind and the resistance that was coming.

In these examples people storied their experiences vividly, narratively re-enacting momentous dialogues and encounters with other Germans. Notably these reflections were grounded in concern about anti-immigrant resentment in their communities. In positioning themselves as 'mediators' who aim to bridge the gap between the prejudice of the majority white population and these newcomers, the narrators emplaced the individuals they supported in public contact zones – the church, street, café or work place – where

they were racialised as different and exposed to potential hostility. In mediating these situated tensions, respondents configured these spaces as culturally normative in which the visibility of difference was not simply potentially unsettling but had to be managed to restore a sense of public calm. As some extracts illustrate powerfully, refugees were not only evoking German fears but also drawn into the task of assuaging them. In as much as they became conduits for German anxieties they were also expected to help temper these emotional responses through displaying behaviour that could be read as non-threatening.

As some respondents were anxious about a breakdown of a consensus about the Nazi past they also suggested that this history's disciplining effects on xenophobes and populists was waning, who 'no longer hesitate to say that they think', as in Carla's quote above. Carla vividly recounts how volunteers begin to experience hostility from members of the public because of their pro-refugee work. Some related to the emotions of migrants who they supported, such as Paula, who understood that the African men were intimidated by racism. Speakers positioned themselves as worried and angry or uncertain about what could be done. However, these experiences of other Germans' hostilities also oscillated with projecting anxieties onto 'race' rather than on racism. Being steeped in local cultural knowledge many narrators related conventional perceptions about the 'otherness' of refugees, most markedly associated with the Muslim faith and the black body. Being visibly 'Muslim' and/or being black were both the most marked traits of difference in these stories and shown to evoke popular racialised assumptions about cultural incompatibility and (particularly male) gendered threats. This could manifest in a remarkably veiled language about racism. In some of the extracts above we can see this in a strong inclination to associate racial prejudice with 'the AFD' and its followers, in a 'lurch to the right', in expressions such as 'AFD talk', or personalised in someone who 'is totally against refugees'. In these descriptions racism was configured as a problem locatable in a perplexing public atmosphere, in specific reactionary individuals, or in a break with a national taboo to shun insignia of Nazism, rather than as a pervasive social issue. In these formulations speakers engaged what Margeret Wetherell calls 'discursive threads with longer histories and conventional and communal powers' (2012: 100). In other words, their language evoked both a wider inarticulacy around structural racism in Germany as well as a more entrenched political and popular resistance to accept Muslim and black minorities into the fold of the national body, routinely imagined as white and (secularised) Christian (also [Chin 2017](#)).

This brings me to the second patterning of affective practices. These revolved around frustrations. Frustrations often accounted for both personal experience and wider, culturally patterned assumptions about the acceptability of the foreigner. As the next section shows, projecting refugees into the world of work brought this prominently to the fore. Work was constructed as a space that was both 'rational', a site where human beings exercise modern citizenship, yet also as specifically 'German', and tied to a story of post war national rehabilitation and economic success.

## Affirmative Germanness

Affirmative positions towards Germanness had a decidedly local flavour, invoking confidence in the economic strength of the region, and in the work ethic as a central moral value. Narratives of frustration were not offered by all but existed in all research locations. Typically these revolved around emotional exhaustion or unmet expectations of reciprocity. Individuals often linked personal frustration with moral values they associated with norms of the mainstream culture. Refugees were routinely perceived as fundamentally ignorant of the rules of German society, particularly its economic culture and ideals of the work ethic. Ralph, a retired business consultant, put his perception of cultural difference this way:

Culturally this is not just about Goethe but about everyday culture, especially the performance culture [Leistungskultur]. We live in a high performance culture you know, if there are suddenly 1 or 1.5 million people from an entirely different context and there is the constant expectation about integrating them into this work culture how is it going to work? Economically speaking Germany plays in the champions league and now a lot of new players appear who have maximally played in the local district league, how is this supposed to work? But I want it to work and I want to help them.

Many of Ralph's verbalised delights and frustrations related to the ways in which individuals responded to his help in finding them work and embraced his cultural guidance in values associated with the work ethic. Similar sentiments arose in other conversations:

I found work for him and looked after him. He went there for a week and then disappeared. And then I disappeared too. I said: 'That's it!' – he had to get up early and work too much [ironically]. (Peter)

I got a bicycle for the young man, I took the time to go there with him and then he said: 'But the colour pink is a girl's colour', and I realised I had put so much effort into getting this bike for him, but that's it, I won't go as far as trying to find a boy's bike in dark blue! (Martin)

The flat I found for the family was up on the hill and they had to carry the shopping bags up there [rolls her eyes] well the egg-laying wool-milk-sow<sup>6</sup> [ironic tone] You will not find everything to your liking, the Germans live up there too and not everyone has a car! (Maria)

In these instances of performed frustration individuals demonstrate confident positions towards their own moral values. Here, acts of care are aligned with acts of cultural induction in which expectations of reciprocity were focussed on the display of the 'right' kind of behaviour. As we have seen, this included normative routines and disciplines attached to idioms of work, such as getting to work on time, accepting unpleasant and low paid work, and, a frequent theme, displaying restraint in consumerist desires which were seen as inappropriate in view of most refugees' reliance on social benefits. The moral value of 'hard work' as productive of personal autonomy and respectability as well as of a

cohesive social order was sometimes characterised as specifically ‘German’ and as lying at the root of Germany’s successful economy, of which the region was considered a prominent example. The following speakers made the ‘German’ work ethic particularly explicit:

Martin, a retired teacher, put it this way:

Regular structures of work are key. In those structures they learn that being on time is commonly expected. As soon as you are in work and your boss wants to pick you up to go to a job at 7.30 in the morning and he is waiting for you, well he will drive off at 7.45 because he can’t wait, and when you keep being late you get sacked. And that is where our social life begins. And then this woman who ran a cultural training course<sup>7</sup> said it would be quite good if we Germans came away from this mentality, our sense of order and our punctuality and stuff, but our affluence and what we have today is based on our discipline, our punctuality!

Ulrich invokes a Syrian refugee and a relative to localise and moralise the work ethic:

Well people say they don’t work. They are looked after but lie in bed all day whereas we work all day. The refugees see it this way also. Ahmad always says to me: ‘The Germans work and the refugees do nothing’. From their perspective the Germans do three things, work, holidays and at home they work too, very industrious. He says he has never in his life worked like this, and when you are out with him his mobile phone rings every thirty minutes his wife calls him. When he started his job I said to her: ‘Listen one thing has to be clear when he works in that company you stop calling him, this is not acceptable in a work place’, and then she quit it. I am sure he has never in his life worked this STRICTLY, that you don’t chat while working that you don’t speak with your wife on the phone and all that. You know my cousin was working for years for manufacturer X, he is one of those real [name of local region] *Schaffers* you know, precision, accuracy, reliability all these principles, do you know what I mean? [Followed by a description of his recent visit to a local silver mine museum]. It was so interesting. Go there and see how hard those people laboured, from 1400 they first opened it and you get an idea of what *Leistung* is, yes, my cousin is totally against this [refugee policy], he is not xenophobic, one of his apprentices is a black African and he is full of praise for him but he has problems with Islam and all those things and there are many people here who think like that.

As both speakers use the work ethic to engage affective styles of (defensive) pride in being German they demote the refugee to a culturally inferior position. Through defining Germans and foreigners as ‘*homines economici*’ speakers construct as evident the gap in cultural achievement between them. These were more broadly championed themes across these conversations. Foreigners could achieve acceptability not only through joining the labour force, but by displaying attitudes to work configured as both ‘German’ and a hallmark of regional identity. This included the embrace of work as a moral duty and path to a secure lifestyle, a disciplining and ordering of daily life around the ethos of work, a saving attitude towards money and a construction of legitimate consumption as earned through gainful employment. The outward local manifestation of these cultural attributes

typically included ownership of a high-end car, the ambition to build a family home and continually invest in its structural and aesthetic appearance, a landscape of neat gardens, carefully maintained home exteriors, clean pavements and quiet neighbourhoods.

In this region Angela Merkel's 'wir schaffen das' ('we can do it') emerged in its noteworthy double meaning, where 'schaffen' in regional parlance not only means 'to manage' but also to be assiduous and achieve through work, and where being seen as a 'Schaffer', or a 'hard-working person', is a positive moral statement, as invoked in Ulrich's extract above. The sociologist Andreas Reckwitz defines these cultural traits as particular to Germany's 'old middle class'. Reckwitz sees this social strata, largely comprising skilled workers and non-academic professionals, as marked by strong sedentary roots in small towns and rural regions, the successful maintenance of economic stability despite post-industrial change, a preponderance of localised social milieux shaped by bonds of family, neighbourhood and the workplace, and an overall identification with their region as a space of belonging and 'Heimat' (Reckwitz 2020: 97–99).

Stories of frustration often articulated these values and simultaneously evoked anxieties around their continuity and the continuity of German economic stability. Refugees were seen to import alien cultural ways and volunteers' efforts to get them into employment was as much about supporting their economic independence as it was about assimilating them into cultural orders of work in which disciplines of behaviour could be imbibed and the surplus of cultural difference controlled. In some conversations this included the expectation that Muslim women should discard their headscarves, habitually interpreted as a symbol of their oppression, as well as culturally archaic and unbecoming of a 'modern' workplace. In striving to make themselves part of the 'German' approach to work they could simultaneously authenticate it as a cultural norm. Ulrich markedly shows this above by quoting a Syrian man as a witness to the formidable 'German' work ethic. In other conversations too, someone's effort to submit themselves to a low paid or challenging menial work regime was often lauded as displaying the right moral attitude. It did not only signal a willingness to emulate German ways of being and reciprocate German generosity, but offered the promise of moving into better paid positions later. Whether the German labour market eventually enables social mobility for these migrants is an open question which cannot be pursued here. The main point I want to make at this stage is that work was consistently used as a metaphor for the social and moral order in which the regional collective recognised itself and which provided some desired social discipline for newcomers.

## Conclusion

These individuals told their stories in an atmosphere of conflicting public moods about the 'refugee crisis'. This article builds upon as well as looks beyond the popular scholarly attention to moral emotions as engagements with the hierarchies of migration governance. It explored how volunteers mediated stances of belonging through reflecting on intercultural volunteering. As 'feeling-thinking actions' these conversations showed that individuals negotiated their relations with the newcomers in ways that involved their identities as Germans. Anxiety was a crucial sentiment in these discursive actions. While

it clearly reflected concerns with a shifting public mood at this historical juncture I also came to understand it as a 'background emotion' in James Jasper's sense, that is, as part of an established form of cultural and moral reasoning. These anxieties had two quite different socio-cultural roots: one was grounded in a concern with Germany's Nazi past and the way in which it seemed to raise its head in the shape of the AFD. The second was embedded in imaginings of economic and social (in)stability and animated in notions of the 'German' work ethic. These stories suggest, then, that questions of what is German resounded with two historical trajectories: the uneasy, discomfiting legacy of Nazism, and the period of post-war recovery as an experience of economic stability and success. Historians have shown the close interrelationship between these two historical tides in processes of post war rehabilitation. As ethno-racial notions of Germanness became taboo, economic and social modernisation moved centre stage as a site for positive national identification (e.g., [Wiesen 2003](#)). Germany's economic success as well as its self-critical Holocaust memory have performed important roles of public rehabilitation as a 'tolerant, post-racial liberal democracy' ([Meng 2015](#): 124).

Evidently the popularity of the AFD has shaken some of this public consensus of successful national catharsis and these interviews were testament to the unease many Germans feel about this. However, a closer scrutiny of the history of immigration in the post-1945 Germanies/y also reveals that, despite strong public commitments to redeem the crimes of a racist regime, hierarchical orderings around race and ethnicity have continued to be socially and politically effective, even if the tarnished language of 'race' has disappeared. The long embrace of an ethno-national definition of citizenship (reformed in 2000) which cemented decades of exclusion for settled immigrants and their children, the normalisation of anti-Muslim prejudice, and a long historical trajectory of ethnicizing labour ([Herbert 2001](#)), are among the prominent fields in which racialised hierarchies and racism have become manifest, without necessarily being recognised as such. Some historians have argued that it is precisely the close interplay between Germany's democratic present and its undemocratic past that has produced specific forms of denial and illiteracy about forms of racism that are not recognisable as 'Nazism' (see [Chin 2017](#); [Meng 2015](#)). Some of the difficulties respondents had with describing problems with racism in terms of 'racism' spoke to this, as did some people's assumption that Islam presents issues of cultural irreconcilability despite the significant contribution Muslim immigrants have made to postwar economic success.

I interpreted the interview texts as ways of incorporating refugees into these loaded German pasts and uncertain futures and the concerns attached to them. Analytical attention to 'positioning', that is to how speakers situated subjects in the story, showed that migrants assumed relatively passive roles. In as much as a migrant subject could passively inhabit fears triggered by the rightwing challenge of the AFD, he or she was often imagined to assuage these fears by becoming a 'German' worker and embracing its attendant cultural norms. In this economically successful region where labour shortages were an issue, people readily made both moral and utilitarian associations with refugees as a potential labour force. The analytical attention to affective modes of talk enabled key insights into the cultural repertoires through which people emoted about their volunteering and related what I called earlier 'entangled layers of care'. These were shown to



revolve around two concerns: The desire to contain rightwing populism and the ambition to integrate refugees into ‘German’ orders of work. I would argue that these simultaneously empathetic and integrationist scripts framed many of these speakers’ relationships with refugees as well as connected them to the moral fabric of their communities. At the same time some of these anxious and frustrated reasonings also mobilised persistent cultural repertoires about the stranger as a potential threat to the social order, whilst they privileged German fears as the most relevant in this period of ‘crisis’. However, cultural repertoires are open to contestation. As we have seen ‘redemptive’ identifications with Germanness could nourish potential not simply for recognising one’s own cultural anxieties but also those of the other. ‘Affirmative’ stances to Germanness might enable a shift of focus from the migrant as a racialised other to someone who simply is a good or bad worker.<sup>8</sup> This reminds us that these engaged yet ordinary spaces of encounter are crucial for understanding the impact of racialised hierarchies and their historical shadows in migration societies, yet also reveal potentialities for cultural learning and change at the grassroots.

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### **Notes**

1. This refers to violent attacks against women during New Year’s eve in Cologne. The allegation that young men of North African origin had perpetrated the assaults sparked a public outcry. See [Kosnick \(2019\)](#).
2. While this cannot be developed here it is important to mention that critical readings of compassion as an emotion that intersects with power resonates with wider literatures in feminist care ethics (e.g. [Tronto 1994](#)), postcolonial theory (e.g. [Edmunds and Johnston 2016](#)) and cultural theory (e.g. [Berlant 2004](#)).
3. The extracts have been translated by the author. All personal names are pseudonyms. Capital letters in the transcripts indicate emphasis, square brackets additions by author.

4. This civic orientation among German volunteers has also been observed in [Herrmann \(2020\)](#).
5. An asylum seeker had killed a GP in his surgery. He was later diagnosed with a severe mental disorder.
6. A colloquial ironic phrase indicating here that they expect the impossible.
7. Intercultural training courses for volunteers were offered in the region from around 2017. Only a few of my respondents had attended them.
8. This has similarities to [Casati \(2018\)](#) who argues that Sicilians judge refugees less on the basis of their ethnicity and more on their capacity to display a strong work ethic. In the case studied here, I would argue, though, that racialisations are situationally (de-)emphasized, rather than disappear completely, particularly in relation to Muslims and black subjects.

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