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UNIVERSITÉ DE NANTES

Exploring the Frames of Altruistic Action

A Comparative Analysis of Volunteers' Engagement in British and French Pro-Asylum Charities (Jan 2017–Dec 2019)

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Interim Report
September 2018



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Overview

The ESRC research project 'Exploring the Frames of Altruistic Action' (Jan 2017 – Dec 2019) analyses what motivates people to volunteer in charities that support asylum seekers and refugees, as well as how they reflect upon the practices, values and ethos that relate to their engagement processes. It aims to explore how the frontiers between different forms of engagement in society are constructed and negotiated. Looking at immigration and asylum policies 'from below', it also aims to analyse how public debates and policies on these issues are reflected in the forms of engagement in support of asylum seekers and refugees.

The project is based on a comparative approach and on qualitative research methods. We analyse volunteers' engagement processes in two contrasted settings: France and the UK. Our in-depth interviews of different participants aim to explore the influence of a range of factors: their life trajectories and moral values, the organisational cultures of pro-asylum charities, the local and national cultures of volunteering, the relations between civil society actors and public authorities, the content of immigration and asylum policies.

Please visit the project website:

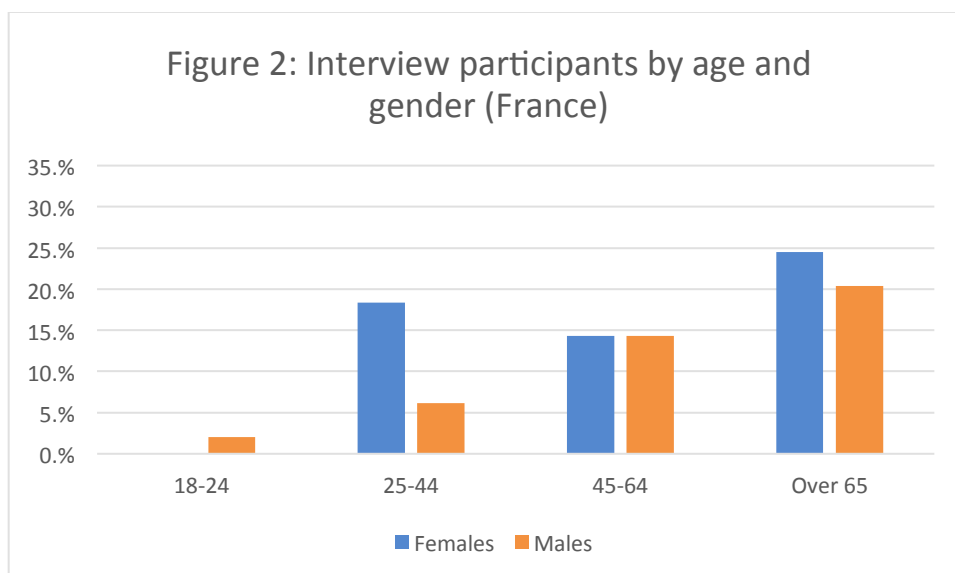
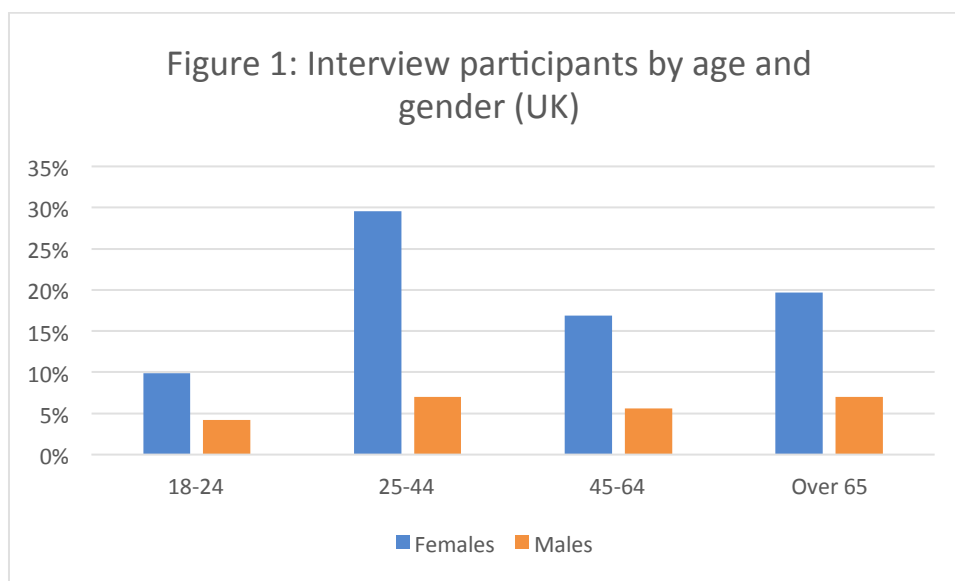
<https://altruism.hypotheses.org>

Or email Pierre Monforte: pm260@le.ac.uk

This report presents our progress to date.

Fieldwork report

- As of July 2018, we have interviewed 123 volunteers in total (71 in Britain and 52 in France). This includes one group interview conducted in London with four participants. The interviews took place between May 2017 and July 2018 in the UK, and between September 2017 and June 2018 in France. They were conducted in different places: 29 in London, 17 in Birmingham, 14 in Sheffield, 11 in the East-Midlands, 28 in Nantes, and 24 in Paris.
- The interviews lasted about one hour and fifteen minutes on average in the UK, and more than two hours in France¹. They were complemented by a short questionnaire that interviewees were asked to fill in, and in which we asked questions about their profile and life trajectory (age, gender, profession, previous experience of volunteering...). The interviews were also complemented by our observation of charity activities (distribution of food, information sessions, fundraising events...).
- The participants were recruited through the charities and networks that we contacted for this project. In total, around 30 charities and networks are represented (around 15 in each country).² This includes: established charities that have a national (and international) scope, comparatively high levels of human and material resources, and formalised structures; local charities that have comparatively lower levels of human and material resources, and less formalised structures; networks that mostly emerged in the context of the “refugee crisis” in 2015 and that are loosely structured. Some of these charities work closely with public authorities (they get access to public funding and can sometimes act as providers of services on behalf of the government) while others are not directly connected with public authorities.
- We are in the process of analysing how these different charities relate to each other at the local and national levels (the structure of the pro-asylum field), and it



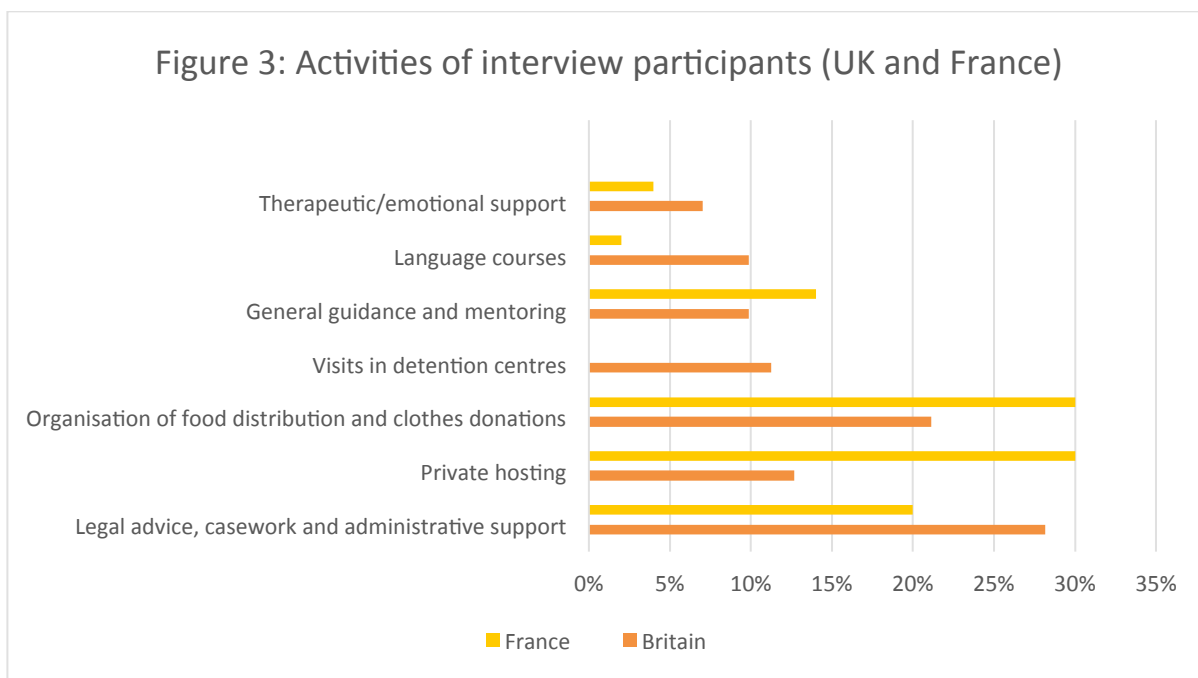
emerges that some lines of distinction and cooperation can be identified. For example, although the informal networks that were created in recent years can cooperate with big charities, their representatives often argue that they play a different role in this field. This seems to be confirmed by our interviews with volunteers in these different structures (see below). Also, we observe some local dynamics. For example, it seems that the associative network is comparatively dense in Sheffield and in Nantes, and we observe a 'division of labour' that enables a cooperation between the different local charities in these cities.

- Our sample shows that women and people who are over 65 are highly represented (see Figures 1 and 2). As it has been confirmed by charity representatives, this is a representation of the general profile of volunteers in the sector.³ In the UK, six volunteers were themselves asylum seekers or refugees; this group is not represented in

France. Our participants were engaged in different types of activities: legal advice and casework; private hosting; organisation of food distribution and clothes donations (including in Calais and Dunkirk); visits in detention centres (in the UK); general guidance and mentoring support; language support; therapeutic/emotional support (see Figure 3).⁴

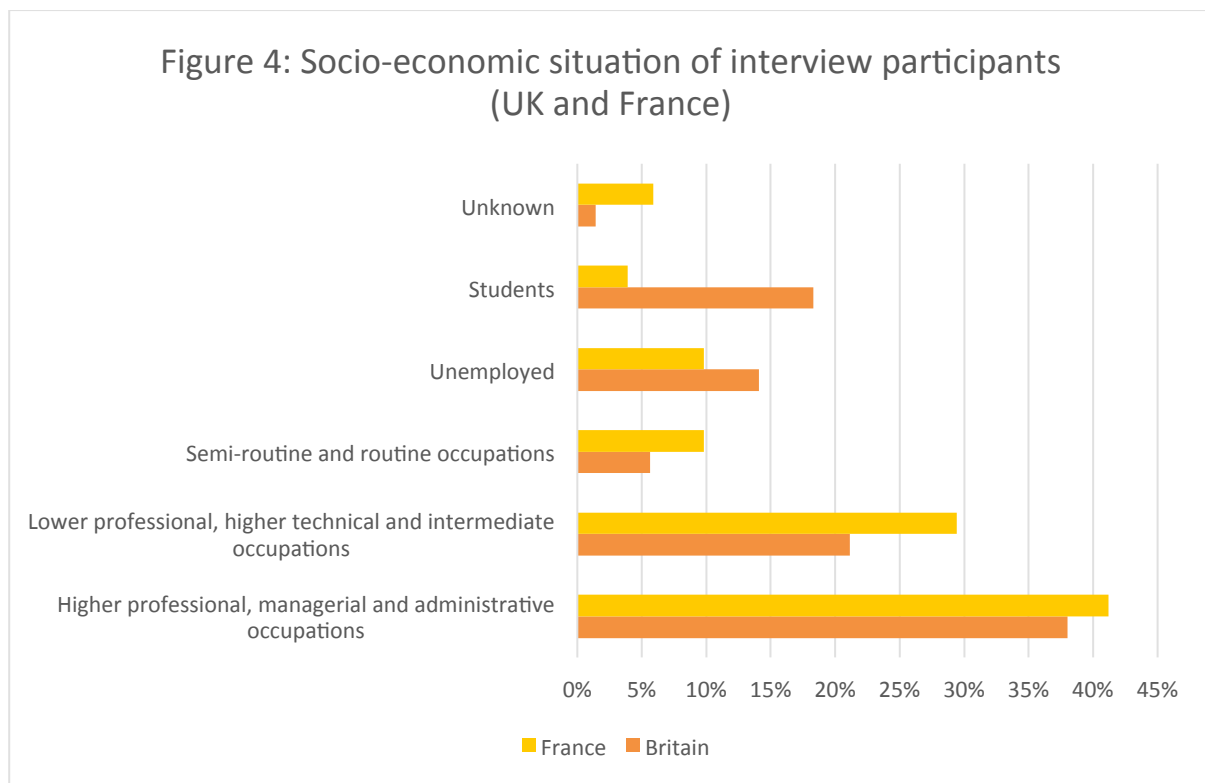
- We will continue collecting empirical data until December 2018. We will continue to work with our partner organisations and we plan to interview volunteers in France who support asylum seekers and refugees in Calais. We will also continue our interviews with charity representatives in the UK and in France.

Figure 3: Activities of interview participants (UK and France)



Observations emerging from the fieldwork

- We observe some similarities in the profiles and life trajectories of our interview participants (beyond the obvious observation on gender and age that we mentioned above). We note that many volunteers have an experience of living abroad and/or have strong linkages with other countries and cultures (for example speaking other languages or having a partner with a migration background). We also observe that some socio-economic categories are more represented than others: 41% of our participants in France are (or were) highly qualified professionals (whether currently working or retired). In the UK, 38% are (or were) highly qualified professionals (see Figure 4⁵). We see a high representation of teachers, journalists, psychologists and researchers. Finally, our first analysis of the interviews shows that a significant number of participants relate their motivations for volunteering to their personal or family history (mentioning for example a personal experience of injustice or the fact that some members of their family lived in exile).
- We also observe some differences between the French and British cases. For example, we see a higher representation of students and people who are unemployed in the UK (due in particular to the participation of a students' charity and of volunteers who are asylum seekers). We also observe that although a significant number of participants started volunteering in their charity in the context of the "refugee crisis" in the two countries⁶, the proportion is higher in Britain: 65,7% got involved in their charity in or after 2015 in the UK, and 52,9% in France.⁷ Finally, we observe that a higher percentage of participants have been active in their current charity for more than ten years in the French case: 21,6% against 2,8% in the UK.



- It emerges from the interviews that many volunteers make a distinction between the bigger and more established charities and the more local and informal groups or networks. In particular, it seems that many of those who are active in the informal networks that emerged in the context of the “refugee crisis” have negative views about bigger charities, and more specifically the organisations that act as service providers on behalf of the government. Nevertheless, many argue that strategic alliances are necessary in this field. The more established charities may serve as a supporting structure for the more recent and informal groups. Likewise, the bigger charities can rely on the more recent and informal groups to solve specific issues (for example in relation to the housing of asylum-seekers and refugees).
- The policies and practices of public authorities seem to have an impact on some aspects of volunteering. In particular, many respondents in France mention that the “délit de solidarité”⁸ and the current reform of the immigration and asylum law strongly affect their experience. Also, in the UK, many volunteers refer to the “hostile environment” policies and to the Brexit context. All these dimensions will need to be taken into account when we analyse how volunteers define their engagement, and in particular whether they perceive it as a politicised form of engagement.
- The local dimensions of volunteering also need to be taken into account: in the interviews, volunteers often refer to what happens in their local (mostly urban) context. For instance, many volunteers in the UK are very critical towards state government and less towards local councils, which in their opinion are under pressure because of the austerity measures and the “hostile environment” policies. Also, we observe that volunteers who are active in areas in which the associative network is dense (like Sheffield) seem to be more often engaged in multiple charities and networks. Finally, in Nantes, we observe a significant religious dimension in the engagement of volunteers, due in particular to the strong presence of religious organisations in the pro-asylum field, especially in relation to housing, food distribution, or general guidance and mentoring activities.



General findings emerging from the analysis

- Our first analysis of the interviews shows the complex relation between volunteering and social activism (and more generally politics). In most cases, there is no clear line that separates volunteering from politics. Although the vast majority of our participants are not involved in social movements and do not present themselves as social or political activists, the interviews show that many of them define their engagement as a politicised commitment, and also sometimes as a form of protest. We observe an “avoidance of politics” (Eliasoph: 1998⁹) in the narratives of some volunteers, but we also observe what can be described as a form of in-between engagement (in-between volunteering and protest) in many interviews. The interviews also show processes of transformation of participants’ relation to politics. In some cases, we observe processes of ‘politicisation’, through which volunteers highlight how they became aware of the political dimension of the immigration and asylum issue. In the next steps of our analysis, we will analyse these processes comparatively and explore whether French and British volunteers have different relations to protest (and more generally to politics).
- The first analysis shows the transformative dimension of collective action (Della Porta: 2008¹⁰): for many participants, new cognitive frames, emotions, and relational dynamics emerge in the course of their experience of volunteering. It seems that these transformations are due in particular to the life trajectories of individuals (for example when their motivations for volunteering relate to changes and moments of rupture in their life), to the way volunteering is regulated by their charities (in particular whether it is constructed as a routine activity or as a more loosely structured learning process), and to the experience of volunteering in itself (what they witness, experiment and create in the course of collective action). We observe that these transformation processes seem to be more frequent amongst individuals who are involved in more intense and less professionalised forms of volunteering (in particular in detention centres, camps, and sometimes hosting). For example, in relation to the previous point, it seems that a part of the respondents did not know the details of immigration and asylum policies before they started volunteering. However, through their experience, they have learnt about the content and consequences of these policies, and they have developed new perspectives on these issues.
- It emerges from the interviews that volunteers base their engagement on different – and sometimes contradicting – representations of who the asylum-seekers and refugees are. For instance, refugees and asylum-seekers can be portrayed as vulnerable, as resilient, or as entrepreneurial agents who contribute to the host society. Focusing more specifically on the UK case, we have analysed this point in more details in a recent conference paper.¹¹ We show that the ways volunteers define the different figures of asylum seekers and refugees are related to their evaluation of who “deserves” their support. We analyse the processes through which different representations of the “deserving” refugees are constructed as well as how these representations are challenged and negotiated over the course of their experience of volunteering. We argue that, throughout their experience, volunteers have to negotiate the tensions that emerge when their initial representations of the “deserving” refugees are challenged. From a cross-national comparative perspective, we will explore whether these deservingness frames are constructed and negotiated in the same ways in the British and French cases.

How volunteers relate to their charities

- During the interviews, many participants highlighted the difficulties faced by their charities in the context of austerity, and they pointed out the need for more paid staff and material resources. Many volunteers insisted on the scarcity of public funding in the field of immigration and asylum, and they argued that they were doing the job that the government should be doing.
- We observe a high turnover of volunteers, both in France and in the UK. Although we have not interviewed individuals who have left the refugee support sector, our respondents underlined this point and suggested possible explanations: an insufficient matching of skills and tasks; a training that did not prepare them for every aspect of their work; periods of very intense and emotionally draining activities that could lead to episodes of burnout (for the case of Calais and Dunkirk in particular). Some participants suggested the idea of having more regular interactions between the group of volunteers and the management team in order to express their concerns.
- As for the more informal networks that have emerged in the context of the “refugee crisis”, we observe that many of them are undergoing a process of institutionalisation and formalisation of their activities. This leads participants to discuss the objectives of their groups as well as their situation in the broader refugee support sector.
- The asylum seekers and refugee participants that we interviewed in the UK highlighted that volunteering is a way for them to deal with the period in which their asylum demand is examined: as they are not allowed to work, volunteering is seen as a way to fight boredom and to get to know people in their city of residence. Volunteering is also seen as a way to improve their English and to develop new professional skills. Finally, it is seen as a way to strengthen their asylum application (by showing that they are active within the community). The organisation representatives that we have met underlined the need for more integration of asylum seekers and refugees in their organisation, and especially in the management team. However, it also emerged from the discussions that some aspects of the volunteering experience can endanger them as they can reflect their own traumatic experience. Generally, we observe that asylum seekers and refugees are less represented in our fieldwork in France than in the UK. This is an aspect that we want to explore in the next steps of the research.



Project activities so far (dissemination and outreach)

- We have created a website (<https://altruism.hypotheses.org>) in which we give regular updates on our project as well as on related projects and events.
- We have participated (as invited speakers, panel organisers or paper presenters) in the following conferences and events:
 - Roundtable on “The Migration and Refugee Crisis: Artistic and Civil Society Responses”, Leicester Migration Network, 13 July 2018
 - Conference on “Peaks and Troughs: New Research on Elites, Wealth, Inequality and Exclusion”, University of Sheffield, 27-28 June 2018
 - Panel on “Solidarities in Times of Crisis”, Conference of the ECPR Standing Group on the European Union, Science Po Paris, 13-15 June 2018 (the paper presented at this conference has led to a book chapter that is currently under review)
 - Roundtable on the film *Calais Children*, directed by Prof. Sue Clayton (Goldsmith University), University of Leicester, 21 May 2018
 - Conference of the British Sociological Association (BSA), Northumbria University, 11-13 April 2018, Newcastle
 - Conference on “Enquêter sur la Bienfaisance: Approches Comparatives des Politiques du Bien”, Maison Méditerranéenne des Sciences de l’Homme, Aix en Provence, 11-12 December 2017
 - Conference on “Beyond Borders: Refugees and Struggles in Europe. Mobilisation, Solidarity and Political Challenges in the Long Summer of Migration”, Scuola Normale Superiore, Florence, 12 May 2017

Timeline/next steps

- The next project advisory board will take place at the University of Leicester in September 2018
- We will organise a session on “Migrants’ Activism and the Notion of Deservingness” at the Midterm Conference of the ESA Research Network on the Sociology of Migration in Strasbourg in January 2019
- We will participate in the organisation of the CES pre-conference on “Social Movements and the Right to the City” in Madrid in June 2019
- The final project advisory board will take place at the University of Leicester in the first semester of academic year 2019-2020

Notes



Parliament Square, Westminster, London, UK 5 March 2016 - Hundreds of protesters stage a demonstration organised by London2Calais group against the recent events in the refugees camps in Calais (Photo: Shutterstock images).



Parliament Square, Westminster, London, UK 5 March 2016 - Hundreds of protesters stage a demonstration organised by London2Calais group against the recent events in the refugees camps in Calais (Photo: Shutterstock images).



Idomeni, Greece, April 15, 2016 - A refugees waits in line to get food. The camp for refugees and migrants at the Greek-Macedonian border near Idomeni (Photo: Shutterstock images).



Paris, France, 2018 - Poster by the group *Accueil de Merde*: 'Did you know that there are more police officers than people in exile in Calais?' (Photo: Elsa Rambaud).

- ¹ The length of the interviews in France decided us to reduce their number in this case (we aim for 60-65 interviews instead of 70 as initially planned). We have also collected a significant amount of data through our observations in the French case.
- ² These figures are approximate as some of the more informal networks we approached have overlapping structures.
- ³ Although we followed a snowball strategy throughout the data collection process, we insisted on recruiting a range of volunteers who are of working age as they have usually less time for interviews and are therefore more difficult to reach.
- ⁴ Due to questions of access to the field, all these activities are not represented equally in the two countries.
- ⁵ We have used the classification by the INSEE in France and by the ONS in the UK to design this chart. For the case of the participants who are retired, we have used their past occupation.
- ⁶ It was confirmed in our discussions with charity representatives in both countries that they have seen a large 'influx' of volunteers in recent years.
- ⁷ These figures will have to be revisited throughout the qualitative analysis as they only take into account the date of entry into their current charity (some participants were involved in other charities in this sector before 2015, in particular in the French case).
- ⁸ The law that (until July 2018) made it illegal to help or facilitate the entry, circulation or residence of undocumented migrants in the French territory under certain conditions.
- ⁹ Nina Eliasoph (1998), *Avoiding Politics. How Americans Produce Apathy in Everyday Life*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- ¹⁰ Donatella Della Porta (2008), "Eventful Protest, Global Conflict", *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory*, 9(2): 27-56.
- ¹¹ "Who deserves compassion? Volunteering and the representation of refugees and migrants in the 'refugee crisis'". Paper presented at the ECPR SGEU Conference, Science Po Paris, 13-15 June 2018.



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