

# From Vulnerability to Trust

## Personal Encounters and Bordering Processes in the British Refugees Welcome Movement

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■ **ABSTRACT:** This article examines the complex and ambivalent nature of the encounters between British volunteers and refugees within the 2015 Refugees Welcome movement. The 72 interviews we conducted with volunteers active in different charities and informal networks reveal the significance of the logic of trust in these encounters. We show that although participants often base their engagement on claims that disrupt dominant narratives about border controls, they also tend to endorse and reproduce bordering processes based on the perceived trustworthiness of refugees and, sometimes, exclude some groups from their support. Taking insights from the literature on encounters and critical humanitarianism, our article highlights from a theoretical and empirical perspective how “ordinary participants” in the refugee support sector can subvert humanitarian borders, but also participate in the construction of new types of borders based on domopolitics. More generally, the article aims to highlight civil society’s voluntary participation in the governance of migration.

■ **KEYWORDS:** encounters, humanitarian borders, “refugee crisis,” trust, volunteering

Since the so-called refugee crisis in 2015, grassroots initiatives in support of refugees have gained an increased visibility across Europe. People have joined the Refugees Welcome movement to host refugees, offer language courses, emotional support, legal and welfare assistance, and provide emergency assistance at the borders (Agustín and Jørgensen 2019; Della Porta 2018). In this article, we examine the Refugees Welcome movement through the focus on how “ordinary” participants in Britain—defined as charity or humanitarian volunteers<sup>1</sup>—make sense of their encounters with refugees. Looking at the transformative dimension of these encounters (Darling and Wilson 2016), we analyze how volunteers relate to government-led discourses and practices that reify and enforce boundaries and hierarchies between different groups of refugees, in particular through “humanitarian borders” (Walters 2011; Pallister-Wilkins 2018; Ticktin 2016). More generally, we aim to explore how participants give meaning to their daily relational practice of volunteering (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; Monforte 2020). In so doing, we want to contribute to the broader reflection on the emergence of new (hybrid) forms of engagement that go beyond traditional humanitarian action in the “refugee crisis” (Vandevoordt 2019; Stavinoha and Ramakrishnan 2020).

Our analysis is based on 72 interviews with British volunteers involved in different types of charities and networks (some dedicated to informal and nonroutinized activities and others to



more formalized and routinized forms of action), as well as in different sites (e.g., charity offices, the camps in Calais and Dunkirk,<sup>2</sup> immigration removal centers). As we will develop below, these distinct settings allow us to explore different types of encounters between volunteers and refugees (some more unpredictable and unexpected than others), and the impact that they have on participants' engagement.

Our analysis shows that volunteers' relation to humanitarian politics is situated and fluid. The way that participants make sense of their engagement—in particular, whether they endorse, reproduce, challenge, or subvert humanitarian borders—is closely linked to their practice in the field, and especially their daily encounters with refugees. We maintain that the unpredictable and unexpected nature of these encounters leads participants to challenge humanitarian borders based on the perceived vulnerability of refugees, in particular because they subvert the physical, social, and emotional distance between those considered to be helpers and those seen as being the beneficiaries of their support. We argue, however, that this process can lead to new forms of inequalities and exclusions, which relate to the centrality of the principle of trust in these encounters and in the broader politics of border management. From this perspective, our analysis sheds light on the forms of engagement that go beyond humanitarianism—which can be defined as “transgressive cosmopolitanism” (Baban and Rygiel 2017), “subversive humanitarianism” (Vandevoordt 2019), or “transgressive solidarity” (DeBono and Mainwaring 2020). As we will develop below, these engagements combine logics of humanitarianism and solidarity: they are based on daily acts of support that either directly or indirectly challenge state immigration policies. Existing scholarship has researched the spaces and places, as well as the specific collective actions, on which these engagements are based (see DeBono and Mainwaring 2020 and Della Porta and Steinhilper 2020 for recent reviews). Our approach aims to complement these studies by investigating the encounters through which these engagements emerge, as well as the transformations that they produce (see also Baban and Rygiel 2020). Moreover, in contrast with these studies, we call attention to the ambivalences of these engagements in order to underline, more generally, the diffusion and fluidity of state bordering processes, as well as the voluntary participation of nonstate actors in these processes.

In line with the theme of this special issue, our analysis relates to a broader reflection on voluntariness in the governance of migration. As shown, for example, by Pallister-Wilkins (2020), humanitarian logic drives the participation of diverse actors—including people active in charities and humanitarian organizations—in the implementation of restrictive immigration policies, in particular by delegating intertwined practices of “care and control” (Fassin 2012). By analyzing the engagement of “ordinary participants” in the Refugees Welcome movement, we want to show that their involvement in restrictive immigration policies does not preclude the emergence of practices and narratives that challenge and subvert state-driven bordering processes. Yet these practices and narratives do not necessarily lead to the complete erasure of bordering processes either. Overall, our findings show the ambivalent and hybrid nature of engagements in the Refugees Welcome movement, as well as, more generally, in charity and humanitarian actions in favor of groups perceived as vulnerable (Malkki 2015).

In the next section, we review the literature on humanitarian borders and reflect on the question of the distance in encounters between “helpers” and “beneficiaries.” We then detail the methods on which our research is based, before turning to the analysis of the transformative dimension of encounters. In our analysis, we highlight how our respondents challenge and subvert humanitarian logics of distinction and hierarchization based on the perceived vulnerability of refugees, but also how they create new types of bordering processes based on the principle of trust.

## Humanitarian Borders and Encounters Within the “Refugee Crisis”

In the last two decades, the literature on critical border studies and humanitarianism has shown that the humanitarian logic of aid to refugees is closely linked to state policies and practices of border controls and management of “undesirable” migrants (Agier 2011; Pallister-Wilkins 2018; Walters 2011; Williams 2015). These studies highlight how humanitarian action can legitimize and reinforce “violent borders” (Jones 2016) by conflating ideas of “care” and “control” (Fassin 2012), as well as “pity” and “risk” (Aradau 2004). In particular, international nongovernmental organizations active for the relief of “migrants at risk” have been actively involved by governments in the definition and construction of exclusionary practices based on the perception of “migrants as a risk” (Pallister-Wilkins 2018: 116). The distinction between different categories of migrants is at the core of what Fassin (2012) defines as the “politics of life”: the production of hierarchies of humanity and the distinction between lives that need to be saved (that should be cared for) and lives that do not have access to care. Processes of distinction and triage between “forced displacement” (concerned with the traditional beneficiaries of humanitarian action, defined as innocent victims) and “economic” or “voluntary” migration (focused on those who fall outside the realm of humanitarianism) create and enforce hierarchies and bordering processes (Vaughan-Williams 2015; Yuval-Davis et al. 2017). Moreover, as the humanitarian figure of the refugee is based on notions of victimhood, vulnerability, innocence, and compassion (Ticktin 2017),<sup>3</sup> these processes reinforce unequal power relations between beneficiaries and providers of humanitarian aid, in a context in which refugees are reduced to their “bare life” and denied political agency (Agamben 1998).

This humanitarian logic of “dehumanisation and depoliticization” (Stavinoha and Ramakrishnan 2020) is closely linked to the construction of refugees—and, more generally, the beneficiaries of humanitarian action—as distant actors. As we will develop below, this distance is geographical—humanitarian aid is often provided “over there” (Ticktin 2016)—but, crucially, it is also emotional and social: beneficiaries of humanitarian action are often represented through their differences from the helpers, and humanitarian actors maintain an emotional and social distance with beneficiaries when they interact (Hyndman 2000; Malkki 2015). This distance is epitomized, for instance, by the focus on the biological needs and the trauma of asylum seekers when assessing their applications (D’Halluin and Fassin 2005; Redfield 2005), by the proliferation of media representations that exacerbate the separation between victims and spectators (Boltanski 1993; Johnson 2011), and, more generally, by the production of judgments about the “deservingness” of refugees (Maestri and Monforte 2020).

While humanitarian borderwork permeated the compassionate response of civil society during the “refugee crisis” (Sirriyeh 2018), the literature on the Refugees Welcome movement also shows the emergence of new forms of engagement, especially in grassroots transnational networks (Agustín and Jørgensen 2019; Della Porta 2018). Indeed, this movement mixes logics of humanitarianism and solidarity: it combines concrete daily actions of support to refugees with a direct or indirect opposition to state anti-immigrant policies and discourses. These forms of engagement—defined by Vandevordt (2019) as “subversive humanitarianism” and by DeBono and Mainwaring (2020) as “transgressive solidarity”—represent a concrete “alternative to formal humanitarian aid” (Sandri 2018: 65), in particular because they are based on solidarities that challenge the distance between volunteers and refugees (Rozakou 2012; Stavinoha and Ramakrishnan 2020). They emerge through the concrete practices of pro-refugee volunteers (Sandri 2018), the features of the spaces and places in which they act (DeBono and Mainwaring 2020), and their relations with power holders in the context of criminalization of human-

itarian action (Della Porta and Steinhilper 2020; Tazzioli 2018). Moreover, these engagements are linked to the daily interactions between volunteers and refugees. For example, Zamponi (2017) argues that forms of “direct social action”—which facilitate the politicization of collective action—emerge through social bonds that take place within emergency situations and spaces, such as borders or camps. Similarly, Sandri (2018), Rozakou (2012), and Vandevordt and Verschraegen (2019) show how unequal power relations between volunteers and refugees are disrupted through logics of solidarity emerging from their daily interactions in camp spaces. Comparing grassroots groups in Chios and Paris, Stavinoha and Ramakrishnan (2020) show how “creative solidarities” and political interventions can emerge through horizontal practices and everyday encounters between volunteers and refugees, in particular through their exchanges of “biographical life” (see also Steinhilper & Karakayali 2018).

In this article, we want to further unpack the features and specificities of humanitarian volunteering in the “refugee crisis,” as well as its ambivalences. Following some of the perspectives developed in the literature on the Refugees Welcome movement—in particular, Baban and Rygiel (2020), Stavinoha and Ramakrishnan (2020), and Vandevordt and Verschraegen (2019)—we focus on the encounters between volunteers and refugees, through the analysis of their transformative dimension. Although we acknowledge existing power relations and the reproduction of state bordering processes, we also want to highlight the encounters through which they can be challenged and subverted by volunteers. Following Wilson (2017) and Darling and Wilson (2016), encounters are specific forms of social contacts or relations that are characterized by difference and momentariness, and that are transformative and productive. It is the very fact that they lead to negotiations and potential conflicts—as well as unexpected transformations—that makes encounters a specific form of social relation. The potential destabilizations—and risks—that the encounter entails explain why it has become the site of political interventions (often leading to a romanticization of certain encounters) proposed as solutions to problems such as segregation or community tensions (Wilson 2017). This, according to Wilson (*ibid.*), is a paradox: it is impossible to fully plan something that is by definition unpredictable. More generally, as argued by Ahmed (2000), encounters unfold within broader relationships of power, but they should not be necessarily understood as moments of contact between preestablished social identities; encounters *produce* subjectivities, as “it is only through meeting with an-other that the identity of a given person comes to be inhabited as living” (*ibid.*: 7–8). This applies to charity and humanitarian action, as for instance observed in food banks (Cloke et al. 2017), mutual support groups (Theodossopoulos 2016), refugee camps (Rozakou 2012; Sandri 2018), or refugee support charities (Squire and Darling 2013). Although these forms of action can have a depoliticizing effect by focusing on charitable aid rather than aiming for structural changes, they can also to a certain extent disrupt the unequal power relations between providers and beneficiaries of help, as a result of the subjectivities produced by their encounters (Baban and Rygiel 2020).

At the same time, the ambivalence of encounters should be underlined. Indeed, although they can be transformative and disruptive, encounters can also be “deeply reproductive” (Humphris 2019: 22): they are shaped by the situated positions, perceptions, expectations, and aspirations of social actors. Therefore, far from romanticizing the encounter as merely a disruption of existing power relations, we turn to it as an epistemological tool with which to analyze the (unexpected) transformations of participants’ engagement, while also acknowledging that they can be “intimate state encounters” (Humphris 2019) through which (state-driven) bordering processes are reproduced. In so doing, we investigate the ways in which daily encounters between helpers and beneficiaries can challenge humanitarian borders and generate political potential, but also create new (or reproduce old) types of hierarchies, distinctions, and power relations.

We maintain that although civil society responses to the “refugee crisis” create new forms of encounters that go beyond the humanitarian logic of “care and control” (Fassin 2012), they do not necessarily abolish principles of distinction and hierarchization of refugees. Rather, they create other forms of inequalities and exclusions. As we will develop below, these other forms of inequalities and exclusions reflect broader (state-driven) bordering processes that are based on the move toward “domopolitics”: a way to govern the state and manage its borders as if it were a home—a space of familiarity, intimacy, and trust (Walters 2004; Gunaratnam 2021; Humpris 2019). The development of “domopolitics,” through the diffusion of border controls across society and the inclusion of nonstate actors in the implementation of the “hostile environment” (Jones et al. 2017), creates a context in which the principle of trust shapes the relationships between citizens and refugees. This is reinforced by media representations of refugees, in particular during the “refugee crisis” (Crawley and Skleparis 2018). In this context, volunteers, by referring to state-driven categories of distinction and hierarchization between those refugees who are deemed trustworthy and others who are not, expect refugees to demonstrate that they can be trusted as they construct proximate encounters.

### **Methods: Analyzing Encounters Within the “Refugee Crisis”**

Our analysis draws on 72 in-depth interviews with British volunteers supporting refugees in Britain (London, Birmingham, Sheffield, and the Midlands) and in France (Calais region). The interviews were conducted between May 2017 and November 2019, with participants who engaged in different types of activities, such as hosting, offering language courses, donating food and clothes, offering emotional support in immigration removal centers, or providing legal assistance. Our respondents (all nonpaid volunteers) were involved in a variety of organizations, from established and professionalized national charities to more local and informal networks that emerged during the 2015 “refugee crisis.” These different organizations and networks share a humanitarian framework, with a focus on compassion and care as core values, and practices that address the immediate needs of refugees and provide services related to their inclusion in Britain (Monforte et al. 2019).

In the interviews, we asked participants about their personal trajectories, their initial motivations for engaging in the field of refugee support, the dynamics of their encounters with refugees, and, more generally, their practice of volunteering. Our analysis focused on the ways that they described and explained how their own engagement had evolved over time. We paid particular attention to changes in terms of how they defined the beneficiaries of their action, how they viewed their own roles, and, more generally, how they made sense of their relations with refugees. Respondents were approached through gatekeepers (e.g., charity representatives) or directly. In our sampling strategy, we aimed to recruit a variety of participants in terms of age, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic background. However, it should be noted that the majority self-identified as white women, middle-class and retired (which, according to the charity representatives we worked with, reflected the composition of the volunteer population).

Our sampling allowed us to investigate different types of encounters between volunteers and refugees, which took place in different settings: short-term encounters centered around emergency situations in borderlands (i.e., in Calais), informal and repeated long-term encounters (i.e., visits in detention centers or hosting), and more formalized encounters organized around specific activities (i.e., language courses, legal advice, psychological support). In what follows, we aim to highlight the transformative and ambivalent nature of these encounters, in particular

by analyzing how the initial distance characterizing humanitarian activities is challenged and replaced by relations of proximity, but also by new logics of distinction and hierarchization.

## Helping Distant Strangers: The Motivations of Refugee Support Volunteers

The analysis of participants' interviews shows that their motivation for getting involved in the field of refugee support—for the vast majority in 2015—was very often linked to a humanitarian framework (as a set of values and an “ethics in action”; Fassin 2007). For many, the need to alleviate the suffering of a distant stranger was the central reason that led them to engage in the Refugees Welcome movement. This was visible in the many references to Alan Kurdi—the Syrian boy who died when attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea—and, more generally, in the evocations of the “vulnerability” and “innocence” of those they aimed to help (Armbruster 2019). For instance, when asked what motivated her to join her charity, a volunteer based in London explained that she wanted to provide aid to people in need (especially women and children), referring to their vulnerability and presenting them as helpless victims:

It's really important that privileged people like us take a compassionate interest in people who are having [a] horrible time and have been through hell. . . . Because there's an assumption that people are leaving and coming to this great life and it's not, it's terrible. People don't leave unless things are dreadful. . . . That's the sort of things that get me passionate about. It's all about compassion. If we don't have compassion, we're not a decent society. (Lydia, 67, London)

Echoing the humanitarian logic of hierarchization, this focus on the vulnerability of refugees led many participants to endorse distinctions between “forced migrants” and “voluntary” or “economic” migrants. More generally, as the reference to the notion of a “decent society” in this last interview suggests, they often referred to moral values and “us and them” narratives rooted in domopolitics (Walters 2004). In so doing, they tended to reproduce state-led exclusionary narratives based on ideas of deservingness, which were prevalent in public debates during the “refugee crisis” (Crawley and Skleparis 2018; Maestri and Monforte 2020). For instance, this was underlined by a volunteer in Sheffield, who made this distinction explicit when asked about her views on British immigration policies:

I'd open up more to refugees, less to people who wanted to come here to make money I guess, if I had to choose, then I would prioritize people fleeing war and persecution above people who can afford to pay a lot of money to settle in Central London for instance, but that's my politics. (Jane, 63, Sheffield)

More generally, the analysis shows that the presentation of refugees as vulnerable victims led many participants to acknowledge (directly or indirectly) the unequal character of their relations with those who benefit from their help (Rajaram 2002). This also led them to present refugees as distant strangers and to find ways to keep this distance throughout their daily encounters (Malkki 2015). For example, this was the case for a participant who used to work as a clinical psychologist and is now a volunteer in an organization offering psychological support to refugee mothers and children. When asked to describe her activities, she highlighted both the unequal and distant (professional) nature of her relations with refugees:

I feel that we're making [a] contribution to people in very harsh and difficult circumstances. That people are truly benefitting from what we are offering them. . . . I am protecting myself a little bit from the knowledge of their story because I had enough of that at work and I don't

need to know the ins and outs of their stories. If they want to talk about it with me, that's fine. But mostly we're dealing with the here and now. (Lydia, 67, London)

As this last example suggests, not knowing too much “about the ins and outs of [refugees'] stories” is a way for Lydia to make her own engagement sustainable over time by “protecting” herself. This echoes Pallister-Wilkins's (2020) argument that distance is a central feature of humanitarian action. Indeed, the distance between the providers and beneficiaries of aid is not only geographical (traveling to distant places), it is also “a distance marked by self and other,” a “distance in social relations” (ibid.: 998). This social and emotional distance (or detachment) is related to the professionalization of humanitarian action, and it is carefully preserved throughout the everyday interactions between the actors present in the field, including when they are physically close (Malkki 2015; Redfield 2005). In the interviews, many volunteers explained how they have constructed strategies to maintain this distance. This was the case especially when they started volunteering, as this participant who volunteers in Calais suggested:

And when I got there and it was raining and it was chaos and I saw the kids . . . It was really deeply shocking. And I was ashamed that I was so shocked and I was a bit embarrassed as well. So, you dive in and you're like, “oh there's one, don't look, don't look.” . . . You can't actually open up, open up and talk to them and just be normal. (Louisa, 31, Midlands)

This example illustrates how strategies of distance-keeping—which can be used to avoid discomfort and feelings of shame and embarrassment—impede the construction of “normal” relations in which volunteers (and refugees) can “open up and talk.” Therefore, distance is not only a practice used by volunteers to “protect” themselves (as suggested by Lydia above), but also something that defines their initial encounters with refugees and, ultimately, their subjectivity. Indeed, as a result of this social and emotional detachment, participants tended to make sense of their encounters with refugees through humanitarian representations that denied their political life and focused on their vulnerability (i.e., the image of the children in the “chaos” in this last example) (Johnson 2011; Malkki 2015). However, further analysis shows that these processes can be disrupted in the course of volunteers' experience. This is revealed by the analysis of participants' narratives about their daily encounters with refugees.

### Unpredictable Encounters: From Distance to Solidarity

Encounters are ultimately unpredictable and can generate unexpected results (Darling and Wilson 2016). They can produce subjectivities that can be transformative and, sometimes, disrupt existing boundaries and power relations (Ahmed 2000; Baban and Rygiel 2020). During the interviews, participants explained how, as an outcome of their daily encounters with refugees, they have, over time, built close relationships that disrupt the humanitarian distance just presented. This was illustrated by a participant who is part of a hosting network in Birmingham and who described her relationship with her guest in a way that evoked a connection with a “friend,” underlining in particular how it has grown “organically”:

I kind of feel like the time that I give to her I would give to a friend or anyone else who I know. . . . I think initially when I started it was nice to have someone in the house. It was nice to have that companionship, it was nice to know that I'm helping someone as well, and someone who's actually in quite a lot of need. Yeah, and I think that's kinda grown now and it kinda feels like more of a friendship rather than sort of me formally volunteering and having to, you know, make the effort to do things.” (Jackie, 32, Birmingham)

Similarly, the participant who volunteers in Calais and who described her initial distance with refugees explained how she has constructed deep bonds with the people in the camp and how this has reinforced her engagement: she has “become very good friends with them . . . It just becomes you. I can’t see myself without it” (Louisa, 31, Midlands). It is important to note that we observed these transformations in specific volunteering settings characterized by more informal and regular encounters between volunteers and refugees, for example through the experience of hosting refugees, doing visits in detention centers, or volunteering in Calais. In contrast with more regulated encounters taking place through formalized and professionalized practices, these encounters led participants to reevaluate their own roles and their relations with the “beneficiaries” of their actions. In particular, the proximity emerging from these close encounters can challenge representations of refugees as distant strangers, as well as, more generally, widespread views of refugees as dehumanized groups. Thus, when asked to describe how she presents her engagement to her family and friends, the respondent we introduced above who volunteers in Calais explained that she talks about the people that she helps as “friends” rather than “entities on the other side of the Channel” (Louisa, 31, Midlands).

Participants’ descriptions of their proximity with refugees led them to acknowledge and look for ways to challenge the unequal power relations defined through a humanitarian logic, for instance by highlighting—as the example above implies—that they also benefit from this relation. More generally, these encounters can lead participants to challenge the hierarchies and bordering processes created by humanitarian action. This is visible in the way that they depicted refugees (as a group) and talked about their needs. Their encounters enabled respondents to nuance the representation of refugees as “innocent” and “vulnerable” victims (Ticktin 2017), and so to recognize their agency and the diversity of their experience. This was illustrated by a participant who visits refugees in detention centers. When asked about the difficulties faced by the people she visits, she explained that she now recognizes that refugees are not necessarily dependent on her:

Even when they receive bail it’s usually to some kind of hostel in another part of the country that they don’t know. And I sometimes think that they’re pretty ill equipped for [it], although then there’s another part of my brain [that] thinks, “well they’ve got themselves here. You know, if they’ve got to move to . . . Sunderland, you know, they’ll probably cope.” (Grace, 43, London)

Narratives about the agency of refugees are often ambivalent. For instance, in this case, the respondent evoked a contradictory internal dialogue in which the agency of refugees was speculated rather than fully assumed. Nevertheless, the analysis of these narratives shows that the figure of the innocent victim is questioned. This leads volunteers to repoliticize the lives of refugees by considering their subjectivity beyond their condition of (apolitical) “bare life” (Agamben 1998), and so to shift the narrative from their “biological life” to their “biographical life” (Fassin 2012; Brun 2016). This was illustrated by a participant based in Sheffield, who detailed the trajectory of a person he was helping in order to reveal the political dimension of his situation:

If you listen to him, he sounds, and he is British. You know, he is culturally [British], he’s grown up here his whole life, he’s a British citizen really, and he speaks eloquently and fluently and articulately, and yet he is now fighting to not be deported to [country], and he cannot work. . . . And it’s almost like it’s an intentional part of the system to say: “you will go through the heartbreak, you will suffer the heartbreak of this.” I mean, Theresa May, when she was Home Secretary, she said: “oh, well we are here to create a hostile environment for refugees and asylum seekers, we are not here to support them.” And that, you can only interpret as, you know, creating an asylum process that’s convoluted. It’s purposely convoluted, purposely confusing. (Jack, 26, Sheffield)



As this last example shows, the repoliticization of refugees' lives led participants to mobilize injustice frames (Gamson 1992), and so to redefine their engagement in a more politicized way (Fleischmann and Steinhilper 2017). More generally, this reevaluation of the condition of refugees in terms of systemic injustice is linked to narratives that challenge humanitarian borders (Millner 2011). This is illustrated by a participant who explained that she has become critical of the distinction between different types of migrants:

I don't think you can separate people into deserving migrants and undeserving migrants. It doesn't really work like that. It's about human rights and human dignity. . . . I'm not even sure you can talk about the economic migrants being very different from refugees and asylum seekers. You just don't leave everything for the hell of it. (Lydia, 67, London)

Our analysis echoes studies on the political potential of encounters within the Refugees Welcome movement and the emergence of “subversive humanitarianism” (Vandevoordt 2019) and “transgressive solidarity” (DeBono and Mainwaring 2020). Through everyday informal and unexpected encounters, humanitarian aid is enacted in a new way that creates spaces for solidarities, in particular by challenging the social and emotional distance between volunteers and refugees (Rozakou 2012; Sandri 2018; Stavinoha and Ramakrishnan 2020). However, as we will now develop, the analysis also shows the ambivalence of these transformations.

### **“We All Have to Feel Comfortable around Each Other”: The Logic of Trust and the Construction of New Bordering Processes**

The analysis of participants' narratives shows that their critique and subversion of humanitarian bordering processes does not erase completely the logics of hierarchization and distinction between different refugees. In fact, the reevaluation of their role as volunteers—and of the everyday practices that relate to it—leads many participants to construct new hierarchies and distinctions, based on new processes of inclusion and exclusion. As volunteers challenge the distance in their encounters with refugees, they ground their relations with them on their (social and emotional) proximity and, more generally, on the principle of trust. Rather than distant victims, refugees are seen as close and trustworthy individuals, with whom deep interpersonal connections can occur and solidarity can emerge. Overall, the principle of trust becomes increasingly salient in their everyday encounters with refugees and in the subjectivities that they produce. However, this process can result in the exclusion of some refugees. Indeed, encounters based on proximity, friendship, and trust are linked to an expectation: to be included, refugees have to demonstrate that they can be trusted, that they can become “friends” (as mentioned by Jackie and Louisa above). As we have shown elsewhere, volunteers involved in hosting activities can even expect refugees to behave as new family members (Monforte, Maestri, and d'Haluin 2021). Those who cannot (or do not wish to) demonstrate their trustworthiness risk being excluded or classified as less deserving and ungrateful (Moulin 2012). This process shows that encounters can be transformative, but also “deeply reproductive” (Humphris 2019: 22). Indeed, this logic of trust reflects broader state-led conceptions of borders that have influenced British immigration and citizenship policies in recent decades. As shown by Walters (2004), these policies are increasingly guided by a form of domopolitics, whereby moral values and feelings of trust and closeness determine who can be included (Gunaratnam 2021). This implies that the state is governed “like a home,” “a safe, reassuring place, a place of intimacy, togetherness and even unity, trust and familiarity” (Walters 2004: 241). In this context, the management of migration is diffused across society, and different nonstate actors (including charities and their

volunteers) become directly or indirectly involved in the implementation of border controls. From this perspective, encounters between volunteers and refugees can be analyzed as “intimate state encounters” (Humphris 2019), which reveal the reproduction of broader power relations and the voluntary participation of citizens in the governance of migration. In particular, as Braun (2017) suggests, the power relations emerging from these encounters can reflect historical understandings of gender, race, and class differences that are rooted in the colonial history of the “host” countries.

Expectations around trust were often channeled by the organizations in which our respondents were involved. For example, one of the hosting networks in which we conducted fieldwork asked for reference letters on behalf of refugees before they could be hosted. This allowed the organization to make judgments about their good character before they could be placed in a family. Similarly, we observed that the refugees who were the most integrated in the daily activities of charities were those who had demonstrated that they could be trusted, for example by acting as intermediaries (interpreters, translators, or cultural brokers) between the organizational staff and the refugee communities. The use of trust (instead of, or in addition to, vulnerability) as a criterion of inclusion and hierarchization was also visible in the ways that respondents described their relations with refugees. This was the case when they evoked the distinction that they established between the “friends” they have made and the other refugees (with whom a relation of proximity could not be constructed). For instance, a respondent explained that she was particularly involved with refugees from East Africa because she felt that as a result of her personal trajectory (she had lived in the region in the past), she had a relationship based on mutual understanding and confidence with them:

Because I have a soft spot for Ethiopians and Eritreans, sometimes I have parties for Eritrean and Ethiopian people and they come around and it's great. And they cook their food or I cook their food at my house, we dance in a circle. (Sophie, 62, Midlands)

As this example shows, trust can be based on what is perceived as a cultural affinity. In other cases, it can be linked to gender. This was the case for a participant who, when doing the initial interview before hosting refugees, told the charity representative that she preferred to host women:

I don't want any single men, because . . . just because I'm a single female. Again, I don't think that would actually be an issue, but it might be more uncomfortable for them than it is for me actually. (Leah, 32, Birmingham)

In this case, even though the respondent justified her preference for hosting women as a form of respect toward prospective guests, she implied that men might not be able to adjust to living with a woman, thus stressing a social, emotional, and maybe cultural distance that could not be overcome, and more generally, the idea that men are not perceived as trustworthy in the private sphere of the home (Humphris 2019). More generally, in line with the idea of domopolitics, she stressed the necessity to be “comfortable.” Similarly, another volunteer who hosts refugees explained that she and her family preferred not to host men because of the presence of children in the house:

One thing I would say is that back then I was a bit apprehensive about it because I've got a seven-year-old daughter and it seemed the right thing to do but it didn't seem, I thought, without risk. So, at the beginning we said we only want to host women. (Lauren, 42, London)

As these examples suggest, the question of trust (related, in these cases, to the culture and the gender of refugees) can lead volunteers to exclude some groups from their support. Moreover,

this question can permeate the daily interactions between volunteers and refugees. In some cases, this led our respondents to expect refugees to display signs of their trustworthiness in their everyday behavior. For example, Lauren explained that she decided to stop hosting a guest when she realized that she did not completely trust her, in particular because of her interactions with her daughter:

One of our guests, . . . she was very nice but there was something about the way she interacted with my daughter that my daughter didn't really like. She wasn't horrible in any way but she was just a bit rough in her face. . . . We spoke to [name of the hosting network coordinator], they found another family that were going to host her, they moved her . . . . So nothing made me want to stop but at the same time it has to work. We all have to feel comfortable around each other. (Lauren, 42, London)

Similarly, a participant who volunteers in Calais explained that she was disappointed when she felt that the refugees did not “respect” the “love and kindness” that she offered:

So, a lot of these people were absolutely just not receptive to the idea that we were in Dunkirk with, like, you know, like everybody sharing, cause it's [a] dog-eat-dog environment, you know, and this whole idea of sharing and giving love and kindness, and hoping that people will behave better as a result of the love that you've spread. That didn't happen. I mean, so many people stole from us, it was untrue. Like, all the volunteers, you know, there wasn't any kind of: “crikey, these people are here, unpaid, just for the love of it, to help us, you know, we should have a bit of respect.” (Melanie, 57, Midlands)

As these examples illustrate, participants experienced disappointments and, sometimes, distress (and some evoked burnout) when they felt that they could not trust the refugees they wanted to help. The expression of these feelings reflected the broader context of distinction and hierarchization inherent in public discourses around migration and the corresponding policies put in place. Indeed, the expectation of trust and gratefulness that is reflected in this last interview shows a logic of “us and them” that is based on the idea of shared moral values and feelings of familiarity (Anderson 2013). Similarly, participants explained that they were disappointed when they observed behaviors that they perceived as dishonest or disingenuous. For example, the same interviewee described her disappointment when she realized that one of the refugees she was supporting was lying to her:

And . . . I don't know, it's just, the whole thing is just so confusing. As I said, you would help somebody only to find out later that they were a trafficker, or . . . there was one woman . . . that we absolutely bust a gut for because the traffickers were after her. She was very pretty, they wanted her to work in prostitution, they wanted to take her children, they had been trying to take her children since Greece, she'd lost her husband. It turned out to be a complete lie, complete lie. (Melanie, 57, Midlands)

As these interviews suggest, the logic of trust that is at the core of migration management policies creates an anticipation that shapes the daily encounters between volunteers and refugees. Volunteers expect that refugees have certain profiles and display reassuring behaviors that are perceived as necessary for a relation based on proximity, especially when they feel that they give a lot of themselves (in opposition to the social and emotional distance of humanitarian encounters). As one of our respondents put it, this expectation is linked to the idea that encounters “have to work. We all have to feel comfortable around each other” (Lauren, 42, London). More generally, the interviews confirm that, as Ahmed (2000) argued, encounters are never detached from broader relationships of power, for example in terms of culture or gender (see also Humphris 2019; Lonergan 2018). In contrast with more activist groups based on “transver-

sal solidarities” that aim to “counter” European domopolitics (Ataç, Rygiel, and Stierl 2021), the encounters we analyzed can, in fact, intensify the construction of domopolitics at the intimate level (Gunaratnam 2021). They show how the discourses and policies on migration create a context that permeates the relationships between volunteers and refugees.

## Conclusion

The analysis of participants’ narratives about their motivations for and experiences of volunteering reveals significant transformations in terms of how they construct and make sense of their own engagement. Although their motivations for volunteering are often presented through a humanitarian framework, the unpredictable and unexpected nature of the encounters that they make leads them to resist the humanitarian logic of “care and control” (Fassin 2012). In and through their encounters with refugees, they challenge the social and emotional distance between “helpers” and “beneficiaries” and construct alternative relations of proximity with the people they want to support. As a result, volunteers give a more politicized meaning to their engagement (in contrast with humanitarianism), in particular by contesting and resisting state-driven logics of hierarchization and distinction based on the perceived vulnerability and innocence of refugees. Thus, the nature of these encounters echoes calls to move “beyond humanitarian borders,” to create an “affective politics that moves beyond a state of emergency, beyond feelings of pity for the innocent” (Tickin 2016: 286).

However, it is important to note the ambivalences of this process. Indeed, in line with the reflections presented in the introduction to this special issue, our analysis shows the ambivalent role of civil society actors in the definition and implementation of immigration and asylum policies. Volunteers’ engagement in the field of refugee support can lead them to actively challenge and resist state-driven humanitarian borders. However, they can also (more or less deliberately) engage in the definition and implementation of new types of bordering processes, which echo governmental logics around managing “undesirable migrants” (Agier 2011). We have illustrated how new forms of distinction and hierarchization emerge from the encounters between volunteers and refugees, which often reflect broader state-led logics of inclusion and exclusion based on domopolitics, and especially the use of trust in the management of migration (Walters 2004). The ambivalences we have analyzed in this article exemplify the diffused and fluid nature of bordering processes in contemporary societies (Yuval-Davis et al. 2017). From a Foucauldian perspective, these ambivalences show that bordering processes are often enforced by different agents through a disciplinary power that spreads across society (Turner 2014). They also demonstrate that logics of inclusion and exclusion can be subverted and reproduced at the same time, at a distance from government institutions and from state geographical borders, in and through the mundane and intimate interactions between volunteers and refugees. More generally, as studies on the nature of volunteering have revealed, this highlights how the actions of volunteers can belong to distinct—sometimes contradictory—logics: critical and subversive, but also reproductive and reinforcing of existing power relations (Cloke et al. 2017; Monforte 2020).

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## ■ ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank the reviewers and the journal editors for their insightful comments and support. This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council. Project title: “Exploring the Frames of Altruistic Action,” 2017–2020. Grant number: ES/N015274/1.

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## ■ NOTES

1. We use these terms—in a broad sense and interchangeably—to refer to the individuals acting for the support of refugees and focusing primarily on their suffering. Moreover, we use the term “ordinary participants” to distinguish between our respondents (volunteers involved in refugee support charities) and paid members of staff.
2. Due to the proximity of the Calais region, many British volunteers cross the Channel on a regular basis to provide support to refugees stranded in the camps in Calais and Dunkirk.
3. As we have shown elsewhere, this figure is often linked with that of the “resilient” and “entrepreneurial” refugee (Maestri and Monforte 2020).

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