

## Key Experiences of Volunteers in Refugee Aid

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### Abstract

To investigate the specific events and processes that contribute to volunteering in refugee aid, we conducted a qualitative study with volunteers in Germany ( $N = 220$ ). Participants described in their own words critical incidents that motivated them to volunteer. Content analysis revealed contact with refugees (spatial closeness or conversation), contact with non-refugees (volunteers or xenophobic persons), media experiences (reports about refugees or calls for action), and biographical incidents (own migration or major life changes) as key experiences. The results provide valuable insights into experiences that motivate people to volunteer in refugee aid, which supports integration processes of refugees and asylum-seekers.

*Words:* 100

*Keywords:* Volunteering, Refugee Aid, Forced Migration, Critical Incident Technique, Volunteer Functions

## **Introduction**

Getting along in a new country can be challenging. Those who migrate are facing high demands such as learning a new language, finding a job, understanding explicit and implicit societal norms and building relationships with members of the receiving society. For people who flee and seek for asylum, coping with the new context is even more difficult as they often leave their heritage country without much resources. Volunteers of the receiving society can play a critical role for coping with these challenges. Refugees and asylum seekers often perceive volunteers as more trustworthy and easier to approach than professional services, so that volunteers can serve as confidants who then mediate the contact between refugees and asylum seekers and professional services (e.g., Essex et al., 2021; Hoogervorst et al., 2016). A better understanding of the reasons that motivate people to volunteer contributes to facilitating voluntary work and thus indirectly to improving the situation of refugees and people who seek for asylum. The present study thus investigates key experiences that motivated volunteers in refugee aid. In the following sections, we describe the context of volunteering in refugee aid, describe two prominent approaches that attempt to explain volunteer motivation (The Process Model of Volunteering, Omoto & Snyder 1995; 2002; and the Functional Approach to Volunteering, Clary et al., 1996; 1998; Clary & Snyder, 1991) and discuss their applicability for the context of refugee aid.

### **Volunteering in Refugee Aid**

Volunteering can be defined as “a form of prosocial behavior that involves a freely chosen decision to commit a sustained amount of time and effort to helping another person, group, or cause, typically through a non-profit organization” (Stukas et al., 2015, p. 459). Refugee aid usually refers to helping people who are legally recognized refugees as well as helping people who seek for asylum. This implies for example language lessons, support in refugee camps or asylum shelters, accompanying meetings with authorities, arranging contacts to professional services, or organizing leisure activities. The status of a person in the

asylum process is highly relevant for their opportunities for permanent residence in the receiving country, access to the labor market and mental health (Hajak et al., 2021). However, the degree of forcedness associated with migration cannot be equated with the status of being a legal refugee. For instance, people who left their country due to economic hardship can experience their migration as forced but are usually not recognized as refugees. Scholars therefore propose to describe forcedness as a continuum rather than a dichotomous distinction based on legal requirements (Echterhoff et al., 2020). Furthermore, people who volunteer in refugee aid help people who are recognized refugees as well as those who are asylum seekers. In the present paper, we thus use the term refugee aid and forced migration with regard to legally recognized refugees as well as asylum seekers.

The sharp rises of forced migration in 2016 and 2022 in Europe (OECD, 2022) would not have been manageable without the support of volunteers. For instance, the number of people who applied for asylum in Germany increased from about 200.000 in 2014 to an unprecedented high of more than 700.000 in 2016 (Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, 2021). More than one million people migrated to Germany in 2022; many of them were forced to flee their home countries because of war in Ukraine, violence, persecution and/or extreme economic hardship (Federal Ministry of the Interior and Community, 2022). The sharp rise in displaced persons led to overburdened public institutions in 2015/2016 in Germany (e.g., Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Seniors, Women and Youth, 2019), and registration, housing, and care of refugees would not have been manageable without the support of a large number of citizens volunteering in refugee aid (e.g., Karakayali & Kleist, 2016). In fact, in 2016, there was an all-time increase in volunteering (Allensbach, 2018) with every second adult in Germany participating in refugee aid by making monetary or material donations, and a total of 25% of the population actively participating in refugee aid (e.g., language teaching or help to find accommodation). Many of them volunteered for the first time in their lives (Karakayali & Kleist, 2016).

## **Theoretical Approaches to Volunteer Motivation and their Application to Refugee Aid**

The motivation to volunteer has been addressed by person-environment fit models such as the Functional Approach to Volunteering (Clary et al., 1996; 1998; Clary & Snyder, 1991) and stage models such as the Process Model of Volunteering (Omoto & Snyder, 1995, 2002; Stukas et al., 2015). We argue that applying these approaches to the context of refugee migration requires some specification. In the following, we describe the two approaches to volunteering and discuss their applicability to the context of refugee aid.

### **The Process Model of Volunteering**

In the Process Model of Volunteering (Omoto & Snyder 1995; 2002), three stages of volunteering are differentiated (i.e., Antecedents, Experiences, and Consequences) each of which can be analyzed on four different levels (i.e., Individual, Interpersonal, Organizational, and Social System). As shown in Table 1, individual-level factors (e.g., life circumstances), interpersonal-level factors (e.g., networks), organizational-level factors (e.g., volunteer recruiting), and social-level factors (e.g., context) influence whether someone begins to volunteer and whether this engagement persists (Omoto & Snyder, 2002; Omoto et al., 2010). Empirical studies support the influence of these factors on initiation and maintenance of voluntary work, and, at the same time, suggest that the model is highly context-dependent. Specifically, it could be shown that the relevance of the different factors for initiation and maintenance of voluntary work differ across contexts (see Stukas et al., 2015, for a review), and that different factors can stand out depending on the specific group of volunteers (e.g., Alfieri et al., 2019). Factors that predict volunteering in the context of refugee aid can be mapped on the process model components as well though the identified factors strongly depend on the methodology employed in the study (e.g., Kende et al., 2017). Thus, the process model of volunteering can serve as a framework covering a broad variety of factors influencing volunteering though it might not provide an exhaustive model for explaining volunteering in refugee aid.

Table 1. The Process Model of Volunteering

Level of Analysis	Antecedent Dimensions (Omoto et al., 2010)	<i>Present Study</i>
Individual	Motivational Tendencies	<i>Direct &amp; Indirect Empathy</i> <i>Duty</i> <i>Negative Emotions (e.g., Anger, Sadness)</i> <i>Prejudice Reduction</i> <i>Curiosity</i> <i>Refugees' Gratitude</i> <i>Self-efficacy</i>
	Life Circumstances	<i>Own Migration</i> <i>Family Migration</i> <i>Stay Abroad</i> <i>Major Life Changes (e.g., Retirement)</i>
Interpersonal	Networks	<i>Contact with Volunteers</i> <i>Joint Activity with Refugees (e.g., Sports)</i> <i>Conversation with Refugees</i>
Organizational	Recruiting	<i>Media Reports about Refugee Situation (e.g., pre-migration perils, migration perils, post-migration challenges)</i> <i>Media Calls for Action</i>
Social	Culture	<i>Xenophobia of In-group Members</i> <i>Call for Optimism of In-group Members</i>
	Context	<i>Spatial Closeness to Refugees</i> <i>Observation of Refugees</i>

*Note.* The table shows the antecedents of the Process Model of Volunteering as proposed by Omoto et al. (2010) as well as antecedents identified in the present study.

### **The Functional Approach to Volunteering**

The functional approach to volunteering is a prominent theoretical perspective suggesting that volunteering can meet different functions (Clary et al., 1996; 1998; Clary & Snyder, 1991). As shown in Table 2, it provides volunteers with opportunities to express their own values (*value function*), to permit new learning experiences (*understanding function*), to spend time with others (*social function*), to receive career-related benefits (*career function*), to distract from other problems (*protective function*), and to enhance self-esteem (*enhancement function*). According to the functional approach to volunteering, these functions motivate people to volunteer, while different volunteers can pursue different functions, and

the same volunteer can pursue more than one goal (Clary et al., 1998). In support of the theory, messages matching a person's motives are more persuasive and increase the intention to volunteer (Clary et al., 1994; 1998). Furthermore, volunteers who receive functionally relevant benefits from being engaged report a greater intention to continue volunteering (see Stukas et al., 2015 for a review). In the context of refugee aid, the volunteer functions, especially the value and understanding functions, have been shown to predict willingness to volunteer as well (Kals & Strubel, 2017).

Table 2. Classification of results according to the Functional Approach to Volunteering

Function	Definition (Clary et al., 1998)	<i>Present Study</i>
Value	Opportunity to express own values	<i>Express duty</i> <i>Express direct and indirect empathy</i> <i>Reduce negative emotions</i> <i>Reduce others' prejudice</i>
Understanding	Permit new learning strategies	<i>Follow the own curiosity</i>
Social	Spend time with others	
Career	Receive career-related benefits	
Protective	Distract from other problems	
Enhancement	Enhance self-esteem	<i>Experience gratitude</i> <i>Experience self-efficacy</i>

*Note.* The table shows the functions of volunteering as proposed by Clary et al. (1998) as well as motivations identified in the present study.

### Applicability to the Context of Refugee Aid

However, while these approaches to volunteering provide excellent frameworks for investigating volunteers' motivations in *general*, they may not suffice to adequately capture volunteer motivations in *specific* contexts. For instance, research revealed that in the context of episodic volunteering in US communities religiosity (Allison et al. 2002), in the context of sports enjoyment (Bang & Ross, 2009), and in the context of volunteering for social or environmental NGOs in Spain community concern, enjoyment, reciprocity, social commitment, interest in the task, and personal growth (Vecina & Marzana, 2019) predict

willingness to volunteer above the Volunteer Functions Inventory (Clary et al., 1998). Most of these motivations (religiosity, community concern, reciprocity, and social commitment) conceptually match the value function. However, the functional approach to volunteering proposed by Clary and colleagues (1998) does not explicitly capture these subfactors. Furthermore, enjoyment, interest in the task as well as personal growth might be seen as subfactors of the Clary functions or even as unique additional functions not considered in the original functional approach. The finding that the factorial structure of the Clary Volunteer Functions varies between studies (Chacón et al., 2017) further supports the claim that the volunteer motivations depend on the respective context. An exploratory approach that potentially allows for further differentiating the volunteer functions may thus advance the understanding of what motivates people to volunteer in refugee aid.

Forced migration is often associated with specific perils, risks, and suffering before and during migration, including traumatic experiences (Knausenberger et al., 2022). We argue that these specific challenges influence volunteer motivations. Volunteering in the context of migration implies to engage in direct or indirect intergroup contact (Landmann et al., 2022), which comes along with factors (de)motivating such forms of contact such as inter-group threat (Landmann et al., 2019). Furthermore, in 2015/16 the extraordinary challenges receiving countries were confronted with, due to the large-scale immigration of refugees, led to highly controversial political debates about refugee migration as well as to xenophobic assaults (Federal Criminal Police Office, 2018). At this time, volunteering in refugee aid, more than volunteering in other contexts, may have also been motivated by the wish to make a political (Kende et al., 2017; Monforte & Maestri, 2022) and/or anti-discrimination statement (Schmid, 2020; see also Stürmer & Benbow, 2017). Moreover, there is mounting evidence suggesting that perceiving someone as a forced migrant can elicit prosocial emotions such as feelings of pity, compassion, and empathic concern (e.g., Echterhoff et al., 2022), and perhaps even more so than do other targets of volunteerism, including voluntary migrants

(e.g., Verkuyten et al., 2018). Volunteering in refugee aid might thus be particularly motivated by a need to act in line with one's feelings of empathic concern.

In sum, these examples suggest that in the context of refugee aid, volunteerism might serve functions (e.g., providing an opportunity for political and/or anti-discrimination statements; providing an opportunity to act in line with one's feelings of empathic concern) that could be seen as specific facets of the functions proposed by Clary and colleagues (1998) (e.g., the value function). Moreover, volunteering in refugee aid might even serve distinct functions that have not been considered in previous research yet.

### **The Present Research**

In the present research, we adopted an exploratory approach to investigate volunteers' motivations in the context of refugee aid in Germany in 2015/16 employing critical incident technique. In doing so, we acknowledge that volunteering in this specific context might serve a number of context-specific functions (e.g., making a statement against discrimination) and might as well be driven by specific context factors (e.g., media reports) and person factors (e.g., own prior experiences with flight or migration). We explore whether these factors cover the factors specified by the Process Model of Volunteering at the Antecedents stage at different levels of analysis. We focus on the Antecedents stage of the Process Model of Volunteering, as we are primarily interested in identifying key experiences that led members of the receiving society to *take up* their voluntary work in refugee aid.

The main aim of the study was to identify key experiences that motivate people to volunteer in refugee aid. To date, studies that investigate volunteer motivations either use established scales like the Volunteer Functions Inventory (Clary et al., 1998) or they directly ask what motivated participants to act (Allison et al., 2002). Both approaches have been criticized due to their predisposed assumptions about relevant motivations or their susceptibility to social desirability (Shye, 2010). By using critical incident technique (Butterfield et al., 2005; Flanagan, 1954), we expand the methodological scope in the field of



research on volunteer motivations. Descriptions of critical incidents can reveal contextual paths to volunteering (e.g. via media or social networks), volunteer motivations (e.g., helping others or making a statement against discrimination) as well as processes that drive the motivations (e.g., empathy or duty). We applied this technique building on previous research that has been conducted in other contexts (e.g., sports, environmental NGOs) showing that qualitative content analysis reveals more fine-grained and context-specific motivations for volunteering (e.g., Allison et al., 2002; Bang & Ross, 2009; Vecina & Marzana, 2019).

## Method

### Sample

A total of 220 volunteers in refugee aid (165 women, 53 men, 2 diverse) were recruited via mailing lists of non-governmental organizations and through newspaper advertisement as a convenience sample. They were asked to participate if they work in refugee aid on a voluntary basis. The participants were between 18 and 77 years old ( $M_{age} = 55.1$ ,  $SD_{age} = 14.0$ ) and lived all across Germany, with an overrepresentation of people from North Rhine Westphalia. Most of them (93.6%) were German citizens, only 14 participants indicated that they hold a different citizenship (in addition). Participants could select one or more employment statuses. They were currently employed (43.2%) or had retired (33.2%); only few participants were students (5.0%), described themselves as housewife or househusband (4.5%), in training (0.5%) and/or as different from that (12.3%). About half of the participants (49.5%) graduated from university, the others indicated that their highest degree was a PhD (5.5%), graduation from high school (19.1%), completion of vocational training (12.3%), secondary school with 10 years (8.6%) or with nine years (2.3%). Six participants did not respond to the question. All participants indicated that they volunteer in refugee aid. About half of the participants (45.9%) volunteered in small organizations that were established in response to the large numbers of refugees in 2015/2016. Others volunteered in religious organizations (e.g., Diakonie, Caritas, Misereor, 12.3%), other large

organizations that already existed before (e.g., Amnesty International, Deutsches Rotes Kreuz, 5.9%) or without organizational connection (17.3%). The remaining participants indicated that they are associated with an organization different from that or did not respond to the question.

### **Procedure**

Participants responded to an online questionnaire with open and closed questions. In the beginning of the questionnaire, participants were asked about their key experiences that motivated them to engage in refugee aid with open questions. Subsequently, they responded to scales that assessed volunteer functions. In addition, participants answered questions about their emotional reactions to the key experiences, the main stressors of their voluntary work and their preferred support as well as job burnout and secondary traumatization, which are reported in the Supplemental Material. The study was conducted between February and April in 2018 after preregistration at <https://aspredicted.org/ze55u.pdf>. Anonymized data and syntaxes are stored in an OSF project (Landmann et al., 2023; <https://osf.io/tjhaz/>).

### **Key Experiences Assessment via Critical Incidents**

To identify key experiences that motivated participants to engage in refugee aid we used critical incident technique (Butterfield et al., 2005; Flanagan, 1954). We defined key experiences for participants as relevant incidents or situations that led to a new perspective or motivate behavioral change. Participants were asked to describe such a key experience that motivated them to engage in refugee aid. On average, participants used 80 words to describe their key experience. To form categories on the basis of these qualitative data, we conducted content analysis according to the procedures proposed by Rössler (2005) and Mayring (2014). In contrast to grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1994), this does not involve theory building during the coding procedure.

Each reported experience was treated as one coding unit without paraphrasing participants' responses. Some participants described up to four key experiences resulting in a

total of 303 coding units. The coding scheme was developed in a bottom-up manner: Coder 1 (the first author of this paper) developed categories based on the content similarity of a subset of forty incidents, and discussed these categories with the second and third author resulting in minor adjustments of the original categories. Coder 2 (a psychology student, see Acknowledgements) was trained with the same subset of responses. After independent coding of all coding units, categories with low intercoder reliability (Cohen's kappa < .40) were excluded. The final coding scheme consisted of 41 categories which are reported in the Supplemental Material (Table S1). Coders' agreement (Cohen's kappa) varied between .40 and 1.00, which can be regarded as moderate to perfect agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977; O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). We used the first coder's ratings for further analyses.

### **Clary et al.'s (1998) Volunteer Functions**

Volunteer functions were assessed with the German version of the Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI; Clary et al. 1998; Oostlander et al. 2014), which consists of 30 statements about the six potential functions of voluntary work: Value expression (e.g., *I can do something for a cause that is important to me*; 5 items;  $\alpha = .75$ ), improved understanding (e.g., *Volunteering allows me to gain a new perspective on things*; 5 items;  $\alpha = .80$ ), social exchange (e.g., *People I'm close to want me to volunteer*; 5 items;  $\alpha = .85$ ), career related benefits (e.g., *Volunteering will help me to succeed in my chosen profession*; 5 items;  $\alpha = .90$ ), protection from other problems (e.g., *Volunteering is a good escape from my own troubles*; 5 items;  $\alpha = .83$ ), and self enhancement (e.g., *Volunteering makes me feel important*; 5 items;  $\alpha = .83$ ). Participants indicated how important these functions were for their motivation to volunteer on scales ranging from 1 (*not at all important*) to 5 (*extremely important*).

## **Results**

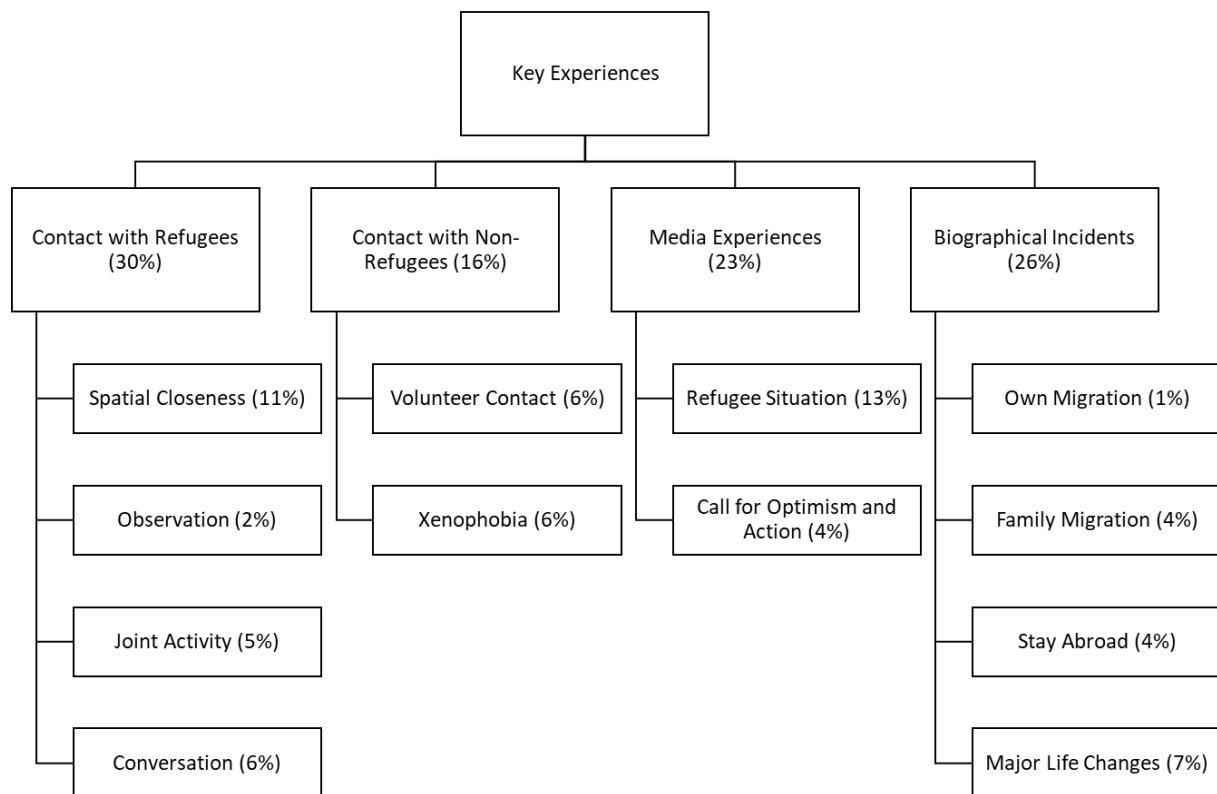
### **Key Experiences of Volunteers in Refugee Aid**

A total of 34 participants did not describe any key experiences (see Supplemental Material, Table S1). The remaining answers ( $N_{incidents} = 269$ ;  $N_{subjects} = 186$ ) to the question of

which key experience motivated participants to volunteer in refugee aid fell into four broad categories (see Figure 1): Most participants described contact with refugees (30%), contact with non-refugees (16%), media experiences (23%), or biographical incidents (26%). For the analyses, we adopted the use of the term “refugee” from the participants. For instance, we created the category “contact with refugees” for situations, in which the participant described the person as refugee – this label was not based on a verification of the person’s legal status.

**Contact with Refugees.** A total of 82 incidents (30%) covered descriptions of contact with one or more refugees. A considerable amount of these contact experiences with refugees referred to spatial closeness to refugees (*Spatial Closeness*; 30 incidents). A typical example for spatial closeness was learning that a new refugee camp was established close by (see Table S1). Other contact experiences with refugees referred to observing one or more refugees (*Observation*; 6 incidents), participating in joint activity such as sporting events (*Joint Activity*; 14 incidents) or talking to refugees (*Conversation*; 15 incidents). The remaining 17 contact experiences with refugees did not fall into one of these categories. The incidents of refugee contact were experienced with one refugee (14 incidents), more than one refugee (41 incidents), or the number of refugees was not indicated (27 incidents; see Table S1). The contact experiences took place prior to 2015 (9 incidents), in 2015 or later (37 incidents) or the time was not indicated (36 incidents). Reported contact with refugees was intended (17 incidents), not intended (8 incidents) or intention was not indicated (57 incidents, see Table S1).

Figure 1. Key Experiences of Volunteers in Refugee Aid



**Contact with Non-Refugees.** A total of 43 incidents (16%) covered contact with one or more persons who were not described as refugees. A considerable amount of these contact experiences with non-refugees referred to witnessing prejudice against refugees or discrimination of foreigners (*Xenophobia*; 17 incidents). Other contact experiences with non-refugees covered situations, in which volunteers told them about their work or directly asked participants to get involved with refugee aid (*Volunteer Contact*; 15 incidents). The remaining 11 contact experiences with non-refugees did not fall into one of these categories.

**Media Experiences.** A total of 62 incidents (23%) covered descriptions of media experiences. About half of these media experiences were reports about refugees (*Refugee Situation*; 34 incidents). These descriptions of refugee situations in the media covered so-called “refugee flows,” pre-migration perils (e.g., war and persecution), migration perils (e.g., arduous journey, dead people in the Mediterranean Sea), as well as post-migration challenges (e.g., difficult circumstances in Germany) (see Table S1). A smaller amount of media

experiences were descriptions of people who called for optimism concerning the refugee crisis or for participating in refugee aid (*Call for Optimism and Action*; 12 incidents). Within this category, the famous slogan “We can do this!” from the German chancellor Angela Merkel was frequently mentioned (see Table S1). The remaining 16 media experiences did not fall into one of these two categories.

**Biographical Incidents.** A total of 69 incidents (26%) were descriptions of biographical factors. These biographical incidents covered stories of own (forced) migration (*Own Migration*; 4 incidents) and family members’ (forced) migration especially during World War II (*Family Migration*; 11 incidents) as motivation to help refugees. Furthermore, biographical incidents covered experiences in foreign countries (*Stay Abroad*; 12 incidents) including descriptions about other countries’ welcoming culture but also experiences of feeling alienated. Finally, major life changes such as retirement (*Major Life Change*; 18 incidents) were mentioned as incident that motivated participants to engage in refugee aid. The remaining 24 descriptions of biographical incidents did not fall into one of these categories.

**Associations with Sociodemographic Characteristics.** To investigate whether sociodemographic characteristics are associated with these key experiences, we conducted a series of logistic regression analyses with age, gender and retirement status as predictors and contact to refugees, contact with non-refugees, media experiences as well as biographical incidents as dichotomous dependent variables. Gender (male vs. female) and retirement status (retired vs. not retired) were dichotomized as some groups (e.g., diverse gender, people in training) were too small for analyzing differences among them. Results of the logistic regressions revealed that age, gender, and retirement status were not significantly associated with the four main categories of key experiences (all  $R_s < .01$ ). Whether someone started volunteering due to a contact experience with refugees or non-refugees, due to media

experiences or changes in the own biography was independent of their age and gender and did not depend on their retirement status.

### **Psychological Processes for the Motivation to Volunteer in Refugee Aid**

A total of 88 incidents (23%) included descriptions of psychological processes that motivated the person to participate in refugee aid in addition to or instead of a key experience. These incidents covered descriptions of feeling empathic concern for or taking the perspective of others (*Empathy*; 42 incidents), feeling obliged to help (*Duty*; 21 incidents) or experiencing negative emotions such as anger or sadness (*Negative Emotions*; 18 incidents). A considerable number of participants described that they participated in refugee aid in order to reduce prejudice (*Prejudice Reduction*; 13 incidents), because they were interested in different cultures (*Curiosity*; 9 incidents), because refugees were grateful (*Refugees' Gratitude*; 8 incidents), or because they wanted to make a difference (*Self-efficacy*; 9 incidents).

Interestingly, perspective taking covered not only descriptions of putting oneself into the refugees' situation (*Direct Empathy*; 24 incidents) but also descriptions of imagining how one's own children would feel as refugees or how one's parents or grandparents felt when they were forced to migrate (*Indirect Empathy*; 10 incidents). For instance, one person wrote: "... and I imagined sending off my son, who was then 15, to another country for a better life. Imagining this and knowing how much care and attention these teenagers still need led me to volunteer." Another person described: „My father has been a refugee of World War II as well. He had to leave this home country Schlesien/Posen. As a kid I heard his story and never forgot about it" (see Table S1).

Duty covered feelings of responsibility due to own prosperity (e.g., "I have been able to live my life in peace and prosperity thus far. I would like to pass on part of this great gift," 10 incidents), German History (e.g., "Our own history – Displacement and expulsion – A chance to make amends," 2 incidents) and feelings of duty in general (e.g., "In my mind, volunteering is a civic duty!" 9 incidents).

Negative Emotions covered the description of negative feelings and concerns (e.g., “The horrible pictures of helpless and crying kids made me sad,” 18 incidents). Prejudice reduction covered the intention to reduce others' prejudice (e.g., “The xenophobic rhetoric of the CSU [Christian Social Union, a center-right party in Bavaria] also had an influence on this decision, I wanted to counter the fear-inducing anti-refugee speeches,” 12 incidents) or one's own prejudice (e.g., “I noticed that I was developing a fear of walking through groups of male migrants ... sitting with them in the train ... So, I grabbed the bull by the horns,” 1 incident). Curiosity covered mentions of curiosity about refugees and their culture (e.g., “For me, it was curiosity to get to know the people who had newly arrived in the country. I had no knowledge or experience with their language, culture and religion,” 9 incidents). Refugees' Gratitude covered descriptions of refugees who expressed their gratitude (e.g., “There were refugees living next door who showed a kind of gratitude that I had never before experienced,” 8 incidents). Self-efficacy covered the description of the intention to make a difference (e.g., “I decided to do something about it myself and not just sit around and remain a passive, distant onlooker,” 9 incidents).

### **Clary et al.'s (1998) Volunteer Functions**

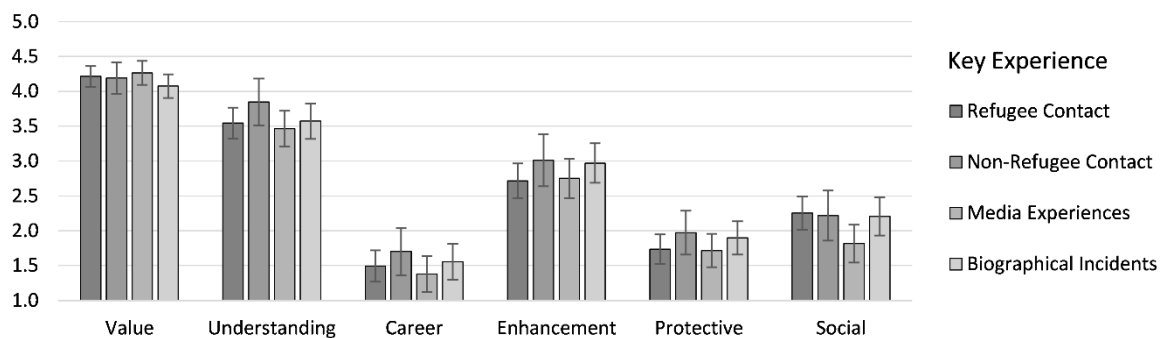
To investigate whether the volunteer functions are associated with volunteers' key experiences, we conducted separate analyses of variance with key experiences (four categories: refugee contact, non-refugee contact, media experiences, biographical incidents) as independent variable and each of the six volunteer functions as dependent variables. For participants who reported more than one key experience, we selected the first experience they mentioned for this analysis. Means and 95% confidence intervals are shown in Figure 2. None of the six volunteer functions differed significantly between the types of key experiences (value function:  $F(3, 171) = 0.87, p = .459, \eta_p^2 = .02$ ; understanding function:  $F(3, 171) = 1.13, p = .338, \eta_p^2 = .02$ ; social function:  $F(3, 171) = 2.24, p = .085, \eta_p^2 = .04$ ; career function:



$F(3, 171) = 0.80, p = .496, \eta_p^2 = .01$ ; protective function,  $F(3, 171) = 0.87, p = .460, \eta_p^2 = .02$ ; enhancement function:  $F(3, 171) = 1.00, p = .393, \eta_p^2 = .02$ ).

As in other volunteer contexts (Chacón et al., 2017; Kals & Strubel, 2017), participants rated the value function as most important ( $M = 4.16, SD = 0.63$ ). The value function was followed by understanding ( $M = 3.50, SD = 0.92$ ), ego enhancement ( $M = 2.78, SD = 0.86$ ), social functions ( $M = 2.12, SD = 0.93$ ), protective functions ( $M = 1.78, SD = 0.79$ ), and career functions ( $M = 1.47, SD = 0.84$ ).

Figure 2. Clary et al.'s (1998) Volunteer Functions dependent on the four Key Experiences



**Association with Sociodemographic Characteristics.** To investigate whether sociodemographic characteristics were associated with the volunteer functions, we conducted a series of regression analysis with age, gender (male vs. female) as well as job status (retired vs. not retired) as predictors and the volunteer functions as dependent variables. Results are shown in Table 3. The understanding function was significantly associated with gender. Females indicated that they were more motivated to learn something while volunteering than males. The career function, the protective function and the enhancement function were negatively associated with age. Older volunteers were less motivated to receive career-related benefits, to distract from own problems and to enhance self-esteem compared to younger

volunteers (see Table 3). The value function and the social function were not significantly associated with age, gender or retirement status.

Table 3. Regressions of volunteer functions on age, gender and retirement status

	Value Function	Understanding Function	Social Function	Career Function	Protective Function	Enhancement Function
Age	.05	-.15	-.08	-.36***	-.30***	-.23*
Gender	-.07	-.14*	.13	.00	-.04	-.03
Retirement	-.10	-.03	.15	-.05	.14	.09
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.01	.05*	.03	.16***	.06**	.04

Note. Gender was coded with 1 (male) and 0 (female), retirement was coded with 1 (retired) and 0 (not retired). Standardized regression weights are shown. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

## Discussion

The present research identified key experiences of resident volunteers that motivated them to engage in refugee aid. In the following sections, we first describe how specific aspects of these findings contribute to the previous findings and then discuss their implications for the theoretical models of volunteering.

### What Leads People to Refugee Aid? Key Experiences

Our results showed that critical incidents that motivated volunteering comprised contact with refugees (spatial closeness, observation, joint activity, or conversation), contact with non-refugees (volunteer contact or contact with Xenophobia), media experiences (reports about refugees or calls for action), and biographical incidents (own or family migration, a stay abroad, or major life changes).

Previous research revealed that being asked by friends or family members is a frequent starting point for voluntary work (Omoto & Snyder, 2002) and that indirect contact with refugees (via family, friends or the media) is more frequent than direct contact with refugees (Landmann et al., 2022). Hence, *social networks* are an important path to volunteering as they can create the affordance to act. In line with this, we identified contact with volunteers as relevant key experiences that motivated volunteering. However, the present research suggests that this is only one path among others. Some participants watched a moving report about

refugees on TV or a call for action in newspapers before they started volunteering suggesting that *media experiences* can create a situational affordance to volunteer as well. Furthermore, some volunteers mentioned that experiences of xenophobic statements or actions against refugees motivated them to engage in refugee aid. Hence, *experiencing grievances* seems to be another path to volunteering. Moreover, *contact with refugees* were starting points for volunteering. A frequently mentioned shallow form of contact was *spatial closeness*. For the receiving society in Germany, refugee migration in 2015/2016 came along with a sudden intensification of spatial closeness with refugees. This spatial closeness in form of refugee camps in the neighborhood was mentioned frequently as key incident that elicited the impulse to act. This sudden increase of spatial closeness seemed to change the situational affordance thus contributing to the motivation to volunteer. Finally, *biographical incidents* like major life changes or experiences of being a foreigner oneself were experienced by the volunteers in Germany as relevant for refugee aid.

These critical incidents emerging from the results of the qualitative data are independent of the functions of volunteering captured via quantitative measures: Volunteers rated the volunteer functions as similarly important independent of their key experiences. Among all key experiences, the value function was most important followed by understanding. Hence, there is no systematic link between specific key experiences and specific volunteer functions. However, the content of the key experiences suggests that all key experiences appealed to the value, understanding and enhancement functions. This suggests that, in the context of refugee aid, the starting point of volunteering is a situation that touches on the person's values, interest or ego.

### **What Leads People to Refugee Aid? Processes**

The content analysis further revealed different processes that motivated participants to act. These processes covered empathy with refugees, negative emotions and concern, the motivation to reduce the own in-group's prejudice, curiosity about cultural differences,

positive feedback from grateful refugees, and experiences of making a difference. Most of these processes have been covered by the literature (see Table 1 and Table 2). However, indirect empathy and the reduction of prejudice have not been sufficiently addressed so far and will be further discussed in the following paragraphs.

### **Indirect Empathy**

The present research identified indirect empathy as an additional process to direct empathy. Empathizing with others is an important predictor for voluntary work (see Stukas et al., 2015), but empathy-based responding seems to depend on how similar helpers or volunteers perceive the other to be to themselves. Specifically, research informed by a group-level theory of helping (see Stürmer & Siem, 2017, for an overview) confirmed that volunteers' empathic feelings only (or to a stronger extent) translated into helping when the recipient shared the volunteer's group membership (e.g., Stürmer et al., 2005) or was a member of a group perceived as (culturally) similar to the volunteer's (cultural) ingroup (Siem & Stürmer, 2012b). Hence, group-based similarity perceptions seem to be highly relevant for empathy-based responding.

The present research suggests that people sometimes bridge the gap to others from dissimilar groups with *indirect* empathy. Some participants indicated that they imagined their children in the refugees' situation or remembered how their relatives felt when they were migrating. This process of indirect empathy has been overlooked by most approaches to volunteering and helping (for an exception in the context of care staff working in care homes see Luff, 2010). The present findings suggest that the process of indirect empathy is relevant in the context of refugee aid as well. Especially as refugees and members of the receiving society sometimes seem to have little in common, the bridge via indirect empathy may considerably facilitate taking their perspective.

To investigate the prevalence of direct and indirect empathy in a follow up study (Landmann et al., 2023), we asked 119 people who work with refugees to indicate on a 7-

point scale how frequently they imagine themselves in the refugees' situation ( $M = 5.11$ ,  $SD = 1.59$ ) and how frequently they imagine their close ones in the refugees' situation ( $M = 4.59$ ,  $SD = 1.77$ ). This suggests that individuals who are in contact with refugees practice indirect empathy almost as frequently as direct empathy.

### **Reducing Prejudice as Motivation to Volunteer in Refugee Aid**

The relevance of media reports about the refugees' difficult situation as well as processes of perspective taking indicate that improving the refugees' situation is an important motivator for volunteering. This benevolent goal is consistent with the definition of the value function as "altruistic and humanitarian concerns for others" (Clary et al., 1998, p. 1517). However, the results point to additional motivations related to participants' values. Some key incidents were experiences of xenophobic statements and some volunteers explicitly referred to the intention to reduce Xenophobia as motivation for their voluntary work. This motivation can be regarded as the value-related goal to improve society, which is consistent with Stürmer and Benbow (2017) who conceptualize value expression as comprising the desire to make a statement against discrimination. Hence, improving society can serve as value-related goal in addition to benevolent helping.

### **Implications for Models of Volunteering**

The Process Model of Volunteering specifies different antecedents of volunteering that can be located at different levels of analysis (see Table 1). The fact that key experiences of volunteers in refugee aid revealed specific situations and processes for each proposed antecedent speaks for the applicability of the model to this specific context. For instance, on the individual level life circumstances like own migration experiences, on the interpersonal level contact with other volunteers, on the organizational level recruiting via the media, and on the social level a welcoming culture and perceived Xenophobia are relevant. Future research can use these results to more specifically cover the different antecedents for volunteering in refugee aid.

The Functional Approach to Volunteering proposes six functions that volunteering can have: Volunteering can be useful to express the own values, increase understanding, facilitate social contact, advance the own career, protect from other problems, and enhance self-esteem. The present study reveals subfunctions that are relevant at the very beginning of volunteering in the context of refugee aid (see Table 2). For instance, expressing one's values by volunteering can be led back to feelings of duty and empathy or it can be used to reduce negative emotions and others' prejudice. Which of these subfunctions are relevant for a person may influence the kind of voluntary work they choose. People who are motivated by empathy may chose work that directly improves the well-being of the person in need whereas people who want to reduce other's prejudice may chose work that is directed at communication with majority members. Hence, it seems to be relevant to look at the *specific* value that motivates volunteers.

The key experiences of volunteers in refugee aid reflected the value, understanding and enhancement function. The self enhancement motivation was not explicitly mentioned, but participants reported that refugees' gratitude increased their feelings of self-efficacy, which may be linked to self enhancement. By contrast, the social, career, and protective functions were not represented in the key experiences. These functions may still be relevant in the context of refugee aid just not at the very beginning of volunteering which was covered by the key experiences. The relevance of volunteer functions may change during the volunteering process. Some functions may become less relevant during the volunteering process whereas others may become more important.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

The present research suggests that the functional approach to volunteering can be further differentiated in the context of refugee aid. Based on qualitative content analysis of critical incidents, we identified indirect empathy as well as making a statement against discrimination as value-related motivations to volunteering. Moreover, experiencing self-

efficacy was frequently mentioned – a motivation that may be considered as a specific form of the self-enhancement function. These specific forms of value and self enhancement functions are not explicitly covered by the Volunteer Functions Inventory. Hence, future research should develop scales that capture these factors and test whether they replicate with quantitative methods.

The sample in the present study was not representative of the population of volunteers in refugee aid in Germany. Two large survey on volunteering in refugee aid in Germany have been conducted so far. In a survey representative of the German population, half of the participants indicated that they are or have supported refugees by diverse activities such as language courses, donating money or signing a petition (Allensbach, 2018). Half of these volunteers were female, 33% were 60 years or older and 45% were working full time. By contrast, in a survey with a large convenience sample, that was recruited via mailing lists of non-governmental organizations, 75% of the participants were female, 24% were 60 years or older and 50% were working (Karakayali, & Kleist, 2016). In the present sample, 75% of the participants were female, 43% were 60 years or older and 43% were employed. Hence, the frequencies of the identified key experiences are not representative of volunteers in refugee aid in Germany. Future research could develop scales from the identified categories and test them in representative samples.

Participants of our study indicated that they work in refugee aid on a voluntary basis and they frequently used the word refugees to describe their key experiences. Based on the present data, it was not possible to distinguish whether the described persons were legally recognized refugees or asylum seekers. However, this distinction can make a difference, for instance, with regard to the type of help that is needed. Future research could investigate the relevance of the asylum status on volunteer motivations.

The present research focused on volunteering in refugee aid in Germany. Some identified processes such as indirect empathy and the intention to experience self-efficacy

may be relevant predictors for volunteering in other contexts as well. However, other factors such as sudden increase in spatial closeness as well as the intention to reduce Xenophobia may be specific for refugee aid. Employing a qualitative approach in other contexts, including other migration context such as voluntary migration, may in the long run allow to establish a general context sensitive model of differentiated volunteer motivations.

### **Conclusion**

Volunteering is essential for meeting the needs of refugees and asylum seekers in the receiving societies. The present research improves our understanding about what motivates people to volunteer in refugee aid. In addition to factors covered in existing volunteer models, our findings show that some volunteers engage in indirect empathy (imagine close others in the refugee's situation) or volunteer to reduce their in-group's prejudice. Furthermore, knowing about spatial closeness to refugees without having direct contact with them can create an affordance that motivates to help.



**Authors' contributions:**

*Helen Landmann*: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal Analysis, Writing - Original Draft

*Birte Siem*: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – Review & Editing

*Birgit Fuchs*: Methodology, Data Collection

*Anette Rohmann*: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing - Review & Editing

**Compliance with Ethical Standards**

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. The current research was conducted in accordance with the APA Code of Conduct and the Declaration of Helsinki. The local ethical review board *Ethikkommission der Fakultät für Psychologie der FernUniversität in Hagen* approved the study (EA\_01\_2019). Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants. We report all data exclusions, all manipulations, and all measures in the study. The study was preregistered at <https://aspredicted.org/ze55u.pdf>. Anonymized data and questionnaires are stored in an OSF project (<https://osf.io/tjhaz/>).

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## Supplemental Material

*Table S1.* Coding Scheme for Key Experiences of Volunteers in Refugee Aid

Code	Definition	Example	Kappa	Frequency
Contact with Refugees	Description of contact with one or more refugees including spatial closeness to refugees, observation of refugees, participation in joint activities and conversation. This code does not apply to instances where participants report about media experiences.		.77	82
Intensity of Contact				
Spatial Closeness	Description of spatial closeness to one or more refugees (e.g., a refugee camp close by).	“In November/December 2015, over 100 refugee families and single men were quartered in rowhouses previously used by British soldiers in the immediate vicinity of my home. This was what brought me to establish a group of supporters and become involved in refugee work.”	.82	30
Observation	Description of seeing one or more refugees (e.g., on the street).	“In my hometown, the sirens are tested every Saturday at noon. I was walking in a pedestrian zone. In front of me, a young man promptly threw himself to the ground and crossed his arms over his head. I talked to him to try to calm him down. When he saw that everyone else was calmly continuing on with their business, he stood up and left. I could see the fear in him.”	.72	6
Joint Activity	Description of participating in a joint activity with one or more refugees (e.g., a sporting event).	“At school, I participated in a sports class with refugees. Because this made an encounter on equal footing possible, I decided to start volunteering.”	.60	14

Conversation	Description of talking to one or more refugees.	“The statement by a refugee woman: When we got into the boat with our children, I said to myself: Either we all make it together or we all go down together [...].”	.42	12
<b>Number of Refugees</b>				
One Person	Description of contact with one refugee.	“By participating in a welcome dinner, we met a Syrian man and came into contact with a refugee for the first time.”	.59	14
More than One Person	Description of contact with more than one refugee.	“I came into contact with refugees by collecting, sorting and delivering articles of clothing to the initial reception center.”	.67	41
<b>Time</b>				
before 2015	Description that contact with one or more refugees took place prior to 2015.	“[...] that was around 2012. That was the first time I had contact with refugees.”	.51	9
2015 or later	Description that contact with one or more refugees took place in 2015 or later.	“In winter 2015, I got to know a young Syrian man at an event during the Christmas season (“Refugees invite locals for tea”).”	.64	37
<b>Intention</b>				
unintended	Description that contact with refugees was not intended.	“I came into contact with an Eritrean refugee family by chance and that was how I got to know the whole issue of the asylum decision, family reunification, looking for an apartment, language, work, school ...”	.51	8
intended	Description that contact with refugees was intended.	“It was attending an open house day in a newly opened refugee reception center.”	.61	17
Contact with Non-refugees	Description of contact with one or more non-refugees. This code does not apply to instances where participants report about media experiences.		.75	43

Contact with Volunteers	Description that one or more non-refugees asked the participant to volunteer in refugee aid or told them about their work.	“I had a close acquaintance who told me about it”	.93	15
Xenophobia	Description of xenophobic expressions or discrimination (e.g., prejudice against refugees, threat elicited by refugees, lack of compassion towards refugees, lack of solidarity with refugees).	“A refugee reception center was built in our area. I attended an information session on it. I was confronted with so many expressions of xenophobic attitudes there, which motivated me to act differently myself.”	.90	17
Media	Description of media experiences, including reports about refugees or non-refugees on television, in newspapers, or on online media.		.90	62
About Refugees	Description of media reports about refugees on television, in newspapers, or on online media.		.75	34
Refugee Flows	Description of media reports about large numbers of refugees migrating to Germany (e.g., refugee flows).	“When I saw the refugee flows on TV in 2014/2015, that was a DEJA VU and deeply moved me!”	.68	12
Pre-Migration Perils	Description of media reports about pre-migration perils (e.g., war, persecution).	“The images of the completely senseless wars in Afghanistan, Syria, etc., that are carried out by the Western and German arms industry and political interests on the backs of the innocent civilian population.”	.66	3
Migration Perils	Description of media reports about migration perils (e.g., arduous journey, dead people in the Mediterranean Sea).	“Images on TV of thousands of people suffocated to death in trucks on Austrian highways, at the German border at Passau, and people encamped at the Budapest train station as well as hundreds of people drowning in the sea over and over again...”	.74	7
Post-Migration Perils	Description of media reports about post-migration perils (e.g., difficult circumstances in Germany).	“As a result of media reports in 2015, which showed that many refugees in Germany were in a very bad situation, I decided to do something about it myself and not just sit around and remain a passive, distant onlooker”	.66	3

Call for Optimism and Action	Description of media reports about calls for optimism and calls to action (e.g., search for volunteers) by one or more non-refugees, including politicians.		.66	13
Call for Optimism	Description of media reports about Angela Merkel (e.g., “We can do this!”).	“When Chancellor Angela Merkel stated to Germany’s citizens in light of the huge wave of refugees on the Balkan route: We can do this. The way she said it, I believed her. Yes, I was convinced that we – both the country and ourselves – could do it. And I wanted to play a part.”	1.00	6
Call for Action	Description of a call for action communicated via media.	“There was a newspaper ad looking for mentors and I signed up.”	.74	6
Biographical Incidents	Description of biographical incidents, including one’s own migration, migration of family members, time spent living abroad, and retirement.		.88	69
Own Migration	Description of one’s own (forced) migration.	“After World War II, my parents came to Bavaria with us kids as displaced people [ethnic Germans from Eastern Europe]. I experienced the feeling of not being recognized here and having to ask for others’ charity as negative from a very early age.”	.66	4
Family Migration	Description of family members’ (forced) migration of (e.g., during World War II).	“My father was also a ‘refugee’, in World War II, he was forced to leave his home in Silesia/Poznan [in what is today Poland]. As a child, I heard the story and never forgot it.”	.86	11
Stay Abroad	Description of experiences during a stay abroad.	“Volunteer service in an African country and the associated realization of how unfair this world is.”	.88	12
Major Life Changes	Descriptions that participants volunteered for refugee aid because they were retired or experienced other major life changes and thus had the capacity volunteer.	“My retirement, and thus more time!”	.88	18

Other Experiences	Descriptions of other experiences (e.g., German history).	14
No Key Experience	No incident is described.	83

Table S2. Coding Scheme of Psychological Processes for the Motivation to Volunteer in Refugee Aid

Code	Definition	Example	Kappa	Frequency
Empathy	Description of the process of perspective taking, including empathy, putting oneself (or close others) into refugees' position, being able to imagine how refugees feel, having experienced a similar situation.		.77	42
Direct Empathy	Description of taking the perspective of refugees (e.g., emphasise with refugees, put oneself into refugees' position, being able to imagine how refugees feel, having experienced a similar situation).	"I saw the horrific reports in the news and always imagined what it would be like for me to arrive in a foreign country, with a language I do not speak, with only a knapsack on my back"	.80	24
Indirect Empathy (Children)	Taking the perspective of one's own children (e.g., putting one's children into refugees' position)	"... and I imagined sending off my son, who was then 15, to another country for a better life. Imagining this and knowing how much care and attention these teenagers still need led me to volunteer."	.49	3
Indirect Empathy (Grand/Parents)	Comparing parents' or grandparents' experiences with refugees' experiences (e.g., remembering how one's own parents felt when they migrated).	"My parents and grandparents had firsthand experience of what it means to be a refugee and finding support in one's new home."	.76	7
Duty	Description of the duty to help.		.64	21
Duty due to Own Prosperity	Reference to own prosperity to explain the intention to help.	"I have been able to live my life in peace and prosperity thus far. I would like to pass on part of this great gift."	.87	10

Duty due to German History	Reference to German history to explain the intention to help.	“Our own history – Displacement and expulsion – A chance to make amends”	.40	2
General Feeling of Duty	Description of general feelings of duty (e.g., civic duty).	“In my mind, volunteering is a civic duty!”	.53	9
Self-Efficacy	Description of the intention to make a difference (e.g., being able to make a contribution).	“I decided to do something about it myself and not just sit around and remain a passive, distant onlooker”	.41	9
Refugees' Gratitude	Description of refugees who expressed their gratitude.	“There were refugees living next door who showed a kind of gratitude that I had never before experienced”	1.0	8
Negative Emotions	Description of negative emotions and concerns (e.g., anger, sadness, helplessness).	“The horrible pictures of helpless and crying kids made me sad.”	.88	18
Curiosity	Description of curiosity about refugees and their culture.	“For me, it was curiosity to get to know the people who had newly arrived in the country. I had no knowledge or experience with their language, culture and religion.”	.70	9
Intention to Reduce Prejudice	Description of the intention to reduce others' or one's own prejudice.	“The xenophobic rhetoric of the CSU [Christian Social Union, a center-right party in Bavaria] also had an influence on this decision, I wanted to counter the fear-inducing anti-refugee speeches” “I noticed that I was developing a fear of walking through groups of male migrants ... sitting with them in the train ... So I grabbed the bull by the horns.”	.49	13