

# Volunteering in Humanitarian Non-governmental Organizations: Reflective Solidarity and Inclusion Work as Mechanisms of Social Transformation<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*In America, in the midst of a populist wave during Trump's presidency, activists who rejected the torrent of xenophobia, racism and Islamophobia volunteered to work with humanitarian NGOs that aid migrants, asylum seekers and refugees. These volunteers repeatedly engage in activities, such as driving refugees to their doctors' appointments or teaching migrants English, that cause the volunteers to be exposed to and interact with people whose backgrounds and daily experiences are much different than their own. Personal relationships are formed between the volunteers and those they are helping, and these relationships produce solidarity and change the volunteers. Both the volunteer and the refugee must adjust to each other, which is usually obvious to the refugee, who is in a state of transition often associated with post-traumatic stress, massive confusion, and status diminishment, but often less obvious to the volunteer. Their relationship needs to go beyond affective solidarity, which is based on emotions, and conventional solidarity, which is based on common interests, and become what Jodi Dean has called reflective solidarity (1999: 125), which is based on clear expectations and mutual respect. The volunteer and the refugee may have different political opinions and beliefs (for example, many refugees were exposed to and believed anti-vax conspiracies theories about COVID-19 vaccines) but, if they establish reflective solidarity, these differences do not pull them apart. The changes in consciousness produced in volunteers through working with refugees can create transformation in and a new reality for the volunteers, which can contribute towards a larger societal change.*

## Key Words:

U.S.A., Volunteer, NGO, transformation, inclusion

## 1. Introduction

How does social transformation take place in highly polarized societies? Through examining individuals who as activists and volunteers work with refugees and migrants in need, we can observe one way in which such transformation can occur. In America, a solid majority believes that extreme individualism drives one's life and one's success, and that society and community, outside of family and church, do not exist or are irrelevant (see, for example, Monbiot, 2016; Rosenbaum, 2018; Vargas et al., 2013, Fisher, 2008). Volunteer work grows out of the opposite assumption, that society does exist and that community is crucial and ought to be fostered in modern society by aiding those in need

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and by including outsiders. The paper's key proposition is that through volunteer work, activists develop solidarity with ostracized, marginalized individuals, and engage in a process that eventually can lead to a changed consciousness – antithetical to the prevailing xenophobic, extremist trends that have become so apparent in American political life today (see for example, Kobes, 2020; Finn, 2019; Belew, 2018; Newert, 2017; Pape, 2022). This article focuses on the motivations and experiences of volunteers who work with refugees and migrants in four humanitarian NGOs in New York and New Jersey.

## 2. Methodology

This paper is based on surveying the work of four regional community-based nonprofits, Neighbors for Refugees (NFR) and Hearts and Homes for Refugees (H&HR) in New York State and Welcome Home Jersey City (WHJC), and First Friends of New Jersey & New York (FFNJ&NY) located in New Jersey. The four NGOs focus on refugee resettlement and inclusion work. I engaged in participatory observation and semi-structured qualitative interviews with 8 activists who are involved in the four organizations and one interview with a refugee activist,<sup>3</sup> as well as the in-depth study of four hands-on projects, the COVID-19 Relief Funds, the Mask Making Initiative, the Lighthouse, and the Fun Club (Franz 2022). The projects in many respects represent the ingenuity and work of these NGOs in order to aid migrants, asylum seekers and refugees in need during the Trump administration, and during the COVID-19 crisis.

## 3. Society in Neoliberalism

Key promoters of the neoliberal ideology such as Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan have long declared society and community as “none-existing” and “dead” (Corbett-Batson, 2013). The average (white) American looks at community – with the exception of church and family communities – with suspicion and mistrust (Rosenbaum, 2018; Vargas et al., 2013; Fisher, 2008; Papa 2022). Neoliberalism depicts extreme individualism as natural and as a key feature for socioeconomic success. Individualism includes the notions of self-reliance and the fostering of an entrepreneurial spirit that long ago became part of American culture. But today, these values are accentuated. In neoliberalism, workers – especially the largely unprotected but essential workers in the service, food, and health sectors – found that safety nets had shrunk or disappeared, and uncertainty and isolation had grown even before the pandemic, but became the dominant feature of life when the COVID-19 pandemic ravaged the country.

Americans have been indoctrinated to dismiss European-style welfare policies and instead have internalized the trope of the self-made millionaire, believing that they as individuals, are solely responsible for their own fate. Rodrigo Nunes (2020) explains that by rendering invisible both the existing but often indiscernible “interdependencies that sustain individual trajectories and the structural constraints that hold [people] back” neoliberalism voids the notion of a social space beyond the immediate private sphere. Society, camaraderie, and solidarity do not exist in neoliberalism. Self-responsibility, hard work and, in case of failure, self-loathing are the main features of the model of man of

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<sup>3</sup> I want to thank the Rider University Masters student Kristin Siegle for her help with transcribing the interviews.

neoliberalism, whereas structural handicaps, social policies and class are not considered at all, when evaluating one's successes and failures.

Neoliberalism's ideological success lies exactly in that the ideology has eradicated community and solidarity from the minds of the majority of American citizens. Thus, life today is frequently experienced as extremely lonely, fragile and anxiety-producing. In addition, individuals hold the justified assumptions that "the system is rigged" and that their lives are in the hands of a corrupt elite and of technocrats who have no concern for common folk. Within neoliberalism and with the momentous popularity of social media, it is not surprising that community is understood as dead, and solidarity often misunderstood and misdirected toward managers and proprietors.

#### 4. Community and Solidarity

Community is what you make of it! Many social scientists have predicted that one inevitable consequence of modernization of Western societies and the rise of new technology, such as social media, is the augmentation of individualism which poses "serious threats" to the "organic unity" of society, and produces atomization, unbounded egoism, and distrust (Allik, 2004; Etzioni, 1993; 1996; Lane, 1994). According to many of these critics, a universal sense of solidarity can only arise from traditional, small-scale, face-to-face communities – "Gemeinschaft" according to Ferdinand Tönnies (1957). For Tönnies, Gemeinschaft is organized around appreciation for personal ties and social interactions of a personal nature. On the other hand, "Gesellschaft" (society), is comprised of impersonal and indirect social ties and interactions that are not necessarily carried out face-to-face but often remotely. The mostly direct ties that link society in the Gemeinschaft are strong, personal, frequently built on kin and family relations, and usually paternalistic in nature. The ties and interactions that characterize Gesellschaft are guided by formal values and beliefs that are directed by rationality and efficiency, as well as by self-interest. These ties are indirect, weak, and usually connect individuals who are otherwise strangers to each other.

The Gemeinschafts-ethos and -solidarity of traditional communities such as the idyllic farming village are obviously romanticized and idealized (Putnam et al., 1993: 114). Over centuries, Gemeinschaft justified and reproduced highly hierarchical, patriarchal structures, that gave rise to extremely violent, dysfunctional and repressive societies in which anger, trauma and resentment drove generations of people. Local coercive regimes of control and conformity produced repressive authoritarianism. The patron-client type of relationship that is most typical for Gemeinschaft engenders privilege based on blood and family, systematic exclusion, public violence, mass trauma, indignation, and oppression. In the patron-client type of model, relations are constructed in a manner that produces a constant struggle, marked by continuous negotiations about specifics of social exchange (Eisenstadt et al., 1980). On the other hand, many scholars have argued that in the Gesellschaft social solidarity is doomed to disappear and to be replaced by a modern, rational, and impersonal form of community, civic passivity, and extreme individualism.<sup>4</sup> However, any argument implying that life in the Gemeinschaft was less suppressive and violent for the vast majority of people than in the Gesellschaft, should be challenged.

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<sup>4</sup> To be sure these explanations of societal evolution are based on Western European and North American models of development.

Scholars have found that social media use aggregates the atomization effect and diminishes solidarity. Scholars such as Zenk Özdák (2016) attest that in today's society, individuals are "anonymized and lost their own consciousness through being reconstructed within the web of interactions of conflicting group identities." However, people also use social media groups to obtain experiential knowledge from their peers, build connections, and organize collective action. With the diminishment of unionized work in neoliberalism, traditional class solidarity clearly has seen its challenges, but it is not dead. In addition, as this essay shows, new forms of solidarity, adapting to new patterns of suffering and humanitarian need, have become more prominent.

Laitinen and Pessi (2014) differentiate between solidarity that has been conceived either as a macro-level phenomenon of group and societal cohesion, integration and order, or as a micro-level behavior, emotions, and attitudes explaining such cohesion.<sup>5</sup> This paper ultimately focuses on micro-level behavior by analyzing the practice of volunteering as an act of solidarity that encourages individual introspection and change. However, macro and micro levels are linked and change on the micro-level, that is, on the emotional level that subsequently modifies the individual's attitudes about a specific issue, will also result in changes on the macro-level regarding group composition, cohesion and order. his eventually may lead to broad social change.

#### 4.1. Practicing Solidarity through Volunteer Work: Two Case studies

Laitinen and Pessi (2014: 4) have conceptualized solidarity, when considered a micro-level phenomenon, as prosocial behavior across different situations, such as, helping and supporting others in situations of need, doing one's share in situations of cooperation, fairness in situations of distributing goods, avoiding breach in situations of trust, and moral repair when violations have taken place. Such solidarity is especially important in societies which single-out and discriminate against specific minority groups, e.g., the USA implementing Executive Order 13769, entitled Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States, commonly called the Muslim Travel Ban. This form of solidarity often produces motivated volunteers seeking to support individuals who are discriminated against and who are often in a subaltern position. For example, the current chair of the board of WHJC, Dina Rose explains the beginnings of the WHJC organization in the following way:<sup>6</sup>

*"I was living in Jersey City at the time, but I had strong ties – my family had been living in Hoboken and then we moved to Jersey City, so we lived in that area for the last 20 years.*

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<sup>5</sup> Émile Durkheim's (1947 [1893]) differentiate between the 'mechanic' solidarity of traditional communities and the 'organic' solidarity of modern societies. Mechanic solidarity is based on the similarity of the members and the dominance of collective consciousness over individuality. Organic solidarity is based on the interdependence of different individuals and on the social division of labour.

<sup>6</sup> WHJC started in 2016 as a loosely affiliated group of volunteers supporting resettled refugees mainly with apartment setups. In 2018 the group continued doing that as well as other basic aid such as, accompanying refugees to medical screenings, meeting new arrivals at the airport, and bringing meals. Within a year, the group began to transition more into education work, focusing on educational volunteer work, including at home tutoring, for those refugees who wanted that. In addition, the volunteers helped people with getting their transcripts evaluated for those who wanted to go back to school. By the end of 2018, the group became a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization.

*We're involved in the synagogue in Hoboken, the United Synagogue of Hoboken, and at the same time, it was sort of happening in parallel paths. At the synagogue we had a strong interest in doing something to help refugees and it was especially in regard to all of the Muslim ban-stuff rhetoric as well as actions. And so, we were getting mobilized at that time."*

Rose volunteered to work with immigrants and refugees following these realizations, and her motives were clearly in opposition to the administration's anti-Muslim policy. In this case, resistance is a decisive element in the decision-making process that heartened Rose's resolve and prompted her work with refugees and immigrants, people who were depicted by the Trump administration and some media outlets as menacing and not belonging in the United States. Rose's volunteer work qualifies as resistance. Not only do these acts and practices make a difference in the lives of deprived people, these material, economic, psychological, and educational practices also express the citizen activists' values that clearly oppose the party line of the dominant political power. Hollander and Einwohner (2004) define resistance as an act performed by someone acting on behalf of and/or in solidarity with someone in a subaltern position, if the action is taken in response to power. This is "solidarity resistance" in the terminology of Baaz et al. (2016: 142), in which an actor is motivated to support someone in a subaltern position in an act of solidarity. The COVID-19 Relief Funds and the Fun Club are two projects that exemplify this kind of solidarity work.

#### 4.1.1. COVID-19 Relief Funds

COVID-19 Relief Funds were granted to urgent projects that arose during the spring 2020 when the desperation and dire situations of many refugees and immigrants living through the pandemic became indisputable. Many humanitarian NGOs including New York's Neighbors for Refugees (NFR) and Hearts and Homes for Refugees (H&HR) applied for and received COVID-19 relief funds. Vice-President and Director of the NFR Board Jmel Wilson explains:

"I think that we responded fairly quickly [...] realizing what the lay of the land was going to be, and realizing that we needed to broaden our focus, and not just work with new families coming in, and not just wait for that to happen. Instead, [we needed] to work with families who are already here, who needed more support. We got connected, through some great people, with a whole lot of Syrian families up in the New Haven area, who were floundering and really needed some help. It started with us helping a family who was about to be evicted by paying their rent for a year, and then it went on from that. We now have a very robust grant program, for people who have been here past that whole resettlement period, along with several other programs for folks who have already been here.<sup>7</sup>

The outreach efforts of small local NGOs like NFR brought relief to refugees living in other parts of the country. When COVID-19 hit, the group identified several organizations that worked directly with refugees in Westchester, New Jersey, Connecticut, and upstate New York. Grants from the COVID-19 Relief Fund were used to help families put food on the table, buy medicines, pay utilities, and pay rent. NFR's webpage explains that the organization "distributed \$23,000 to 73 families, that's 265 people" through a number of local sister organizations. The robust grant program of the Westchester County NGO aided

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<sup>7</sup> This interview was conducted on May 20, 2021. NFR has ramped up their preparations and is now ready to help resettle a number of Afghan families.

refugees in need elsewhere through an impressive network of aid and advocacy organizations.

Other groups also had COVID-19 relief funds. WHJC and H&HR also raised funds for COVID-19 relief. H&HR's webpage details the organization's support for refugees, asylees and asylum-seekers with \$30,000 in cash assistance, including MasterCard gift cards, grocery and clothing store gift cards, and cash grants. Overall, 130 families, made up of 414 people, were assisted by H& HR between the months of March and July 2020 alone.

COVID-19 relief funds were often easily accessible entry points to volunteering for these NGOs. For example, in her interview, the Board Member of Welcome Home Jersey City (WHJC), Priti Christnis Gress explains: "My husband has been very supportive – he did a donation which his company matched." WHJC created another way for locals-turned-activists to get involved with refugee work - the Fun Club.

#### **4.1.2. The Fun Club**

In contrast to fundraising and giving financial aid to those in need, the Fun Club, initiated by WHJC in 2017, is based on weekly get-togethers and meals of volunteers with refugees. The Executive Director of WHJC, Alain Mentha, describes the Fun Club as a major success of WHJC:

"So, probably our major accomplishment of the last few years has been the establishment of Fun Club, a family program where we provide academic coaching, homework help, ESL classes for the adults, and we provided meals, we had sort of a bazaar where people could get household goods. We drove the families from their homes and back from Fun Club. It really helped us deepen the sense of community that existed within these micro-communities, based on language and nationality of our clients or friends. And that was a great thing!"

The outbreak of the pandemic made it difficult to continue with the Fun Club as a live event. However, quickly the Fun Club also became a remote event. Dina Rose explains:

"We ended up on Zoom like everyone else did, and we started out with just Fun Club on Thursday nights, and trying to figure out how to interact with our kids in Fun Club. It really became about the kids [...] Fun Club itself in-person had an adult component and a volunteer component with creating friendships. Our Zoom efforts, when [we] started with Fun Club, it was really just 'How do we keep our clients engaged with us?' So Fun Club became about activity, it was not about tutoring anymore.[...] I think, [by] the first week we played Bingo."

The existence of these weekly activities that were often mundane and, in 2020 (until June 2021), remotely organized and held, aided the refugees and gave a means to citizen activists who sought to create stronger communities in order to resist state policies with which they disagreed.

## **4.2 NGOs as Connecting Platforms**

The activities of humanitarian NGOs such as infrequent get-togethers, exhibitions, theater performances, other public events such as H&HR's Refugee Shabbat and Day of Action, as well as established programs such COVID-19 Relief Funds and the Fun Club provide platforms of interaction that allow for the refugees and activists to get to know each other. Rose explains the underlying social process:

"We are trying to hook an individual person with a client [refugee] as their partner or their primary contact. I would say that maybe half of our clients already have that person who is

close to them, [...] I work very closely with a family. And I don't know if that relationship would ever come to an end because it is now, my relationship with them [and] is less about Welcome Home, than it is about our relationship. [...] Helping the kids get into better schools, and things like that."

All humanitarian NGOs discussed in this article, including First Friends of New Jersey & New York (FFNJ&NY), provide such platforms. For example, FFNJ&NY organizes campaigns in which volunteers visit and write letters to incarcerated asylum seekers. Through reoccurring activities, these NGOs allow individual refugees and volunteers to connect in order to begin relationships. Rose emphasizes that, in the end, a lasting personal relationship often arises from these connections:

"So, I think that we would like to get everyone paired up that way. If we did that successfully, then the individual would take more of the responsibility, and then the core organization would take less of it. And then, they may or may not still come to [the NGO] for social reasons, let's say. The clients [refugees] themselves became friends [with the volunteers]."

This is what Schiertz and Schwenken (2020) call "doing solidarity."<sup>8</sup> Often arising from volunteering in NGOs, doing solidarity is a practice that both the activists and the refugees engage in, in order to look for and find points of connection (Vikki, 2010: 249). These points of connection are crucial for the promotion of acculturation and well-being of the refugee and the community. The creation of lasting personal relationships can be seen as a second step toward creating solidarity between citizen and refugee, that has the long-term aim of eventually including the refugee and her family into a larger community. Interestingly, very few of the activists I interviewed for this project spoke of the need to develop lasting friendships, affinity and camaraderie. Instead, they used the term "relationship." Relationship is a broad term and includes affinity relations, such as friendships, but also focuses on the way in which two or more people are connected, or the specific state of being connected, for example, an association, alliance, or bond. Indeed, for the volunteer-refugee relationship to work, what needs to develop is reflective solidarity rather than (and/or in addition to) friendship. Only with an understanding of the limitations and the specific quality of the relationship – that is with the acceptance of reflective solidarity as the overarching objective of the relationship between volunteer and newcomer – can people practice inclusive solidarity and can societal inclusivity occur.

### 4.3 Stepping-Stone to Inclusivity: Reflective Solidarity

Inclusive solidarity hardly ever arises automatically, but must be created. In order for the relationship between refugee and volunteers to work, both the refugee and the activist need to adjust to each other in various ways. This is usually very clear to the refugee because she is in a state of transition often associated with post-traumatic stress and massive confusion as well as a status diminishment. Adjustment is the name of the game for refugees. However, the notion that an adjustment will occur during this period is not always obvious (or easy) for the volunteer. The relationship between refugee and activist needs to go beyond affective solidarity, which is based on emotions, and conventional solidarity, which is based on common interests. Both the volunteer and the refugee need to reach what Jodi Dean has called reflective solidarity (1999: 125). Dean defines reflective solidarity as "the mutual expectation of a responsible orientation to

<sup>8</sup> Doing solidarity is a concept developed by Vikki Reynolds (2010) in the context of counseling and psychotherapy. I here adapt the concept to refugee and inclusion work.

relationship.” These relationships are not necessarily based on feelings of friendship or even sympathy, but on mutual respect and concern. They are essential in contributing to civil society, because these relationships combat othering and exclusion.

If the refugee-volunteer relationship reaches the point of reflective solidarity, the activist provides help and advice with certain issues, such as job searches and education. The volunteer and refugee sustain reflective solidarity despite the existence of issues that under different circumstances might pull these two people apart, for example, different political opinions or a different understanding of the importance of tolerance toward other minorities. This relationship endures, despite feelings of sympathy or antipathy that might arise. Reflective solidarity creates a lasting relationship between the refugee and the activist, and it facilitates the refugee’s adjustment and inclusion process.

The concept of reflective solidarity draws from the intuition that the permanent risk of disagreement must itself become rationally transformed so as to provide a basis for solidarity (Dean 1995). In contrast to conventional solidarity in which dissent always carries with it the potential for disrupting the relationship, reflective solidarity builds dissent into its foundations. Dean (1995: 136) suggests that with reflective solidarity, “we have both the opportunity and the need to see differences of others as contributions to and aspects of the community of all of us.” Mentha clearly illustrates how reflective solidarity works. Here he refers to the conspiracy theories that many refugees and migrants hold surrounding COVID-19-shots:

“It might make me infertile, it might cause me to contract COVID, change my DNA’ - I’ve heard it all. That is sort of where we are now, in addition to providing continued educational and material support which is not getting any easier [...]”

Mentha realized that many of the refugees and immigrants he works with are exposed to conspiracy theories and misinformation campaigns through their friends, news outlets, and their social media, such as WhatsApp communities. He clearly recognized that his clients have a very different perception of the state, science, community, and public health than he does, but that did not discourage him. In contrast, recently, WHJC received a grant for a COVID-19 vaccine information campaign, and Mentha explains:

“So what we are doing now [...] is first of all fast track to get all of our clients vaccinated who want it. Then after they’re vaccinated, we ask them to be apart of our education system, where we can do a video recording of them talking about how they got the vaccine, and what the reasons are why they got the vaccine, and then encourage them to help us to dispel certain myths. [...] [There is] deep rooted skepticism about vaccinations in different parts of society.”

Mentha’s analysis shows that he sees the different perceptions of his refugee and immigrant clients and accepts these beliefs for what they are. But he is not discouraged about this. Mentha also realizes that he, as a non-immigrant American activist, will most likely not be able to convince those skeptics whose vaccine mistrust is driven by conspiracy theories that proliferate in their communities. WHJC attempts to overcome the mistrust and misinformation that their clients are exposed to and seeks to transform their understanding of the pandemic through the voices of fellow refugees and migrants.

With the COVID-19 vaccine information campaign, WHJC engenders what Dean (1995) means when she writes about mutual expectation, responsibility, and orientation toward the relationship by changing the boundaries of community from “us vs. them” to “we” and



making possible a form of understanding of the other where the other is considered a part of the community despite her difference. Mentha sees the refugees and immigrants he is working with as different but has realized that they are part of the community. WHJC has begun to engage in the difficult task of educating the vaccine skeptic groups, the organization is working with. Mentha and other volunteers involved in this project demonstrate reflective solidarity in the sense that the existing differences in opinion are seen as part of Jersey City. Mentha's statement shows that the activists strongly disagree with the vaccine skepticism that many of his clients hold. However, WHJC's information campaign is in full swing, clearly demonstrating that dissent is seen as given within the framework of the NGO's public education drive but can be changed by involving pro-vaccine voices and advocates from the immigrant and refugee communities.

Dean's reflective solidarity suggests to focus on the generalized other and thus provide a way to conceive mutuality of expectations without hypostatizing the other into a restrictive set of norms. She (1995: 136-7) states:

"What is expected is the recognition of our interdependency and shared vulnerability. The acknowledgement of our relationship to one another. At a time of increasing globalization, (im)migration and individualization, we have both the opportunity and the need to see differences of others as contributions to and aspects of the community of all of us."

Framing the actions of volunteers under the banner of shared vulnerability and reflection about one's own positionality in connection with others, provides a broader framework of understanding. The COVID-19 pandemic has made this recognition very obvious. However, to reach reflective solidarity is difficult for many volunteers especially if working with refugees or migrants who hold truly opposing beliefs regarding such diverse issues as child rearing, the roles of women in society, education, and environmental pollution, to name just a few. Frequently, the volunteer's realization that her relationship to the refugee needs to go beyond these differences, is a difficult step to make. This is the case, because both the volunteer and the refugee will need to change their consciousness in order to reach reflective solidarity.

#### 4.4 The Volunteer's Changes of Consciousness: An Attempted Explanation

Some volunteers can pinpoint to the exact activity that changed their perceptions and consciousness. For example, in her interview, Priti Christnis Gress explains her friendship with Doha, a Syrian refugee and mother of four living in Jersey City, who was separated from her two older children:<sup>9</sup> Christnis Gress explains: "[Doha] and I became particularly close,... she has a very warm spirit and a gregarious personality. She is one of my favorites,

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<sup>9</sup> Welcome Home Jersey City's webpage solicits donations for Doha, who is a refugee from Syria and single mother of four. Her family initially fled to Thailand as the war in Syria escalated. Doha and her two minor children were offered resettlement in the USA, but her two older children were excluded because of their age. Eventually Doha's son and daughter in Thailand, who had been working to support themselves, were rounded up in an immigration raid and spent nearly a year at the notorious Immigration Detention Center in Bangkok for violation of their visa rules. WHJC was able to secure their release, and they are awaiting the papers needed to immigrate and re-join their family in New Jersey. Thailand unfortunately does not recognize refugee status, so Doha's children are in the difficult position of not being able to work anymore. Her daughter also has ongoing medical needs from being sick in the detention center. WHJC is fundraising for their upkeep until they are able to leave Thailand. <https://welcomehomerefugees.org/campaigns/dohas-family-support-fund/>

she is just so open and talkative.” Many volunteers began to involve family members. Christnis Gress explains how she mobilized her entire family with her efforts to support Doha—whose two oldest children were stranded in Thailand—and how the members of her family eventually turned into activists, volunteering in various projects at WHJC:

“My daughter who is a teenager organized a benefit concert and had all of her friends perform, and Doha came and spoke and we raised \$3,000—which was enough to keep them for 6 months in Thailand. In so many different ways, my whole family has been involved. My son also goes. He’s been going since [he was] 11 or 10 [years old]. He doesn’t go to volunteer as much, but really just is near the kids and does things with them. Now he’s big and strong, and moved a bunch of furniture into a place, you know, that we are setting up for asylees and refugees, so it has become a group effort in our family.”

Including family and friends cultivates and expands the awareness of one’s own involvement. With these activities, Christnis Gress and her family began to practice solidarity. Christnis Gress emphasizes:

“I am motivated and actually feel empowered. Getting Doha’s children out of detention [in Thailand], I would tell you, is the single most important work I have done in my entire life.”

For Christnis Gress, the relationship she developed with Doha, that led to substantial improvements of the lives of Doha’s children who are stuck in Thailand, switched her perspective and changed her consciousness. Today, Christnis Gress and Doha’s have a very close relationship.

In another context, the queer Chicana poet, writer, and feminist theorist Gloria Anzaldúa explains the shift in activists’ consciousness that is necessary to reach reflective solidarity in the following way: Meditating about changes in one’s consciousness through the experience of differences, Anzaldúa calls for a new arising awareness, a “consciousness of the Borderlands.” In “La Conciencia de la Mestiza” (1987: 101), Anzaldúa emphasizes that this new consciousness can only emerge by developing “a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity.” She writes that one ought to develop a “plural personality and operate in a pluralistic mode - nothing is thrust out - the good, the bad, and the ugly - nothing rejected, nothing abandoned.” Consequentially volunteers need to adopt new perspectives because they are willing to share and to make themselves vulnerable to foreign and strange ways of seeing and thinking. However, at the end of this process, a new reality will be created. Anzaldúa (1987: 100) agrees:

“It is not enough to stand on the opposite river bank, shouting questions, challenging patriarchal white conventions. A counter stance locks one into a duel of oppressor and oppressed... All reaction is limited by, and dependent on, what it is reacting against. Because the counter-stance stems from a problem with authority - outer as well as inner - it is a step toward liberation from cultural domination. But it is not a way of life. At some point, on our way to a new consciousness, we will have to leave the opposite bank, the split between the two mortal combats somehow healed, so that we are on both shores at once and at once we see through the serpent and the eagle eyes.”

Anzaldúa stresses that these changes in perspectives lead to a transcending of boundaries. She emphasizes that solidarity cannot be achieved conclusively, but rather demands an infinite process of “solidary practices” and inclusive ways of relating to one another.

Similarly, Schwiertz and Schwenken (2020) see solidarity arising "through the mediation of differences" with respect to legal status, class, race, and gender, and political ideologies. While these categories are broad and might not get to the crux of the matter when it comes to the volunteer's daily interactions with the refugee, the authors also note the emergence of "new, transversal subjectivities." With the practice of reflective solidarity, volunteers learn to create these transversal subjectivities by standing at both sides of the border at the same time. By doing so, they can create a new reality with their work and the development of a new understanding of difference and how this difference can aid us in conceptualizing an inclusive society.

## 5. Conclusion

The paper situates volunteer work with refugees and migrants as a practice that engages individual volunteers in activities that are outside of their daily routines. By working with refugees and other strangers, activists are exposed to different ways of thinking and doing things. They learn about what others experience in their daily lives and how they respond to these experiences. Engaging in repeated practices of doing volunteer work fosters solidarity with newcomers who are frequently living in marginalized communities. The second part of the paper centers on reflective and inclusive solidarity as key features that often lead to the transformed consciousness of individual activists.

Not all volunteers become friends with individual refugees, but very frequently the act of volunteering leads to new feelings of solidarity based on the development of personal relationships with refugees, who usually are individuals the activist would not have met before becoming involved in humanitarian work. Sometimes these relationships create psychological challenges for the volunteers. However, this paper has argued that the development of reflective solidarity between migrants and refugees on the one hand and citizen activists on the other, can overcome these issues. Frequently, volunteers in pro-immigrant and pro-refugee organizations are actively remaking their relationship with individual immigrants and refugees and in the process changing their role within and understanding of the wider community and the state. This, I speculate, could eventually result in large-scale social change.

However, only by imagining and creating new models of communality, for example by combining elements of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, and by developing new methods of inclusion will we be able to overcome the ideological and political limiters that neoliberalism has so successfully placed upon our lives in America today. We need new ideas of society and community in order to change the reality that many define as extremely lonely, fragile, and anxiety-producing and what is often defined as a "rigged system" that works against the interests of the common folk.

Reflective solidarity is one of the elements that is necessary to build an inclusive society independently of structures of power. Ideally, inclusive society contains elements of *Gesellschaft*, especially the significance of meritocracy and networks of horizontally connected individuals, and *Gemeinschaft*, specifically the significance of solidarity and appreciation for personal ties and social interactions. It is time to begin to imagine possible new future societies with all their key features. Only then can we begin working toward a new society that include initiatives which not only criticize, "protest, object, and undermine what is considered undesirable and wrong," but simultaneously "acquire, create, built, cultivate and experiment with what people need in the present moment, or

what they would like to see replacing dominant structures or power relations” (Sørensen 2016: 57). Thus, only by changing our perspectives and transcending the existing borders and limitations will we be able to form new kinds of communities. Volunteers and activists have been changing their consciousness, and therewith creating and practicing new ways about thinking of community.

In terms of future research, the concepts of reflective and inclusive solidarity need more analysis but should be included in the theorizing surrounding the conceptualization of community and society and the position of the citizen (and the asylee/refugee/migrant) as an agent of relevance vis-a-vis and within the state.

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