A Human Touch Across The Hall

Volunteers’ Relations with Refugees with Base in Voluntary Activities at a Refugee Reception Centre in Norway

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1. Introduction

In this chapter, I will introduce my field of inquiry and present the background, objectives and intentions for focusing on the interaction between volunteers and refugees during voluntary activities. Furthermore, there will be an introduction to the location which this work is based upon, which is the temporary homes of the refugees, and also the setting where most of the interaction between the actors is situated. An emphasis on the background of the voluntary work and a presentation of the offer of activities arranged for refugees will then be attended to. Finally, the chapter also outlines methods used in the collection of data, which this dissertation is based on. Finally, the structure of the thesis will be presented to emphasize the thesis’ evolution.

1.1 Objectives

This paper focuses on volunteers who practice voluntary activities at Melville reception centre for refugees in the outskirts of Oslo. My overall purpose is to seek the meaning behind the relationship between the volunteers and refugees from the former’s point of view, through an analysis of interaction, perceptions and expectations. This interaction takes base in relatively short-term social relations, which have been prepared by the organizations Save the Children and Norwegian Peoples Aid (NPA). These organizations have volunteers with minimal training in how to handle cultural differences and how to deal with people having experienced difficult situations. Through a combined focus on how the volunteers interact, their

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1 The names of people and places have been changed to provide anonymity.

2 In the following, the term refugee also includes asylum seekers. The legal sense of refugees (as defined in the UN Refugee Convention) is a "person who has a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion" (Norwegian Directorate of Immigration, www.udi.no). An asylum seeker is "a person who on his or her own initiative, and without prior notification, asks the authorities in Norway for protection and recognition as a refugee" (Norwegian Directorate of Immigration, www.udi.no). The situation of an asylum seeker is thus less secure than that of a refugee.
relations with each other, the organization and the refugees, this study aims at identifying factors influencing the work of the volunteers. Thus, the approach to the problem is:

*In the interrelation between volunteers and refugees during voluntary arrangements, how do volunteers interact with refugees?*

This will be addressed in light of what the voluntary role consists of through the demands of distance and a desire of closeness. This duality is a relevant approach as during the course of my participant observations and interviews it became apparent that my informants were experiencing being pulled in two directions. My informants wanted to create close relations, but experienced certain limitations in the contextual frame when meeting with the refugees. As representatives for an organization, the volunteers are representatives for the organization’s ambitions and are advised to follow a set of guidelines, which is a further part of delineating how this interaction is to take place. Additionally, the interaction is influenced by the different life situations and background between the actors. Therefore, a further approach to the problem includes:

*What do the volunteers experience as the possibilities and limitations in their relations with the refugees and how is this part of delineating the voluntary role?*

This thesis will provide an insight into voluntary work, but will also touch upon how Norwegians interact with foreigners. My motivations for writing this thesis are to provide further material on a subject which has been given little research attention, with a particular focus upon volunteers at reception centres (Straand and Festervoll 2003:18). This approach could provide knowledge of an important practice in Norwegian society. Furthermore, information about the voluntary practice could be valuable because of the tendency among volunteers to quit practicing voluntary work after a short period of time. One ambition of this thesis is thereby to explore what could be regarded as challenges leading volunteers to quit, in addition to locating what makes voluntary work valuable.
1.2 Introducing the Location

This section will give a presentation of Melville reception centre, which is the location this work is based on. While the living conditions of refugees will be attended to in chapter 2, this part includes an overview of the location which houses the refugees. It is also the location where most of the voluntary activities are situated. This will include a briefing in what kind of reception centre Melville is and delineate some of the limitations and possibilities the refugees are presented with living there. This section will thereby attend to the location where the volunteers operate, and by that introduce the field which the collection of data is based on.

A refugee reception center is a voluntary living arrangement for asylum seekers and refugees provided by the government. The arrangement of governmental reception centers was established in 1987, and followed the previous solutions that had existed since 1985 (Berg 1990:1). With the commencement of a governmental responsibility, the primary goal was to create reception centers of a modest standard (ibid.:2). Norwegian Peoples’ Aid turned Melville into a reception centre for refugees in 1999. Melville is thus under municipal management, as opposed to being run by a private enterprise. While both such facilities are to follow the guidelines of the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI), NPA aims to provide a value basis and principles that are concerned with the welfare of the refugees, rather than being constitutive of a fixed governmental management.

As one of five transit reception centres near Oslo, refugees are transferred to Melville reception centre after they have been registered, and before they are moved to a regular reception centre. A transit reception centre is the second reception centre which the refugees arrive at, before being moved to a longer term residency. Here, the refugees wait until they have been interviewed by UDI which decides the outcome of their asylum application. In general, this is meant to take four to six weeks. However, as the progress in the casework tends to be more time demanding than this, quite a few of the refugees stay at Melville longer, and some wait for as long as a year. Meanwhile, the refugees are financially hindered from being active,
as their budget rarely covers more than the absolute necessary, making their lives comparable to social exclusion (NOVA 2006).

Situated in a residential area in the outskirts of Oslo, there are few opportunities to socialize at the location. Normally, Melville is surrounded by a rather large garden with possibilities to conduct various activities. However, during my participant observations the garden had been dug open and left as a temporary mud hole. This prevented the refugees from having an outside area and breathing room as an alternative to staying inside their temporary housing. Situated far-off from the city-centre walking distance wise, the refugees are reliant on public transportation if they want to socialize elsewhere. Yet, the opportunities to go out of the reception centre are limited due to the refugees’ moderate budget, which mean that they are most likely to stay within a close range of their residency.

As noted, all reception centres are to maintain a modest standard according to the guidelines presented by UDI. At Melville, the refugees share kitchen and bathrooms, and are granted money to cover their household expenses. Meanwhile, the refugees are responsible for cleaning the common rooms, halls, kitchen and bathrooms, which each must take part in. Melville’s housing capabilities are limited to 180 refugees who are divided into shared rooms according to gender, nationality, and age, except for families and long-term residents, who normally are assigned their own space. Few activities are arranged by the employees at the reception centre, as the capacity of the employees is marginal. While waiting for their asylum application to be processed, the refugees are therefore practically segregated from the rest of society. Thus, the need for volunteers from the outside is perceived as considerably important.

As a social system, the reception centre can be observed as being a place outside of Norwegian society. Isolated from the surrounding community, there is a clear distance from the rest of the community. The function of this isolated institution is to keep people inside, but also to shield the rest of the society from the refugees living there. As such, a reception centre can in many ways be observed as a non-space. A non-space points to a stage of temporality located in a social void, which is
in many ways comparable to that of the reception centre (Eriksen 1993a). Many reception centres are positioned in far off places, making their appearance further distanced from the nearest community. Melville however, can be regarded as a preferable location in the capital, in comparison to many other reception centres. Still, even though Melville was placed centrally, it could be regarded as secluded and as a separate sphere. Arranging for activities or social gatherings in this setting can here be considered important in light of the few opportunities provided to these refugees.

1.3 Introducing Voluntary Work

This part will present an overview of the offer of activities at Melville reception centre. The arrangements for these activities are divided between the humanitarian organizations; Save the Children and NPA, who first recognized the need for these measures, and initiated an offer of activities through recruiting volunteers to carry them out. By providing an overview of the voluntary work at Melville, as well as a presentation of some of the ambitions of voluntary activities, this section is further part of outlining the context which this thesis is based on.

In 2002, Save the Children initiated voluntary activities at Melville aiming at improving the living conditions of the children. During my participant observations, they had close to forty volunteers registered. These were divided between three activity groups; two children’s groups and a café for women, who each met once a week. On Wednesdays there is a play group for children between 8 and 12 years old that last two hours. Every Thursday a group of volunteers look after the children and offer help with homework, which at the same time enables their mothers to join other volunteers for the women’s café and some quality leisure time. NPA supplemented the offer of activities when they recruited around 60 volunteers in 2006 and thereby increased the offer of activities to a youth group, cookery classes for men, a women’s’ group, courses in Norwegian, and football groups.
Nearly one hundred volunteers take part in these activities in an attempt to improve the living conditions of the refugees. Divided by groups of four to eight members, they arrange for social gatherings for refugees at a fixed time once a week, while the individual volunteer tend to participate every other week in a period of one to four hours. The members of each group share the responsibilities of maintaining a fixed schedule, which is considered important in order to provide the refugees with some stability in a living situation with generally few fixed points. The voluntary commitments furthermore necessitate some planning ahead of the activities. Additionally, many of the volunteers attend meetings arranged by the organizations which aim to provide solidarity and further commitment.

While organizations and volunteers work towards expanding the activities offered to the refugees, the Norwegian government does the exact opposite. In 2004, courses in Norwegian for refugees were cancelled. These language courses were an important step to improve refugee’s living conditions. The volunteers who now teach Norwegian to the refugees find themselves faced with this responsibility once done by professionals. Across Norway, hundreds of volunteers are committed to voluntary work that aims to provide activities for refugees who live at reception centres.

Arranging activities for refugees aim to start the process of integration between refugees and Norwegians at an early stage. This is meant to introduce the refugees to Norwegian society, and provide positive encounters between refugees and the surrounding community. The activities are implemented in an effort to improve the living conditions of the refugees while waiting for their governmental application for asylum to be processed. Equality and solidarity are here important characteristics which the organizations are aiming to generate through the commitments and care of volunteers. The volunteers are encouraged to create close relations by establishing a space for comfort, amusement, and solidarity.
1.4 Methods

The aim of this thesis is to understand how volunteers relate to refugees during voluntary activities. Through participant observations of particularly one voluntary group, I examined how the volunteers interacted with the refugees at a reception centre in Oslo. During a period of five months I took part in meetings, seminars and voluntary activities as a regular volunteer. I interviewed eight volunteers, one employee within NPA and one employee at the reception centre. This was vital to acquire an understanding of this interaction and what it is that determines and influences it. Participant observations and interviews are qualitative methods which aim to provide the researcher with an understanding of the lifeworld of the group which is being investigated. The following will provide a presentation of how the data were collected through qualitative methods.

1.4.1 Qualitative Method

Qualitative methods can be regarded as interpretative, as the researcher *is* the research instrument seeking for social phenomena. “Qualitative researchers are concerned with the meanings people attach to things in their lives” (Taylor and Bogdan 1998:7). Such methods attempt to understand people from their own frames of reference and the way they experience reality (ibid.). The researcher is allowed to go into the field of inquiry in depth by investigating “people’s own written or spoken words and observable behavior” (ibid.). John W. Creswell names four basic types of information to collect in the qualitative area: “…observations, interviews, documents and audio-visual materials” (1998:100). My main techniques in terms of methods are semi-structured interviews and participant observation.

1.4.2 Gathering Data

While collecting material, I used different means to access information. By working as a volunteer for five months from January to May 2007 at Melville reception
centre, some of the information was collected in the field through participant observation. This observation work was mainly based on the youth group, but I wanted to prevent my material from being based on only one group of volunteers. I therefore attended other voluntary activities as well, such as the football group, Norwegian class, the women’s group and excursions on which all the refugees and volunteers were invited.

I wanted to shed light on the volunteers’ role from their point of view. How do they connect with the refugees, the other volunteers, and the organization? What were their motivations for initiating voluntary work, and did this source of motivation go through a process of change as the activities were carried out? Conversations followed by reflection and interpretation seemed like a good approach to close in on these topics. The Interview were thus chosen, which is an important tool in research within the social sciences (Valen 2000:9).

**Interviews**

A researcher can choose between a variety of interviewing methods, for instance surveys, opinion polls and questionnaires, which fall under the category of *structured* interviews (Taylor and Bogdan 1998:87). The structured interview emphasizes that “each person is supposed to be asked identically worded questions to assure comparable findings” (ibid.:88.). However, I would rather the informants steer the conversation into topics and issues that perhaps were more hidden to the researcher, or at least were of importance to the informants. Thus, a type of interview was chosen that was less structured, and more flexible and dynamic: the qualitative interview.

The unstructured or semi-structured interview takes a conversational form according to the interests, experiences and views of the interviewees (Valentine 1997:11). This people-oriented approach allows the interviewees to “construct their own accounts of their experiences by describing and explaining their lives in their own words” (ibid.). Qualitative interviewing or *in-depth interviewing* is described
as “nondirective, unstructured, nonstandardized, and open-ended interviewing,” focusing on the conversation between equals (Taylor and Bogdan 1998:88). Qualitative research interviews seek to describe the meanings of central themes in the lives of the subjects (Kvale 1996). In fact, the interview should shape itself along the way, depending on the respondent rather than being based on fixed questions.

The gathering of data was based on semi-structured interviews. This approach is well suited to gathering extensive information on the informants’ life situation. It also allows the research to be flexible and open regarding other topics the informant might broach which the researcher otherwise would have missed (Thagaard 2003). The interviews were based on a prepared set of questions and themes as a starting point. But as maintained by Thagaard (2003), it is also important to be open towards what the informants have to say, instead of insisting on the topics prepared. While a few questions were presented at the beginning of the interviews, the form emerged as more conversational after a while. From one interview to the next, I found myself with new questions and different formulations. The original themes for discussion have therefore undergone some transformation along the way.

Prior to the interviews, my participant observations had given me some insight into and knowledge of the voluntary activities which proved to be helpful when conducting the interviews. My observations were the main source of forming the topics I wanted to touch upon in the interviews. It was preferable to avoid the strong lines of a structured interview which would have involved my asking the questions and the object of interview answering. By virtue of a conversation during which the topics were introduced more naturally, the informants were more in control of the issues to discuss. This allowed the informant to steer the conversation towards themes that were vital to them, which I could follow up.

When choosing a location for the interview, it was important that the informants were comfortable. Since the informants and I were students at the same university, it seemed natural for the interviews to take place at this location. Most of the interviews were thus held at a student café. The seven informants I had already met
before the interviews were interviewed for nearly two hours, while the other three informants’ interviews lasted less than one hour. Having met at a voluntary arrangement beforehand might have helped create a joint interest and a shared background as volunteers, thus making the setting of the interview more rewarding for both. This might also have helped bring about a relationship which was more based on being co-volunteers, rather than a researcher/informant relationship. It proved easier to stay in touch for further conversations and questions later on with these informants. In total, I met four informants on more than one occasion, two of whom were met one more time, and one whom I met three more times.

**Using a Tape Recorder**

Most of the interviews were conducted with a tape recorder, which allowed there to be a more open-ended conversation. There are both advantages and disadvantages linked to using a tape recorder. On the one hand, the informant might dislike being taped, and thus might not be as informative and straightforward as he or she might have been without the presence of a tape. On the other hand, using a notebook alone may limit the flow of the conversation. Additionally, taking good notes and remembering afterwards what was said can prove to be challenging, and even a source of misinformation. A tape would also produce a more accurate and detailed record of the conversation (Valentine 1997:123). However, as I became more acquainted with some of my informants, I did not use a tape recorder when meeting a second time.

There was an agreement that the informants would be anonymized in the thesis. Additionally, the questions were rarely of a sensitive nature. Thus, I anticipated that using a tape recorder would not result in less forthcoming informants. However, as soon as the interviews were finished and the tape recorder was switched off, I noticed the conversation flowed more easily. A few informants showed even more interest in my paper, and in the conversations we often continued discussing both my and their experiences at Melville, and our thoughts about the situation of refugees. At this point I was tempted several times to switch the tape recorder back
on. Instead, I continued the conversation without recording, and made notes shortly after. Nonetheless, I found that the material provided by the tape recorder was important in a further analysis of the material.

**Participant Observation**

Participant observation can be defined as “social interaction between the researcher and informants in the milieu of the latter, during which data are systematically and unobtrusively collected” (Taylor and Bogdan 1998:24). This technique implies the researcher becoming “an unobtrusive part of the scene, people the participants take for granted” (ibid.:45.). Being incorporated into the practices of volunteers provided me with much information with a base in one voluntary group, and I was able to follow the processes that the volunteers took part in. This gave me basic information about the practices surrounding the volunteers, and was crucial in gaining a certain picture of what they did. This information and insight were also important when conducting the interviews. Without this basic insight, it would have been difficult for me both to find the informants, and to know the course of this research.

In an analysis it is important to include variation. Participating in other voluntary contexts was important to widen my research material. I therefore spent time at the reception centre on a few occasions outside of the voluntary activities to gain an insight into its environment and the people within it. Attending meetings and seminars that volunteers were invited to by the organizations allowed me to observe and participate in several aspects of what the volunteers were involved in. NPA invited volunteers to meetings four times during my fieldwork, all of which I attended. At these meetings there was room to exchange ideas and discuss the dilemmas faced as volunteers. The meetings also functioned as an opportunity for the organization to present its ongoing projects nationally and internationally, in an effort to involve the volunteers in further commitments.
On one occasion, NPA’s voluntary coordinator invited the representatives from each voluntary group from Save the Children and NPA. Meeting volunteers from all the groups aimed to create a closer field of cooperation. Attending an eighteen-hour weekend seminar\(^3\) arranged by Save the Children also granted me access to what volunteers across Norway were concerned about at other reception centres. At this seminar, politicians, employees of Save the Children, volunteers and refugees were in attendance and discussed the issues surrounding refugees, reception centres and the voluntary activities.

Conducting participant observations so close to home based on a group of people in a similar life situation to my own may entail certain challenges. Studying the familiar and the close can be challenging precisely because so much is taken for granted (Wadel 1991:18). My object of study is one where “the others” are recognized as part of the same community. But one obvious advantage of this study is language. Additionally, taking a basis in the close can be advantageous when establishing relations with the informants.

From the above, it becomes apparent that being a volunteer at a reception centre constitutes much more than the actual encounters between volunteers and refugees. It consists of planning, meetings, evaluations and seminars. I have had first-hand experience of some of the experiences voluntarism generates: frustration when it takes 45 minutes to gather the refugees for activities while being in a hurry to leave Melville to conduct planned activities elsewhere. Satisfaction and joy when activities go to plan and people are smiling, laughing and making jokes. All in all the participant observations are based on encounters between volunteers and refugees, between the volunteers themselves, and between volunteers and the organizations. This has aided the task of grasping the motivation, practice and experiences as seen from volunteers’ point of view.

\(^3\) “Krafttak for mottak”, May 2007
1.4.3 Informants

Research into human behaviour tends to be based on a few selected individuals who act as representatives of a larger group. Using a selection is necessary to ensure the quality of the results, and it would be an enormous, if not impossible, task to interview every single volunteer at Melville. Using qualitative methods, selecting a few representatives may provide for an in-depth analysis. This type of research values the depth of the research findings rather than the quantity of material or the quantity of informants. When using qualitative methods based on a few individuals, it is therefore important to choose these informants well. Both the researcher and the informants imprint on and influence the findings of the paper (Hastrup 1995). However, the research tends to be reliant on whomsoever is willing to be investigated.

As mentioned above, informants are part of shaping the material. It is therefore important to be critical and thorough when selecting the informants who are to represent a group. When searching for informants, I therefore added some criteria with regards to location, variety and experience. My first criterion was that the informants were part of the voluntary programme at Melville reception centre. Basing the study on just one location allows for a deeper understanding of the worldviews and ways of life from the “inside” (Cook 1997:127). It would also be easier for me to locate informants at a place I already had access to.

To include some variety, it was important that the informants were part of different voluntary groups, and that there were both women and men participating. While my observations mainly were based on one of the groups in particular, my informants were members of different voluntary groups. Searching for differences was a deliberate choice made to create diversity and was an effort to reach a wider understanding of voluntarism at reception centres. Part of this process included a deliberate search for both women and men among the informants. However, as there is a majority of women among the volunteers at Melville, my selection of informants reflects this accordingly.
My last criterion for the selection of informants concerned *experience*. I wanted informants who had conducted voluntarism for a minimum of six months. However, I soon discovered that I was dependent on whomsoever was willing to respond to my enquiry. As a consequence, two informants had only two months of experience, while the rest of my informants had worked as volunteers for more than six months.

Initially, I had sent an e-mail to all the volunteers (almost one hundred) at Melville, and presented an appeal for interviews. The response was quite disappointing as I only received three replies and one of those who replied suddenly had a change of heart. My second effort at locating informants proved more successful. This time, I went directly to several voluntary arrangements where I participated, and made contact with volunteers subsequent to the arrangements. I was able to establish a connection with the informants not only as a researcher, but as a fellow volunteer. This may have made it more difficult for the informants to decline to be interviewed, but my intentions were in fact to make the actual interview less intimidating. Approaching volunteers in person allowed me to find informants from different voluntary groups and of both genders.

My ten informants consisted of five volunteers from NPA, three volunteers from Save the Children, the voluntary coordinator for NPA and the voluntary coordinator for Save the Children. There were three men and seven women. Three of the informants were interviewed on more than one occasion. They were part of one of the following arrangements: a children’s group, a football group, Norwegian class, a youth group or a women’s group. One informant was a member of two groups, the rest were members of only one group. All of the informants who were volunteers were in their early twenties and studied the humanities or social science subjects at the university. A general view among the informants was that the voluntary activities were an opportunity to do something in practice as opposed to the theoretical approach to their studies.
1.4.4 Ethical Dilemmas: Researcher, Friend and Volunteer

Ethnography depends on an interaction between the investigator and informant that allows the investigator to become close enough to see the world through the informant’s eyes. During this attempt, the investigator/informant relation can emerge into a relation between friends. This can create ethical issues, and it is therefore important to provide the protection of those being researched. Such considerations are perhaps particularly important when those being investigated belong to a vulnerable or powerless group. My research was not based on a vulnerable group, but it is nonetheless important to maintain the dignity and privacy of those being studied.

I became a researcher of, a friend to and a co-volunteer of some of my informants, which may be confusing for the informants to deal with and separate out. Consequently, the informants might provide information that they would prefer not to have printed, even though they have been anonymized. It was therefore important that all the volunteers with whom I interacted were aware of my role as a researcher, and they were reminded of this on several occasions throughout my fieldwork. This issue was particularly vital to discuss with the volunteers in the youth group, as this interaction took place regularly, and my participation here as a volunteer was more observable than my role as a researcher. Discussing my thesis with them became a way of reminding them throughout the fieldwork that I was also there as a researcher.

As mentioned, some of the interviews were conducted without a tape-recorder, and some information was provided after an interview had been concluded, and the tape was turned off. Switching off the tape recorder and engaging in chit-chat was a sign both to me and my informant that our relation as researcher/informant had been concluded. During this time it is likely that the informants were providing information that was not meant to be part of this research. At the same time, the informants were aware of my position as a researcher, and the “additional” material did not include any sensitive information. I also made sure to confirm with the informants that the conversation after the tape recorder had been switched off could
be used. The response to this was always positive. This was also an opportunity for me to be more familiar with my informants.

I often noticed that without the tape recorder on, the informants relaxed more, and the conversational flow was less obscured by questions and answers between researcher and informant. To provide the privacy of those being studied, I made sure to remind the informants that I also was a researcher and that I intended to use the material even though the tape recorder was switched off. During these conversations I made sure that the conversation revolved around my thesis, which a few were interested in and eager to discuss. Focusing upon my thesis during these conversations, became a way to hinder any misuse of the information provided during this time.

The overall impression I was left with, was that the informants were eager to provide me with useful information, and that they almost feared that the information they provided would not be of importance in an analysis. Whenever I noticed this trait in some of the informers, I made sure to tell them how insightful their information had been. The response to this was almost always a sense of relief. This may indicate that it was important to the informants that their statements were of value to my work, which should draw one’s attention to the dilemma of the informant’s honesty and whether one can trust the material. It seems natural to question whether the informants, consciously or unconsciously, are emphasizing issues they assume will be of importance to me. The informants’ honesty is an issue that most qualitative research probably has problems with calculating. Nevertheless, it is important to be aware that an informant might want to present herself or himself in a certain way, which may have an impact on the material that is collected.
1.5 How the Paper is Structured

This thesis has been divided into six chapters and its purpose is to provide insights into the interaction between volunteers and refugees, and the construction of a voluntary role. This will be attended by first presenting some background about the field of inquiry, followed by a focus upon reasons for voluntary action in a chapter concerning motivation. How the volunteers related to the other volunteers and the organization they worked for will then be outlined, before attending to the interaction between the volunteers and the refugees. The final chapter will function as an analysis of the findings made, where the aim is to explain the volunteers’ need for maintaining both closeness and distance towards the refugees at the same time, and what kind of communication this opened for.

As an introduction to the contents of this paper, Chapter 1 drew attention to the objectives of this paper and presented reasons for conducting this study. Furthermore, a briefing on the location and the offer of activities provided an overview of the setting of this project. Additionally, a focus on methods has been attended. Chapter 2 will provide background to this thesis to place this subject into context. By attending to the situation of the refugees, this chapter will provide information on their situation, which is important to gain an understanding of how the volunteers interacted with the refugees. This then leads to a focus on the importance of arranged activities to refugees. Finally, there will be an emphasis on placing voluntarism into context by delineating its place in the Norwegian society. The importance of voluntarism as it is described by sections of society is also a part of shaping the motivation for conducting voluntary activities, which is attended to in chapter 3. An emphasis on motivation will provide information about the volunteers’ reasons for conducting voluntary work. This is also part of delineating the voluntary role.

Chapter 4 attends to the surrounding bodies and people that the volunteers relate to: the organizations and the other volunteers. It shows how the volunteers are trying to create predictability, belonging and continuity, by establishing solidarity between them. This will draw attention to the importance of establishing known and safe
structures when operating in an unknown environment. Chapter 5 looks into the interaction between the volunteers and refugees, and makes observations about the way in which the volunteers related to the refugees. The final chapter builds on the findings of this thesis, and will function as an analysis. There will be a focus upon how the relation between the volunteers and refugees can be understood through ethnic variety and differences in rules of interaction. This will culminate in an understanding of what the voluntary role consists of, and further how the volunteers interact with the refugees, which is part of delineating challenges and possibilities connected to practicing voluntary activities.
2. Background

The main emphasis of this thesis is the volunteers’ perspective when interacting with the refugees. Therefore, the focus will first and foremost be upon the group of volunteers. However, in order to gain a better understanding of this relation, it seems meaningful to take a point of departure and provide some background about the refugees and the situation they are in. In this way one may acquire a better understanding of what the volunteers were facing during their voluntary commitments, which may help explaining their motivations and actions as addressed in this dissertation. Research into refugees and reception centres tends to deal with challenges the refugees are facing. Lauritzen and Berg claim that the research of the early nineties concerned waiting, isolation, passivity, a lack of privacy, a lack of influence, and a loss of status (1999:22). Drawing attention to some of these challenges might also be of value in attempting to gain an understanding of what the volunteers were faced with in the course of their participation. Subsequent to this approach, there will be a focus upon why arranged activities might be regarded as valuable to refugees in a challenging situation. This may be regarded as important in that it allows for an understanding of what the purported aim of the activities was. Towards the end of this chapter, the role of voluntarism in Norwegian society will be addressed to place the volunteers better into context, and to provide some scientific material on the topic. Accordingly, this chapter will function as a background to the further investigation of the way the volunteers related to refugees during voluntary activities at a reception centre.

2.1 Life at Reception Centres

The refugees’ challenges that are presented in this chapter should not be regarded as something that applies for everyone at all times. People necessarily have different ways of coping and experiencing a situation, which also can change over time. It is
fair to assume that how people experience this situation can differ according to different variables. The state of their asylum application could be an important feature, or whether one has come up with ways of coping. Someone who is accompanied by family or friends can experience this way of life different from someone arriving alone. The experiences of a child can vary from an adult. A woman from Ethiopia can feel differently than a man from Chechnya. Additionally, their situation can vary according to former events, or the situation of family and friends left behind. Several other variables could also be mentioned, but the point is that one might claim that there are as many different challenges, perspectives and ways of coping to this situation, as there are refugees experiencing them. Different ways of coping with life at reception centres is thereby necessarily dependent upon the individual.

Treating these challenges from a perspective upon each individual becomes impossible and even unnecessary. In any case, it is not possible to escape the fact that this living situation can be experienced as challenging. A NOVA inspection has demonstrated that life as a refugee is characterized by poverty, temporariness, insecurity, a lack of structure and poor living arrangements (2007). Some of these challenges will be treated here, and can be regarded as important to bear in mind when approaching the relations between volunteers and refugees in the following.

2.1.1 Lack of Control

The first challenge I will attend to is how the refugees feel a lack of control over their own lives. The refugees’ situation is distinguished by the fact that the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI)\(^4\) can choose to move the refugees from reception centre to reception centre over the heads of the refugees. During the course of the asylum process in Norway, the refugees are transferred a number of times. When arriving, they are first registered by the police and then moved to a

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\(^4\) UDI handles immigration policy and immigration-related activities.
reception centre to fill out a statement and to undergo a medical examination. After a few days, the refugees are transferred to one of five transit reception centres near Oslo where they wait to be interviewed by the UDI. Normally, the refugees are to stay at such centres for three to four weeks, but many stay for several months, and some for as long as a year. Then, the refugees are transferred to a reception centre somewhere in Norway\textsuperscript{5}.

These processes not only amputate any attempt to integrate with the community, but being moved without being allowed to take part in the decision can be experienced as a violation of the refugees’ personal freedom and as a feeling of not being in control of their own lives (Sollund 1996:10). Many are unaware of how long they will have to wait for a response to their application for asylum, or whether they can expect to be sent back or remain in the country. Neither should one ignore that the refugees are in a foreign country and culture, which may amplify their perception of lacking control over their situation. The customs and people are different, knowledge about the location is slim, and the possibilities to explore this are diminished by a lack of resources – or money. The refugees are in other words deprived of any control over their present or future situation.

\subsection*{2.1.2 Faced with Passivity}

Berg et al. maintain that the refugees’ experiences of passivity can be one of the worst things about living at a reception centre (2005:36). Time is thus in many ways one of the greatest challenges for and enemy of the refugees. They have too much time on their hands, and close to nothing to fill that time with. Some may have a work permit, but without knowing the language, the culture, or how or where to apply for a job, the refugees are left immobile. Being able to fill time with activities or work-related matters often requires a network of people, a privilege only the

\textsuperscript{5} This transfer period is more complex as it varies according to the status of the refugee (Dubliners, 48-hour procedure, single minors). As this information is not directly related to this study, it will not be expanded upon. It is important to be aware that my illustrations here are brief.
fewest of the refugees have. The time that should perhaps have been spent learning about a new environment, meeting new people or learning a new language, finding a job or taking an education, is instead filled with waiting. This waiting can in many ways be regarded as attributable to the amount of money which the refugees receive while waiting.

The refugees receive an amount of money from the state each month, which is to cover all expenses, including clothes, food and medicine. A single person with a three-year old child receives NOK 2,820 a month at a transit centre, compared to NOK 4,750 at an ordinary refugee reception center (NOVA 2006)\(^6\). Normal consumption expenses in various types of households based on age and gender show that the same type of family is expected to live on NOK 8,720 a month according to Norwegian Social Research (ibid.). This is a notably higher amount than what refugees at a transit reception centre receive. In fact there is a difference of NOK 5,900 and a huge reduction in quality of life. Everything, from money to activities and living facilities, are scarcer at transit reception centres than at longer term reception centres, and it is at one of these facilities my research took place.

The refugees are free to go where they please but are mainly hindered by a lack of money. Due to the limited distribution of financial aid, few of the residents have the possibility to cover the expenses of anything but absolute necessities. All reception centres\(^7\) in Norway are governmental residencies and are an optional facility for the refugees to stay at while waiting for their application to be processed. However, if staying elsewhere, for instance with family or friends, the refugee must give up the money and other facilities granted by the state. This, one might add, is also an option that the fewest can consider, as many have neither family nor friends in the country. In a questionnaire at various refugee reception centers, 91\% of the refugees answered that a lack of money was an influence on their passivity (Berg et al 2005:36). As a consequence, the refugees were in a position with few opportunities

\(^6\) None of the rates include expenses for housing, car or kindergarten.

\(^7\) This includes transit reception centres.
and hardly any possibilities to fill their time with meaning or routines. Caught between a mixture of fear and too much time on their hands, the refugees often stay stuck in their rooms – thinking and worrying about their situation (ibid.:143). Being left immobile, as has been showed, may lead to reflection upon the situation they are in, or the experiences they have been through:

“When you feel physically safe, your mind is filled with thoughts. Then there is time to truly grasp the extent of what has happened. Periods like this can provoke great stress. This is a load that increases due to an abnormal living situation. There is little to do, and too much time” (Lauritzen and Berg 1999:67, my translation).

As the quote implies, having too much time, yet nothing to fill this time with, can cause great trauma on refugees. The refugees have many worries and passivity can result in contemplating their situation, their past, or their uncertain future which may lead to increased uncertainty and an amplification of their challenges. There is uncertainty linked to family and friends left behind, and financial uncertainty while staying at the reception centre. A network of people who have been part of the expensive and often risky operation seeking refuge involves, may have been left behind relying on reciprocation in the near future. This is a situation which involves the refugees often staying passively in their rooms due to a lack of time, money or a network. As shown, this passivity can lead to contemplation of their situation which further increases the feeling of despair. The effect of passivity may amplify already existing challenges, such as living in isolation or living with other refugees, which will be addressed next.

2.1.3 Coping with Isolation and the Other Refugees

The isolating features of reception centres can pose a challenge which inclusion in social gatherings can often ameliorate. Reception centres are often situated in far-off places, and in this way function as places which maintain a certain distance between the local community and the refugees. Sollund maintains that the isolated situation of the refugees complicates any efforts to establish contact with the community, and strengthens the impression of the reception centre being a ‘total
institution’ (1996:11). According to Goffman, an institution has a greater influence on the client’s condition than a medical illness in itself (1968). Although reception centres are not total institutions, as described by Goffman, they have many similar characteristics in that they violate personal integrity, put people under guardianship, and isolate and passivize the individual (Sollund 1996:9). As Sollund contends, the refugees are not only to cope with a foreign culture, but also the prison-like culture of the reception centre (ibid.:8). Within this isolated atmosphere in a foreign land, the refugees are more or less compelled to have dealings with the other refugees living there, even though they may be as different from one another as they are from the country in which they now find themselves.

Having close, personal relations with unfamiliar people imposed upon one may be experienced as a violation in that the refugees did not choose these relations themselves (Sollund 1996:14). Often, cultural conflicts may be underlying, and being in the same situation is not necessarily of any consolation. Many of the refugees find these temporary homes at the reception centre unsafe. Often, these refugees have just fled a country due to fearing for their life or safety, and are faced with new challenges instead of working on already existing ones. At a seminar organized by Save the Children, a teenage boy who had lived at a reception centre for many years explained that his mother had usually forbidden him to leave their room because of her fear of the other refugees living there. He continued by describing the reception centre as a place at which there were a great many disagreements:

“We live in small rooms in old and poorly built houses that were erected before World War II. While one wants to listen to music, his room-mate is trying to get some sleep. People keep different hours which can result in arguments among the refugees. They basically have nothing to do! They spend too much time being bored. To be honest, few are psychologically healthy, because people are being exposed to psychological pressure and have problems falling asleep.”

As shown from this quote, relating day and night to the others living at the reception centre can be challenging. Many refugees, especially those in transit, have to share a room with one or several others. Additionally, bathrooms, kitchens and public rooms are shared. The modest and isolated living facilities at the reception centre
may thus be perceived as a great challenge. As Sollund maintains, refugees in a
difficult situation do not necessarily become kinder, gain a greater sense of
solidarity or become more anti-racist from living closely with others who are also in
a difficult situation (1996:14). Being exposed to and having others’ difficulties
imposed on one may instead function as a constant reminder of the situation the
refugees are in.

2.1.4 Loss of Identity

The situation of the refugees can include a change in or a loss of identity. In the
situation they are in, the refugees have little or no chance to reciprocate or be of use.
They are fed and housed by the State, while being instructed not to give anything in
return (Eriksen 2007:15). Without work or a chance to take part in activities useful
to the community, the refugees have few opportunities to try and establish some
structure while they wait. “They are, it could be argued, taught how to lose their
self-esteem sufficiently to become professional welfare clients” (ibid.). What used
to determine the refugees’ identity through school, work, activities, being a sister or
an intellectual, etc, is now reduced; “[He/] she is a refugee” (ibid.:21). As Eriksen
here points out, the refugees are no longer in a position where they can confirm
their identity through actions or activities.

What she or he does, or rather does not get to do, confirms a new identity as a
refugee and as a client (Eriksen 2007:22). This change of identity is confirmed by
being generalized as refugees by the community, which can be further strengthened
by difficulties in communicating related to language barriers. This can therefore be
considered a situation that entails a dramatic change in the accustomed ways of
coping with the everyday. This loss of identity through the lack of opportunities to
act can also point to an absence of an everyday life as the refugees would recognize
it. Routines, activities, work or school, which used to fill the daily schedule, may be
considered as temporarily lost. Instead, they are left in a waiting room for their life
to continue, where an everyday life is absent (Gullestad 2002:18). As Gullestad further explains:

“What happens when you are waiting for an everyday life, something you have yearned for, something safe? Like an asylum seeker at a reception center. The way of life can be described roughly as a limbo of some sort, filled with insecurity” (ibid. my translation).

As the quote implies, the situation of the refugees may include an absence of an everyday life with few fixed points or routines to act in accordance with. Therefore, one of the greatest challenges the refugees face is too much time, and little to fill that time with. The refugees have no control over their lives, and they are furthermore unaware of how long the waiting will be. The insecurity this entails can cause great challenges for both adults and children, and may include a change in the role of the individual (Sollund 1996:21).

As presented so far, living at a reception centre can be hard both financially and socially. This condition adds to the refugees’ already difficult life situation of having had to flee their country to enter an unfamiliar new country. Arriving at a host community, refugees tend to be perceived, however unjustly, as posing a threat. Consequently, there is a barrier between the newly arrived and the members of the community which is difficult, or even impossible to overcome, without interacting with one another. Such interaction might prove valuable to prevent a “clientification⁸” of residents at reception centres, who to a large extent are left immobile with nothing to do.

To be left immobile with nothing to do can describe the situation of the approximately 180 refugees that live at Melville reception centre on the outskirts of Oslo. The refugees’ lives can to a large extent be viewed as temporarily put on hold with nothing much to do besides waiting. It is a middle station between past and future (Lauritzen and Berg 1999:15). As such, being surrounded by waiting, monotony, boredom, and fear, activities can become of great importance, according

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⁸ Clientification here points to a process where the system enclosing the refugees turns them into social welfare clients, due to an inability to reciprocate.
to Berg (1999). The implementation of activities could therefore be regarded as an important investment to create “distractions” and thus increase the welfare of these refugees.

### 2.2 The Importance of Voluntary Activities

The challenges refugees are faced with, as presented above, can be regarded as a main reason why humanitarian organizations arrange voluntary activities, and recruit volunteers to carry them out. They are also an important motivation why individuals choose to engage in voluntary activities. As a refugee, being allowed to focus on matters other than their current situation, and participate in something positive and enriching can have an immense effect (Lauritzen and Berg 1999:15). This is also acknowledged by and reflected in the work of the organizations.

Apart from the activities arranged by organizations and volunteers, each reception centre tries to maintain a certain level of activities for the refugees. However, due to a lack of time and resources, and too much work to do for the employees, these activities are minimal and rarely enough, and they vary from each reception centre. Swimming once every week is one such activity arranged by the employees at Melville, rather than by the volunteers. Refugee children can use a playroom that is open four times a week and every other weekend. The long-term residents up to thirteen years of age, who stay for more than three months, are offered educational facilities. Additionally, the refugees have access to four computers with internet, a TV-room, table tennis, a few board games and books in several languages.

Though there are certain ways to keep activated without assistance from others, the general impression from conversations with employees and volunteers is that the refugees mostly remain in their rooms unless someone from the outside, such as the volunteers, initiates activities for them to participate in. In 2004, the few activities already on offer at reception centres were additionally cut back when the government decided to drop educational lessons in the Norwegian language for
those still waiting for residence permits. The influence of organizations that recognize the demand for activities and recruit volunteers can thus be regarded as imperative within this context.

“Several [of the refugees] stated that they felt as though they had no reason to get up and nothing that structured the day” (Berg et al. 2005:37, *my translation*). The days go by reflecting on what has happened, worrying about their family and loved ones, and worrying about the uncertain future (ibid.:143). Passivity, as presented above, can contribute to psychological problems and strengthen the feeling that one’s life has been put on hold. Taking part in activities can here be experienced as an escape from a situation as the mind and body is allowed to occupy itself with other things. Activities and social encounters can furthermore be considered a part of shaping the meanings people give their lives, in addition to work, family and religion, and so on. This is maintained by Eriksen who claims that; “practically none of the humans’ inherited abilities and talents gets the opportunity to self-develop without stimulation from outside and both-way-communication” (2004:39). As mentioned, living at a reception centre may involve a loss of identity. Taking part in activities can ease this situation as it allows the individual to act out other sides of him- or herself besides being a refugee:

“Through activities, the refugees can enter roles other than that of “the refugee” and get the chance to reveal other things about them. For two kids observing their parents gradually starting to break down, from among other things being deprived of their former status and roles, the opportunity of experiencing their parents as active can be of great value” (Berg et al. 2005:143, *my translation*).

Work-related activities such as a job, school, or courses can function as preventive, and can improve the mental health of these refugees. Physical activities can provide a social network and possibilities to experience that one is able to manage, or be in charge of, the situation. Improving one’s physical health and being active can also influence one’s mental health (Berg et al. 2005:144). Activities can help in different forms and to different degrees to normalize the lives of the refugees. However, what is experienced as meaningful to one individual may not be regarded as meaningful to another. What someone experiences as *meaningful* activities can vary according to age, gender, physical and mental health, preferences, former experiences and
present situation (Berg et al. 2005:144). People come from different life situations, with interests that differ accordingly. Being able to work can for instance be experienced as particularly meaningful to many adults. Through work, one is able to feel useful, in addition to its direct progressive effect with regards to integration within society, and the possibility of creating professional and social networks (Berg et al 2005:144-5).

A nineteen-year old man who had spent the past four years at a reception centre proposed that there should be a factory next to every reception centre. This factory could use the labour of the refugees, which would enable them to be of use, improve integration, and be of value to society at large. Such arrangements that take place outside of the reception centre may furthermore involve a breathing space from the reception centre (Berg et al. 2005:145). Activities at the reception centre can also be of importance, as these may help create greater solidarity among the refugees. The milieu among the refugees can be improved and expanded into more of a fellowship that again can open up for more activities and social gatherings within it. Therefore, interaction within the residence can contribute to a reduction of internal conflicts (ibid.).

Voluntary activities can be indispensable while living at a reception centre. This was also confirmed by my informants while participating in the voluntary activities with the refugees. Often, my informants were reminded that their presence and efforts were greatly appreciated. This was shown through invitations and requests from the refugees, who often were eager to extend their relation, and make the volunteers return, for instance, the next day. Margrethe, a volunteer in a children’s group, explained how she experienced that the arranged activities proved to be valuable to the children, by drawing a comparison with her earlier experiences of working at a primary school. At the primary school, the children ran happily home when it was time to leave. In the children’s group at the reception centre on the other hand, none of the children wanted to go when the voluntary arrangement was

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9 From the seminar “Krafttak for mottak” initiated by Save the Children, May 2007.
over. Instead, the children could become difficult and stubborn, and tried as best they could to make the activities last longer.

While the importance of arranged activities is not recognized in the actions of the State, which decreased what was on offer, humanitarian organizations across Norway recruit volunteers who want to be a part of improving the situation for these refugees. As this voluntary work is not rewarded financially, there must be other values linked to being a volunteer. Such values afforded to the individual and the position of voluntary work in the Norwegian society will be addressed in the following.

2.3 Voluntarism in Norway

Voluntary work at reception centres is the basis of this paper. But what does voluntary work consist of and mean? Similar to paid work, voluntarism is a productive activity and it has features similar to paid work. There is a market for voluntary work, much like the market for paid labour (Wilson and Musick 1997:695). One definition of voluntarism is that individuals give their time freely for the benefit of others (ibid.). Voluntary work may also be an arena that includes the creation of social networks as a form of “social capital” through the establishment of social ties, which “supply information, foster trust, make contacts, provide support, set guidelines, and create obligations” (ibid.). It can be a way of advancing a career, either within the organization one works for, or as something to improve a CV.

Voluntarism can include both self-oriented and community-oriented types of participation. Øyvind Andresen paints a picture of a dual function of organizations: a “governmental” function referring to the influence on society, and an “individual” function with a focus on the individual (1999:9). For the individual, voluntarism may ascribe certain qualities through implications of being a good and decent person (Wilson and Musick 1997:695). Through voluntary work, an individual can
therefore act out the values which he or she wants to possess. Additionally, by showing initiative, vitality, and humanity, voluntary work suggests a commitment to society. The following will address these two functions of voluntarism, with a focus on the implications for society, and subsequently for the individual.

2.3.1 Position in Society

One way of categorizing society is by separating the private sector, the public sector and the voluntary sector. The private and public sectors are alike in that they share the objective of maximizing some measure of utility to the owners while satisfying constraints on demands (Revelle et al. 1970:692). The voluntary or the third sector, which includes humanitarian organizations such as Save the Children and NPA, maintains its goals are other than profits (Straand and Festervoll 2003:25). The voluntary sector can also be described as “the ideal sector” or “civil society”, and consists of many individuals with the ability to take initiative and bear practical responsibility (ibid.).

In Norway, “voluntarism” and “voluntary sector” are concepts without a long tradition either in language or in the public consciousness (Straand and Festervoll 2003:7). Concepts like “the voluntary sector” and “voluntary work” have been borrowed from research and reports from outside Scandinavia, particularly the US and Europe (ibid.). Nevertheless, voluntary organizations have long traditions in Norway, and these can be traced back to the 1870s when the building of the modern nation and democracy were taking place (ibid.:9). Today, approximately half of the Norwegian population is committed to voluntary work, equivalent to 115,000 man-labour years\textsuperscript{10}. 2,480,000 Norwegians are registered in a range of voluntary contexts.

\textsuperscript{10} 03/2007 www.frivillighetnorge.no
Membership of an organization is one type of voluntarism, while another means to conduct voluntarism is through action and participation. Figures from Statistics Norway indicate that active members of *solidarity and human-rights based* organizations constitute only 1% of the population (SSB 2006). Voluntary activities at reception centres that organize meetings between local Norwegians and refugees are part of this 1%. This is an effort to further integration and to contribute with activities to improve the life situation of the refugees. Being part of activities and experiencing encounters that are not linked to an asylum application is believed to help the refugees create a distance from tough situations and may even make the waiting time seem shorter.

“(…) Participation in voluntary associations has been regarded by many as the fundamental sign of pluralism, civic engagement and civic-mindedness” (Wollebæk 2000:6). Evidence of the highly recognized work of volunteers are the year of 2001 which was declared the *International Year of the Volunteer*, and 5 December that is called the *International Volunteer Day*, both designated by the United Nations. *The United Kingdom Year of the Volunteer* in 2005 and Australia’s *National Volunteer Week* are further verification of the appreciation of voluntary work.

Voluntary work has become a well established and recognized part of society with a distinctive status. The voluntary sector provides an important range of values to society, and this may be of important benefit to the democratic model. This sector connects people that are committed to several groups of interests, and together they function as representatives of diversity. Voluntarism can be viewed as contributing to open-mindedness, tolerance and understanding, which can transcend the cultural foundation of society. Straand and Festervoll argue that voluntarism is a provider of solidarity, understanding and obligation as it offers an opportunity for responsibility, participation and control, in addition to reducing illnesses to those which voluntarism is directed at (2003:29).

If the same work were conducted as a part of a salaried position, it would be at the expense of quality and be much more expensive to manage. Also, one might suggest that people would miss out on the opportunity to conduct *meaningful* work,
which could be regarded as a creator of a commitment that enriches society, both locally and on a wider scale. Organizations can connect people in a value-based fellowship, provide practice in mutual acts of decision-making, carry out important social values, and maintain the standards of society and an active cultural life (Straand and Festervoll 2003:29). The members can be provided with lifelong experiences with an opportunity to improve their knowledge and skills. Important welfare duties can be solved and the members are given the possibility to influence in multiple places (ibid.). This leads to the focus upon the individual, which will be attended to in the following section.

2.3.2 Implications for the Individual

The status of voluntary work is valued for its humanistic and empathetic values which reflect on the individual who chooses this particular path. A person who volunteers at a reception centre may thus be interpreted as a possessor of these values. Not only from conversations with the many volunteers, but also when talking to outsiders, it becomes apparent that there is a certain collective understanding associated with a person who conducts voluntary work at a reception centre. None of my informants had any difficulty addressing questions about what kind of values the volunteers should and did in fact possess. Some of the qualities mentioned during interviews, which described what a volunteer is and should be, included: patient, involved in society, tolerant, attentive, showing humility, decency, being respectful, dedicated and creative. Martin, a volunteer in a football group and in a Norwegian class declared that:

“If you sign up as a volunteer, you have sort of agreed to give of yourself and be open, and talk to people...You are supposed to create relations that are not so evident to everyone...and there are those who find this hard and who do not fit into voluntary work.”

As shown from the quote, Martin recognized certain character traits which he believed a person who volunteered possessed. He further included a separation between those who were “fit” to carry this type of work out, and those who were
not. As such, he suggested that a person needed certain character traits, as stated above, in order to volunteer. Furthermore, Martin maintained that the creation of certain relations necessarily followed from this work. Human relations within a specific context, like voluntary work, can additionally lead to the establishment of social structures. Through voluntary work people can be enabled to connect with each other, build trust and express values. It can be debated whether such specific social structures build exclusion rather than contributing to a stronger civil society. Nevertheless, voluntarism in today’s Norwegian society can produce structures of interest where individuals come together and bond through a mutual objective. As such, voluntarism could be a platform for the establishment of networks.

A few of my informants maintained that their relations to other volunteers were essential for their commitment to voluntary work. The social importance of establishing a group of volunteers was emphasized by all my informants, with only one exception. Markus, a volunteer in a Norwegian class, found the positive side of being able to conduct voluntary work was “not having to be super-sociable or extremely committed to society in general”. However, he was also the only one considering giving up his voluntary commitment, as he regarded the work as monotonous. It could be suggested that his desire to quit and his lack of social features were connected, and that his desire to quit was partly due to a lack of social features, indicating that the social features could be regarded as an important attribute. These social features also have another function. Working together around a shared objective makes the volunteers’ tasks easier, as each person’s responsibilities are divided between the members of a group. Such cooperation is maintained by Putnam to be important both with regards to the individual and to society:

“People who have active and trusting connections to others (...) develop or maintain character traits that are good for the rest of society. Joiners become more tolerant, less cynical, and more empathetic to the misfortunes of others.” (2000:289-290).

As shown so far, voluntary work has distinct implications for the individual and for society. Social relations through voluntary work have the potential to benefit not only individuals, but also the rest of society. Voluntary work becomes a means to
act as resourceful individuals, and also contributes to the establishment of trust between individuals: “Trust between individuals (…) becomes trust between strangers and trust of a broad fabric of social institutions; ultimately, it becomes a shared set of values, virtues, and expectations within society as a whole” (Beem 1999:20). The voluntary sector can in other words provide potential resources and qualities through a network of relationships.11

2.4 Concluding Remarks

This outline of the refugees’ situation which points to the importance of implementing activities, and the implications of voluntarism for the individual and society, together constitute a background for the continuation of this dissertation. Refugees living at reception centres are faced with challenges which are partly attributable to there being few alternatives for them to do anything useful and there being little with which to fill their time on an everyday basis. Being deprived of money and a social network, while facing a foreign country and language, often led the refugees to remaining passively in their rooms. Here, there were few opportunities apart from the activities arranged by volunteers and some by the centre to participate in activities and few opportunities through which to confirm their identities by other means. Surrounded by others in a similar situation, but with different backgrounds, did not necessarily relieve the tension of their situation. Meanwhile, control over their lives was left in the hands of people who, to the refugees, were more or less strangers. Not knowing how long this situation would last, or the outcome of the application to the government for asylum, could lead to additional insecurity for the refugees. Taking part in arrangements could function as a diversion from the challenges the refugees faced. Participation could allow them

11 Such networks of relationships can be referred to as social capital, pointing to “(…) features of social life – networks, norms, and trust – that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives” (Putnam 1995:64-5). It could have been interesting to further elaborate on this. However, the subject of social capital is vast, in addition to being on the side of the main focus here. Still, it is important to mention social capital as it can be connected with voluntary work and implications on the individual.
to experience something positive and detached from their habitual lives. Such voluntary arrangements could additionally have implications on the individuals arranging them, and incorporate certain values on society. What motivated individuals to carry out voluntary activities, however, were not due to any effect on society. What did in fact motivate the volunteers to perform voluntary work will be addressed in the next chapter.
3. The Importance of Motivation


The field of motivation is a complex phenomenon in which several characteristics interplay and therefore become relevant. It not only includes a pragmatic rationality, but can contain a whole range of emotional terms, such as “need, fear, desire, and others – that must surely be part of motivation (Ortner 1984:151). Motivations are furthermore not always easy observable, but can be understood through the reasons for the actions. Therefore, an examination of motivation may indicate the premises for the way the volunteers interact with the refugees. An insight into motivation may help explain the volunteers’ expectations from their commitment, which could be an important variable in the attempt to understand the relation created between the actors. In the attempt to delineate my informants’ motivation, I did not only take my point of departure in their responses when they were asked directly. By searching for what my informants found to be valuable and rewarding, without having presented this as motivating features, it became possible to further understand what my informants found inspiring and motivational.

This chapter will deal with some of the motivations my informants emphasized for practicing voluntary activities. However, as Ortner maintained in the quote, this is a vast subject which it would be impossible to cover exhaustively. By focusing upon what seemed to be of the most importance to my informants, the following will delineate at least some of their motivations for carrying out voluntary work at the reception centre. First, I will attend to the important aspect of wanting to help others, which may also provide the individual with certain inner values. This will lead to a discussion why my informants were participating which derived from a focus on the welfare of the refugees, rather than from selfish motivations. Here, my informants showed a concern for the importance of partaking in this commitment.
based on what they considered to be the ‘right’ motivations. Finally, there will be an emphasis on the exciting features linked to entering a different context.

3.1 Inner Rewards

Reasons to volunteer can be complex, vary from individual to individual, and change during the course of the participation. With ambitions to create close relations to the refugees, many of my informants suggested that their participation was of mutual value to all participants. Several of my informants maintained that an important motivation for their voluntary work was to help people in a less fortunate situation without ruling out the fact that they also received much in return. The refugees were considered by many of my informants as a group in society which was in the most need of assistance. Focusing upon this group was therefore regarded by my informants as more important than any assistance they could have provided elsewhere. This motivation, which was partly based on a desire to contribute to people experiencing hardship, means that their voluntary participation first of all was connected to intrinsic value. In other words, the volunteers could experience that their participation was valuable in itself, and this provided the volunteers with an inner reward. The act, then, becomes a goal in itself, and can function as a provider of meaning. Such inner rewards have been highlighted by practically each and every of my informants as an important source of motivation. They expressed a desire to make a difference in someone else’s life and considered voluntary work to be rewarding and valuable, as maintained first by Markus – a volunteer in a Norwegian class – and then by Margrethe, who worked in a children’s group:

“I simply wanted the feeling of doing something good.”

“It’s very rewarding and gives me lots of positive energy.”

As these quotes imply, being able to be of use and contribute to increasing the welfare to others was experienced as a privilege. Being able to be of use to others
was mentioned several times as valuable to my informants. In line with what the majority of my informants expressed, this can thus be regarded as one of the main motivations to practice voluntary activities. Being of value to the refugees through voluntary activities was a motivation which everyone, with one exception, revealed to have. Experiencing that the refugees with whom they interacted were faced with certain challenges seemed to add to this feeling that their participation had meaning. How the activities extracted meaning can be exemplified by a volunteer who, despite having faced a plethora of challenges during participation, did not want to consider quitting. Instead, her voluntary work seemed to increase in value, as will be shown in the following.

The informant in question revealed that her last visit to Melville had been particularly challenging. On this day, the police had arrived at the reception centre looking for a man with a knife, she had overheard a man receiving a refusal to his application to the government for asylum, and a third incident concerned a small child who, left without supervision, was crying looking for her mother. Monja, who experienced this, clearly had a hard time retelling all these incidents, and found each of these incidents difficult. At the end of that day, she had ended up crying, and was frustrated about the tough situation of the refugees. The point of this story was what Monja revealed after the story had been told:

“…I think we give a lot, but at times everything seems so hopeless. There are so many fates in need of so much more. It feels like so little, giving just two hours of your time every other week. But I am sure it means a lot to those involved. I think perhaps that it means more than we can comprehend.”

Here, Monja concluded by holding onto an aspiration that her participation through the voluntary activities provided something useful for the refugees. Despite some of the challenges which she faced, Monja did not wish to quit. Rather, it seemed to further convince her of the importance of continuing being of assistance to the refugees. It could seem here that Monja was further motivated by experiencing that there was a need to provide help to the refugees. As the quote disclosed, she chose to hang on to her confidence of being of use and that the activities added something of value to the refugees. Her participation thus became valuable also to her. Inner
rewards can here be regarded as an important aspect to continuing carrying out voluntary activities. Some of these inner rewards which a few informants mentioned were connected to *ethical* and *idealistic* motivations.

A few of my informants expressed that their participation was motivated by a desire to “give something back”. One of these informants maintained that she regarded her life situation to be fortunate. From travelling and experiencing poverty elsewhere, she had begun to reflect upon her life, and found that she did not think she had earned the things afforded to her in life, leading her to become a volunteer. In other words, this describes an ethical motivation involving my informant considering her voluntary participation to be the *right* thing to do. It can also be regarded as closely interlinked with certain idealistic views. Among such volunteers was Madeleine, who was a volunteer in a Norwegian class:

> “I like being part of making a contribution! It is important to help out, because in my life, I have something of a “rich-girl complex”. I have travelled some, and seen a great deal of misery, and lived with people here and there who are not as fortunate as Norwegians are. I am just an ordinary Norwegian who never really had to work particularly hard for anything, but still I feel like I have *everything*…without necessarily feeling like I’ve earned it. So I want to give something back to the world, in a way.”

The quote above implies that Madeleine felt obliged to “make up for” being in what she regarded as a fortunate situation as a Norwegian. Guilt also proved to be present when, as Madeleine said above, she felt that she had not earned the benefits she had been granted in life. She was not the only informant expressing the same line of motives. Quite a few made the same comparison. According to these informants, they furthermore claimed to recognize the differences in society and wished to even out social indifferences. This suggests that they recognized their participation as a duty, and one informant maintained that “*I think every Norwegian should become volunteers and care about other human beings.*” Such idealistic ideas and motivations are frequently mentioned as characteristics of voluntarism, according to Wollebæk, Selle and Lorentzen (2000:124). They further maintain that it is assumed and practically taken for granted that taking part in the work of voluntary organizations springs from a desire to carry out such *ideal* values (ibid.).
The inner rewards granted by the feeling of being useful through creating positive experiences to the refugees can be considered as the strongest motive, as being useful was the aspect most frequently mentioned and reflected on by almost every informant. Furthermore, it has been showed that idealistic and ethical motivations were also present in the motives of my informants. This suggests that the feeling afforded when being useful to someone, and the feeling extracted consequentially to this – as some of my informants put it – to “even out social indifference” - were important parts of my informants’ motives. Although these same informants overall commented on the positive aspects which derived from actually interacting with the refugees, the volunteers were not wholly reliant upon the outcome of this interaction with the refugees to continue their voluntary participation. Receiving inner rewards from interacting with the refugees must here be considered an important aspect to their participation. The following will address the reactions of my informants, and their views on, the possibility of volunteering based on certain selfish motivations. I believe this aspect is important to address, because it was a subject which several informants felt strongly about. It can thus reveal their views of what their voluntary work represented to them.

3.2 Admitting to Outer Rewards

When addressing during interviews what type of rewards my informants could receive, most of these rewards referred to a line of inner rewards as showed above. These rewards were sometimes gained when the volunteers observed that their participation and voluntary work was useful to the refugees. When discussing other motivations, a few informants also revealed that they were motivated by learning and experiencing more about voluntary work in general, and the work of the organization, as this corresponded to their own interests. It was also something they could imagine continuing with in the future as a paid job. However, only one informant maintained that his voluntary work was a definite career move. As a
motivation, this proved to be the most “extreme” example in line with specific outer rewards as expressed by my informants.

The informant in question revealed quite openly that his voluntary commitment was only a means to gain a foothold within the organization. Furthermore, he was the only one who expressed a desire to quit, as he found his voluntary commitment boring. His main, and it seemed only, motivation was a hope that the organization would recognize his work, and that they could provide him with a paid job opportunity in the near future. If nothing else, he hoped his voluntary work could be valuable when applying for a job. According to him, his participation was a path into working life, as he thought his education from the university could not provide him with the same. The difference between him and the rest of my informants was that while he acted based on a strategy and as a means to an end, my other informants maintained they were volunteering out of an interest in this particular work, which again provided inner rewards. Of interest in this connection were the responses of a few of my informants when asked about the possibility of being motivated to pursue a career.

When addressing this particular topic, some informants practically regarded the suggestion as an insult. One informant attempted to refute even the possibility of conducting voluntary work, or at least continuing with it for a longish period of time, based on what she described as a selfish motivation. While the response of all of my informants was not equally vigorous, the subject was of great interest to many of them. One general perception seemed to be that being motivated by furthering a career could only be one small part of a range of motivational sources. Being interested only in a career was presumed not to be enough in the long run. Furthermore, this did not seem to be an acceptable motivation to these informants. They had a great interest in this subject and it could seem that it was important to them that partaking in voluntary activities needed to be motivated by the right reasons, as will be addressed below.
3.3 Participating for the Right Reasons

Few of my informants felt it likely that someone could take an interest in conducting voluntary activities at the reception centre, unless motivated by the “right” reasons. Being motivated by a career was, as shown above, not considered acceptable by most of my informants. Neither was it believed that such motivations in themselves were motivating enough. This section will pursue why this subject was of such importance.

One informant, who was particularly sceptical towards any selfish motivations, suggested that those with selfish interests should not be allowed to be volunteers. She further questioned whether it was at all possible to be a volunteer completely based on selfish motives “when being surrounded by all those fates” at the reception centre. Another informant was equally concerned with the issue and maintained that; “… unless one is emotionally cold, it would be impossible to carry out voluntary work at reception centres with a career move as the only motivation”. As these quotes imply, it was believed that those who might have self-interests to begin with would necessarily experience that their motivations changed during the voluntary activities, due to what was regarded as the emotionally charged atmosphere of the reception centre.

From interviews with several of my informants it soon became evident that the notion of pursuing a career was regarded as an unacceptable attitude by several of my informants. Even the only informant who said he specifically wanted to establish a network within the organization and improve his résumé revealed that this attitude was unpopular. After he had mentioned a career move as a motivation to me, he quickly added that he also had chosen to become a volunteer to help others. Though it is possible that he meant it, I got the impression from the interview that he only added this perspective because he found the subject rather delicate. This assumption from my side was further strengthened when he admitted that he wanted to quit his voluntary commitment due to the difficulties in obtaining contact with members of the organization.
Being motivated by direct or outer self-interests was clearly thought less of by the volunteers. Martin, who was a volunteer in a football group, also emphasized the importance of being motivated and volunteering for the right reasons. He maintained that volunteers should be motivated by a desire to help the refugees. In Martin’s opinion it was clearly important that the volunteers were dedicated to their work and the situation of the refugees. A part of this motivation should, in his opinion, include a sincere interest in being of assistance to the refugees through close relations. As Martin further maintained: “…if we get to know them better and they get to know us better, then maybe their situation will become a little easier for them to endure.” This draws attention to the way my informants considered the importance of focusing upon the refugees, and keeping the refugees’ situation fresh in mind as a main motivation for conducting voluntary activities.

The underlying motivation was a matter several of my informants took a great interest in and were very concerned with. Some of my informants suggested that it was better if people refrained from becoming volunteers if they volunteered for the wrong reasons. An interesting point came from Monja from a children’s group who was convinced that it would be impossible to continue to do voluntary work with only self-interests as motivation. In fact, she was confident that the voluntary work itself would generate a compassion towards the situation of the refugees, and that the motivation would modify itself to include more altruistic features. She was also convinced that if this did not occur, the volunteer in question would find that his or her self-interests were not sufficient to continue working as a volunteer. In other words, Monja maintained that this voluntary work would only be of interest to those who participated for what she considered to be the right reasons.

As has been presented here, most of my informants maintained that the situation of the refugees, and concern about their welfare, should be part of a volunteer’s motivation in this setting. It was presumed that it would be impossible to continue working as a volunteer with only self-interests at heart. Furthermore, it was suggested that a person with self-interests to begin with, would experience an alteration in their motivation when meeting with the refugees and their situation.
This presumes that my informants imagined that a person with only self-interests at heart would not manage the voluntary work, and therefore quit. From this line of thought, it might seem that the inner values from their participation are of great value to my informants. Additionally, it seemed that the strange or different aspects connected to refugees and reception centres were found to be exciting, as will be demonstrated below.

### 3.4 Seeking out the Different

The final motivation which will be addressed concerns a motivation based on seeking out what some of my informants referred to as the ‘mysterious’ aspect to the reception centre. The focus upon this motivation does not exclude the presence of other motivational implications. As maintained at the beginning of this chapter, what motivates people can include a variety of different aspects simultaneously. Attending to this aspect of their voluntary commitment became relevant as my informants on several occasions maintained a special interest in the refugees based on what was regarded as unusual.

The reception centre and the refugees seemed to represent different and unusual elements as opposed to what my informants were usually faced with. By becoming a volunteer, the opportunity thus arrived to seek out something unfamiliar, which proved to extract meaning and was a part of my informants’ motivation. These informants revealed that they were motivated to explore a situation far from their own reality or points of reference. Some of my informants explained this as a desire to initiate change in their own character. This suggests that they assumed the refugees to possess other values. When making contact with refugees, several of my informants regarded this as an opportunity to seek out something uncertain, exciting, and different.

Working in a football group and teaching Norwegian, Martin claimed to be motivated by an urge to change or challenge himself by interacting with people he
viewed as different. He further explained that this was an opportunity to face his prejudices in the meeting with “what was different” – which he might not even have been aware of – in an effort to become more open to people with different backgrounds. In other words, Martin expected a certain character change from experiencing peoples’ situations and lifestyles that did not correspond to his own. This may also point to the way he expected people from this situation to provide him with other values in life.

Mia, a volunteer in a youth group found the “different” aspects connected to the reception centre exciting, and referred to it as a “forbidden area” and a “hidden society”. She did not conceal the fact that she found this element about her participation exhilarating. She revealed herself to be motivated by the foreign aspect of the reception centre, but was even more motivated by having the chance to meet people from different parts of the world. While she demonstrated that this aspect was a part of her motivation, Mia also found that these differences could at times be experienced as difficult or challenging due to the way in which she observed the differences between her lifestyle and that of the refugees. It may seem that part of this inspiration could be traced to the actual differences, or expectations of difference in the refugees.

The strange or unknown elements seemed to function as an attraction to some of my informants. Following this line of thought, it could seem that a part of this motivation stemmed from a desire to create unpredictability. Exploring something unknown, which here refers to the reception centre and the refugees living there, could be regarded as an exciting feature to their participation. As maintained by Eriksen, sometimes insecurity represents opportunities, while risk can extract something exciting (2006:11). If what is unknown represents insecurity or risk, then Eriksen’s comment may apply to the way some of my informants were looking for opportunities and excitement from their voluntary commitment.
3.5 Concluding Remarks

At the beginning of this chapter, Ortner introduced motivation as a field which can include a range of variables, including emotional terms. These phenomena of motivation can rarely be regarded as measurable, and are not always directly observable. Therefore, one can hardly suggest that the motivations as introduced in this chapter were my informants’ only motivations, or that they applied to everyone all the time. Reasons for action may alternate, and may be expected to include certain variations between individuals. In this chapter, I have attempted to address motivating features that were reiterated by my informants, to present as representative an image as possible to deal with this wide topic. The actions of my informants seemed to derive partly from ethical and idealistic motivations.

Volunteering based on ethical and idealistic motivations was emphasized by several of my informants. Practicing voluntary work thereby derived from a desire to take responsibility for other people’s hardship. To the volunteers, this represented a way of making up for being in what they deemed to be a fortunate situation as Norwegians. At the same time, there were expectations to receive something in return for their voluntary work. Inner rewards derived from making a difference in other people’s lives were by practically all of my informants mentioned as an important aspect to their participation. Wanting to conduct voluntary work derived partly from this desire to be useful to others, which provided the volunteers with a good feeling. Experiencing that their voluntary commitment was valuable to the refugees seemed to be an important motivational force for most of my informants. It has also been suggested that inner rewards were valuable when faced with challenges. Following this line of thought, the value of their work partly derived from an understanding that their voluntary commitment was necessary.

Reasons for my informants’ actions frequently revolved around receiving a feeling of being useful and creating something meaningful for others in a difficult situations. Therefore, it is fair to suggest that receiving inner rewards was one of my informants’ main motivations. This suggestion is further amplified by what was said by the informants when selfish impulses for participating were broached in the
interviews. It was believed by many of my informants that such motivations would not be strong enough to continue. Additionally, it was assumed that new, more unselfish motivations would appear when faced with the refugees and after having observed their situation. Thereby they discounted the possibility that anyone was participating based on selfish motivations. While inner rewards and doing something good for others were the main motives for performing a voluntary commitment, some of my informants also focused on the exciting aspect of meeting new people and encountering situations that could provide different and new experiences, ideas, and insights. Creating certain known elements could here be a way of establishing something safe, which leads on to the next chapter in which the importance of solidarity between the volunteers will be addressed.
4. Establishing Solidarity

The volunteers were entering an unknown setting, which have been showed to include an exciting element in the previous chapter. Entering a new situation may also entail an uncertainty which most people have probably experienced. Though my informants revealed that over time this uncertainty lessened, they also revealed that they were comfortable with being representatives of an organization and being part of a voluntary group. Nonetheless, the volunteers expressed that their relations with the other members of their group, and their relations with the organization were based on relatively weak bonds. Few of the volunteers met one another outside of the voluntary setting, and two of my informants had never met any representatives of their organization. Further, every volunteer maintained that the reason for volunteering was not so much to establish a network with the other volunteers, but rather to spend time with the refugees. The emphasis in this section will thus be to investigate how the volunteers related to the people around them, and how this affected their role as volunteers.

4.1 Following the Organizations’ Guidelines

The volunteers were expected to follow the guidelines presented by their organizations which aimed to protect the refugees, and provide the volunteers with some information. Thus, the volunteers were not only operating as private individuals, but were also representing an organization and needed to act accordingly. The organizations’ guidelines were a part of shaping the volunteers’ roles. Save the Children and NPA had many shared goals and aspirations in their guidelines. Therefore, these guidelines will be treated here as one set. Both the organizations and the volunteers emphasized the importance of interacting with the
refugees based on respect and a genuine interest. Listening to what the refugees had to say, and wanting to get to know them was therefore an important requirement.

Volunteers were advised to meet the refugees with mutuality and equivalence. Being a traditional helper did not fall under the category of volunteer. Rather, the volunteers were to prepare a place for communication and interaction, both between the refugees themselves, and between the volunteers and the refugees. The organizations had underlined that the volunteers were first and foremost to arrange communication between the refugees. In this way, being a volunteer also included the role of an intermediary of communication. The volunteers were to create a breathing space for the refugees, and help contribute to the inclusion of them and solidarity between them. The voluntary activities were supposed to give the refugees the chance to feel worthwhile. The interaction between volunteers and refugees was also to function as a route into Norwegian society.

Arranging activities at fixed times was regarded as important to create predictability and continuity for the refugees. The refugees, and especially the children and young people, were supposed to be able to trust the volunteers to arrive according to plan. Therefore, it was vital that the volunteers committed to continuing carrying out their work for a longish period of time. This continuity was supposed to create an element of tranquillity for and imbue confidence in the refugees. The organizations underlined the principle of making sure that it was the refugees, and not the volunteers, who initiated conversations about their pasts and other potentially difficult topics. If a refugee communicated something in confidence, it was important that the volunteers maintain discretion and guarantee the privacy of the refugees. The organizations assured this discretion by making the volunteers sign a statement in which they promised to maintain secrecy. It thus became important for the volunteers to be able to communicate their experiences with each other.
4.2 The Role of the Organizations

The volunteers I encountered had joined an organization to do voluntary activities which were part of a programme established by an organization. The voluntary organizations made these activities accessible in different ways. First, they had an agreement with the employees at the reception centre which granted the volunteers access to Melville. They also distributed an amount of money to spend on the voluntary activities, and had a contact person who linked the volunteers to the organizations. If the volunteers needed help to arrange future activities, or had other queries, there was someone specific they could contact. Several times a month, the volunteers received invitations to events where the national and international work of the organizations was on the agenda. This was also an opportunity for the two groups to interact and create a social network. The organizations were not part of the actual arranging of the activities. Thus, unless the volunteers went to meetings the organizations arranged, they rarely met the organizations’ representatives.

The organizations decided which groups to arrange, when they should be carried out and for whom. They continuously recruited new volunteers. The main responsibility for executing the voluntary activities was thus divided between the organizations and the volunteers. When volunteers were recruited, they needed, as mentioned, to sign a statement in which they agreed to maintain client confidentiality. Additionally, during the autumn of 2007, Save the Children extended this to include the need for a police attestation confirming a clean criminal record to prevent child-abusers infiltrating voluntary work. The organizations had a responsibility for the refugees, and checking who became volunteers was part of ensuring their safety.

According to a conversation with NPA’s voluntary coordinator, signing a piece of paper was also supposed to increase the volunteers’ sense of belonging to the organization by agreeing officially to cooperate with it.

The NPA had a moderate budget that the volunteers could use. Having a budget at hand was judged by my informants to be an advantage, as money was essential to be able to carry out many of the activities. The volunteers who arranged Norwegian classes for the refugees needed paper, pencils and textbooks. To arrange activities
for the youth group, the idea of which was to get out and about and away from the reception centre, money was needed for transportation, food, museums, and so on. The volunteers in the football group needed money to rent a football pitch. In other words, without money, it would have been difficult or impossible to conduct many of the activities. By presenting a budget to the organization a few days before each activity, the volunteers could be granted a certain amount of money. However, when the youth group, where I conducted participant observation, asked for money to conduct activities, the decisions to allot money appeared rather random. At one time, we received NOK 400 to go bowling, and another time we were told that we would have to do something less expensive.

Save the Children and NPA are both humanitarian organizations with an emphasis on solidarity. While the former fights for children’s rights and to make children’s voices heard worldwide, the latter had a broader set of goals. NPA’s goals are counter oppression, poverty and racism, and it worked actively to realize the vision of improving individuals’ living conditions and contributing to a more just society. Monja who worked in a children’s group chose to volunteer for Save the Children and her decision was based on an already established sense of belonging to and trust in the organization. She had been a member of Save the Children for many years, and felt that she agreed with the aspirations and goals on which that organization placed emphasis.

Margrethe who worked in another children’s group had contacted Save the Children to volunteer, but was less aware of the stance of the organization. She did not quite know why she chose this particular organization, and maintained that this was a rather random choice. Margrethe explained that she had become interested in the work of Save the Children during the course of her participation. It is thus possible that the volunteers could experience a similar transformation, as they became more involved in the organization’s work. The following will address my informants’ experiences of their relations to the organization which they represented.

12 www.norskfolkehjelp.no
4.3 Belonging to an Organization

My first impression was that the volunteers had little or no affiliation to the organization they worked through. In practice, the volunteers and the organizations operated in different arenas and had little to do with one another. Most of the contact between the two parties was carried out by e-mails. The main arena where the volunteers and members of the organizations could meet was at meetings where the aim was to present the work, issues and goals of the organizations. As maintained by NPA’s voluntary coordinator, one function of these meetings was to arrange contact between the volunteers and the organization. In conversations with volunteers, it was explained to me several times that the volunteers did not feel part of any organization – they felt as if their work were being done independently. Markus who worked in a Norwegian class, Mia, a volunteer in a youth group, and Michael who represented a football group, emphasized this separation between the volunteers and the organizations by focusing on their independent roles:

“I view all the volunteers as free agents! I am at [the organization’s] disposal every other week, and that’s that.”

“…I am not even a member of NPA. I’m just working as a volunteer on my own.”

“I don’t feel like a representative of anything, really…we’re just operating within the framework of the organization.”

Based on the statements of my informants, who seemingly had no affiliation to the organizations, I started to wonder whether this might indicate a new type of voluntarism, and whether the role of the organizations was on the verge of being diminished. To explore further the relation between the organizations and the volunteers, I took into consideration the observations that had been made. “[It] is important to get at what people do because there is so much cultural practice that is never verbalized” (Rudie 1994:28). Though a few of my informants maintained that they felt little or no affiliation to their organization, focusing on the actions of the volunteers, rather than on what they said, was important to elucidate the relation between the volunteers and the organization they worked for.
A few of my informants maintained that they felt little or no affiliation to their organizations, as expressed above. Yet I found that this did not correspond to their participation in the meetings held by the organizations. During participant observation, these meetings were mentioned as important by my informants, as they included an arena where the volunteers could be involved and clarified further the work of the organizations. Margrethe explained that the meetings functioned as a way in which to be updated about what was going on in the rest of the world, and emphasized that she was proud to “be part of” the organization’s work: “It is nice to know that I am maybe a little bit part of their work too, being a member and everything.” Despite some of the informants’ thoughts that their voluntary participation had little to do with the organization, it seemed that the volunteers still felt part of the organizations’ work.

Both Monja, who worked in a children’s group, and the voluntary coordinator for NPA, expressed the importance of solidarity between the volunteers and the organizations. They further claimed that becoming a member of the organization the volunteers worked for and having knowledge about the work of this organization helped create solidarity between the two. Courses and seminars could increase a sense of belonging between the volunteers and the organizations, as shared goals and values were communicated at them. Such meetings were the main arena where the volunteers and the organizations interacted. Monja emphasized that the meetings she attended had an impact on her sense of belonging to the organization:

“Maybe it wouldn’t have mattered if we had been free agents rather than a part of the organization. But after having been involved for a long time, and having attended regional meetings and other things with Save the Children, you get even more committed to continue voluntary work. I think most people feel a certain sense of belonging in one way or another. People connect more at the more meetings they attend. I think that is very important.”

Michael, a volunteer with the NPA: ”I’ve been to a variety of courses, one of which had an emphasis on racism in Norway, and stuff like that. It was interesting to learn a lot about the challenges which I had no idea were taking place in my own country.”

As mentioned, many of the volunteers reported that they felt little or no affiliation to the organization. In fact, a few maintained that they were operating as
independent individuals. At the same time, several of my informants appreciated the meetings which enabled an interaction between the volunteers and the organization they worked for. The various meetings were essential to make voluntary work accessible to new potential volunteers. They also functioned as a way of instructing the volunteers about the expectations and duties that accompanied working as a volunteer. Additionally, the meetings functioned as an arena where the volunteers could become included more in the work of the organization, and included as a part of the organization. The meetings provided a space for the volunteers and the organizations to interact and create a social network.

4.4 Understanding Rules and Routines

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the organizations prepared a structured setting for the volunteers to operate within, thus making their work more functional and more easily accessible. This was important in order to allow the volunteers to focus on arranging and carrying out the activities. Having a fixed schedule to relate to was something both the organizations and the volunteers found to be essential in order to make the activities run efficiently. Madeleine, who lectured in Norwegian at Melville, chose NPA’s voluntary arrangement because it seemed to be a more structured form of activity. She knew that she had fixed hours to deal with and operate within:

“It’s very nice knowing that I’m supposed to be there twice a month. But if the meetings had no structure and I was in the middle of something when I had to show up…no, I would need to have some structure.”

Routines are part of shaping the individual’s behaviour and they are also a part of determining the relation between the volunteers and the refugees. Routines can create predictability and stability, and can function as a guide for everyday actions. As mentioned by Madeleine above, she was dependent on routines in order to make her voluntary participation fit her schedule. The routines in question concerned time and place; the volunteers met at a given time at Melville to conduct the voluntary
activities. The challenge to this set of routines was however that the refugees overall rarely seemed to act in accordance with it, which partly is due to the difficulties connected to provide sufficient information to the refugees.

During the course of my fieldwork, I observed that while the volunteers were eager to establish a certain set of routines for their actions, few of the refugees who attended the activities fulfilled this desire. For instance, the volunteers could spend almost an hour gathering the refugees who were to attend an activity before the activity could although the activities took place at the same time each week. On several occasions, this was mentioned by the volunteers as a source of frustration for them. Implementing and maintaining a set of fixed routines was continuously challenged by the lack of routines in the schedule of the refugees. The frustration this entailed, caused by the fact that the refugees did not act in accordance with routines, was mentioned at meetings with the organization, as well as between the volunteers themselves. Though the volunteers were trying to fit their voluntary participation into a schedule, the refugees rarely had any schedule at all.

Other sets of rules which were observed during fieldwork consisted of certain rules of interaction. Some of these rules were based on guidelines which the organizations had presented to the volunteers, while other rules were less direct, less tangible and more concealed. These behavioural rules are about individual obligations which one imposes on oneself, and expectations about how others will relate to these. These rules of interaction will be further addressed when discussing the issue of interaction in chapter 4.

4.5 Solidarity Among the Volunteers

The voluntary context was characterized by the rather frequent turnover of individual volunteers. New volunteers entered the voluntary groups, while others quit during the course of my fieldwork. Only one of the volunteers in the group I participated in remained throughout my period of observation. Some of the
informants revealed that they did not know the names of everyone within their group. This was explained by their main concern of becoming acquainted with the refugees, rather than with the members of their group. The average volunteer participated twice a month, which meant that the volunteers did not meet that often. Therefore, I expected the solidarity within each group of volunteers to be rather weak. But despite the high turnover, practically every one of my informants emphasized the importance of establishing a sense of community within each group, and further maintained that this solidarity was very much existent. Feeling that they were a unified group seemed to be a quality appreciated by most of my informants:

Martin, a volunteer in a Norwegian class and a football group: “I think [the volunteers] are a nice group of people. I don’t know them very well, but I have studied with a few and we get along just great. But they are not the main reason why I’m here. There are times when I have to arrange the whole thing by myself… which of course I do. But obviously it’s easier, though…Being a unified group of people.”

Mia, a volunteer in a youth group: “…the fact that we are entering the reception centre united - all the volunteers in the group. We are a group of people who meet up on Wednesdays, and it is very, very nice.”

The informants above illustrate what I believe was the case with many of the volunteers at Melville. It seemed that close personal acquaintanceship between the volunteers was not a requirement for experiencing a sense of fellowship or unity. Some of my informants expressed that they did not know each other that well. Nevertheless, they sensed fellowship and unity.

Some of my informants also put some effort into establishing unity within the groups, by for instance making their meetings take place in a nice environment. One group met for an evening of planning once every five or six weeks. Surrounded by good food, some snacks and wine, they aimed to create a nice environment while planning ahead. Margrethe, who worked in a children’s group, was convinced of the importance of solidarity between volunteers:

“Solidarity is extremely important among the volunteers. I mean, it is the very foundation, I think, to make everything work out okay. It is kind of impossible to become friends with the kids if you walk around “bitching” with the other volunteers.”
As these encounters often revolved around their experiences of and thoughts about their participation, it might seem that the need for community sprang from a desire to talk about and “digest” their experiences at the reception centre. Many of the refugees were depressed and had been through horrific experiences of which some addressed towards my informants. Consequently, the volunteers often found themselves confronted by certain uncomfortable situations with the refugees, to which the volunteers did not always know how to respond. Monja, who worked in a children’s group, faced a situation that she experienced as uncomfortable:

“I remember an example when I was talking to a man from Congo. His wife and kids who I had talked to many times before had been absent for a while. I understood that something was wrong, and I felt that I had to ask...though I found it really hard to talk about. I didn’t want to talk to him, because I couldn’t bear the thought of what he would answer... At the same time, you just has to get on with it. I mean, it’s ridiculous that I don’t talk to him because I find it hard.”

Situations that entailed difficulties as described in the quote above could be experienced as tough on and challenging to the volunteers, and they often felt perplexed about how to react to them. It can thus be useful to discuss such experiences with others in the same situation. The volunteers could relate to one another knowing that they shared a point of reference and possibly had a deep interest in the same subject. Many of the volunteers revealed that there was a strong need to discuss the many situations that they encountered, and that they made use of one another in that process. These conversations could revolve around situations or conversations they had experienced with the refugees, but also thoughts about the organization and the employees at the reception centre.

The volunteers wished to establish a unity within their group to create stability in the structure and continuation of the group. However, there was also an aspiration to build relationships to develop a set of interlocutors, for and with each other. These conversations between the volunteers could be considered an important link towards establishing a solid group, and a particular voluntary role. They bonded by sharing their experiences and through mutual goals and objectives. Sharing experiences was also an important way for the volunteers to give each other advice and guidance when facing difficult situations. In that way, together the volunteers could establish
and work on ways to deal with cultural differences and the problems they faced during the course of their participation. By identifying common goals and by defending a basic set of beliefs, such as fighting for better policies and improving the life situation of refugees, collective action and a collective group were shaped and strengthened. From conversations with my informants, the treatment of refugees in Norway was something all were concerned about and wanted to improve.

Michael, a volunteer in the football group: “I wish I could tear down the images of terror around refugees many walk around with. I don’t feel that it matches reality at all.”

Margrethe, a volunteer in a children’s group: “I think everyone in Norway should become volunteers and guardians to juvenile refugees and care about other human beings.”

The contentions above were shared by many of the informants and indicate a belief that there is a unity between volunteers as the bearers of certain common values. This perception supports a self-identification as volunteers and as fighters for the rights of refugees. A mutual interest in creating a space for reflection and conversation provided for a rather strong sense of solidarity. The ties were to a large extent formed in Melville reception centre, but had their basis in meetings outside of the voluntary encounters. It could furthermore seem that the differences between the volunteers and refugees extracted an increased bond between the volunteers. This could be explained through a strong sense of fellowship among Norwegians, where it is believed that the members of this community have something in common (Longva 2003:19). The bond among the volunteers could seem to exist as a presumption of similarities which was increased in strength when faced with the presumed differences with the refugees. Through mutual experiences and goals, a specific group mentality was being formed. The volunteers were allowed to discuss their experiences which could be difficult to mention in the presence of the refugees. They met and united in a common platform based on their concern for the people at the reception centre. The actual reflections around their experiences were thus an important link to construct a united group of people with whom to work.
4.6 Concluding Remarks

In the voluntary context, the volunteers related to others than just the refugees. Cooperation between the volunteers within each voluntary group, and between the volunteers and the organization they worked for was part of the voluntary context within which my informants operated. Focusing on the welfare of the refugees proved to be the most important task for many of my informants. Nevertheless, the voluntary activities would have been difficult to implement alone, and each informant was glad to be able to unite as a group to work towards mutual objectives. Creating solidarity was thus seen as an important part of their voluntary commitment.

Establishing solidarity had also other functions and benefits. A united group of individuals enabled the volunteers to benefit from each other’s thoughts and experiences. Using each other as interlocutors became a way for my informants to communicate and digest their experiences. This proved to be important to them, as they expressed a need to talk about many of the positive, as well as the difficult, situations they had encountered. Establishing familiar and known parties to interact with, in terms of the organization and the other volunteers, was something many of my informants valued and worked towards. A united voluntary group was also important in that it could provide a “safe” setting to interact within, which will be further addressed in the subsequent chapter.
5. Outlining Social Interaction

It may be rather meaningless to regard interaction only through the actions of one individual. Instead, interaction must be understood through the reciprocity of an act made by at least one individual for another (Eriksen 1993:55). Interaction between the volunteers and refugees will be of importance to try to reach an understanding of their relations, and to attempt to unveil the potential of and limitations to these relations. As mentioned, the volunteers gave the impression of being tugged in two directions in their relations with the refugees. Though my informants expressed a desire to create close relations with the refugees, they found certain limitations to actually performing this. Their actions in fact revealed that a certain distance to the refugees was required. Determining the role of the volunteers is a meaningful approach to discover how the volunteers related to the refugees, and this will serve as a background throughout this chapter, and be focused on in the subsequent analysis in chapter 5. Locating issues of fear and safety are part of substantiating the volunteers’ reasons for experiencing the need for distance, and this will be focused upon here. As will be shown, this is not only an interaction between people with relatively weak bonds; it is also an interaction which includes cultural differences. In this regard, it will be of importance to survey the relations based on cultural differences, which can be regarded as interconnected with issues of fear and safety, distance and closeness. This will function as a point of entry and a background for a discussion of which structures of meaning are produced, with a basis in the interaction between volunteers and refugees.
5.1 Entering the Reception Centre

How people interact must be seen in relation to the context in which interactions appear. The place where the volunteers and the refugees met could influence the course of this interaction. Certain expectations and standards could be linked to both place with which and the people with whom an individual interacts. Several of my informants maintained to experience each encounter at the reception centre as a point of entry to a displaced society imprinted with isolation and with characteristics comparable to an institution. They were not the first to draw a parallel between the reception centre and an institution. As postulated in chapter 2, several researchers have made the same comparison.

One informant described the reception centres as “nothing but long corridors and doors with numbers”. There were no name tags on the doors to indicate that people lived there, and the numerous halls appeared identical. An increased sense of entering an institution can be observed through the relation between the volunteers and the employees. During participant observation, the employees were rarely visible unless entering their offices or unless they were at the reception desk at Melville. The relation between the refugees and the employees adds to the similarities with an institution. During participant observations, I encountered an employee who revealed that she rarely had time to associate with the refugees, except when it was work-related. She further emphasized that it would have been of benefit to everyone, both to the volunteers and the employees, to have extra time for “social calls”. On several occasions, the refugees had invited her for tea or dinner, but she could not remember when she had last accepted such a request, because of her work schedule. The employees and refugees remained in separate spheres where the interaction between them was based on a professional relationship. This separation between the employees and the refugees is also a characteristic that describes a total institution (Sollund 1996:13). While the employees are at work, the refugees “are just there” (ibid.). Many refugees perceive the employees as inspectors as opposed to helpers, and the conflicting interests between them might add an element of distance (ibid.:14).
One informant described the reception centre as a “small secret society, or a hidden world”. She perceived Melville as a society displaced from the rest of the world. Here, the refugees have few or no rules to abide to. As described in chapter 2, the lives of the refugees have temporarily been put on hold at the centre. They remain inside this “hidden world” where time has seemingly stopped. Mia, an informant from the youth group, admitted that she had experienced some issues of uncertainty linked to performing voluntary activities at the reception centre. She feared that the refugees might misunderstand her intentions as a volunteer, and interpret her voluntary work as charity. This was something Mia, and several of the other informants, wanted to avoid. Rather, they emphasized the importance of activities between equals. Often, the informants explained that they received just as much from interacting with the refugees, as the latter did from interacting with the volunteers. Preventing their participation from including charity seemed important to the volunteers, here expressed by Mia, who worked in the youth group:

“It is a little weird meeting and just doing stuff together at the reception centre. It is after all their territory, their homes, even if they are only temporary. And then we sort of arrive to help them, which is the same as saying “oh you poor people! But don’t worry about a thing, because now we have arrived to play with you so you can forget how terrible your lives normally are.” That is why I think it is a lot better meeting outside of Melville. There is a more neutral atmosphere and setting where we are equals more. We meet more on the premises of both parties.”

This quotation gives an impression of how essential it has been for the volunteers not to be perceived as performing a charitable act. It was important for my informants to underline that their participation was not only an effort to help the refugees; they also wanted to create relations based on equality and mutual interests. This was something that several of my informants emphasized and reiterated. Most of the voluntary activities took place at the reception centre, a place which the volunteers did not deem to be a neutral place. Though the volunteers wanted to establish a neutral place so that the interaction could proceed as smoothly as possible, they found that the reception centre had a negative function when attempting to establish this sense of community. The relations were thus framed by a given context which could influence the relations within it. The context that
surrounded the voluntary activities could be experienced as unique in its portrayal of a place that seemed to be disconnected from the rest of society.

5.2 Communication through Activities

The interaction with the refugees did not only revolve around conversation. Voluntary participation also opened up for communication about activities. By activities such as playing football, games or going bowling, the volunteers and refugees could gather around something fun, which did not necessitate much conversation. This could, with a focus on doing something that both parties found interesting, function as unifying. Martin, who worked in a football group, had in fact become a volunteer mainly to be able to play football. The cultural meetings which resulted from his participation were regarded simply as a bonus. Through the activities, it became easier to communicate, according to Martin:

“Planting the ball in the upper corner…now that’s what I call universal language! You don’t really have to say anything! Instead of me having to be in sort of a teacher position, we are all part of a gang, just playing football and having a good time.”

As Martin illustrated, the activities could become the centre of attention. He further emphasized that this communication made him realize that their cultures were not that different after all. Playing football was not requiring mutual language skills, nor any deep conversations, but became a way of placing the differences in the background rather than being the starting point for interaction. Another informant who attended the football sessions sensed that gathering around an activity could lighten the atmosphere and confound prejudices which one might not even have been aware existed. Furthermore, he suggested that this common meeting point might provide the refugees with confidence in Norwegians as well. As he commented; “there is no need to engage the entire world into the football field. We can just have fun!” In other words, the activities could become an arena where the barriers between one another lessened.
Gathering around an activity, either by doing sports, watching movies, making food or playing games, could open up for a mutual understanding of one another. As one informant pointed out, the activities could increase an understanding among them, which could benefit the refugees in their meeting with Norwegians. Conversations that might include personal information and sensitive topics often became superfluous and even unnecessary for the activities to be carried out and to gain a sense of affiliation. Activities allowed the refugees to communicate as *individuals* rather than as refugees. A few of my informants experienced the voluntary encounters as a setting where the differences were overlooked, and where there was little or no negotiation regarding cultural manners. The activities functioned as the main language of communication where solidarity across languages, age and cultural differences could be created. According to Martin, the activities were a way of experiencing that, despite cultural differences, the volunteers and refugees were in reality concerned with many similar things in life.

Although doing activities could unite them in another way than through conversations, it was after all put focus on the benefits that came out of oral communication. Through conversations, my informants became familiar with the refugees and were introduced to their stories and experiences, but the conversations also generated difficulties and challenges. Through such interaction, it became more evident how my informants related with the refugees, as well as how they defined their role as volunteers. Therefore, the following section will focus on how the volunteers related to the refugees in dialogues.

### 5.3 Interactions with the Refugees

Interaction between individuals is often linked to certain behavioural expectations. By following rules of behaviour, individuals demonstrate a respect for and recognition of themselves and others. It seems reasonable to assume that these rules of behaviour vary according to place and culture. Through manners, ways of speaking, gestures and attitudes, the individual presents what he or she wants others
to see. This may vary according to whom one interacts with, and expectations of this person’s character. As far as interaction with the refugees was concerned, a number of my informants discussed which matters they had to take into consideration when facing the situation of the refugees and their culture, and how they should modify their behaviour accordingly. Taking considerations as to a particular behaviour was partly encouraged by the guidelines of the organizations which encouraged the volunteers to avoid certain topics, as presented in chapter 3. In other words, the informants revealed themselves to be acting in accordance with certain expectations and interpretations linked to being volunteers.

The interaction between the volunteers and refugees was usually of a temporary character. A volunteer normally assisted at the reception centre twice a month for one to four hours at a time. The same refugees did not always participate each time so the voluntary context often featured new faces. Thus, the encounters between volunteers and refugees had a basis in relatively short-lived relations. Nevertheless, several of my informants maintained a good contact through their encounters with a few “regulars” in which contributed to that they were afforded the chance to become more familiar with some of the refugees. This meant that the voluntary context also gave room for closer contact between the volunteers and the refugees. At the same time, the volunteers wanted to open up the communication between the refugees themselves in order to create a sense of solidarity and a network between them.

A few informants put emphasis on the importance of avoiding addressing differences between the volunteers and refugees, as presented in the previous section. At the same time, these same informants had certain ideas linked to what the voluntary activities and this interaction should provide the refugees with. Some expressed that their function was to be at the refugees’ disposal, with a focus on the refugees, rather than on themselves. Several informants also expressed that they wanted to show humanity, and give of themselves by functioning as interlocutors for the refugees. They wanted to create relations of trust by communicating that
they participated out of their free will, and by communicating that they were interested in becoming on familiar terms with the refugees.

The volunteers expressed a sense of responsibility for the refugees with whom they had become acquainted, and were frustrated that the refugees’ situation was so poor. Practically each informant felt that these people were in need of extra care rather than insufficient care. It was obvious that though the voluntary encounters were brief, and the volunteers did not always encounter the same refugees, they were deeply concerned about their welfare, and wanted to do the best they could to enable the refugees to have a good time during the activities. However, my informants also revealed issues of uncertainty, and that their behaviour was characterized by an attempt to avoid certain situations they were unsure how to handle. This included avoiding talking much about themselves and their lives.

**Avoiding the Personal**

When interacting with the refugees, several informants revealed that they avoided certain topics. A few postulated that they were afraid to say or do the wrong thing, in fear of being misinterpreted. Several elements triggered this uncertainty. First, some admitted that they were often careful in their choice of conversation. Margrethe, a volunteer in a children’s group, revealed that she avoided talking about herself to prevent creating an unnecessary barrier based on how her life differed from those of the refugees. When confronted with questions about her life, she preferred to avoid the issue or even lie to make her life situation seem more moderate, and thus avoid what she thought might emerge as an uncomfortable situation. On one such occasion, a refugee asked her where she lived, and as Margrethe did not want to explain that she lived with her boyfriend in a nice apartment, she answered that she lived with her parents. Avoiding responding correctly could be interpreted as a way to avoid what she considered as their cultural differences between them from surfacing, as well as out of consideration to the different life situations of the actors.
Margrethe was not the only informant who chose this technique involving refraining from revealing much about one’s own life. This may be the result of several factors. First, it is a consequence of the different life situations of the two parties, which the volunteers felt amplified the differences between them and the refugees. The example of Margrethe above showed that she was unsure of whether the refugees would find her Norwegian way of living to be strange or unacceptable. Margrethe was afraid the refugees might consider living together with a man without being married inappropriate, which she took into consideration when lying and saying that she lived with her parents. Further, Margrethe continued by saying that she did not want her lifestyle to become a source of envy, and she was uncomfortable about revealing to the refugees that she had her own apartment. In other words, she refrained from discussing her life to avoid the differences between them widening. Margrethe explained her actions and said that she took into consideration that such cultural differences needed to be both respected and challenged. She also emphasized the importance of showing the refugees what was normal in Norway.

One example where Margrethe wanted to express what was normal in Norway occurred while participating in a voluntary arrangement for all the refugees at Melville. Margrethe revealed that she tried to find some middle ground which involved both respecting and challenging the refugees’ view of the world, or at least her interpretation of what their worldview might be. At this arrangement, people had started to dance. As Margrethe said, “the men danced alone, because that is a part of their culture and everything. The women danced too, but not while the men were dancing.” All the while, many of the children kept dancing regardless of this gender division. Margrethe did not want to stop dancing when only the men were on the floor, as she explicitly wanted to show that this behaviour was normal in Norway. At the same time, Margrethe made sure to dance only with the children and not with the men while they were dancing, to prevent her actions from being considered as “inappropriate”.
In light of Margrethe’s stories, it seems evident that her actions were being tugged in two directions. On the one hand, she wanted to demonstrate Norwegian customs and what was “accepted” in Norway, but even so she did not want to enter a situation which she was unsure of how to tackle or to create misunderstandings about her character. In this way, she found middle ground: she did not refrain from dancing, but neither did she dance directly with the men. She assumed that dancing with the men in this setting would have been regarded as inappropriate. As she said; “I did not want to push the limit and appear promiscuous,” which she thought might have been the outcome if she had danced directly with the men. The example above revealed how Margrethe played it safe and constantly thought her actions through while considering her observations of cultural differences. This also revealed an uncertainty about what the reactions of the refugees might have been if she had paid no attention to being surrounded by people from different cultures. The point for now through the exemplification of Margrethe is that the volunteers relate in accordance with certain behavioural considerations when interacting with the refugees.

**A Lack of Competence**

In the guidelines of the organizations, the volunteers were advised to avoid initiating conversations about the backgrounds of the refugees, as this might entail difficulties. Especially as regards children, but also when interacting with adults, the organizations emphasized the importance of avoiding such topics because the refugee might be afraid of answering something that did not coincide with his or her application for asylum. A child might worry that his or her answers or stories could affect his or her parents’ asylum application, which could cause a great deal of trauma for a child. Although the volunteers had nothing to do with the processing of the asylum cases, a refugee could have difficulties understanding this. Michael, a volunteer in a sports group, demonstrated how he chose to appear by refraining from asking the refugees questions:
“I guess I’m kind of sceptical about asking too much. I think that’s important…that this is not supposed to be therapy or an interview…I don’t ask why they’re there, or if they’re alone or stuff like that. That’s not the purpose of football. I mean, if they want to talk about it, that’s great! (…) But I never ask questions. You really need to remember that you have no idea of what has happened before!”

As this quotation shows, topics of conversation were carefully considered by the volunteers. In that connection, respect for and discretion towards the refugees was an important point to consider throughout their voluntary work. It was also clear from the volunteers I spoke to that the guidelines of the organizations had been adopted into their own frames of reference. Having to avoid certain topics of conversation had an impact on the way the volunteers related to the refugees. As Michael pointed out, he had no knowledge of the refugees’ past experiences.

Neither had he had any training or guidance about how to deal with people who had been through such hardship. Most of the volunteers had only been advised to avoid these issues. It is not my intention here to contemplate the “right” ways of interacting with these refugees. The point is to focus on the volunteers’ experiences. As Martin, an informant said:

“I rarely know how to proceed when meeting these refugees. But considering the cultural differences and all…it is unfamiliar territory. I think it is difficult with many people from so many different places who have different perceptions of what they mean by things.”

Martin here reflected on how his voluntary participation was unfamiliar territory to him, and contemplated on the difficulties connected to operating with no knowledge about the refugees and their background. My informants operated based only on a belief that there were certain cultural differences and painful experiences linked to all the refugees. This shows that the volunteers lacked the incorporation of advice in how to handle difficult situations that arises when working with refugees. Such lack of competence created insecurity with the volunteers connected to how they were to act around the refugees. The difficulty involved in lacking knowledge was solved by attempting to avoid discussing potentially difficult topics. Being confronted with difficult or unpleasant stories was experienced as challenging by my informants, who did not know how to respond. However, information or experiences that
allowed my informants to become better acquainted with the refugees could also generate curiosity, and were often considered an exciting part of being a volunteer.

**Maintaining a Distance**

On several occasions, my informants maintained that they had been placed in what they experienced as uncomfortable situations with the refugees. On most occasions, this discomfort was the result of a situation in which my informants felt that the refugees were coming too close. Considering such experiences will here be an important part of determining the informants’ perceptions of their role as volunteers, and their need for a certain distance to the refugees. This will be shown through an example from Monja, who worked in a children’s group, but the incident seems representative of similar incidents experienced by other informants.

"Once, there was a man from Iraq or something at an arrangement who approached me. He said that this voluntary arrangement was incredibly nice, and that it had been his best day so far. But then, he explained how terrible his life was, and how hard it was going around waiting for an answer that never arrived. He continued talking about how he had fled from his country, and that he could not talk to anyone at Melville, because nobody came from where he was from, and he did not trust anyone. You know, all these problems that are really hard to grasp…First of all I attend the voluntary arrangements like attending a party, to talk a little bit with everyone. So I could not just talk to him, even though that is what I did that evening, which I think he appreciated. *At the same time you become so helpless because there is nothing you can do for him. And I think it is so difficult getting to know all those things…I mean, how do you respond to that?*"

Monja revealed her discomfort with the confessional approach of the refugee, and her reaction could be attributed to several reasons. Again, this implies that the difficulties can arise from a lack of competence as to how to deal with the refugees’ challenges. Fearing to respond “incorrectly” was experienced as a challenge which the volunteers several times faced during their voluntary work. Monja expressed an uncertainty regarding how to respond to the man’s revelations, and her discomfort could stem from not knowing what would have been an accepted reaction. The interaction on display could be connected to a form of unsafe social communication for which the internal “rules” for the interaction had not been not determined (Eriksen 2007:12). As such, this social communication was accompanied by risk
Eriksen argues that safe interaction may be located at a place where there is an undebatable presence of a united ‘us’ (ibid 12). A safe interaction can be characterized by predictability implying that the actors involved are following the same patterns of interaction (ibid 12). It did not seem as the voluntary setting opened for such a common pattern of interaction.

Monja was here confronted by an *unsafe* interaction which involved her lacking knowledge of the person she was faced with, which might have been the reason for her uncertainty regarding her actions. A part of why Monja had trouble knowing how to respond to the refugee’s confessions may be linked to a lack of familiarity about the refugee. This must also be seen in light of the relatively weak bonds between Monja and this refugee, whom she had only recently met. It is likely that this confessional approach was interpreted as inappropriate by her, as she did not know the person in question, and did not even know his name. The starting point for the interaction was originally one between strangers. One reason for Monja’s discomfort could here be linked to the refugee’s attempt to initiate a close relation at a too early stage.

Monja’s interaction with the refugee as portrayed by the quote was also linked to a feeling of helplessness in that she was not in any position to help. She could do nothing but listen to this man who revealed he was beset by a range of difficulties, which Monja had no idea how to handle or respond to. Attempting to help would here have implied greater obligation and the use of additional time. Even so, Monja revealed that a way of providing some type of help was beyond her comprehension. Providing the volunteers with more qualifications and information from the organizations seems a step in the right direction to reduce some of the uncertainty expressed by my informants. The powerlessness as expressed by Monja could here be associated with uncertainty, and the typical reaction to this type of uncertainty is often withdrawal (Eriksen 2007:13-14).

In the quotation, Monja revealed that her intended nature of the situation was to associate to some extent with everyone, rather than a great deal with just one person: “*like attending a party*”. The man’s confession above did not coincide with
her understanding of what her voluntary participation involved. It thus follows that
Monja was interpreting her role as a volunteer as that of someone who prepared for
the voluntary arrangements and ensured the welfare of everyone who attended.
Within this role, Monja was allowed to mingle and move around, while conversing
somewhat with many refugees, which was regarded as a safe type of closeness to
the refugees. The refugee’s approach as presented in the quotation in some senses
violated the safe closeness Monja wanted to maintain.

During the course of my fieldwork, a preference for a distance to the refugees was
illustrated not only by Monja, but similar concerns have been maintained by a few
of the other informants as well. In light of Monja’s example, relating to the refugees
has been shown to entail a number of complex challenges regarding what my
informants perceived as comfortable interaction. It has been revealed that the
informants were seeking out a relation which was based on relatively weak bonds.
This may be explained by the relatively seldom contact between the parties, which
prevented them from processing a personal relation. At the same time, the refugees
seemed to have few barriers regarding this issue. Furthermore, the interaction could
be regarded as unsafe due to the different life worlds of the parties, where an
established way of communication was seemingly absent.

5.4 Interlocutors for Each Other

When meeting in plenum, the volunteers generally ended up discussing their
experiences as volunteers, as maintained in the previous chapter. This might take
place either before or after the activities, or during the regular meetings held by the
voluntary groups. Talking about their experiences was regarded as important by
many of my informants. Such a forum allowed them to address any potential
difficulties they had faced, and also to talk about the many pleasant incidents in
their meeting with the refugees. This became a way of digesting their experiences,
seeking advice, or merely sharing their ways of practising being volunteers.
Introducing and negotiating their experiences as volunteers was here a process
which was part of influencing their interpretations of what their voluntary role meant.

Some of these conversations were expressions of concern for the refugees at Melville who the volunteers had understood were going through tough times, while other topics revolved around stories they had heard from the refugees during the course of their participation. On many occasions, the volunteers emphasized the things they found to be different, exciting or out of the ordinary. This could include a refugee from Iraq telling about his home and position during the war; a child who revealed that she had to go back to her native country without wanting to; or a couple of teenage girls who, overwhelmed by joy during the activities, had held hands at the end of the activities with a volunteer.

The volunteers also discussed what they experienced as challenging. One example of this was connected to feelings of helplessness with regards to the life situations of the refugees they had met. The way the volunteers had experienced that the refugees seemed to have nothing compared to their own life situations was something many of my informants reflected on. Other conversations revolved around young men with romantic intentions towards them. Generally, the volunteers I encountered merely smiled at these attempts, and found them entertaining or charming. At the same time, a few maintained that a consequence of these seemingly random proposals became to avoid young men whom they thought likely to make such romantic advances.

Sharing their experiences with each other was something many of the volunteers said they appreciated and found important. This allowed the volunteers to address issues that arose during their work without worrying about breaking their promise of secrecy to the organization. These experiences seemed also to be imbued with greater meaning when the informants could share them with the other volunteers. This might have functioned as a way of expressing and confirming their roles as volunteers. By positioning themselves as interlocutors for each other, the feeling of solidarity between the volunteers was increased, and confirmed their having established a sense of being a group.
5.5 Establishing Unity

As mentioned, my informants found the refugees’ diverse backgrounds exciting; one informant used the word “exotic”. The volunteers’ curiosity about the refugees was based on these differences, but the volunteers also expressed the necessity of trying to create a unity, or a meeting point through which the volunteers and the refugees could link. “There is no need to bring the whole world onto the football pitch,” one informant has stated. I believe he was implying that the differences – religious, language-wise, status-wise, etc. – did not need to be addressed during some of the activities in which they all participated. Instead, it became possible to gather around one activity, and find shared interests that to a large extent functioned as a way of experiencing that the participants also shared something in common. In other words, the volunteers experienced differentiation, while hoping to attain unity. The creation of unity was also expressed by the organizations as an important aspiration.

In the attempt to create unity, many of my informants expressed the importance of understanding the refugees, while showing what was normal in Norway. One informant expressed that gaining an insight into the lives of the refugees and hearing their opinions of matters were also important. This allowed him to reflect on his own life and put things into perspective. As described by Fredrik Barth: “Knowledge about the lives of others also provides perspectives on our own life” (1991:8, my translation). The intention to create unity, combined with a curiosity and an interest in the refugees seemed to result in behaviour which aimed to show a respect while mainly observing and listening to the refugees. Acting from a certain distance was therefore regarded as an important part of the attempt to provide unity. Their voluntary role could very well coincide with that of the anthropologist, though of course in moderate terms, in the desire to enter a world unknown and become a part of it by experiencing others’ perspectives on things. My informants’ attempts to do this involved trying to build something shared while allowing for individual and cultural variation. At the same time, facing the many differences in the refugees’ situation also made a certain distance necessary for my informants.
The volunteers related within a framework consisting of responsibilities for and a commitment to the organization, the refugees and themselves. These were responsibilities and a commitment that had their basis in the difficult life situation of the refugees. The volunteers acted in accordance with a perception that the refugees in general had had a troubled or difficult past and present. The life situation of the refugees was in fact expected to include difficulties. The volunteers’ level of knowledge concerning the situation of the refugees and their cultural background rarely exceeded that of their own presumptions, or else sprang from their current level of experiences as volunteers. The volunteers had no right to information concerning the asylum “cases” of the refugees. Nor did they receive any updating on the refugees’ cultural background, how to relate to people who had experienced war, or people facing psychological problems. It thus seems reasonable to say that the volunteers were operating based on a limited level of information.

The organizations encouraged the volunteers to avoid focusing on the refugees’ difficulties, unless the refugees initiated such a dialogue themselves. Avoiding this was also emphasized as important by my informants. Additionally, the volunteers experienced a sense of restriction as far as discussing their own personal lives was concerned, which may be regarded overall as a consequence of a fear of creating envy, misunderstandings, or a fear that the differences between the parties would be amplified. In the attempt to establish unity, it was therefore seen as important for the volunteers not to reflect on what was different or difficult in the life situations of the refugees. Avoiding the obvious difficulties or differences between the volunteers and the refugees was here meant to function as a provider of unity.

5.6 Concluding Remarks

The social interaction between the volunteers and the refugees had its basis in a meeting between people with relatively weak bonds. It also involved parties with seemingly different cultural traits. Gathering around activities could here become a way of communicating without focusing on what was experienced as different.
Activities could function as a space that opened up for experiencing the shared characteristics and interests of the parties. This interaction was special in that the volunteers performed their duties based on certain considerations towards the refugees, and aspirations with regards to what their participation included and should provide. This role, which my informants have been demonstrated to have entered, was partly influenced by the guidelines of the organization. But more importantly, their actual experiences as volunteers in the meeting with the refugees were part of a modification of their position and a reinterpretation of the way they viewed their functions as volunteers. It also seemed that my informants’ discussions with each other concerning their aspirations and experiences were preparation for and a useful supplement to their position and role as volunteer.

Interaction with the refugees also relied on conversations. Here, it became clearer what the challenges to and opportunities for relation between the parties were. My informants experienced certain limitations which did not seem to exist in the refugees, who were often eager to extend the relations beyond the voluntary activities. It should be underlined that my informants found that during their role as volunteers, it became necessary to avoid some of their personal characteristics, while steering clear of certain issues that might be painful to the refugees. Retaining a certain distance allowed my informants to keep these demands. This distance also became a mechanism through which to avoid potentially difficult situations with the refugees which were connected to a feeling of uncertainty. In the interaction with the refugees, the cultural differences on display resulted in the experiencing of a division between the volunteers as an “us”, and the refugees as a subsequent “them”. These categories of thought (Hastrup and Hervik 1994:1), where the differences of the refugees strengthened the similarities of the volunteers, opened up for a stronger sense of fellowship between my informants and the members of their voluntary group. Through this unity, the volunteers found it possible and important to use each other as interlocutors. This space allowed my informants to share experiences and the situations they had encountered as volunteers which was an important part of delineating their position as volunteers.
6. A Human Touch from a Distance

Interaction implies knowing that we act; but we do not always know what our actions mean (Eriksen 1993b:55). While in the previous chapter the interaction between the volunteers themselves and between the volunteers and refugees was observed, this chapter will involve an analysis of the empirical findings presented. On an interpretative level, deciphering the actions of other subjects is meant to tell us why or how they take a particular shape (Rudie 2004:30). This part will base itself in how the volunteers responded to certain conflicting demands and objectives presented in the previous chapter, and will attempt to understand why certain situations were linked to uncertainty and regarded as challenges. The aim of this approach is to recognize what the voluntary role consists of, and how this shapes their interaction with the refugees. It seems meaningful to observe this through theories which present an image of ethnic traits, and how actions may be understood in light of certain rules of interaction. Thereby, an emphasis of Norwegian rules of interaction will be adopted. Additionally, the voluntary role will be in focus as an important means to understanding the interactions made.

Ethnic differences and rules of interaction based on ethnic traits, will introduce this chapter to increase an understanding of how the subject of ethnicity should be used, and how it will be applied here. Expectations towards another character, which can include expectations towards for instance ethnic groups, can be part of how one’s behaviour adjusts according to a situation and according to the person with whom one communicates, and lead to the next section of this chapter emphasizing the formation of roles. Then, the formation of the voluntary role will be focussed upon, followed by a delineation of Norwegians’ perception of safe interaction, which can also be understood as being interconnected with how my informants form a role in the voluntary setting. How and why it becomes of importance to maintain within the voluntary role will be focused upon, subsequent to a focus upon how Norwegians create friendships which can further delineate why it becomes difficult for the
volunteers to step out of their voluntary role. Finally, this chapter will base itself in the voluntary role which up to now has been in focus, and will draw lines as to what is regarded as safe interaction.

6.1 Experiencing Ethnic Differences

It may be of benefit to reflect on how to treat *ethnicity*, a term which is often misused, and in which some of the theories in this chapter take their point of departure. Ethnicity can be used to describe contact between groups whose members consider themselves culturally different (Eriksen 1993b:362). Ethnicity does not refer to “objective” cultural differences; rather it is socially and culturally defined and points to the social communication of cultural differences (ibid.). According to Eriksen, social relationships need to be understood “contextually yet not reduced to their context” (1993b:142). “[It] can be misleading to consider ethnicity as an “empty vessel” or a system of arbitrary signs, or a form of deep grammar” (ibid.:129). The critical focus of investigation ought to be “the ethnic boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff it encloses” (Barth 1969:15). Eidheim further maintains that, undoubtedly, ethnic distinctions can persist regardless of an insignificant differential “distribution of objective [cultural] traits” (ibid.:39). Accordingly, ethnicity should be considered an *aspect* of interaction, and it should not be suggested that everything can be explained through this term.

Ethnicity can be made relevant by parties through their appearance, clothing, finances, religion and language (Barth 1969:39). My informants often explained the behaviour of the refugees through what they experienced as cultural differences. A common opinion among them was that; “[The refugees] are different from us volunteers, but that is also a part of what makes this work exciting.” Not recognizing exactly what is different, but that the differences fully exist to my informants, means that they recognized a separation between an “us” and a “them”. Fredrik Barth argues that; “ethnic groups are not groups formed on the basis of shared culture, but rather the formation of groups on the basis of differences of
culture” (1995:1). Sharing the same nationality and duties as volunteers, were here important components in the formation of a believed separation between an “us” and a “them”. This is a question of creating inclusive and narrow communities of identity (Eriksen 2000:260). From that, it is fair to conclude that the volunteers experienced a formation of groups, and a separation between the volunteers and the refugees based on ethnic differences. How these differences were experienced could be an individual matter.

The refugees at Melville did not constitute any homogeneous group, as mentioned earlier. Rather, they consisted of individuals from all parts of the world. Nevertheless, the volunteers regarded the refugees as a group of people from whom they were altogether different. From the perspective of the volunteers, the refugees were considered as different which could be experienced as a group that they were excluded from. Or the other way around; the volunteers found that they consisted of a group that the refugees did not belong to. To my informants, experiencing ethnic differences through their voluntary participation was often connected to excitement or at least regarded as interesting. One informant maintained that she observed her voluntary participation as a privilege in light of the opportunity which was connected to getting to know people “from other cultures.” Here, my informants were allowed to experience something different, and out of the ordinary. They could meet people they would never have met in a normal setting, without leaving the Norwegian borderlines.

As maintained by Henrietta L. Moore; “Differences exerts an uncanny fascination for all of us” (1994:1). It was obvious from the conversations with most of my informants that the “cultural” or ethnic meetings at the reception centre were considered as positive partly because of their observations of ethnic differences. When forming a meeting point between individuals, the expectations of differences based on, among other things, ethnic variety can be just as decisive in the formation of a meeting situation between individuals as any actual facts. How individuals adjust according to a situation and how expectations towards others influence interaction between individuals will be attended to next.
6.2 Separating Roles

The individual is built by different statuses, which Erving Goffman refers to as *roles* (1992). Connected to each status, there are expectations of certain behaviour. Much indicates that my informants entered a voluntary role with specific expectations attached to their participation. The expected nature of this voluntary role was shaped by own motives, the organization’s requirements, interactions with the refugees, and conversations among the volunteers. In line with Goffman, different roles connected to the individual can point to how the individual shapes themselves based on the situation and according to the other person with whom one interacts (ibid.:11). This indicates that the individual adjusts proportionally to another individual in order to provide a more easy flow of interaction. Such adjustments are made with a basis in the information available, which can depart from appearances and behaviour if no other information exists (ibid.).

The information provided concerning another individual, is used for practical reasons to clarify a meeting situation, and make it easier for both parties to create a dynamic meeting point (Goffman 1992:11). Some of the “knowledge” that these presumptions stem from can be traced in the perception of stereotypes. Stereotypes are simplifications of presumed cultural traits, and can delineate presumed behaviour of an individual (Sørheim 1997:179). Based on predetermined ideas, rather than objective knowledge, stereotypes can present a useful tool to think through, but often correlate mistaken generalizations that can hinder insight and mutual understanding (ibid.). When referring to people from different parts of the world, fewer questions are posed with regards to the correctness of the descriptions, than when referring to the close and familiar (ibid.).

Although the information my informants had concerning the refugees was minimal with regards to documented facts, the refugees’ roles as refugees and foreigners provided the volunteers with vast information concerning assumptions and expectations attached to these categories. In other words, how people imagine another person to be can be just as relevant, or even more so, than any “actual” facts. People can be categorized based on appearance, education, background,
outfit, age and ethnicity, which again produce expectations of certain behavior. There are thus expectations connected to each category, including the refugees. This was recognized by both the organizations and the volunteers, who maintained the importance of taking certain precautions based on the expectations for the challenging situation and background of the refugees. Knowing that the person they interacted with was faced with challenges and experiences unknown, but presumably existent, in addition to certain ethnic differences, was part of shaping their own behavior towards the refugees – which again is part of delineating the voluntary role.

The volunteers’ own expectations connected to the voluntary role first of all implied that the welfare of the refugees was first priority. When interacting with refugees, there were furthermore expectations connected to remaining at a certain distance by avoiding a line of topics that could concern the challenges the refugees have been through and are situated in. It has also been shown that avoiding personal issues on their own behalf was a mechanism used by my informants to avoid the differences between the actors from increasing. Providing a setting for interaction with a mutual communication across different ethnic backgrounds, was expected and prioritized. Such prospects can be regarded as a platform of interaction, where certain rules and aspirations are to be followed, which meant that the volunteers entered what I am referring to as a ‘neutral’ role.

6.3 Performing as Neutral

The interaction in the voluntary setting, both among the volunteers, and between the volunteers and refugees was delineated by a focus upon interaction within a group. Working as a group seemed to coincide with my informants’ expectations of what their participation included, that is – what their role consists of. The volunteers in a group were here expected to cooperate towards shared objectives. This meant that their responsibilities were divided between the members of a voluntary group, thusly reducing the responsibilities of each individual. As far as the interaction with
the refugees is concerned, it was shown in the previous chapter that several of my informants valued the importance of being in a role where they could attend to everyone, rather than just focusing upon one individual. This implies that they wanted to focus upon ensuring that all the refugees benefited from the arranged activities, and by that help create a community among the participants. As such, it seemed important to my informants to remain in a role where they were allowed to intermingle, rather than focusing upon only one individual during the whole of the arrangements.

Gathering around an activity could become a way to switch from a focus upon the activity, to being interlocutors with the refugees and again to a focus upon the other volunteers. What could be experienced as differences between the parties in terms of ethnic or social traits could here become overshadowed by a focus upon teamwork around each activity. This provided a chance to focus upon communication through and about the activities, which became an important meeting-point, and furthermore seemed to include a role which my informants were comfortable with in terms of creating relations with the refugees. The rules of, for instance football or bowling, do not necessitate any verbal communication that might illustrate what is different, which my informants attempted to avoid, but rather become a possibility to focus upon the activity and communicate through the means of a mutual objective. Entering a role where they were allowed to step back and maintain an overview, while associating something with everyone, here seemed to be an interaction my informants were searching for. By performing in a group, with a desire to make sure everyone involved with the voluntary activities was comfortable, this became a way for the volunteers to avoid a close contact with a few individuals, while it opened for a communication where the focus was upon the entire group, both the volunteers and the refugees. A focus upon collaboration between volunteers and refugees around activities thereby included a safe interaction with my informants, where what was considered as different was not contemplated.
Maintaining an overview and associating a little with everyone, while attempting to avoid certain issues where differences or difficulties could surface, can imply that the volunteers entered a role as ‘neutral’. This must be regarded as a consequence to expectations towards refugees as a group, and in light of ethnic variety. It could also be associated with my informants’ expectations regarding what their own role as volunteers consisted of. The consequences of these mixtures of expectations regarding own functions, in addition to expectations towards the refugees, concluded in an attempt to maintain a neutral role. By neutrality, I am referring to character traits which attempt to avoid a socially marked role which aims to attract less attention to their own self. The volunteers alternated their behaviour according to expectations regarding their voluntary role where difficulties connected to the refugees preferably were to be avoided.

The question the following will attempt to address is then why there is a need from the volunteers’ side to act neutral and avoid focusing upon the differences between the volunteers and the refugees. Although a part of the answer to this question has been showed to be a means to protect the refugees from experiencing that their life situations are considerably different, the following part will focus upon whether it furthermore could be understood through Norwegian manners in a search for equality. Thereby, it would also have a particular function to the volunteers as an attempt to create a comfortable interaction with the refugees. The following part will attempt to explain these modifications of the different by a focus upon how Norwegians’ rules of interactions are reliant on shared elements.

6.3.1 Searching for Equality

Marianne Gullestad has drawn attention to the way “normal Norwegians” relate to differences in modes of living and ways of life (2002:82). In this regard, she focuses on the way equality in a strong imagined Norwegian fellowship is strengthened through conceptions of inequality associated with immigrants. Important here is her presentation of the logics of equality, and how people in different informal contexts
have a need to perceive themselves as equal to feel of equal worth (ibid.). By avoiding the differences between the actors, as have been shown so far, my informants seemed to be searching for equality. What caused this urge to establish equality between the actors?

Marianne Gullestad has maintained that the logic of equality includes a need to feel alike to believe that one “fits together” (2002:82). There is a need to be considered equals, which results in communication during which mutual characteristics are underlined, while what separates the individuals is omitted (ibid.). According to Gullestad, a problem arises when meeting others who are considered different (ibid.:83). Differences can be considered a flaw which suggests that a person lacks something of significance (ibid.). This search for equality is a way of preserving “peace”, “tranquillity” and “harmony”, which may very well coincide with my informants’ attempts to avoid what is different between the actors (ibid.).

With reference to chapter 5, many of my informants felt uncomfortable about talking about their own lives. This could be interpreted as an attempt to avoid increasing the differences between the actors, indicating that they were searching for common characteristics in line with Gullestad’s theories. My informants’ attempts to reduce differences can seem to correspond to Gullestad’s presentation of how Norwegians try locating equality and an equal space to operate within. One way of reducing the differences was to enter a neutral role within which certain information was avoided, or even concealed. This was evident in different ways. As one informant said during interviews; “How can I sit there and tell them about me going to Paris or that I live in a nice apartment with my boyfriend?” By avoiding topics that included a great deal of personal information, my informants assumed that the differences between them as individuals would be less obvious. By keeping what they assumed to be different separate, and by becoming a neutral other, the volunteers wanted to avoid situations they thought likely to provoke discomfort related to differences. Not revealing their “true selves” became a mechanism through which to maintain this role. In this way, the volunteers were attempting to locate shared elements with the refugees.
The neutral role could be regarded as a preventive measure to avoid unpleasant situations connected to what is not shared between the actors, and to provide harmony. As such, the role as neutral could be a strategy of some sort to prevent situations which could entail conflict. When a person puts to use a strategy or tactics to preserve the intended nature of a situation, these can be regarded as “defensive measures” according to Goffman (1992:21). One such defensive measure can be connected to an example in the previous chapter where an informant concealed personal information by claiming to live with her parents, when she in fact lived in an apartment with her boyfriend. Preventing discussion of personal matters here became a way to preserve her neutral role and her intended nature of a situation. This furthermore implies that a certain distance towards the refugees connected to the role as a neutral agent seemed a natural part of their commitment.

This focus upon locating shared elements and establishing equality lead the volunteers to enter a role as neutral based on certain lacks of equality between the actors. In the attempt to create something equal, they enter a role based on the possibility of differences, which the volunteers do not always know what includes. This can also be explained in light of how the volunteers expect these differences to concern highly difficult issues based on the refugees’ challenges connected to their past and present, in addition to their uncertain future. At the same time, the volunteers enter the context partly to experience differences, as was emphasized in chapter 3. This was looked upon as something positive and meaningful. The differences lead to excitement and challenges, and the volunteers wanted to learn about the refugees’ situation. However, it has now been shown that there was also a need for some defensive measures, partly due to an attempt to avoid uncovering potentially difficult issues on the refugees’ behalf, but also as a necessity to prevent the differences from becoming too obvious. The focus upon activities was here an important possibility for a relation to be based on what was searched for; equality. The differences became less focused upon, and the volunteers could experience the common characteristics between the actors.
My informants’ behaviour was characterized by attempts to modify the differences between the actors and establish equality. How the volunteers adjusted their behaviour to avoid misunderstandings based on what was different, and the importance of focusing on the shared have been suggested so far. Such differences not only included ethnic traits, but also living situations and ways of life. It has further been suggested that the neutral role, where the focus could rely on something shared, was regarded as safe interaction with the volunteers. The need for equality thereby illuminates an important part of how my informants establish a voluntary role.

6.4 Possibility of Friendship

As was presented in the previous chapter, my informants expressed certain discomfort regarding initiating a friendship with the refugees. Not wanting to directly refuse such requests, combined with an uncertainty towards accepting them, here created a conflict. Agreeing to a further commitment of friendship necessarily meant stepping out of the voluntary role and a safe interaction. On the other hand, refusing such a request would include discomfort, as they from a starting point were interested in creating positive experiences to the refugees, which did not include turning down an offer of friendship. This section will attempt to find why it proved important to my informants to remain the interaction with the refugees as part of their voluntary commitments. In that connection, it could be meaningful with an approach which includes Norwegian rules of interaction, and more specifically; how Norwegians’ initiate friendships. This focus attempts to find out what the voluntary context opened for in terms of interaction between volunteers and refugees, and furthermore to explain why it was difficult to initiate a friendship with the refugees disconnected from their voluntary participation.
6.4.1 A Relationship Requires Time

Rules of interaction are not objective, but rather something that has been learned, implying that they can vary across cultures. This section will suggest that my informants’ difficulties with committing to a friendship with the refugees also might be due to different rules of interaction between the actors, by focusing upon a specific Norwegian or Scandinavian way of initiating friendships. This will function as one aspect to an explanation of why the volunteers find it hard to respond to the refugees’ requests of friendship, but can hardly be said to be the only factor.

Anh Nga Longva attends to how there is a specific Norwegian way of building close relations (2003). According to Longva, Norwegians’ relations are built gradually over time (ibid.:22). The establishment of friendships is a slow process in which it is normal that two individuals first get to know each other well, and then take the step to meet alone as friends. As Longva suggests; “there is no short-cut in the Norwegian social world when it comes to inter-human relations!” (ibid., my translation). Longva further maintained that these “Norwegian” rules of interacting may mainly be recognized in Scandinavia, as compared to her observations in other ethnic contexts (ibid.). This notion of how Norwegians construct friendships may lead to a better understanding not only of the relations between my informants and the refugees, but also between the volunteers themselves.

First of all, it could be valuable to address how the volunteers related with each other in light of Longva’s theories. As maintained in chapter 4, the volunteers had a mutual understanding of the importance of solidarity between the volunteers in their group – which they also felt existed. Functioning as interlocutors to each other necessarily requires a friendly atmosphere among the volunteers. However, unless the volunteers were friends to begin with, my informants did not seem to extend their relations with the other volunteers in their group. Most of my informants simply remained partners as volunteers and worked together for a mutual aspiration, where their interaction revolved around their voluntary commitment. Without questioning the fact that the volunteers were friendly towards each other which has been observed on several occasions and maintained by a few of my informants,
their relation mainly revolved around their voluntary commitments. This way to interact was accepted and not reflected on further by my informants who continued meeting only when their voluntary work was on the agenda. In other words, there was a mutual understanding among the (Norwegian) volunteers about how and when it would have been appropriate to establish a relation.

While Longva maintained that frequent interaction over time, and being well-acquainted were requirements when Norwegians initiate friendships, a specific characteristic of the interaction between the volunteers and refugees was rather a lack of time. The voluntary context included an interaction which rarely took place between the same individuals, or over a longer period of time, indicating that the actors had relatively weak bonds. As such, this setting rarely led to chances for the actors to develop a well-established mutual acquaintance. Longva’s theories here increase the understanding of my informant’s reactions to the refugee’s requests to become friends. The discomfort when confronted with requests to become friendlier could be regarded as a result of dissimilar ways in that which the volunteers considered to be “appropriate” rules for initiating friendships. Part of the reason why the volunteers needed the interaction between the actors to remain in the voluntary context could thereby be attributed to a lack of time to be properly acquainted.

In light of Longva’s theories, it is possible that the approaches of the refugees did not coincide with my informants’ criteria for creating close relations. For this, my informants would have needed repeated interaction over a longish period of time, which the voluntary context rarely allowed for. Nevertheless, one should not take for granted that my informants would have attempted to have a closer friendship with the refugees even if these criteria had been fulfilled. This must be regarded in light of individual variety and whether one actually found any people with whom one wished to become friends. Neither should one reject the possibility that some might be quite comfortable with other ways of initiating friendships than what Longva describes. The point here is that the voluntary context was limited with
regards to the establishment of closer relations in light of the ways in which Norwegians interact.

Furthermore, one could ask whether “requests for friends” were in fact what the refugees were seeking out. In the situation of the refugees, establishing contacts and a network with Norwegians could have been regarded as a way of gaining greater access to Norwegian society and a way of establishing a more “normal” life. Another possibility was that the refugees wanted to express appreciation towards the volunteers for arranging activities for them. What my informants interpreted as friendship requests could have been a way to show their appreciation. At the same time, it should be mentioned that not all the requests or invitations by the refugees were in fact refused. By that, I am referring to the incidents where the volunteers could remain in the voluntary context in company with other volunteers, for instance after a voluntary arrangement was over for the day, which was often greatly appreciated by my informants. Regardless of the refugee’s intentions, this section has shed light on theories concerning my informant’s actions and reactions towards what they interpreted as friendship requests, and this should be regarded as the main emphasis.

Here, I have presented some ethnic distinctions with a point of departure in Norwegian manners and have focused on the importance of time connected to interaction and the establishment of relations. This was done to shed light on my informant’s interactions with each other and in particular to draw attention to an aspect of their interaction with the refugees, and my informant’s limitations to extending relations with them. As maintained at the beginning of this part, treating ethnic traits as a standard can be deceptive or erroneous, and these cannot be said to exist objectively. Rather, this focus upon ethnicity based on specific Norwegian rules of interaction may function as a tool through which to observe interaction, yet it should not be regarded as the only aspect through which to explain behaviour or attitudes.
6.5 Balancing Distance and Closeness

Until now, it has been recognized that my informants entered a role as neutral to provide what they interpreted as safe interaction with regards to the refugees, but also on their own account. By safe interaction, I am here referring to a prospect of avoiding conflicts to arise in the relation with the refugees, based on assumptions of differences between the actors. Taking into consideration the challenging past of the refugees, in addition to their difficult present life situation, the volunteers entered a role as neutral where their main emphasis was to operate as fellow human beings. A communication where the volunteers were neutral could be seen as an attempt to open up for a relationship of trust between the actors.

A neutral role could on one side function as a way to maintain a certain distance by protecting their personal life. At the same time, their neutrality was important in order to prevent a distance between the actors based on differences in their own character. Preventing such differences was here a technique to avoid what they assumed could result in reasons of conflict, which could have functioned as a distance between the actors. It thereby became important to conceal certain personal information or attitudes which could have resulted in a wall between the actors where the volunteers wanted to build confidence. In an aspiration to maintain the welfare of the refugees, the volunteers needed to distance themselves from what they interpreted as differences. This role as neutral could seem to open up for what the volunteers were aiming at; meeting the refugees as fellow human beings.

Within the role as neutral, the differences were not contemplated and the volunteers could communicate an interest towards the refugees, without fearing to bring up issues which could cause harm to the refugees. Meeting the refugees with curiosity and compassion through shared elements could open up for a communication where the volunteers functioned as attentive listeners and fellow human beings. Here, the volunteers were allowed to maintain a distance, while expressing closeness towards the refugees. Such a role as attentive listeners could seem to denote several functions. On their own behalf, they were able to remain a comfortable closeness towards the refugees. At the same time, they could express care towards the
refugees and feel that their participation was meaningful, while avoiding a personal relationship. The refugees on the other hand could be able to communicate with someone who showed interest in a focus upon them.

The volunteers aimed to create a voluntary context where the refugees steered the course of the conversations while being the midpoint during activities. Unattached from the refugees’ lives, the volunteers could represent something new and different, and the refugees could experience being met with care. Through a combination of distance, closeness, and commitment, the interaction between volunteers and refugees could open for a relation of trust. Here, the volunteers were able to refrain from a focus upon them, while concentrating on following their motivations for practicing voluntary work; being fellow human beings. Within a neutral role, the volunteers could thereby maintain both the elements of distance and closeness towards the refugees at the same time.

In the attempt to create unity, many of my informants expressed the importance of trying to understand the refugees, and at the same time show what was normal in Norway. Their voluntary role could be considered as a desire to enter a world unknown and become a part of it through experiencing others’ perspective of things. My informants’ attempt to do this involved trying to build on something shared. At the same time, facing the many differences with regards to the refugees’ situation also made a certain distance necessary. In light of some of the challenges which the volunteers experienced during the course of their voluntary commitments, it was thereby important to be part of a group of volunteers. This allowed the volunteers to switch from a focus upon the refugees, to a secure backstage with other volunteers. The aspect of belonging with a voluntary group here created a safety which relied on being surrounded by something familiar and close. Establishing solidarity within the voluntary group became a way for the volunteers to ensure of this safety while participating as volunteers. That way, they could at any time distance themselves from the refugees if facing difficulties, by focusing upon a communication also among the volunteers.
Intending to create unity, combined with a curiosity and an interest towards the refugees seemed to result in behaviour which aimed to show respect and mainly function as interlocutors to the refugees and someone to provide activities. In the attempt to establish unity, it was seen as important that the volunteers did not contemplate on what was different or difficult regarding the life situation of the refugees. This was maintained by both the organizations and the volunteers. Not knowing how to respond to some of the challenges the refugees could reveal to be faced with was therefore part of why the volunteers needed to preserve of their neutrality. Acting from a certain distance was therefore regarded as an important part of the attempt to provide unity.

6.6 Concluding Remarks

During voluntary commitments, my informants experienced an uncertainty connected to the challenging past and present they presumed and understood the refugees were dealing with. Although the exact information concerning the refugees’ asylum case or the contents of their past challenges mostly remained unknown to the volunteers, the volunteers were none the less aware that they existed, and could only speculate as to what these matters consisted of. Such “information” can be regarded as equally, if not more, decisive as any documented facts, and this was part of shaping how the volunteers interacted with the refugees. Differences culturally and socially among the actors were also part of determining the behaviour of the volunteers. Meeting people from other parts of the world has been shown to be an exciting feature for the volunteers. At the same time, the differences between the actors in terms of culture, behaviour, background, way of life, and present situation, were all part of shaping the role of the volunteers.

In an attempt to discover possibilities connected to the interaction between the actors, an emphasis of why some of the volunteers experienced discomfort connected to stepping out of the voluntary context, and into a friendship with refugees was addressed. On several occasions, the volunteers were confronted with
requests for friendships by the refugees, which the volunteers found hard to respond to and agree on. This could partly be explained in light of how Norwegians create friendships. Repeated interaction over a longish period of time, and being well-acquainted has been showed as criteria Norwegians tend to be in need of when establishing friendships. The interaction between volunteers and refugees rarely allowed for repeated interaction between the same actors over a longer time-period. The uncertainty connected to such requests could thereby be explained through a lack of such criteria in the voluntary context. At the same time, these were culturally attached tendencies, and one can not assume that the same criteria apply for everyone. Neither could one presuppose that provided these criteria, friendships would automatically take place. However, it could here provide an insight regarding the limitations connected to the interaction between volunteers and refugees.

When interacting with the refugees, the volunteers seemed to enter a particular role. This role was influenced by their knowledge and suppositions regarding the refugees’ ethnic and social differences, in addition to past and present challenges which the volunteers either knew or anticipated existed. A motivation to communicate humanity and care was also part of influencing the materialization of a particular role. This role attempted to modify differences and establish equality between the actors. The importance of creating equality can be explained through Norwegian rules of interaction, and how there is a specific need to focus on similarities rather than differences to prevent potential conflicts which could hinder communication based on respect and humanity. Respect and humanity were important characteristics which the volunteers wanted to provide when practicing voluntary work.

In the attempt to provide equality when interacting with refugees, the volunteers entered a role as neutral where they avoided or concealed some personal information. This was a role with several functions. First of all, the volunteers were able to maintain a certain distance, where the focus was upon the refugees rather than their character. Additionally, entering a role as neutral was an attempt to create relationships of trust between the actors, rather than focusing on differences. This
was necessary to maintain a focus upon the refugees and to communicate humanity, which were important reasons for practicing voluntary activities.
7. Conclusion

The aim of the thesis was to elucidate how volunteers interacted with refugees with basis in a reception centre for refugees in Oslo. Refugees were here coping with difficult experiences from the past leading them to seek refuge, as well as being confronted with new challenges connected to the living situation at the reception centre. Being prevented from socializing or confirming their identities by different means due to a lack of money or a network of people, the refugees were practically left immobile at the reception centre, with little to do except for waiting. They were faced with challenges connected to passivity, a lack of control over their lives, and isolation, in addition to worrying about people at home or the outcome of their governmental application for asylum. The implementation of activities must be considered as an important arrangement for the refugees to be able to distance themselves from the challenges they are faced with.

Voluntary activities are not only beneficial for the refugees they are directed at. Those arranging these activities also experience to receive much in return. Partaking in voluntary activities was maintained by many volunteers as a privilege which allowed them to contribute to those in a less fortunate situation as well as providing their own life with meaning. Being able to help others in exchange for meaning and inner rewards has been shown to be an important reason for partaking in voluntary activities. Additionally, meeting with the refugees provided the volunteers with new and different experiences which could extract value in itself. At the same time, the activities could extract challenges connected to the different life situations of the actors.

When operating with an uncertainty connected to the differences between the actors, solidarity among the volunteers within each voluntary group was considered important. Establishing solidarity was recognized as significant by the volunteers, and it was shown to have several functions. As far as the practical issues connected to the arranging of the voluntary activities are concerned, being acquainted and trusting one another meant that they could rely on every participant to take part in
the responsibilities. Furthermore, it was a comfort with a sense of solidarity when associating with the refugees who they did not always know, allowing the volunteers to switch between a focus upon the refugees and the other volunteers. Being able to discuss the experiences had during the course of their commitments here opened for a communication where they were able to provide each other with advice or merely the comfort which talking can provide. This became an opportunity to strengthen the feeling of making a contribution as well as confirming and shaping their role as volunteers.

The volunteers were practicing voluntary activities as well as gaining an insight into the life world of the refugees. This could entail positive experiences as well as connote challenges connected to the difficult situation which the refugees were faced with. Experiencing the different life situations and backgrounds of the participants, both in terms of ethnicity and status as refugees, was here an important element in explaining how the volunteers interacted during voluntary activities. Without the incorporation of advice and no knowledge as to how to deal with people having experienced difficulties, combined with a desire to create closeness with the refugees, the volunteers entered what I have delineated as a neutral role. This has been explained by a specific desire to create equality among the actors, while being allowed to maintain a certain distance.

The need for a distance could be explained as partly due to the differences between the actor’s life situations and partly because of an uncertainty connected to how to handle the refugee’s difficulties. The organizations maintained the importance of avoiding addressing issues which could be connected to traumatic experiences from their past and present. Additionally, the volunteers chose to avoid or hide personal issues connected to their own life. This allowed the volunteers to remain a certain distance, while also preventing some differences between the actors to occur, which the volunteers felt could lead to a distance between the actors. In an attempt to avoid potential conflicts and in a pursuit for equality which was regarded necessary to create positive experiences, the volunteers aimed to neutralize some of their personal features that might have the potential to visualize the differences between
the actors. Entering a role as neutral where some of their own characteristics remained hidden aimed to provide of a space where the refugees could remain in focus, and some of the differences between the actors could be left out. This could allow the volunteers to continue their voluntary activities, and communicate humanity and care towards the refugees from afar, or – across the hall.
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