Five Years of Voluntary Refugee Aid in Germany[*]

A Retrospective Analysis of Discourse, Local Organisation and the Emotions Involved

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Abstract: This article examines voluntary refugee aid from 2015 to 2020, investigating the extent to which volunteers and refugee aid recipients have related their perceptions and emotional interpretations to the welcoming discourse and the local organisation of voluntary refugee aid. The analysis was based on contrasting sample of interviews and newspaper articles and includes a comparison of the politicised metropolitan refugee aid in Berlin with traditional charity-based aid in Braunschweig. It becomes evident that the emotional perceptions of volunteers differ depending on their reason for helping and their previous experiences. In addition, the article suggests that the recipients of refugee aid, most notably shortly after their arrival, do not refer to the welcoming discourse but instead to their own experiences or those of their acquaintances.

Combining the concepts of governmentality and performativity, I use a critical perspective on power and add an affect-theoretical level in the sense of immersive power. This theoretical view raises awareness of the significance of affects and emotions in voluntary refugee aid.

Overall, the stance of the article shifts. It sees refugees not only as persons in need of help but contrasts this image with the potential they offer. It takes a critical look at the last five years of voluntary refugee aid and considers the implications for voluntary refugee aid if, indeed, emotions are as significant as they appear in the article.

Keywords: Refugee aid · Voluntary work · Power · Media coverage · Emotions

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1 Introduction

Even though many people throughout Germany had already been active in voluntary refugee aid before 2015 (*Karakayali* 2018: 9), it only became a central field of civil society engagement in the summer of the so-called "refugee crisis" (e.g. *Aumüller et al.* 2015; *Baethge/Wieck* 2016; *Karakayali/Kleist* 2015; *Lewicki et al.* 2017: 3; *Speth/Becker* 2016). The media and politicians praised the welcoming culture ("Willkommenskultur") and fuelled the so-called welcoming discourse ("Willkommensdiskurs"). Even though the organisation of voluntary refugee aid in Germany is largely the responsibility of the municipalities, many people across the country – whether in global metropoles, in small towns or in the countryside – felt a sense of responsibility. Everywhere they took on important tasks to help refugees cope with their everyday lives (*Aumüller et al.* 2015; *Hamann et al.* 2016; *Karakayali/Kleist* 2015; *Speth* 2017: 48). In Braunschweig, for example, where no refugees were permanently housed until the end of 2015, the city's status as the state reception centre for Lower Saxony meant that broad civil society support for refugees quickly emerged. At times, voluntary refugee aid developed into a social experience, with many public voices giving the impression that volunteers not only helped refugees through their civic engagement, but that they themselves felt joy and satisfaction by helping. Voluntary refugee assistance developed into a movement marked by painful experiences and fear, e.g. of deportation, as well as passionate connection and shared joy.

In recent years, numerous funding programmes have been set up for voluntary refugee aid. Some of these programmes have now come to an end. Many of the former volunteers are no longer active and quite a few of the refugees who accepted help in the past are no longer dependent on organised aid or are no longer living in Germany. The welcoming discourse has also changed, with media coverage of refugees living in Germany having dwindled since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In light of these developments, the question this article asks is therefore as follows: How did the welcoming discourse and the organisation of voluntary refugee aid in Berlin and Braunschweig change between 2015 and 2020? How did the aid recipients and the volunteers perceive the aid and the welcoming discourse? And which emotional expressions do they use when reporting on voluntary refugee aid? In examining these questions, there are three underlying assumptions to this paper. First, certain interpretations working on the affective level become particularly catchy through images and expressions of the welcoming discourse and favour certain modes of emotional perception among volunteers and refugee aid recipients. Second, the way local voluntary refugee aid is organised also affects their experiences and emotional perceptions. Third, as first-hand experience of voluntary refugee aid increases, the relevance of the welcoming discourse and the local organisation wanes.

This article expands on the literature by linking media coverage of refugees, volunteer refugee aid and refugee policy, and the local organisation of refugee aid with the (emotional) perceptions of volunteers and refugees. For this purpose, I

initially present my premises in the context of governmentality and affect theory (2). I follow this by explaining my methodological approach and by elaborating on central assumptions of the Grounded Theory Methodology (3). In the results section, I outline the development of the welcoming discourse and the organisation of voluntary refugee aid in Berlin and Braunschweig in three periods (4). I then discuss various ways in which volunteers and refugees use differing emotional interpretations and I examine which factors other than the welcoming discourse and local organisation shape their perceptions (5). Finally, I raise awareness of what it can mean for voluntary refugee aid, but especially for refugee aid recipients, if the media portray them in an emotionalised way. (6).

2 Theoretical considerations and literature review

Since 2014, there has been a real upswing in research with a flood of academic publications, a considerable number of practical reports, press articles and grey literature on voluntary refugee aid. They deal with individual mentoring programmes for refugees (*Alazar et al.* 2014), charitable welcoming initiatives (*Daphi* 2016), volunteer management (*Lidzba* 2018), or municipal structures of voluntary refugee aid (e.g. *Glorius/Schondelmayer* 2018; *Speth et al.* 2016; *Speth/Becker* 2016). Thus, the argument that volunteers are activated not only by political appeals but also by the governance of volunteerism to contribute to the common good is already well established for many areas of volunteering (e.g. *Ataç* 2015: 82; *Graf* 2016; *van Dyk/Misbach* 2016). Looking at refugee relief as a voluntary activity, only *van Dyk et al.* (2020) have addressed this aspect to date. But even in their case, it remains unclear how the volunteers or the refugees experienced the welcoming discourse. So far, there is little work systematically developing the relevance of local contexts. Even though *van Dyk et al.* (2020) compared the way in which voluntary refugee aid in eastern and/or western German cities or rural municipalities varied in terms of their organisation, the question of how organisation at local level shapes the emotional perception of volunteers and refugees is still unanswered (*Karakayali* 2018: 23).

Similarly, little research has been done on the affects influencing refugees' and volunteers' behaviour, which are changed by external impacts and modes of subjectification. But there are some contributions that work with a corresponding understanding of affects (e.g. *Behnam Shad* 2021; *Lindqvist* 2013; *Wettergren* 2015). In the context of refugee aid, priority is given to compassion and empathy as key elements that motivate people to support refugees voluntarily (e.g. *Armbruster* 2019; *Doidge/Sandri* 2019; *Kleres* 2018). Articles on "deservingness" are therefore particularly interesting (*Casati* 2018; *Kyriakidou* 2021; *Wernesjö* 2020). They raise awareness of how the media and political stakeholders distinguish between refugees who deserve help and refugees who do not. There is a lack of consideration that leads to the question of how affective modes of interpretation are mediated in the welcoming discourse.

I bring together *Foucault's* governmentality, *Butler's* performativity and *Mühlhoff's* immersive power. In addition to conventional work on the theory of

governmentality, I address the influence of micro-social dynamics of emotionally moving and being moved in relation to the sense of affective resonance (*Mühlhoff* 2015, 2018). In doing so, I examine emotional perceptions of volunteers and of refugees receiving aid.

Michel Foucault's governmentality allows for the examination of the subjectification of refugees and volunteers against the background of the welcoming culture as presenting a temporary dominant image of the welcoming discourse. In terms of governmentality theory (e.g., *Foucault* 2003: 50, 238ff.), I focus on the connection between state policies of integration and volunteerism, leading images shaped by the media, and volunteers and refugees. Foucault conceptualises government techniques as techniques of guiding others and themselfes. Such techniques are intertwined with knowledge regimes and constitute and mediate power relations (e.g. *Denninger et al.* 2014: 25; *Neumann* 2016: 26f.). Accordingly, volunteers and refugees in receipt of aid play a role in reproducing the complex of power and knowledge through their reflexive reference and by using discursive knowledge (*Mühlhoff* 2018: 76f.). *Butler* (2006) offers a concept of subjective agency that introduces possibilities of the resistance to subjectification (*Rose* 2015: 328). In keeping with *Rose*, the welcoming discourse pre-structures what can be thought and what can be said. Refugees and volunteers are only forced into the position of subject by realising and recognising the discursive foundations (*Butler* 2014: 176). With both *Butler* and *Foucault*, the subjectification of refugees and volunteers can be thought of in terms of the reproduction of inequality and their societal meaning.

Rainer Mühlhoff's concept of immersive power has thus far barely been considered from a sociological perspective. It looks at affective transformations of subjects and how these are socially embedded. Where repression, disciplinary actions or normalisation hardly operate, subjects are fully integrated into a local environment through reciprocal dynamics of affect and are situationally modulated in their thinking, feeling and acting (*Mühlhoff* 2018: 418). *Mühlhoff* thus connects affective action, power and subjectification and promotes a view of the conditions as having an emotional effect on someone or being emotionally moved by someone or something and their inclusive and exclusive character. While Foucault and Butler focus on discourses, acts of speech, and symbolism, the concept of immersive power complements micro-social, affective arrangements in which subjects continuously establish a self-reference through reciprocal enhancement or weakening (*Mühlhoff* 2018: 422). According to Mühlhoff, refugees and volunteers become subjects of their affective agency. He complements Foucault by assuming that subjects actualise their emotional impact, their agency and their perception not only in light of societal discourses but with mutual affective relations, and that the mode in which the discourse is perceived or referred to is affectively permeated.

3 Empirical basis and methodological procedure

I examined newspaper articles to reconstruct central developments in the welcoming discourse. I also conducted a sample of 45 guided interviews of volunteers, full-

time or voluntary organisers and refugees in receipt of aid in Berlin (n=19) and Braunschweig (n=26) between 2015 and 2020 to capture the local developments and the practical perspective. As a basic principle, I followed the Grounded Theory Methodology. Accordingly, I did not arrange the research process sequentially, but instead followed a circular process (*Strübing* 2014: 14f., 30) in the sense of a constant comparison (*Glaser/Strauss* 1998: 107).

As part of my empirical work, I analysed 29 newspaper articles on voluntary refugee aid,[1] refugees and refugee policy from 11 different newspapers published online between 2015 and 2020, as well as eight documents from government organisations and governing parties in order to augment the analyses of *Akpinar/Wagner* (2019), *Fengler/Kreutler* (2020) and *Haller* (2017, 2019). While selecting the newspapers, I made sure that a broad range of political tendencies were represented among the country's newspapers with the largest circulation. With the help of MaxQda, I analysed these sources using a simple category-based system, with thematic categories and categories on affective and emotionalising expressions. In this manner, I reconstructed the welcoming discourse and emotional implications. I compared the results of these analyses with statements from the interviews.

The starting date for my analysis is August 2015. This marked the point when, from the "long summer of migration" onwards (*Haller* 2017: 18; *Steinhilper* 2017: 77), the issue of voluntary refugee aid was addressed increasingly by political actors in the German government and media coverage of this topic increased significantly too.

Braunschweig has a population of just under 250,000 inhabitants. In this industry-driven city, voluntary aid for refugees barely existed prior to 2015. Even in the years covered by the survey, the aid to be found there was primarily civic-based and traditional in nature. In this mid-sized city in Lower Saxony, there is no self-organisation of refugees visible to the public and there are only a few grassroots organisations. Berlin, on the other hand, has a wide range of organisations and a very clear community that is politically motivated. There are many activist networks in Berlin that focus on the equal treatment of refugees and volunteers. In addition, the city has a comparatively large anti-colonial voluntary refugee aid community and self-organisation of refugees is strong. Considering that no refugees were permanently accommodated in Braunschweig prior to 2015 and that, in contrast, 55,001 refugees were officially accommodated in Berlin[2] in that same year, the sampling sites will undoubtedly display considerable contrasts.

In addition to the two sampling sites, I maximised the variability of the interview sample in the institutional context of aid, kinds of aid, and level of reflection of the interviewees. I selected the participants through a mix of theoretical sampling, snowball sampling and empirical sampling to follow the stimuli of the research field as well as the demands of the theoretical premises.

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[1] The list of newspaper articles is attached to the list of references.

[2] Up-to-date statistics on refugees in Berlin may be found under the following link:
https://www.berlin.de/laf/ankommen/aktuelle-ankunftszahlen/artikel.625503.php

The following table lists the five structuring dimensions of the interview sample and its characteristic values.

Even though I took care when compiling the interview sample to include aid recipients, volunteers and organisers, the division of these roles is to be understood as ideal-typical. This is partly due to the fact that in addition to the many full-time organisers, e.g. at church organisations or municipal aid services, there are many volunteer organisers, especially at local welcome initiatives or smaller associations. Moreover, it is not uncommon for individuals in voluntary refugee aid to combine different roles. For example, one interviewee was employed as a pedagogue at four emergency shelters in Berlin and simultaneously assisted young refugees in a volunteer programme. Furthermore, I noticed how some interviewees transitioned from one role to another. For instance, one interviewee who had fled Sudan mainly received voluntary help during her first years in Braunschweig, whereas she now volunteers in a welcome initiative. Moreover, there can be fluid transitions between organising, providing and receiving help.

To interpret the interviews, I then created a second system of categories against which I analysed the interviews in relation to the welcoming discourse, spatial dimension and emotional interpretations or expressions. The system includes categories on the aid context and aid relationships, on volunteers, aid recipients, and their social practices.

4 Results: The welcoming discourse, the organisation of voluntary refugee aid and the perceptions of volunteers and refugees receiving assistance

I have identified three periods of development which differ in how refugees are addressed in the welcoming discourse, in the high organisational level of aid practices, in the assistance offers and training measures for volunteers, and in the common willingness to help. In each period, I will first outline the welcoming discourse, before giving an insight into the local organisation, and finally discussing how refugee aid recipients and volunteers refer to these two factors in their perceptions. I thereby focus on the affective character of their statements.

4.1 First period: 2015 and 2016: From emergency aid to qualified volunteering

A key event was the summer press conference of 2015 when Angela Merkel set a narrative, which was widely picked up by the media: "Germany is a strong country. The motive with which we approach these things must be: We have accomplished so much – we can do this! We can do it[...]"[3] (*Merkel* 2015). At the same time, the

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[3] "Deutschland ist ein starkes Land. Das Motiv, mit dem wir an diese Dinge herangehen, muss sein: Wir haben so vieles geschafft – wir schaffen das! Wir schaffen das […]".

Tab. 1:   Structural dimensions of the interview sampling

Role of interviewees	Level of reflection	Location of aid	Institutional context	Kinds of aid
organisers (with and without refugee background) (O+R) (O)	*Affirmative/ favouring migration regime* - traditional voluntary work, e.g., motivated by Christian charity - refugees willing to "adapt"	*Braunschweig* (BW) - civil society/ traditional voluntary work - no relevant refugee self-organisation - few grassroots organisations	municipal administration refugee self-organisation individual independent volunteers	political activism, e.g., joint writing of public statements open encounters, e.g., cross-cultural events
voluntary or full-time Refugees receiving help (R)	*Apolitical* - without interest in the political asylum regime - inexperienced volunteers not wanting to participate in a political debate - refugees who describe themselves as apolitical		non-governmental welfare organisations church congregations registered associations	education/ teaching, e.g., language courses distribution of gifts, e.g., clothing banks counseling/ support,
Volunteers (with and without refugee background) (V+R) (V)	*critical of society/ asylum regime* - volunteers and refugees who reflect on their position in the asylum regime - conditional political resistance	*Berlin* (B) - wide range of different associations - distinct political scene of refugees	independent groups of volunteers social enterprises	e.g., tandem for work orientation administration/ control, e.g., power of the keys over common rooms

Source: own design

welcoming culture was celebrated in the media (*Weltonline1*; *Zeitonline1*; *Zeitonline2*; *Botkas* 2015; *Spiegelonline*).[4] Consequently, during this period, volunteers were described as "useful for integration" (*Han-Broich* 2015: 44), as the "backbone and heart of inclusive refugee work" (*Phineo gAG* 2016: 9), as a "welcoming movement" (*Schiffauer et al.* 2017: 18). Migration-critical voices, such as the parliamentary group leader of the Christian Social Union, Hans-Peter Friedrich, who said, "We are at full capacity",[5] referring to the idea that Germany could not manage Merkel's refugee policy (*Birnbaum* 2015), seemed to be almost drowned out. The fields of politics, academia and journalism all acknowledged the responsibility that volunteers had taken upon themselves for the basic welfare of the refugees. These statements point to the fact that in 2015, the welcoming discourse conveyed the idea that whatever aid given to refugees was good aid. At this time, hardly any critical reflection took place in the media on what makes adequate aid or which pitfalls of paternalism voluntary refugee aid might have.

After these insights into the welcoming discourse, there remains the question of how voluntary refugee aid was organised during this period. While a broad spectrum of different support services for refugees in Berlin already existed at the time, with new initiatives being added almost daily, voluntary refugee support in Braunschweig was still in its infancy. This consisted primarily of an association that had been set up to offer legal counsel in the asylum process and a few programmes for people with a migration background. Notwithstanding these differences, a full-time leader of a Berlin neighbourhood initiative, as well as the employee of a welfare organisation hired in Braunschweig, reported that in 2015, volunteer refugee aid was characterised in both cities by emergency care which was relatively open in nature, unstructured and largely uncontrolled. Furthermore, they described how the focus during this period was on providing initial care for refugees, such as medical treatment at health centres, the provision of clothing and food, and organising places to sleep. They also reported a lack of support services for volunteers, who felt overwhelmed and poorly served in refugee volunteer work.

But how did volunteers and refugees relate to the welcoming discourse in this period and what were they missing due to the poor organisational conditions? Dokor Solomon, who himself fled Rwanda and now works in Berlin as a coordinator in a political education association for refugees, reported the following: "I always have in my head what Merkel said in 2015, 'we can do it and we want to help [...] refugees'". In addition to him, volunteers from both cities also referred to Angela Merkel's speech. It awakened their desire to "contribute to the welcoming culture". One volunteer language teacher even felt a sense of "euphoria" in thinking that she and the other volunteers could manage to master "the situation". These few insights into the interviews lead to the assumption that the welcoming discourse favoured

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[4]   Most of the newspaper articles I used for my analysis cannot be assigned to an author because a press agency is given as the originator. Therefore, they can only be labelled by the newspaper's name.

[5]   "Das Boot ist voll".

positive affective perceptions among volunteers and motivated some to help. Among the refugees interviewed, the so-called welcoming culture was not known in this first period. They reported not having felt particularly welcome when they first arrived in Germany. For example, a woman who had fled Sudan with her three children described how she was afraid when she lived in the mass accommodation centre in Braunschweig. Moreover, she found it strange when strangers came up to her bringing fruit or clothes for her children or wanting to talk to her.

A member of the Lower Saxony Refugee Council reported that a volunteer from Braunschweig asked him: "[…] give me a refugee [...] I'll choose a refugee and go for a coffee with him". This example suggests an unrealistic idea of refugee volunteering, especially among volunteers who had not previously been involved in refugee and migration policy developments and had had no contact with any refugees. One volunteer who helped out in a mass shelter in Berlin and an interviewee from Braunschweig who worked at a non-profit institution for adults and accompanied refugees, voluntarily described how their ideas, shaped by the media, had not been fulfilled in everyday refugee aid. Providing daily aid was much more demanding and psychologically stressful than both had assumed. The volunteer mentioned above, who helps out in the mass accommodation centre, spoke of how "[...] the idea promoted in the newspapers and by politicians to help refugees on an equal footing is not at all feasible in practice […] I feel stressed to some extent at how much the refugees depended on me and how few of our relationships are balanced ones". Other volunteers felt overwhelmed by their voluntary work too. They spoke of experiencing "frustration" and "dissatisfaction". In view of the comparatively poor organisation of voluntary refugee aid in 2015, it is not surprising at all that volunteers felt left alone with to deal with their insecurities, overwhelming challenges and frustrations, and did not know whom to turn to.

From 2016 onwards, critical opinions regarding refugees began to grow. Some newspaper articles portrayed them as a danger to the societal order (*Weltonline2*). For example, FOCUS Online ran the headline "No 'Multikulti': Klöckner calls for sanctions against immigrants unwilling to integrate" on 23 May, 2016.[6] Meanwhile, more awareness was given to the stresses and strains taking their toll on volunteers. In the spring of 2016, for example, more and more money was being spent nationwide on training programmes for volunteers. A corresponding programme valued at 3.5 million euros was set up by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees in autumn 2015 (*Bundesregierung* 2015). A staff member of the Berlin Refugee Council said that the Council members, as well as charities, political associations of self-organised migrants, and the municipal administration were all developing different types of support for volunteers. Whereas in Braunschweig training for volunteers was offered mainly by church providers, welfare organisations and the municipality, in Berlin this was also done by people with experience of working with refugees (e.g. at glokal. e.V.). They focused in particular on making volunteers more aware of the impact of societal and/or colonial power relations in aid. In Braunschweig, on the

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[6] "'Kein ,Multikulti': Klöckner fordert Sanktionen gegen Integrationsunwillige".

other hand, there was hardly any public discussion about good aid from a power-critical perspective.

Even though volunteers in both cities were aware of the growing number of voices that were critical of migration, they did not seem to adopt these judgements of refugees. In fact, volunteers were now less likely to perceive refugees through media narratives. On the contrary, they seem to have related more and more to their individual experiences. For instance, a retired teacher who took on some organisational tasks in a welcome initiative in Braunschweig and also personally supported refugees, explained that she would feel "terribly upset" if the refugees she took care of were "picked up by the police in a cloak-and-dagger operation". She said the BAMF "literally put a gun to the refugees' heads" and she expressed great pity for them, regardless of the countries to which they were deported. However, she felt frustrated by the fact of not being able to do anything to stop the deportations.

At the same time, as financial and professional support from the federal government and the municipality or the city increased, volunteers adapted more in line with communal or municipal guiding concepts of good help. Volunteers identifying themselves as apolitical seem to have adapted their aid and their perception of refugees. This is shown, for example, by interviewees following the idea of "active integration" and demanding that recipients of aid "make an effort to integrate" themselves. Some volunteers were reported to have been irritated because a small number of refugees made barely any effort to improve their living situation. Others were angry about the lack of commitment among individual refugees. For example, a volunteer from a church community in Braunschweig said the following about a refugee from Kosovo: "Although the boy was only 16, he always came too late. Sometimes he didn't even show up for our appointments [...] and then he hadn't done his assignments. It reached the point where it really annoyed me. [...] He didn't appreciate the opportunities Germany offered him. [...] You can't just take things for granted, if you want to live in Germany, you have to do something for it."

On the one hand, this early period (2015/2016) was characterised by a very comprehensive and positively praising welcoming discourse which motivated citizens to help refugees. On the other hand, it is synonymous with a largely unorganised emergency aid operation in which refugees did not seem to feel very welcome.

4.2 Second period: Ending 2016, 2017 and 2018: The polarisation of the welcoming society

Towards the end of 2016 and throughout 2017 and 2018, the welcoming discourse was clearly more polarised than before. Newspapers increasingly reported a negative social atmosphere with regard to refugees: *Weltonline* (1), for example, reported "Welcoming culture in Germany is on the wane", "The majority of the population

is in favour of refugees returning home at some point",[7] while the headline in the Berliner Morgenpost on the 31th of December 2016, "How New Year's Eve in Cologne changed the country. New Year's Day was a black day for refugee policy. The half-life of the welcoming culture was short".[8] Attacks on refugee shelters and media statements critical of migration were rapidly increasing (*Akpinar/Wagner* 2019: 320; *Beckmann et al.* 2017: 2). In addition to the integration narrative, reports on regulated deportation, state security through Anchor Centres,[9] and forced removal to safe countries of origin or third countries were gaining ground during this period (*Prantl* 2018; *Schuler* 2018). One political stakeholder, namely the former SPD chairwoman Andrea Nahles, told the Passauer Neue Presse on 26 May 2018 that "Anyone who needs protection is welcome. But we cannot take everyone in".[10] This serves as evidence of the fact that views regarding refugees who deserved help and those who should be denied help vary in Germany.

Very good organisational structures were now emerging in both cities. A Braunschweig-based organiser, who also accompanied young refugees voluntarily, reported that new offers of voluntary aid did not address many refugees who had just arrived or those who were in material need, but instead focused on social and societal opportunities for refugees to evolve. For example, there was a social entrepreneurship venture in Berlin which aimed to contribute to "cross-border encounters and exchange as equals",[11] and which brought together teams for labour market integration and addressed refugees as individuals with their own. However, new demands were placed on volunteers when it came to aid that both pursued long-term integration and aimed to create a lasting relationship between refugees and volunteers. While needs were met in terms of clothing donations, food distribution or welcoming refugees at train stations at short notice, the new form of refugee aid was much more time-intensive and required a considerable level of personal engagement.

In the interviews conducted during this period, volunteers repeatedly expressed their disappointment and anger about how refugee aid was seldom portrayed in a positive light in the media. A full-time employee of a welfare organisation, who also volunteered in Braunschweig to match up tandem couples, believed that there had been a "polarisation within society" due to the media's portrayal of refugees and voluntary refugee aid. The statement of another interviewee from Braunschweig, who ran an association full-time while simultaneously volunteering in a welcome

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[7] "Die Willkommenskultur in Deutschland nimmt ab", "Eine Mehrheit der Bevölkerung ist dafür, dass die Flüchtlinge irgendwann in die Heimat zurückkehren".

[8] "Wie die Silvesternacht von Köln das Land veränderte. Neujahr war ein schwarzer Tag für die Flüchtlingspolitik. Die Halbwertszeit der Willkommenskultur war kurz".

[9] Anchor centres (German: ANKERzentren) are accommodation centres specifically for asylum seekers. The German term stands for Arrival (ANKunft), Decision (Entscheidung), Repatriation (Rückführung). Refugees are to be housed in an anchor centre until they are either assigned to a municipality or deported.

[10] "Wer Schutz braucht ist willkommen. Aber wir können nicht alle bei uns aufnehmen".

[11] "zu grenzübergreifender Begegnung und Austausch auf Augenhöhe".

initiative, demonstrated how this perceived polarisation affected her. She said: "I am sometimes afraid, not so much for myself, but more for the younger volunteers and the aid recipients here [...] We have received threatening phone calls here [...] I was insulted on the street during an event with refugees. That was really extreme and the last time we were here we had a swastika painted on the outside." While no volunteers from Berlin reported having been criticised for their commitment to refugees in their social environment, the experience of volunteers from Braunschweig seemed to have been altogether different. Moreover, they reported that their friends and acquaintances had become more and more critical of their work helping refugees. A volunteer from a church congregation in Braunschweig even said that she wasn't sure "[...] whether all this [her work for refugees] still makes sense". It seems as if volunteers who weren't driven by political motives to become active in refugee aid became demotivated and uncertain in the face of increasing criticism coming from their immediate social surroundings and the fall in positive media coverage of refugee aid. Overall, the willingness to help waned considerably in 2017, especially among volunteers from community-based welcoming initiatives. More than half of the interviewed volunteers withdrew into their private sphere. Most of the volunteers were from Braunschweig.

In the interviews, the refugees never referred directly to the German media but only to experiences that they or their acquaintances had had. Some of the refugees who arrived in Germany in 2015 felt that many Germans were afraid of them and did not want them to stay in Germany. A doctor who had fled Syria, for example, told me: "It was sometimes really tough. When I was in town... people looked at me as if they were afraid of me [...] I know there was this incident in Cologne on New Year's Eve. I believe that many people in Germany think all Arab-looking people are like the ones in Cologne." Whereas many of the refugees who were interviewed expressed the desire to interact with the local population in order to "arrive properly", they experienced rejection. Braunschweig in particular suffered from a lack of volunteers. Refugees whom I interviewed seemed to have found themselves in an ambivalent position. Although many had improved their language skills in recent years and had a recognised legal status, some of them felt rejected.

The following three factors might explain the sharp decline in civil aid on behalf of refugees. First, many volunteers reported that their motivation to become involved had been diminished by the increasing degree of negative representation of refugees in the media and the resulting decline in the importance of volunteering in society. Second, the pressure many volunteers felt – such as having to justify their engagement to people in their social environment – appeared to have put a strain on their relationships with the refugees. These two factors suggest that the emotional perceptions of the volunteers were shaped by the welcoming discourse and by their social environment. Third, many neighbourhoods' welcoming initiatives disappeared and volunteers ended their activities; they no longer saw any need for their help and didn't want to provide aid where it wasn't needed. This happened in particular to volunteers who had not been involved in voluntary refugee aid before 2015 and who started their engagement for humanistic rather than political reasons. Some had the feeling that they were no longer doing something relevant and good

for society. This may also have been due to how aid was organised at the local level. The spirit of equality gained more and more importance and aid programmes became increasingly flexible. They were supposed to be offered to people with a range of issues and no longer mainly for refugees. In this way, some refugee volunteering transformed in such a way as to blur the roles of those helping and those receiving help.

The second period thus reveals how the emotional perceptions of volunteers are partly affected by media coverage and organisational transformation. However, it also shows that the everyday reactions of individuals' (personal) social environment shape the perceptions both of the volunteers' and the recipients of refugee aid.

4.3 Third period: 2019 and 2020: On the waning welcoming discourse and refugees as individuals with potential

Despite this period seeing historically unprecedented levels of displacement worldwide (*United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees* 2020), there was significantly less reporting on refugees and hardly any reporting on voluntary refugee aid in the German media compared with 2015 (*Fengler/Kreutler* 2020: 28f., 38). The welcoming culture was now only very rarely addressed and, if so, mostly from a critical perspective. The narrative, which was focused on helping refugees, thus lost much of its impact. While regular reports on European refugee policy and the situation in refugee camps in southern Europe continued up to the start of the coronavirus pandemic in February 2020, these topics have received little attention since then. Meanwhile, the subject of refugee aid in Germany disappeared from the media almost completely. The few articles dealing with voluntary refugee aid published in 2020 often took stock of five years of refugee policy (*Beisel et al.* on 09.03.2020; *Schiltz* on 03.03.2020). For example, the correspondent *Riegert* wrote: "Germany is trying to pass on the 'refugee issue' to others and is meanwhile proceeding according to the principle of 'deterring and defending'" (*Riegert* on 03.03.2020) and a headline in *FOCUS Online* (2020) read: 'Dead end' instead of 'We can do it!' Europe is sealing itself off".

Voluntary refugee aid had declined sharply in quantitative terms as many of the interviewed volunteers from Berlin and Braunschweig were no longer involved in aid. Moreover, many publicly funded projects were terminated, either because the funding ran out or because there was no more demand for them. On the whole, this period showed a deep structural change in which the organisation of voluntary refugee work was decreasing. Providing material support for refugees hardly played a role anymore. From 2019, diversity and equal opportunities were addressed on a progressive basis. While these issues had already been the subject of political debate in Berlin prior to 2015, now they were increasingly playing a role in voluntary aid in Braunschweig. Rather than explicit refugee aid, the focus lay on helping socially disadvantaged people. Volunteers were supposed to become "opportunity

mentors"[12] for the refugee they were accompanying and were to contribute to that person's participation in society. Tandem programmes were set up in both cities at universities or football clubs, to encourage refugees and locals to come together. Their aim was to create sustainable communities. The new programmes referred to volunteers as locals, which shows that the aid character took a back seat to the goal of promoting community spirit. As part of the focus on a diverse and accepting society, addressing refugees as volunteers who have something to give to society became the focus of attention. This is how the Braunschweig Volunteer Agency addressed refugees as potential volunteers. In Berlin, there are some very dynamic and highly professional social entrepreneurship ventures supporting locals and refugees in developing ideas for civil society aid together. They used activating rhetoric such as: "At the end of the programme, you will have set up something unique together: Your own encounter project",[13] and thus emphasised their view of refugees as people with their own skills.

The small number of volunteers in the sample who were still active in the third period no longer referred directly to the media coverage. However, some seemed to have drawn a conclusion just as the Focus article cited above. For example, a volunteer language teacher from Berlin mentioned how the "euphoria" she once experienced in her politically oriented aid initiative had now passed and what a pity that was. Furthermore, she reported compassionately about a friend with a refugee background whom she had met in one of her language courses: "He lives without any member of his family in Berlin… I have the impression that he is struggling badly […] He tried to take his own life with pills. I don't know how I can help him… I have taken him to the psychiatric ward and am helping him with his appeal against his deportation […] It frustrates me to see how our society treats him badly". These statements suggest how the everyday challenges of accompanying a refugee in long-term integration fostered emotional perceptions ranging from compassion to extreme anger and impatience.

Different volunteers from both Berlin and Braunschweig now described the refugees, whom they had first met as aid recipients, as friends. One volunteer from Berlin even said that she was now in a permanent relationship with a refugee she had met while helping in a mass shelter. Only rarely were their emotional descriptions "refugee-specific". It is therefore not surprising at all that the volunteers hardly ever referred to the media, as the media now rarely reported on refugee aid. In addition, the volunteers who were still active in the third period had themselves an individual, differentiated, and hugely valuable experience to draw on in their emotional interpretations. It is also noticeable that, especially in politically motivated refugee aid in Berlin, attention continued to be drawn to refugees as victims of structural inequalities. They also pointed to the poor living conditions of refugees in shared

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[12] Chancenpat*innen".

[13] "Durchstarten mit Volunteer Rockets", "Am Ende des Programms habt ihr gemeinsam etwas Einzigartiges auf die Beine gestellt: Euer eigenes Begegnungsprojekt" (See: the project's homepage).

group accommodation and their unequal treatment, e.g. during the coronavirus pandemic, when refugees from shared group accommodation facilities were often obliged to live in forced quarantine (e.g. Women in Exile, e.V.). Overall, the volunteers had a significantly more varied impression of themselves and of the refugee aid recipients than before. In Braunschweig, there was no comparable discussion about how the COVID-19 pandemic could ostracise refugees.

Among the refugees who were still taking part in voluntary aid, two different groups seemed to have emerged. Some were very grateful and happy to live in Germany and emphasised in the interviews just how grateful they were for the help they received. In the interviews, they demonstrated the efforts they were making to integrate into society. For instance, an engineering student who had fled Afghanistan in 2016 described how he tried to be "just as hard-working as the Germans". Another refugee from Berlin said that she felt a lot of "female solidarity" in her friendship with a female volunteer. While some expressed their joy, gratitude and satisfaction, others were disappointed by how their lives had developed. Moreover, they found their life in Germany to be stressful and perceived volunteers as not really being able to help them with many of their problems. The refugee interviewees I would assign to this group expressed their wish to find a decent job or described their disappointment at not having found their own flat even after years. In fact, one refugee from Congo now living in Berlin said that he did not feel safe in Germany because he was afraid of racist attacks.

The 2019-2020 period points to the fact that, besides the local organisation, the welcoming discourse and the experiences in voluntary refugee aid, another factor that increasingly shaped perceptions and emotional interpretations was the intensity of the individual relationships between recipients of refugee aid and volunteers. The assumption that can be drawn in this case is that the less the media reports on voluntary refugee aid and refugees, the more significant their own experiences become for refugees and volunteers. In addition, the programmatic broadening of refugee aid to also encompass people with a range of difficulties, and the addressing of refugees as volunteers, also seems to inhibit aid-specific emotional modes of perception.

Figure 1 summarises my explanations and illustrates characteristics of the three periods. The individual boxes contain some typical examples of titles by politicians. The grey clouds represent the dominant discourse discussed both in the media and at the level of the local organisation. The blue graph shows, in simplified form, both the increase and decrease in the importance of three issues which have concerned local refugee aid in both cities.

5   Discussion

Analysing the data, it became clear that the media coverage of refugees and voluntary refugee aid between 2015 and 2020 changed from conveying an overwhelming sense of welcome euphoria to articles that were few in number and somewhat critical in nature. Overall, the welcoming discourse failed to sufficiently represent

Fig. 1: The welcoming discourse and voluntary refugee aid in three periods
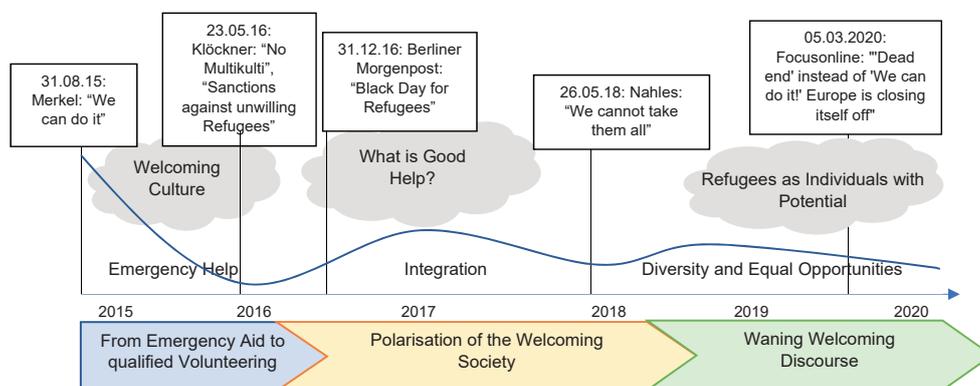
Source: own design

the different circumstances of refugees and instead defined many norms that they would need to follow in order to integrate well. Many articles in the second period also represented refugees in an exclusionary manner, depicting them as a potential threat to the local population.

In both cities, local organising has evolved from a rather disorderly emergency response. Even though refugee aid has broadened in scope opened up in these two cities and new services also address other people in need of help, Berlin in particular has seen the development of community-based aid projects to address refugees as providers of skills to support a caring community.

Although voluntary refugee aid in Berlin is more diverse in nature and the parties involved have a greater degree of experience, the aid in Braunschweig was more thoroughly organised by the municipal authorities. Compared with the capital, hardly any refugees or migrants in Braunschweig have helped to shape the urban discourse. The differences between the interviewees cannot therefore be attributed solely to the two cities or their organisation of refugee aid. Instead, it turns out that among experienced volunteers and volunteers with anti-racist or anti-colonial views, their perceptions, interpretations or the representation of their feelings relate less to the welcoming discourse than is the case for those volunteers who consider themselves apolitical and help primarily out of humanistic values. The latter group were motivated to take action by the "We can do it" narrative, a synthesis of welfare state invocation and individual attitudes to life. They interpret the suffering of refugees portrayed in the media in a way which displays affective compassion and accountability. However, they feel unsettled when the positive coverage diminishes. Nevertheless, it seems that as first-hand experience of voluntary refugee aid increases, the relevance of the welcoming discourse and local organisation wanes for these volunteers. Their social environment increasingly criticises the commitment and dedication they show to refugees, which is presumably why the volunteers also relate more affectively to the critical reporting than others. This shows how relevant

the micro-social affective dynamics mentioned at the beginning of the article are. Thus, volunteers and aid recipients both refer to the feelings they experience in their individual aid relationships.

The interview sample shows that these volunteers are more likely to be found in Berlin than in Braunschweig, which can presumably be attributed to the fact that a broad range of refugee aid and civil society debates on refugee and migration policy were already underway there prior to 2015. It can therefore be assumed that emotional expressions of the welcoming discourse make a particular impression both on inexperienced and humanistically oriented volunteers and have fostered certain emotional modes of perception among them, while politically motivated and/or experienced volunteers were less emotionally receptive to the welcoming discourse.

What also emerged from the interviews is that at the start of their lives in Germany, many of the refugees who were interviewed were not able to follow German news coverage on their own. At the same time, there was hardly any reporting that was contributed by the refugees themselves. The recipients of refugee aid became aware of the German media coverage only gradually. In the interviews, for example, they linked their personal experiences in the first few months with their feeling of not having felt welcome in Germany at first. These findings indicate that although – or precisely because – the refugees have little knowledge of German welcoming discourse when they first arrive in Germany, they are brought into Butler's subject positions by volunteers who have taken these positions from the discourse.

Some refugees interpret their life situation as very positive and feel satisfied while others are rather negative. But I am unable to identify a systematic distinction based on the cities in which they are involved in refugee aid. However, it is much more noticeable that refugees who were already politically active before they fled and who fled because of political persecution are more likely to express themselves with more negative emotions. It remains open at this point how much their emotional perceptions are shaped by traumatic experiences during their flight, or by their experiences in their home country.

Contrary to the initial assumptions, it seems that the intensity and quality of the aid relationship also influences how volunteers and refugees relate to the welcoming discourse. In the interviews, volunteers and refugees whose aid relationship has evolved into a friendship hardly ever refer to the welcoming discourse and have emancipated themselves from organised aid. They hardly use any refugee-specific or aid-specific interpretations of their relationship. Once again, it becomes clear just how important Mühlhoff's consideration on the environment of reciprocal dynamics of affects is in order to sociologically understand the developments both of voluntary refugee aid and aid relationships.

My explanations have shown that media coverage has by no means shaped the emotional perceptions of volunteers and refugee aid recipients as effectively as assumed. Thus, the results indicate that the way in which volunteers and aid recipients perceive voluntary refugee aid (and themselves as part of it) only partly depends on whether they themselves feel represented in the welcoming discourse or whether they feel accepted by their social environment. On the one hand, these

findings emphasise the possibilities of resistance to subjectification as elaborated by Butler. On the other hand, they demonstrate Mühlhoff's emotional and /or affective aspects of the subjectification process.

Looking at the three consecutive periods in the development of refugee aid, this article sketches a diachronic picture of the welcoming discourse. This should not obscure the fact that some processes in these periods partly overlap and were perceived differently by both volunteers and refugees, and that discursive representations can still have an emotional effect even if they have already been replaced in the welcoming discourse by others. The fact that there are organisational structures and modes of subjectification among volunteers and refugees that display a certain level of persistence in defying any discursive change has not yet been addressed either. Thus, further research should be used to identify cross-city types of volunteers and refugee aid recipients who differ in their affective relationship with the welcoming discourse or organisation of aid.

6   Conclusions

This article has shown that different volunteers and refugee aid recipients relate to the welcoming discourse and local organisation in their emotional expressions and affective perceptions to different degrees. Furthermore, it shows that the relationship with the discourse changes with ongoing involvement in or withdrawal from voluntary refugee assistance. In addition, the emotional perceptions of volunteers and refugees are shaped by the openly expressed lack of understanding of their social environment. Affective imprinting can therefore be problematic because it contributes to the huge emotional gap between the volunteers' ideas and their feelings in light of what they have experienced through helping. The emotionalising modes of representation through the welcoming discourse pave the way for affective ways of perceiving refugees as people in need of help, with whom volunteers can have fun or from whose potential German society can benefit. In the process, the precarious situation of those unable to live up to these images is in danger of being pushed to the background. This is fatal because there are reasons why refugees need help that reduce their ability to correspond to these representations. Refugee aid misses its target if the only people to benefit are those to whom the provision of support is a source of pleasure for the volunteers and if it does not reach those people who, due to a lack of resources, tend to behave in a way that is difficult to understand (such as appearing lazy). The emotionally charged media praise of volunteering and the idea conveyed in the welcoming discourse that voluntary help is fun, which attracted some citizens to civil society engagement, do not provide a steady basis for voluntary refugee aid because (emotional) modes of perception are fluid and the desire to help can quickly subside. The one-sided termination of aid relationships threatens to perpetuate the feeling of helplessness among aid recipients.

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