**Addressing Needs in a Liminal Space: the citizen volunteer experience and decision-making in the unofficial Calais migrant camp – Insights for Social Work**

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**Abstract**

This paper examines transferable knowledge from the work of citizen volunteers addressing migrant needs in Europe, relevant to social work with migrants at border hotspots. The discussion is based on a case study conducted in the unofficial Calais camp in June 2016, which included semi-structured interviews with long-term volunteers; participant observation; and field and reflective notes. The inductive analysis examined volunteer experience, and mechanisms and values underpinning their decision-making at critical moments in the camp’s history. Starting from the observation that the circumstances at the border were a liminal, ‘in-between’, space (Turner, 1969) in which migrants lived in limbo between leaving and arriving, and between cultures, life styles, and identities, we examined the implications for workers who experienced this environment by proxy, and how they developed a service infrastructure in these conditions. A horizontal, contribution working model emerged in the context of a strong bond between workers, shared human experience with camp residents, and powerful intrinsic motivation informed by a sense of duty to care. Implications for social work are discussed in the context of the profession’s search for clarity of its role in addressing grand global challenges, including forced migration.

**Keywords**: Calais migrant camp, liminality, citizen volunteers, decision-making, social work at the borders

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**Introduction**

In the past decade international social work has re-evaluated its contribution to policy and society, becoming increasingly aware that the profession needs to be repositioned, re-defined, and even reawakened to its historical roots in community work and social justice. Growing evidence of evolving global challenges facing the world will test the profession’s position and will challenge it to adapt and innovate (AASWSW, 2013; Bent-Goodley, 2016). Among the challenges are globalisation and large-scale movements of population, natural disasters and new types of conflicts, and significant social and environmental injustices (IFSW, 2012).These global trends, which create ‘complex emergencies’ (Palattiyil *et al.,* 2018: 7) manifest in fact as amplified local social problems (Jones, 2011, in Palattiyil *et al*., 2018: 6). This, as Schraer (2015) found when engaging informally in the Calais migrant camp, creates confusing, unfamiliar spaces in which to do social work.

Insiders regard social work as uniquely placed to respond to these social conditions directly (AASWSW, 2013); most likely to mobilise (Maglajlic, 2018); and ethically bound to act as agents of social justice (Bent-Goodley, 2016). However, can social work respond to these expectations? Introducing The Global Agenda, Jones & Truell (2012) talk about a crisis of professional identity and function. The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) found low morale and loss of confidence among social workers worldwide. In the US, Johnson (2004) critiques the significant distance between today’s social work and its origins in the work of Jane Addams and community practice when social work was strengthening links between individuals and their communities. Today, Dominelli argues (2013, in Maglajlic, 2018:10), social workers lack adequate skills in mobilization, lobbying and challenging oppression to respond effectively to the social needs caused by, for example, natural disasters. This skill gap, Johnson (2004) suggests, has been increasingly filled by groups in the development sector, which risks marginalising social work into irrelevance.

This vulnerability is largely attributed to neo-liberal policies and pressures shaping the profession, particularly in the West (Baron & MacLaughin, 2017). Palattiyil *et al*. (2018) observed that whilst social workers in the Global South have adopted an activist, social justice and community-development approach, Western social work has been formalised and guided towards a risk-infused, managerialist approach, and technocratic de-skilling of social workers. A trend towards individualisation (Sjöberg *et al*., 2018) is relentlessly focusing social work on individual-level interventions at the expense of concern with large-scale structural change (Rodriguez, Ostrow & Kemp, 2017). Social workers now have limited autonomy to make value-informed judgements (Evans and Harris, 2004, in Beckett, 2018:971), and operate at a distance from clients and from their original value base of social justice and empowerment. As a result, Ferguson suggests (2007, in Beckett, 2018: 971), partnership, leadership, or multi-agency working are idealised.

A variety of solutions have been proposed. The American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare (AASWSW, 2013) advocate for systematic testing and scientific assessment towards grand-scale thinking for the greater good (Mor Barak, 2018). Other commentators however, call for re-instating community social work as the most suitable methodology for dealing with challenges likre migration or disasters, which need contextualised responses (Dominelli, 2013; Baron & McLaughlin, 2017; Maglajlic, 2018; Mor Barak, 2018; Shenan, 2018). Palattiyil *et al*. (2018) suggest exploring commonalities with the humanitarian and development-oriented practice of the Global South. Overall, these positions call for re-actualising the ‘social’ in social work (AASWSW, 2013; Stepney & Popple, 2008) i.e. acknowledging that creative and effective interventions can only emerge in social interaction and partnerships. Sjöberg *et al*. (2018) add that these challenges require new concepts, strategies, and interventions, as well as new social actors, and diverse types of community work.

Within this frame, and focusing on one of the more recently experienced grand challenges – the forced displacement and irregular migration to Europe – we explore what transferable knowledge might social work derive from observing the work of a new social actor: the citizen volunteers who, in 2015, were first to react to the humanitarian needs of people fleeing from the Middle East and Africa and converging into camps along various borders in Europe. Whilst social workers are considered most likely to mobilise (and some participated independently from Local Authorities – see Berry, 2018; Social Work Without Borders), the political situation at most borders restricted their and INGOs’ formal access (Wanrooij, 2019). The citizen solidarity movements filling the gap offered comprehensive responses, effective particularly on cost and response time. Kynsilehto (2018) emphasises the value of learning from actors with long-term experience of these spaces, being sensitive to their skills and knowledge of local dynamics. Therefore, could observing the volunteers’ methodologies contribute to extending the knowledge that social work needs about assistance in these social spaces? And could these insights contribute to a vision for complementary partnership between volunteers and social workers? As the phenomenon of forced migration to Europe is anticipated to persist due to political and social consequences of inequality and climate change, the potential for grassroots volunteers and social workers working together is also likely to increase.

We explore these questions by analysing the decision-making, experience, and work approaches of long-term citizen volunteers who contributed to the development of a support service infrastructure in the unofficial Calais migrant camp, in 2015-16. Unpacking these aspects of working in an irregular camp at the border offers an insight into the individual and collective methodologies that motivate, mobilise, develop communities of support, and safeguard the perceived rights of vulnerable populations in these spaces. This is a complex context however, which impacts in complex ways on the status, and subsequently on the actions of the actors involved. To understand these nuanced conditions, and to elevate the relevance of our findings, we utilise the work of van Gennep (1909) and Turner (1969) on liminality.

**Liminality**

Liminality is conceptualised as the ‘between and betwixt’ transitional stage of a rite of passage from one structure/position/identity to another (Turner, 1969, 1974). The liminar lives in ‘a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state’ (Turner, 1969: 94). This is a stressful experience of ambiguity, uncertainty and loss of meaning, but also one of intense creativity and self-awareness, with potential for transformation. The task is to traverse liminality and acquire a new status for re-assimilation into the social structure. This end stage of re-structuration distinguishes liminality from similar cultural states such as marginality for example, where the individual does not have the opportunity to end their ambiguous marginal status.

When liminality is a group experience, individuals come together to form *communitas*, a distinct form of relationship characterised by camaraderie, equality, unselfishness, acceptance of hardship, and bond with one another (Turner, 1969). ‘The ongoing act of doing community’ in an unstructured and open manner, *communitas* is a powerful mechanism, simultaneously a radical anti-structure critique to the status quo, and a generative source of a new social structure. This is the successful response by which individuals unite to meet the challenges of liminality (Szakolczai, 2017). Edith Turner (in Pyhonen, 2018) further highlighted *communitas’* ­value in generating plural, democratic rather than hierarchical leadership in the new social structure.

Later researchers have critiqued Turner’s conceptualisation of liminality as linear process, observing that it does not always reach an end point of social upgrade (Tsoni, 2016). This can be caused by circumstances causing circularity (Tsoni, 2016) or interrupting the continuum towards restructuration, reaching instead the impasse of enduring liminality (Stenner, 2017; Szakolczai, 2017). Other circumstances, such as mobile working, generate liminality for workers but not a rite of passage to a new position. In these potentially debilitating conditions Garsten (1999) proposes that workers need ‘liminality competence’ to cope with their ambiguous working conditions and to avoid the negative consequences of liminality. Borg & Sunderlund (2015a; 2015b) found that high liminality competence combines an ability to acquire and use technical skills in new contexts, with social participation, and through reflexivity, with an understanding of the unique value of in-betweeness for both the environment and the individual. Additionally, Szakolczai (2017) highlights the value of the ‘heart’ as guide in the existential crisis posed by liminality i.e. a profound reconnection with basic human values, personal integrity, and the essence of life experience, which can reinstate stability and meaningfulness.

Whilst liminality is largely missing from the social work conceptual toolkit, elsewhere it has been recognised as a powerful analytical tool for understanding transitions and identity development in various social and political contexts (Horvath, Thomassen & Wydra, 2018). In migration research, it has been used to understand the experience of migrants and those involved by proxy (Malkki, 2002; Tsoni, 2016), and to analyse the condition of the camp (Bauman, 2002). We propose that the concept’s relevance to social work is increasing as the global challenges anticipate large scale transitions and even crises, challenging the skill set of contemporary social work.

**Volunteer mobilisation in the 2015 European migration**

The recent mass migration to Europe has been recognised by the UN as the ‘most challenging transnational issue of our time*’* (Osaki-Tomita, 2017). However, politically a highly contested phenomenon, EU states responded variably, mostly refusing to recognise the migrants as ‘refugees’, or the circumstances of their life at the borders as ‘humanitarian crisis’ (Wanrooij, 2019). This resulted in this population being largely unsupported formally. As this phenomenon was however intensifying by autumn 2015, with an unprecedented one million people crossing the Mediterranean (UNHCR, 2016), many European borders closing, and the tragic consequences becoming widely reported (BBC, 2016), citizen volunteers mobilised to offer emergency aid in the areas of arrival and in those with makeshift shelters along the border hotspots (European Commission, 2015; Tsoni, 2016; Kynsilehto, 2018).

This type of solidarity activism is not new. In crises and emergencies citizens are known to converge as volunteers, and join existent organisations or form new ones (Whittaker, 2015). In northern France undocumented migrants camping in Calais or Dunkirk were reported since 1999, and local charities formed to provide basic support (Fassin, 2005). However, the recent migration events mobilised the response and commitment of an atypically large population (over three years, 25.000 volunteers interacted with Help Refugees alone), including people who never mobilised before (Sigona, 2016). As put by Pezzani & Heller (2013, in Kynsilehto, 2018:188), European citizens mobilized to perform a ‘disobedient gaze’, contrary to their governments’ position, watching over and acting in solidarity with the displaced population. This is a ‘new movement in humanitarian aid’ (helprefugees.org) amassed by ‘everyday people’being political (Sigona, 2015).

At the beginning of their mobilisation the volunteers were individuals without aid relief training, who ‘simply saw a humanitarian crisis and wanted to assist’ (Slaughter, 2016). Those engaged with the Calais camp were a heterogeneous population, from diverse professional, socio-economic, generational and geo-cultural backgrounds. Volunteering was flexible and differed widely in committed time. Some became ‘long-term’ volunteers committing for months. Most were new or ‘return’ volunteers, engaging for one or more weekends or weeks. One of us was a ‘return’ volunteer having completed three weekend visits, and a one-week fieldwork. Despite being inexperienced, the volunteers used transferable professional knowledge and skills and mobilised citizen donors to secure funding and influx of basic goods. In time, they transformed from *ad hoc* to organised services and alliances, providing aid around the clock and organising a vast network of resources in donations, skills, expertise, connections and workforce.

**The Unofficial Calais Camp and its Residents**

Around the world there are various forms of assistance for displaced people, from disaster volunteering, to refugee camps established, managed and supplied by humanitarian INGOs with governmental approval (e.g. Zaatari, Azraq and the Emirati in Jordan; Kakuma in Kenya), to camps in buffer zones in Europe operating within emergency conditions, based on volunteering, and outside formal jurisdiction (e.g. Calais, Dunkirk, Metz, Lampedusa, Indomeni).

The camp in Calais was one such emergency space, which became a key point on the European migration map, attracting continuous arrivals, volunteers, political activists, border police, and the invisible presence of smugglers. The camp lasted between April 2015 and October 2016. The population included 20 cultural groups, and expanded to between 7000 (government official data) and 10,000 people (*in situ* grass-roots charity data) (Full Fact, 2016). Being considered illegal, the humanitarian INGOs were not invited to intervene (Wanrooij, 2019) (except for limited mandate on basic health and sanitation for MSF, Medicine du Monde, and Acted).

The living conditions, especially in 2015, were invariably described as shocking and inhumane (Dhesi *et al*., 2015). The migrants, mostly young men, but also unaccompanied children and some women, lived with inadequate sanitation, in waterlogged conditions, most ate only once a day, and lived in camping tents, rudimentary wooden shelters, and caravans (Calaid-ipedia). These living conditions, and the weather, caused illnesses and added psychological pain to the trauma experienced before arriving (Dhesi *et al*., 2015; Wanrooij, 2019). The residents’ attempts to cross the Tunnel caused injuries and even death, and the lack of large humanitarian agencies leaved the camp vulnerable to human rights abuses (Refugee Rights Data Project, 2016). Its ambiguous unofficial status maintained the camp as a ‘space of exception’ (Agamben, in Malkki, 2002), being outside jurisdiction, citizenship or protection of rights, but subjected to the punitive application of jurisdiction by the border police.

But perhaps the most significant aspect of living in the camp was the inability to advance or retreat, the firm aim for most being to cross the highly secure France-UK border. This forced people to live in what Bauman (2002) called ‘frozen transience’, stuck in psychological, cultural and social transitions, and in limbo between leaving and arriving. The camp residents, with their ‘irregular’ legal status and extended delay in completing their rite of passage towards a new life in the UK, were experiencing ‘expanded liminality’ (Tsoni, 2002). Refugee camps are described as ‘nowherevilles’ (Bauman, 2002) or ‘netherworlds’ (Cirtautas, in Malkki, 2002) in which, by losing their old identities people become ‘bare bodies’ (Bauman, 2002), mere ‘victims’ or ‘recipients of humanitarian aid’ (Agier, in Bauman, 2002). Agier also suggests that camps may appear as spaces of ‘urban sociability’ but they are in fact arested forms of urbanity in which nothing can develop. Malkki (2002) however disagrees, highlighting the risk of conflating the refugees’ oppressed legal status with their subjective experience, thus missing people’s agency and ability to resist, transform, and create collective action ‘in a complex system of relationships’.

This later interpretation fits more closely our observations of the unofficial Calais camp during two pre-study volunteering visits in Nov 2015 and April 2016. Notwithstanding the difficult conditions outlined above, one of the most fascinating aspects of the camp was its emerging structure. Gradually and through human enterprise and inventiveness from both, camp residents and volunteers, the camp developed organically into a complex and fascinating structure. It featured spaces for: worship and meeting (churches, mosques), information and education (legal, language learning, advocacy, school, library), connectivity (free mobile top-ups, free internet access), safety (for unaccompanied children and women), leisure and well-being (sports, circus, music, theatre, art and exhibition), addressing basic needs (health, shelter, food, clothes, everyday goods, community kitchens, sanitation, health and safety), and growing a local economy (restaurants, cafes, shops). All this was supported by an extensive social media network connecting volunteers and migrants to each other, and to citizen donors. This rapid growth and organisation has been achieved through vast creative effort, decision-making, and increasing know-how. The untrained volunteers developed their approach through trial and error, flexibility and gradually accumulated situational and contextual knowledge.

It was documenting this overall achievement in an unsupported, liminal environment that was the focus of this study. What are the implications of this environment for those involved with it by proxy? Whilst the long-term volunteers were not themselves experiencing the inbetweenness of the migrants, and their volunteering was temporary, they nonetheless were immersed physically, affectively and intellectually in this space. As it will be seen, working in and for the camp without formal strategy or experienced humanitarian support, was a transitional experience in itself. How are the volunteers affected by this, and what is required to work efficiently in this type of environment, and acquire ‘liminality competence’?

**Methodology**

We draw on a case study conducted in June 2016, over seven days in the camp and in one of the supplying warehouses, with additional interviews in the UK. It included semi-structured interviews with five long-term volunteers; participant observation of the volunteers’ everyday practice and organisation, and of camp-related activities (e.g. sorting and distributing aid, helping in a kitchen, shadowing services, participating in educational activities); and field and reflective notes.

We explored the volunteer experience, and the dynamic between the volunteers’ decision-making and migrant participation. We focused on how the fluid and ultra-varied population of volunteers constructed an eventually coherent methodology for addressing the needs of various communities in the camp, and how the camp residents participated in this process. Participation is a right protected by social work, and a core principle in INGOs' guidance on best practice in humanitarian camps. It facilitates the psychosocial well-being and dignity of refugees and their communities, and efficient aid response and problem-solving (Wright, 2006). It is also congruent with Malkki’s (2002) thesis regarding migrants’ subjectivity and agency. The decision-making process here refers to decisions made under certain conditions and considerations, which generated action and propelled the accumulation of substantive resources, gradually constructing the grass-roots service infrastructure ground-up.

Based on the two previous volunteering visits, we learned that the repository of this retrospective knowledge were the long-term volunteers who began volunteering from autumn 2015. This included warehouse volunteers who managed the sorting and distribution of basic items and food; the design, building and repairing of shelters; the cooking; and the data collection on culturally-specific needs in the camp. They developed relationships with the camp, formed a volunteer community, and facilitated the application of ideas/solutions. Other long-term volunteers worked independently, either living and working in the camp, or being affiliated with one of the many services developed in the camp. In this study, we captured the experience, views and activity of a small section of this population (Table. 1).

*Table. 1. The characteristics of the research participants at the time of volunteering*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Extent of involvement | 5 long-term (nine to ten months) |
| Gender | 4 F |
| 1 M |
| Nationality | 3 UK |
| 2 other European |
| Age | 2 aged 25-34 |
| 1 aged 35-44 |
| 2 aged 45-54 |
| Professional background | 3 in social and humanities fields |
| Activity in Calais | 4 developed projects |
| 1 contributed to projects |
| Affiliation | 4 to grass-roots charity on the ground |
| 1 independent |
| Living arrangements | 3 permanent base in Calais |
| 1 visiting recurrently |
| 1 living in the camp |
| Interview location | 3 Calais |
| 2 UK |

Their selection was purposive, and via opportunistic and snowball sampling (Creswell, 1998). The narrative of the participants’ volunteering begun in September 2015 for two of them, October for two other, and November for the fifth participant. They were therefore well-positioned to convey a retrospective snapshot of the camp history.

Ethical approval was obtained from the Faculty’s Research Ethics Panel. Verbal permission to conduct interviews and participant observation was obtained from the volunteer warehouse manager at the time (a rotating role) on the first day of fieldwork[[1]](#footnote-1). Each interviewee gave written consent based on a participant information sheet discussed before the interview. Volunteers interacted with informally were informed about the researcher’s dual role as volunteer and researcher and gave verbal consent to be asked questions. Although a challenging method given the fluidity of the setting with implications for the visibility of the researcher’s dual status, participant observation was the most suitable method in this study. Methodologically, it provided rich insights into the day-to-day activity of volunteers and into the experience of being a volunteer. Ethically, it enabled the researcher to contribute to the constant need for workforce. As the camp was under no governance[[2]](#footnote-2), and the volunteers were independent individuals, no additional ethical approval was sought[[3]](#footnote-3). However, the researcher remained ethically mindful, and used reflection and reflexivity to address dilemmas arising in the field. For example, the researcher was aware of a media discourse against volunteer activism and of a subsequent nervousness about surveillance and representation on the part of the volunteers. This was mediated in the discussion and the information sheet, by clarifying that the researcher’s starting position was that volunteering was a positive activity, and that the focus of the study was on enhancing it further. Questions on the work of the volunteers were contextualised to clarify the rationale. However, researching a politically contentious topic carries the risk that participants may self-censor (de Angelis, 2019).

Notes from the participant observation and informal conversations were hand written during and at the end of each day. The interviews were recorded with permission, and took place in Calais (x3) and in the UK (x2). As the work in Calais was intense, the interviews there lasted 0.5-1h being responsive to emergencies and to the priorities of the volunteers’ roles. The interviews in the UK lasted 1-1.5h. Despite the brief interaction with the field, and the constraints posed by the camp constantly changing, impacting on the availability of the volunteers, the study nonetheless captured a degree of depth and intersectionality of data, which enables us to develop transferable knowledge.

Apart from age, gender, nationality and professional background, the interview also explored the participants’ overall experience in Calais, pull factors, motivation and coping, challenges and enablers of volunteering, and the decision-making trail they experienced or were familiar with in the context of five critical moments in the camp history (selected by the researcher) (Figure 1).

*Figure 1. Critical moments in the camp history*

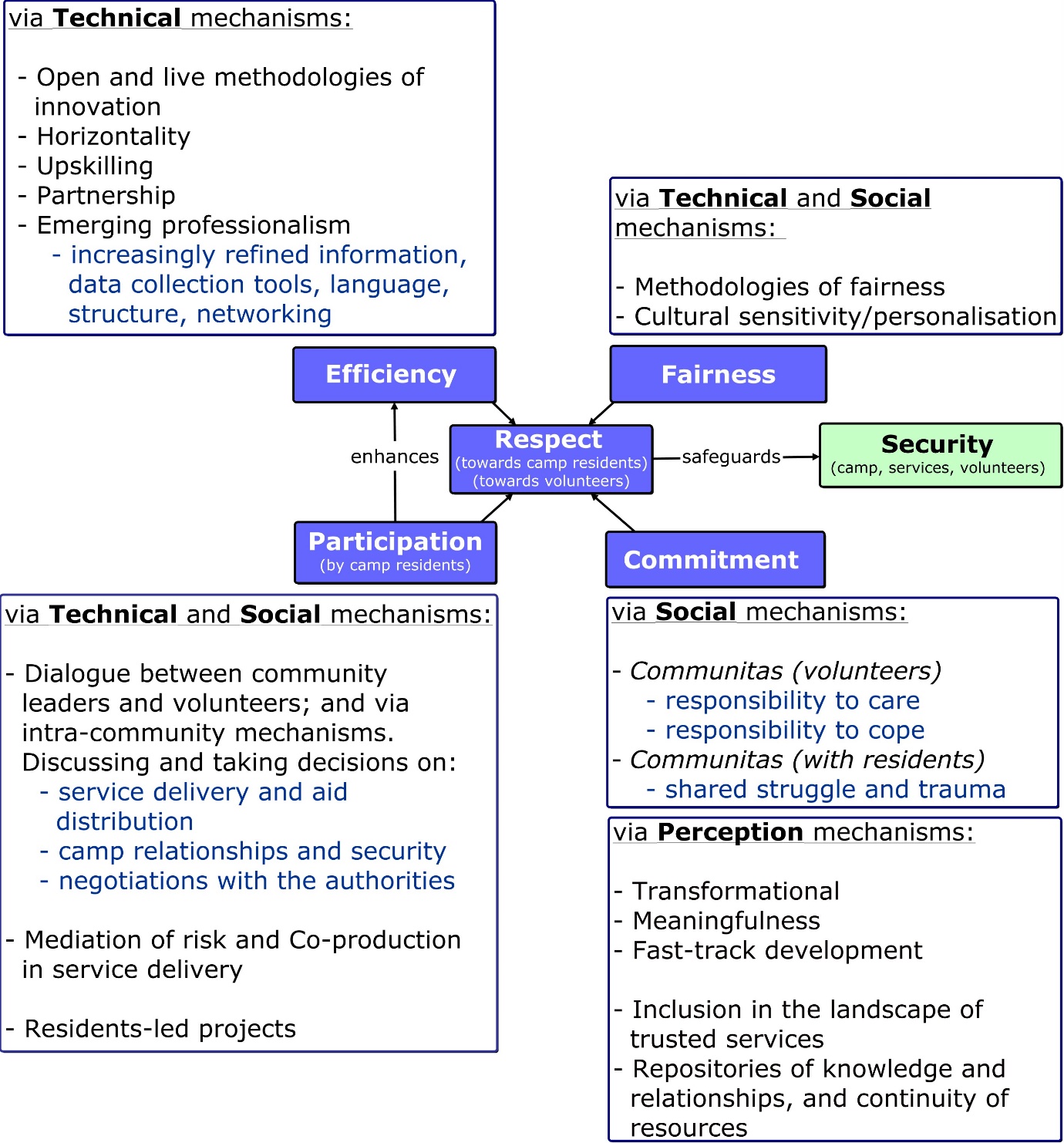
The diagram in Figure 1, which also included the months in between these key moments, aided the volunteers’ recall of their volunteering journey. The timeline begins when migration to Europe intensified and the population in the camp suddenly doubled creating a critical mass of need which attracted attention on both sides of the Channel. The next two key events depict the most traumatic moments in the camp history up to that point and refer to the actions taken by the local government to prevent urbanisation and to press the migrants to select alternative solutions in France. The Southern section of the camp was gradually demolished, dispersing 3000 people and destroying much of the service infrastructure apart from key services negotiated by the volunteers to remain functional (church, school, library, information point, youth centre). For the remaining duration of the camp only the North section was allowed for habitation. The last two key moments depict significant events, but without noticeable aftermath.

All the material was transcribed electronically, anonymised, and analysed thematically. The inductive analysis began with a chronological synthesis of the volunteers’ narratives constructing a rich picture of events, context, experience and chronological decision-making. The analysis captured decisions on: volunteering and committing long-term; the nature of the volunteers’ contribution; methodology; solutions to problems; action and troubleshooting; and the response to the needs of the camp communities. This was followed by the conceptualization (Schutt, 2011) of the core values and mechanisms that informed and shaped the volunteers’ decision-making. The relationship between these elements is captured in Figure 2.

**Addressing Migrant Needs in the Unofficial Calais Camp**

The model in Figure 2 depicts the core values (blue) that informed the volunteers’ methodology and everyday work, central to which was that of mutual Respect. This value was further demonstrated through the application of four other values (see arrows). In the clear boxes are the mechanisms that put these values into action, which also mirror Borg & Sunderland’s typology of competences in liminal working environments.

*Figure 2. Interconnected core values informing the volunteer’s decision-making, and the mechanisms operationalising them*



The reading of the model starts from **Security**. In an ungoverned ‘space of exception’, with trauma and inter-cultural conflicts, fragile security was a key concern. The threats were external (attacks from local groups; border police raids), and internal (inter-group conflicts along cultural and political considerations; tension from perceived preferential methods of aid distribution).

The impact of the volunteers’ methodologies was a challenge at the beginning of the volunteering enterprise (September-October 2015), which unsurprisingly had a chaotic start.

*‘We had no concept about* [distributing aid] *to the right people, on a reliable basis, to lower tension’ (I.2).*

Overall, the disorganised distribution did not deliver to the many most in need ‘*who were more vulnerable and didn’t dare’* (I.4). In these conditions, the volunteers had to cope with intimidating talk from migrants (‘*I’ve been threatened, threatened, and threatened!’* (I.5), and with the task of managing the power they found themselves having to decide who they release the limited aid to.

*‘I.5: Everybody wanted a house, and everybody was like, oh my god! I: You couldn’t make that decision. I.5: No, none of us could!’*

As the camp and the response from citizen donors were constantly increasing, the volunteers felt overwhelmed by the scale of the organisational job they took on. They were aware that their approach was inefficient and badly received, and were in search of a system for organising donations, needs assessment, and distribution.

From November onwards they constantly adapted, and developed, stopped or transformed their methodologies in response to recurrent crises and to rapid changes in numbers and needs. They aimed to demonstrate a key value: to embody a **respectful** approach to supporting the migrants in line with the philosophy that motivated them to mobilise, and to safeguard against security threats. They eliminated practices that disrespected the dignity of the camp residents, and consolidated developments which put solid foundations to the volunteering enterprise:

* Humanitarian pull factors determined some volunteers to commit long-term and full-time;
* A core of ‘key persons’ (‘*we’* I.2) emerged and became repositories of knowledge with oversight on methodology;
* Volunteers took on roles spontaneously, and developed projects that suited their transferable skills ‘*we fell into our roles*’ (I.5). This gave them capital through profile, role, and ownership.
* A round-the-clock social media campaign maintained interest from citizen donors internationally;
* An array of tools were developed: social media groups to organise volunteers, the donation process, and transport; database gathering, categorising and updating information about the camp (Calaid-ipedia); questionnaires collecting information about volunteers’ transferable professional skills to match with jobs; apps; templates for wooden shelters; camp maps locating services and cultural neighbourhoods.
* Regular inter- and intra-team meetings to ‘*learn about each other’, ‘network’* (I.4), find solutions, make decisions, offer mutual support, analyse effective responses to crises, and share and construct the values underlying the work
* Regular interaction with ‘*community leaders’* (I.2) to attune the aid and methods to needs. *‘We realised that we have a huge amount of people in camp and different communities, and we actually needed to speak to them in terms of what they needed, and what they needed to happen. That’s when we started developing a new distribution system’ (I.3)*
* They understood the vital importance of **fairness** (co-defined with the camp residents) to meaningful support and to reducing conflicts *‘We had to figure out a system of fairness…we started doing that from within the community itself’ (I.3).*

Working in partnership, and enabling **participation** was in fact a contributing methodology and a core principle (Figure 2).

*‘It’s very grass-roots, no top-down approach to this, people don’t feel patronised, they have agency in what’s happening to them’ (I.3).*

Although the information about who initiated the community leader groups was ambiguous, the volunteers understood early on the importance of joining this dialogue and maintained it through regular meetings as a symbol of their commitment to empowerment, fairness and security. These meetings were used to communicate culturally-specific needs, the action the communities wanted to see taken, and to take issues from volunteers to the wider community for discussion. The decisions focused on aid distribution; camp relationships and security; and negotiations with the authorities. Outside of these meetings, the communities had their own strategies for participating to the camp and the volunteer effort: joining the distribution teams to protect the security of the process; developing projects based on home professions (e.g. school; service security guards and informal carer to unaccompanied children); and intra-community mechanisms for democratic decision-making such as council and church meetings (e.g. on the future of their communities, induction of newcomers, protection of women and children).

Overall, the long-term volunteers’ approach towards **efficiency** combined community participation with a wider openness to innovation. They invited all volunteers to contribute ideas to streamline any process

‘*people who have amazing ideas like Y who had an idea to put bags on the skateboard, it was a simple idea but it was a revolution for us*’ (I.2);

kept open a live dialogue with technical support abroad to find feasible solutions to practical problems (e.g. building shelters based on combined ideas from builders, architects, and trades men; similarly for heating, electricity, mobile charging); and based their work on principles such as horizontality, transparency, fast adaptability, and cultural sensitivity. In time, they developed emerging professionalism. This became particularly apparent by February 2016 during the second camp demolition when the volunteers fought the local government’s decision. Their strategies included:

* Producing professional tools such as a Census verified through triangulation to provide reliable data that could stand up in court. The tool highlighted the significant number of unaccompanied children, which became a powerful argument in the debate and guided much of the subsequent action.
* Using online journalism to document the demolition, its impact on the residents and any human rights breaches.
* Using mainstream media as platform but also to monitor the discourse
* Using language to influence the discourse towards solidarity and a humanitarian paradigm (e.g. referring to the wooden shelters being destroyed as ‘*people’s homes’*)
* Maintaining continuity amidst disturbance and distress. *‘It was really important for me to maintain exactly what we do normally, to give people a sense that while it’s so crazy and so unstable, […] people at least see that that’s one reliable, predictable thing. And that felt really important […] for people to see familiar faces’ (I.4)*

Through these combined actions their work became rigorous, credible, transparent and compassionate. This brought them recognition from the UNHCR and the media ‘*our work was seen and valued’* (I.2), as well as enhanced knowledge of the camp population and an elevated stakeholder/advocacy profile. Increasingly refined systems of support were achieved through stability of personnel, continuity, accumulated knowledge, and relationships. By June 2016, they recognised that to be efficient in working in the complex social, psychological and political environment of the camp

*‘we have to be professional, we have to be organised, we have concepts, we have contact meetings in the camp, here on site, with other organisations, in France, as well as the UK’* (I.2).

It is in fact striking what a substantial effort the volunteers have made, putting together a complex response to a complex and stressful human situation, and how they have insisted and persisted and dedicated themselves to learning how to do this increasingly well, and to keep protecting this group of people despite the significant challenges they too have experienced. This takes us to the final value in the model in Figure 2 – demonstrating respect through **commitment**.

The volunteers’ commitment was encouraged by three mechanisms: belonging, responsibility, and transformational gains. Key to these mechanisms was what appeared to illustrate Turner’s (1969) concept of *Communitas*. In the complex and demanding context of their work the volunteers developed a bond between each other helping them cope with the emotional costs of volunteering, and between them and the camp residents, helping them empathise and demonstrate authenticity of motivation.

‘*There is a real sense of belonging here*’ (I.4).

*‘I think now you have a different relationship with people because they know ‘yeah they’ve been here, they’ve seen it’ […] you have a shared history of the camp, and it becomes really important in relations with the people’ (I.4).*

This bond offered mutual support and a sense of belonging, and strengthened their commitment. It has also been essential to coping with exhaustion, overstrain, and ‘*trauma by proxy’* (I.3).

‘*I was filled with such sadness and anger…the pastor of the church was left holding the cross whilst they destroyed* [the church] *around him…that was a devastating day’* (I.1) (1st demolition)

*’We didn’t cope well, not at all…it turned out to be very bad. We recovered slowly’* (I.2) (2nd demolition)

In the absence of formal psychological support and of alternatives for the camp to their volunteering, they felt compelled by the responsibility to cope and the responsibility to care. ‘*You can go – not really!’*(I.3). However, balancing that were powerful transformational gains: fast-track development enabling them to take action quickly, acquire role and status, and be valued; a sense of having found one’s vocation; upskilling by undertaking a role that used their abilities to the full; new learning of languages, cultures, traditions; an *‘undeniable sense of purpose’* (I.3); ‘*immense privilege’* (I.4); and insight ‘*my eyes are open completely…the experience in the Jungle has made me a completely different person’* (I5).

Considering these findings through the lens of liminality, it appears that whilst the border camp is a space of liminality for migrants, concurrently it is also a space of uncertainty and potential transformation for untrained citizen volunteers. As ‘everyday people’ they were in a transition of their own, from unstructured approach to pre-professionalization and emerging structuration. In the process, the volunteers acquired diverse ‘competences’, which included technical and social skills, particularly notable, *communitas*, as well as the perception that their work and position were uniquely valuable to the camp residents and to themselves. Their work also echoed Szakolczai’s point about the centrality of the ‘heart’ in coping with, and resolving liminality. The volunteers’ intrinsic motivation, investment in the here and now of the migrants, solidarity, and commitment to giving support in contested conditions of hardship complete the array of competences they gained. These are important insights for long term but meaningful engagement in the demanding spaces at the border. However, it is costly to work in conditions of suffering and disruption. The volunteers’ mental health and resilience were threatened by the intensity of this frontline working environment, and by accumulated trauma and exhaustion. The next section will discuss the implications of these overall findings for social work in similar environments.

**Insights for Social Work**

Whilst in some disaster situations, volunteers are experienced as nuisance (Whittaker, 2015), the Calais citizen volunteers developed into a key resource in the recent mass migration to Europe. At the beginning of this discussion we posed questions about what contribution could an exploration of their work make to the knowledge that social work needs to work in irregular camps at the border, an environment which we discussed as liminal.

The case study above illustrates the basic, traumatising, but also transformative conditions which characterise living and working at the border. The concept of liminality helped us to highlight the complexity of this environment, one that is largely unfamiliar to western social work. What format might work to address the needs quickly, adaptively, and close to the needs of individuals and groups in this environment? The study highlights the transnational and translocal (Kynsilehto, 2018) nature of this grand challenge, and that the response requires a similar approach. Baron & McLaughlin (2017) suggest that one of the ways of addressing the Grand Challenges is to ‘collaborate with individuals, community-led organisations, and professionals in all fields and disciplines’ (p. 3). This diversity of contribution and inter-disciplinarity was at work in Calais. The volunteers’ emerging working model, most suited to the wide-ranging needs of the camp and to the wide-ranging knowledge of the volunteers, was a type of molecular contribution. Everyone added their expertise or skill along a mostly horizontal decision-making process, and based on regularly renewed sense of purpose, commitment, and principle. This has echoes in the unity and non-hierarchical interaction between those caught up in liminality, the essential conditions for the development of a meaningful and innovative new social structure. As highlighted by AASWSW (2013), this multi-faceted social interaction creates solutions to address needs directly and immediately. For social work this might mean that its role needs to be conceptualised as complementary, another molecule among all those social actors coming together to contribute horizontally to effective solutions to the challenge. Their working model offers an example of how this interactivity emerges and evolves, and how we bond these skills co-productively, incorporating the participation of individuals, groups and communities in this molecular structure. The methodology developed by the volunteers is a contribution model rather than a service-provision model. A top-down strategy of providing solutions to complex local problems, at arms-length from those who experience them is ineffective and unproductive, and jeopardizes the potential for creativity. Instead, the organic growth of a flexible, unregulated structure was instrumental to the volunteers’ model of working. This describes a core process that can initiate a response, rather than a structure to replicate. In a similar environment, the core values of this molecular model might be the same, the mechanisms and skills needed might be similar, whilst the operationalisation would be contextually situated.

One aspect that would support this molecular methodology involving social workers and volunteers is a shared value base. The volunteers mobilised and worked from a critical perspective. They actively resisted the official discourses on ‘illegal undeserving migrants’, and related to ‘people as people’ (Help Refugees, 2019) in need of basic life support and mental health protection, constructing their work as human response to human distress. This echoes Agier’s reframing of refugees as ‘people like all of us’ recognising people’s human subjectivity (in Bauman, 2002:344).The volunteers became change agents (Hegar, 2008) using an ever-expanding network as a deliberate means of communication and mobilisation through which they diffused their ideas (Rogers, 1995, in Hegar, 2008) of solidarity, contribution, and civic and human responsibility, and created solutions through societal interaction. Their work was reminiscent of the traditional tenets of social work: egalitarian, inclusive, committed to social justice, and autonomous, characteristic of social work within a community discourse (Lynch & Forde, 2006). The volunteers were working from within or very close to the community, reminding again of the original methods of social work in the settlement movement of the late nineteen century (Till, 2013) based on skilled and knowledgeable workers (students) supporting the community from within, imparting knowledge as well as learning from the people they were supporting. Sharing the space and the experience, and operating close to the needs and to the human experience created relationship, trust and even bond. The volunteers’ approach mirrored social work values, opening the opportunity for social work to learn to practice in that setting in partnership with other social actors.

One highly valuable mechanism however, to be protected but also enabled in a collaboration, is the relationship and bond that workers responding to liminal conditions develop and need towards sustainability. *Communitas*, and the values that served as the bedrock of the volunteers’ enterprise, were the ingredients that made work of impact and created this enormous resource that the volunteers have gradually grown into. The challenge that would then emerge would be how to create *communitas* between social workers and volunteers. This might in fact highlight a new direction of training for social workers if they are to maintain relevance and make powerful contributions in conditions of transition and shifting positionalities.

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1. Previously the field researcher learned that the volunteers lacked the time to engage with written documents – the only method to acquire informed permission was *in situ,* although email contact was made in advance [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. the Calais Prefecture had legal jurisdiction [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. France lacks a process of ethical scrutiny for research in social sciences and humanities (Vassy & Keller, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)