Article Type: Original Article

Struggling with meaningfulness when context shifts: Volunteer work in a German refugee shelter

Mona Florian
European University Viadrina
Faculty of Business Administration and Economics
Große Scharrnstraße 59
15230 Frankfurt (Oder)
Germany
florian@europa-uni.de
+49 335 5534 2506

Jana Costas
European University Viadrina
Faculty of Business Administration and Economics
Große Scharrnstraße 59
15230 Frankfurt (Oder)
Germany
costas@europa-uni.de
+49 335 5534 2509

Dan Kärreman
Copenhagen Business School
Department of Management, Society and Communication
Dalgas Have 15
2000 Frederiksberg
Denmark
dk.msc@cbs.dk
+45 3815 3437

Abstract

This article draws on an ethnographic study of volunteer work in a German refugee shelter to explore how individual experiences of meaningfulness are intertwined with shifting discursive and organisational contexts. At the beginning of the so-called refugee crisis, societal discourses portrayed this volunteer work as extraordinarily meaningful – a state we capture through the metaphor of 'overflow'. This 'overflow' mobilised volunteers and was an important point of reference for framing their work experiences as meaningful. Later, shifting discursive and organisational contexts challenged their framings. Instead of letting go, however, the 'overflow' triggered volunteers to reframe their experience in dysfunctional ways in order to sustain their sense of meaningfulness. This paper reveals how shifting societal discourses feed into individual

experiences of meaningfulness, shows how individuals may respond to such shifts in problematic ways and theorises the nature of such shifts in drawing on Swidler's notion of settling contexts.

Key words:

Meaningful work, refugees, settled and unsettled contexts, societal discourses, volunteer work

Introduction

Most types of work are thought to suffer from a scarcity of meaningfulness, with negative consequences for motivation, commitment, and wellbeing (Michaelson et al., 2014; Pratt and Ashforth, 2003), engagement (Kahn, 1990; May et al., 2004), and job performance (Rodell, 2013). Extant research has thus been mainly interested in how and when individuals experience meaningfulness (Chalofsky, 2003; Lips-Wiersma and Morris, 2017, Rosso et al., 2003) and how organisations can help to create this experience (Michaelson et al., 2014, Steger, 2017).

In our paper, we adopt a more socialised and situated understanding of meaningfulness in order to theorise how individuals frame their work as meaningful in relation to shifting societal discourses. In order to explore how shifting societal discourses and individual experiences of meaningfulness are intertwined, we draw on an extensive participant observation study in a German refugee shelter during the so-called refugee crisis in 2015 and 2016, focusing on volunteer work. In exploring this case, we will show how societal discourses about meaningful work can become significant points of reference for individual constructions of meaningfulness – something that can become problematic when the discursive and organisational context of work is shifting.

We seek to contribute to the literature in three ways: First, we develop the metaphor of 'overflow' of meaningfulness, which resonates with the emerging literature on potential dark sides of 'too much' meaningfulness (Bailey et al., 2017). The metaphor captures how societal discourses

provide purpose and significance in abundance, by casting certain types of work as extraordinarily meaningful. Metaphoric theorizing allows us to highlight the particularities of the phenomenon under study, compare it to other similar phenomena and create new understanding (Cornelissen, 2005, p. 751).

Second, we show how societal discourses feed into individual experiences of meaningfulness, especially when they shift. The paper reveals how the 'overflow' can be a strong pull to undertake a work activity, but also highlights the potential of 'flowing over' when societal discourses and the organisational context of work shift. Then, we argue, it can trigger individuals to reframe their work and work environment in order to sustain their sense of meaningfulness – with problematic consequences for themselves, their work and organisations, e.g. overwork, conflict, rigidity, and resistance to professionalisation.

Third, we theorise why individuals respond to shifting contexts in dysfunctional ways by drawing on Swidler's (1986) concepts of unsettled and settled circumstances. Unsettled periods lack appropriate templates for action. Consequently, people draw on explicit ideas – in our case the 'overflow' – to get guidance. When the context is settling, habit and conformism substitutes for ideas to guide action (p. 281), which challenges individuals' sense of meaningfulness derived from the 'overflow'. While some are able to align their sense of meaningfulness with the changed work realities, others are unable to let go and find alternate ways of conceptualising their work in order to match their sense of meaningfulness, with the aforementioned consequences.

In developing these arguments, our paper contributes to the emerging literature on the impact of shifting organisational and societal contexts on meaningfulness and adds a sociological perspective to the literature on the dark sides of meaningfulness.

Meaningfulness in shifting contexts

Meaningfulness – defined as an inherently positive 'subjective experience of the existential significance or purpose' (Lips-Wiersma and Morris, 2009; see also Pratt and Ashforth, 2003) – has been related to several favourable individual (Arnold et al., 2007, Bassi et al., 2013, Hackman and Oldham, 1976, Isaksen, 2000) and organisational outcomes (Britt et al., 2001; Chen and Li, 2013). The extant literature on meaningfulness primarily advances from a psychological understanding of the matter focusing on the level of the individual. Accordingly, the central issue in the literature is how and when individuals experience meaningfulness and how management can help that process (Michaelson et al. 2014). Studies focus on organisational factors shaping meaningful work (e.g. Nillsen et al., 2014; Tummers and Knies, 2013; Pratt and Ashforth, 2003), its moral ends (e.g. Bowie, 1998; Michaelson, 2011, Yeoman, 2014), subjective constructions of (e.g. Bailey and Madden, 2017; Vuori et al., 2012) and 'pathways' to meaningfulness (Chalofsky, 2003; Lips-Wiersma and Morris, 2009; Rosso et al., 2010), examining how individuals balance antithetic experiences of meaningfulness, such as 'serving others' and 'expressing full potential' (Lips-Wiersma and Morris, 2017, see also Rosso et al., 2010).

While these approaches have been productive for understanding individuals' relation to work, they tend to underappreciate the influence of the broader social context on experiences of meaningfulness. Indeed, as pointed out by Bailey and Madden (2017), there is a 'dearth of sociologically oriented studies that have focused on meaningful work and therefore a lack of theorisation in the area' (p. 16). A limited number of studies adopts a more situated understanding of meaningfulness, e.g. by exploring how societal discourses shape its experience (Berkelaar and Buzzanell, 2015; Kuhn et al., 2008). Socio-historical discourses provide shared meanings of work (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000) maintained not primarily by individuals or organisations but by culture and society. These discourses are resources for constructing work as meaningful (Broadfoot et al. 2008, see also Kuhn et al., 2008, Lair et al., 2008; Marchiori and Buzzanell, 2017). Carton (2018), for instance, shows how President Kennedy provided discursive resources for NASA

employees to frame their work as meaningful. Only when employees related their mundane tasks to the mission of 'putting a man on the moon', they experienced them as meaningful. Similarly, Bailey and Madden (2017) explore how refuse collectors construct their work as meaningful by connecting it to environmentalist ideas. Mitra and Buzzanell (2017) study how sustainability practitioners relate to the discursive and material context of their work in tensional ways, negotiating their sense of meaningfulness vis-à-vis constraining and enabling factors.

These studies emphasize how individuals draw on contextual resources to construct their work as meaningful, a process that typically involves translation or negotiation in order to connect discourses about meaningful work to day-to-day work practices. This tension-centred, processual understanding of meaningfulness is also a key theme in recent studies that look at meaningfulness in shifting socio-economic and cultural contexts (Barrett and Dailey, 2017; Cohen et al., 2018; Long et al., 2016). By showing how individuals struggle to align their sense of meaningfulness with changed conditions, they also stress the ambivalent and conflictual nature of meaningfulness in shifting contexts, in which it is at risk or even lost.

Our study contributes to and expands on this focus on shifting contexts and their impact on individuals' experiences of meaningfulness. We add to this emerging literature by creating a more nuanced understanding of how shifting social context and individuals' responses to such shifts turn problematic for individuals and organisations. Whereas extant literature highlights how shifting context endangers meaningfulness, we explore a case in which individuals find ways to sustain meaningfulness – albeit in dysfunctional ways. We show that societal discourses can become such strong drivers for meaningfulness that individuals are unable to adapt to changing work realities once the context shifts. Instead of aligning their sense of meaningfulness with the changed realities they face, we found that individuals reframe their work environment in order to match their sense of meaningfulness – a dynamic that leads to problems for themselves and their workplaces.

In order to capture this phenomenon, we develop the metaphor of 'overflow' of meaningfulness. Metaphoric theorising allows us to 'see one concept in terms of the other, making its meaning inherently more profound and exotic' (Cornelissen, 2005, p. 755). We understand 'overflow' as a state in which societal discourses depict certain types of work as exceptionally meaningful. We show that 'overflow' can become a major mobilisation force for undertaking such work. Likewise, 'overflow' can impede individuals to engage with their actual work realities. This metaphor highlights how societal discourses about meaningful work 'pour' into the individual experience. At the same time, it suggests the risk of 'flowing over' – becoming problematic for individuals and organisations.

In developing this metaphor, we pick up the emerging idea that 'too much' meaningfulness can have negative consequences (Bailey et al., 2017, p. 427). These include exploitation (Barcan, 2018; Dempsey and Sanders, 2010) or 'unmitigated expressions of meaningfulness' (Lips-Wiersma and Morris, 2017, p. 70), in which the balance between different 'pathways' to meaningfulness is lost (Lips-Wiersma and Morris, 2009, p. 492).

While empirical studies about negative consequences of meaningfulness are rare, the related literature on callings discusses these more deeply (Berkelaar and Buzzanell, 2015; Duffy and Dik, 2013). Callings describe individuals' orientation towards work, characterized by external summons to work, a sense of purpose and a prosocial motivation (Duffy and Dik, 2009). Besides several positive outcomes, studies show how 'called' individuals are prone to endure poor working conditions, low pay, exploitation, overly long hours, loss of personal identity and work-life balance as well as social inequalities (Berkelaar and Buzzanell, 2015; Bunderson and Thompson, 2009; Madden et al., 2015). Moreover, 'called' individuals are less receptive to career advice (Dobrow and Thosti-Karas, 2012) and hold their organisations and co-workers to extremely high standards (Bunderson and Thompson, 2009; Cardador and Caza, 2012, Schabram and Maitlis, 2017).

Although the callings literature offers fruitful insights about likely negative consequences of 'too much' meaningfulness, it lacks an understanding of how shifting societal and organisational contexts can fuel these consequences. Indeed, scholars understand callings as an 'individual wiring' deeply engrained in individual life stories (Bunderson and Thompson, 2009, p. 53). Our paper puts forth a socialised understanding of meaningfulness and its negative consequences. We show how individuals' experiences of meaningfulness can be contingent upon changes beyond their and even the organisation's control. In developing the metaphor of 'overflow', we theorise the role of societal discourses in bringing about 'too much' meaningfulness. Furthermore, we identify the reason why 'overflow' becomes problematic when context shifts, namely when individuals cope with shifts by engaging in a dynamic we term 'reframing'. We argue that the 'overflow' triggers individuals to reframe their work to sustain their meaningfulness, which obstructs them to engage with changing work realities.

Moreover, we theorise the conditions under which 'overflow' and 'reframing' can emerge in drawing on Swidler's (1986) notion of 'unsettled' and 'settled' contexts. In 'unsettled' circumstances, ideas become the main driver of action. In our case, the 'overflow' motivated people to volunteer and shaped their expectations to experience volunteering as meaningful. When moving from an 'unsettled' to a 'settled' stage, ideas gradually lose their power to guide action to inertia and habit, allowing for ambivalence and inconsistency. We argue that this 'settling' process, in our case the shifting societal context and the increased institutionalisation of the organisation, can challenge individuals' sense of meaningfulness creating a need for guidance. This need triggers them to 'reframe' their work to match the 'overflow' in order to sustain their sense of meaningfulness – with negative consequences for their work and organisation.

In sum, our paper contributes to the emerging literature on the impact of shifting organisational and societal contexts on meaningfulness and adds a sociological perspective to the literature on the dark sides of meaningfulness. To develop these contributions, we explore the following research questions: How do shifting societal and organisational contexts influence

individuals' experiences of meaningfulness? How do individuals cope with these shifts and what are the consequences thereof?

Meaningful volunteer work

To explore these questions, we study volunteer work in a refugee shelter in Berlin, Germany. Although literature on meaningfulness in volunteer work is limited (for an exception see Yim and Fock, 2013, Rodell, 2013), the implicit assumption that volunteer work is inherently meaningful is widely shared in the literature, but also among volunteers (Flores, 2014; Kuhn et al., 2008; McAllum, 2014; Rodell, 2013). Assumedly decoupled from the market logic, volunteer work is seen to celebrate the ideals of work autonomy, free choice, community, and social impact (Cnaan et al., 1996; Kelemen et al., 2017). Moreover, volunteer work constitutes an important site for identity work (Alfes et al., 2016; Cunningham, 2010; Grönlund, 2011), as it allows individuals to pursue altruistic values and political positions (Clary et al., 1998; Chen et al., 2013; Wilson, 2012). Furthermore, research points out how volunteering can satisfy individuals' needs for social interaction and belonging (Hustinx and Lammertyn, 2003; O'Toole and Grey, 2016; Prouteau and Wolff, 2008, Wilderom and Miner, 1991). Given the high risk of turnover (Garner and Garner, 2011; Haski-Leventhal and Bargal, 2008; Hustinx, 2010), non-profit organisations are seen as prone to tailoring tasks to members' preferences (McAllum, 2018; Meisenbach and Kramer, 2014) and to granting autonomy with respect to working hours (Dartington, 1998). Overall, these depictions hint at a potential abundance of opportunities for meaningfulness in volunteering.

While some of these studies acknowledge that this image of volunteering is idealized (e.g Hustinx, 2010), critical studies explicitly highlight how volunteers are often exploited (Dempsey and Sanders, 2010), putting them at risk for compassion fatigue and burnout (Yanay and Yanay, 2008), especially when working with vulnerable populations, e.g. refugees (Behnia, 2007). Furthermore, their unpaid and often chronically underfunded work may replace paid labour (Halford et al., 2015; Taylor, 2004; 2006), which can fuel conflicts with paid staff (Golden-Biddle and Rao, 1997; Kreutzer

and Jäger, 2011). Moreover, the meaningfulness of volunteer work can vary in different social groups: Eliasoph's ethnography (2011) demonstrates how deprived volunteers in youth empowerment projects experience their work as meaningful because it helps them defy their social conditions, whereas middle-class volunteers stress ideas of helping their disadvantaged peers and instrumental motivations – a difference that reinforces social inequalities. Due to shifts towards performance-based models in the third sector, volunteer work ideals such as altruism, caring and autonomy may be further compromised in the name of efficiency (Baines and Hardill, 2008; Hardill and Baines, 2011).

As this short synopsis shows, volunteer work is particularly insightful for exploring our research questions: On the one hand, scholarly discourses implicitly portray volunteer work as a prime example for meaningful work, as it seems unburdened from the economic pressures of paid work and their negative consequences, e.g. alienation. On the other, extant research hints at the potential of exploitation, conflict and inequalities in volunteer work, especially during contextual shifts – aspects that the literature on callings sees as negative consequences of 'too much' meaningfulness. While these lines of thought are inherent in the literature, our paper foregrounds them in drawing on an extreme empirical case – volunteer work during the so-called refugee crisis in Germany.

Methodology

Our exploratory and inductive participant observation methodology derives from the rationale of the study: to examine a historical event – the so-called refugee crisis in Germany. In 2015, the arrival of refugees became a major political challenge. With government agencies stretched to the limit, millions of people all over Germany volunteered and organised themselves to ensure primary care to the refugees. Given the lack of knowledge about this phenomenon, we chose an explorative approach (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007). While we did not set out to study meaningfulness, it emerged as a significant theme throughout our research.

In exploring this theme, we adopt a social constructionist perspective (Berger and Luckmann, 1966), taking interest into processual shifts in societal constructions of meaningfulness and their impact on the subjective experiences of meaningfulness. Although individuals experience meaningfulness subjectively, we understand it as a deeply social and thus situated phenomenon. Hence, we seek to decipher the social interactions that bring meaningfulness into existence, the products of these interactions and the ways in which these feed back into the social (Fairhurst and Grant, 2010). To explore these aspects of meaningfulness, we embrace an interpretivist standpoint, mainly using participant observation. This method allows the researcher to understand 'how things work' (Watson, 2011, p. 202) or do not work in organisations (Van Maanen, 2011, Rosen, 1991). It provides insights into how actors construct, practice, and interpret their work as meaningful in interaction with each other and the researcher (Ybema et al., 2009). Due to its open-ended nature, participant observation permits to develop creative empirically grounded theoretical arguments (Hammersley, 1992).

The case: volunteer work in the Welcome Shelter

Our case can be viewed as an extreme case of how shifting societal discourses feed into experiences of meaningfulness: For instance, in summer 2015 the media praised the German outburst of solidarity as a 'new summer fairy tale'[i] (*Zeit*, 17 September 2015), casting volunteer work as exceptionally meaningful – an appreciation that waned over time. Such an extreme case is useful for theory building, as here the dynamics at play are highly visible (Yin, 2009).

We studied the Welcome Shelter, established by a non-profit organisation in a former town hall in a middle-class Berlin neighbourhood, from October 2015 to October 2016. After opening its doors in August 2015 to accommodate up to 1200 refugees, mostly Middle Eastern, it became a prime site for volunteer work. Although designed for emergency short-term accommodations, the majority of refugees ended up staying several months, awaiting word from the overstrained asylum

authority. As most of them had no work permit, they spent their days making the rounds of various administration offices and language classes.

In the shelter's first days, hundreds of volunteers from all walks of life self-organised via social media and word-of-mouth. Frequently, public debate cited the shelter as a prime example of a successful volunteer organisation. While improvisation ruled at first, the volunteers quickly organised their work into shifts using online tools. They created different departments, putting into place a hierarchy and communication channels. By the end of the study, volunteers ran more than twenty departments, e.g. a logistics centre that received and sorted, clothing donations, a kindergarten and a food counter.

While in the shelter's first weeks far more people volunteered than needed, this enthusiasm eventually fell off and volunteer numbers dropped. To address this volunteer shortage, the non-profit contracted coordinators to recruit new volunteers and increase commitment, and a government programme allowed a few refugees to work in the shelter for a symbolic wage. For a condensed overview of the unfolding of significant events within and beyond the shelter, see the timeline below (Figure 1).

Data collection

The shelter management granted the first author access and announced her presence as a researcher publicly. To ensure the consensual participation of the volunteers, they were informed about the nature of the study and the role of the researcher. In order to protect their identity, field contacts were notified that the organisation, the shelter, and the names of all participants would remain anonymous (Bryman and Bell, 2015). The great majority participated in the study, openly sharing their experiences. Others were deleted from the material, which includes observational, interview, and documentary data (Spradley, 1979).

During the *participant observation*, the first author spent more than 400 hours in the field over the course of a year. She fully participated in volunteer activities in a range of departments, e.g. sorting donated clothes, tidying cellar rooms and distributing food. Working as a volunteer shift supervisor for three months, she also joined team meetings, various celebrations as well as three formal meetings of the shelter volunteers and employees. She interacted with a wide array of volunteers, paid staff, refugees, and donors, totalling at least 180 people. Her prolonged engagement in the shelter allowed her to unravel how volunteers' experiences of meaningfulness evolved over time. In situ, the researcher created short notes and voice recordings, typically in bathroom breaks to not interrupt the flow of interaction. She used these to produce detailed field reports after her shifts, amounting to 417 pages. In order to triangulate, validate and challenge the first author's emerging findings, the second author also volunteered, observed and took field notes on three occasions at the beginning and the end of the data collection period. Her field contribution allowed for multi-perspective cross-comparison, adding to a fuller understanding (Clerke and Hopwood, 2014).

Additionally, the first author conducted 29 formal semi-structured *interviews* with volunteers and employees, averaging approximately one hour. Interviews allowed her to gather more focused data on how volunteers construct their work, particularly in relation to the wider societal debate. Sampling aimed at covering a broad range of volunteer experiences: the approach was variously organic (due to the high fluctuation of volunteers and the researcher's rotation through different departments), snowball and purposeful. The sample reflects the diversity of volunteers in terms of age (23-78 years), gender (21 female, 8 male), occupation, and involvement. The first author approached interviewees during shifts or via email, informing them about the research topic, namely their experience of volunteering in refugee support. Interviews took place at interviewees' apartments, in quiet corners of the shelter, or in a nearby café, according to participants' preference. Topics covered, among other things, the volunteers' experience at the shelter, their organisation, and interactions with refugees and paid staff. Each interview was

recorded and transcribed, resulting in roughly 1000 pages of material. Around 150 informal interviews provided complementary insights. These 'friendly conversations' before, during or after work shifts (Spradley, 1979) were often initiated by volunteers. They were useful for drawing the researcher's attention to phenomena participants considered important and yielded backstage impressions, e.g. shelter gossip. Notes about these conversations were included in the field reports.

The first author gathered *documentary data* within the shelter, e.g. team leaders' messenger chats and screenshots of online shift schedules. All this data was open to the public and thus exempt from strict confidentiality protocols. The online conversations helped flag 'hot topics', and the shift plans helped track volunteer numbers. Furthermore, the first author collected media coverage about the shelter to illuminate how debates in the shelter related to wider societal discourses on the meaningfulness of volunteer work.

The following table gives a condensed overview of the data (Table I):

Data analysis

The meaningfulness of volunteer work frequently recurred as a subject of conversation among volunteers. Once it emerged, the first author drew on extant frameworks on 'pathways' to meaningfulness (Lips-Wiersma and Morris, 2009; Rosso et al., 2010) to derive categories to analyse the data, namely society, beneficiaries, community, and tasks. These are discussed as relevant contextual factors influencing meaningfulness, along other individual-centred aspects, e.g. spirituality and identity. As the contextual factors resonated with the data, the first author coded meaning units that showed how volunteers related meaningfulness with these four categories. Furthermore, she coded elements of the observational and documentary data that matched the categories, e.g. newspaper articles that celebrated volunteer work as beneficial for society. In adopting this abductive approach (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007; Locke et al., 2008), she aimed to unravel how experiences of meaningfulness were contingent upon shifting contexts – both organisational and discursive. In a next step, she merged in-vivo codes into first-order themes, to remain close to the informants' language. By means of iterative cross-categorical comparison, which

involved going back and forth between themes and creative theory building, we developed more abstract second-order themes that captured the dynamics between shifting context and experiences of meaningfulness. In a last step, we aggregated the second-order themes to a key theoretical dimension, namely the 'settling' process. Table II exemplifies our analytic approach for the category society.

We continuously corroborated our findings, using multiple ways to ensure 'validity' and 'relevance' (Hammersley, 1992). We triangulated between different types of data: whereas the field notes captured interactions between volunteers and refugees, the interviews more directly assessed the volunteers' constructions of meaningfulness. As volunteers heavily drew on the wider societal debate, we used the collected documents to reflect on how shifts in the societal debate informed volunteers' accounts. Furthermore, we triangulated between researchers: inspired by recent developments in organisational ethnography (Jarzabkowski et al., 2015), this team-based process allowed us to engage in collective sense-making (Scales et al., 2011). Peer debriefings with the third author further provided credibility and plausibility checks (Flick, 2007). The analysis of a negative case – in our case a volunteer who left – led to further validation of our second-order themes (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Findings: contextual shifts of meaningfulness in the Welcome Shelter

Without being prompted, volunteers frequently reported that the wish to 'do something meaningful' attracted them to the shelter:

> I wanted to do something meaningful. Meaningful for me and maybe also for my fellow human beings. (Justin, shift supervisor)
>
> Well, for me it is about using my time for something meaningful and do something half-way reasonable. (Uta, volunteer)

While the desire to contribute 'something good' and help people in need constituted a strong pull, subjects also derived meaningfulness from the volunteer community and the specific tasks they

undertook. Given the prevalence of these ideas, we have organised our analysis according to the categories society, beneficiaries, community and task – categories that extant research on meaningfulness also describes as relevant contextual factors (Lips-Wiersma and Morris, 2017; Rosso et al., 2010). Below, we will explore the dynamics around meaningfulness regarding each category to clarify how the 'overflow' of meaningfulness and the shifting contexts influenced experiences of meaningfulness.

Society

During the first weeks after the shelter's inauguration, the topic of volunteer work dominated the public debate (see Figure 1). The media played a crucial role in framing it as an honourable 'wave of solidarity' (*Berliner Zeitung*, 16 August 2015). The press specifically celebrated the Welcome Shelter as a successful 'showcase' (*Tagesspiegel*) for its unprecedented volunteer engagement (*Tagesspiegel*). In particular, the media covered the volunteer organisation's founding by a student who attracted a massive number of volunteers via Facebook, and German president Joachim Gauck's visit, during which he put volunteer work in a pointed historical context:

> There is a light Germany that is shining against the backdrop of a dark Germany that we experience when we hear about attacks against refugee shelters or racist actions against human beings.

Here we see how volunteer work was construed to represent exemplary citizenship and the surmounting of Germany's 'dark' shadows, past and present – rhetoric that exemplifies what we call 'overflow'. Besides the president and other politicians, the shelter also became a destination for various entertainment celebrities. Social approbation also coined volunteers' face-to-face encounters with the public, as people who donated clothes, money, or toys recurrently thanked the volunteers for their engagement:

> A woman comes into the coordination office. (…) She comes closer and says: 'I have [donated] metro tickets for €200.' The volunteer says 'GREAT'. (...) Natascha [another volunteer] shouts 'THANK YOU' from the back. The woman: 'Yes, I really want to thank YOU, YOU are doing something great.' (field notes, 19 November 2015)

Only a few months later, the public debate shifted towards what were seen as negative effects of the refugees' arrival: the rise of right-wing movements, resulting societal schisms, security concerns, and practical issues regarding housing and employment. A tipping point of this discursive shift came on New Year's Eve, 2015, in Cologne and other German cities, when groups of young asylum-seekers from North Africa totalling at least 2000 men allegedly assaulted, raped, and robbed 1200 women (see Figure 1). The subsequent public outcry left its mark on the perception of refugees and volunteer work as public debate began to question the euphoric welcome the civil society had extended to refugees (*FAZ*, 10 January 2016; *taz*, 30 December 2016).

So how did the 'overflow' and the following discursive shift affect the volunteers? Our data show that they significantly framed how volunteers related to their work. Interviewees reported how media coverage attracted them to volunteer work in the first place. They heard of it on the 'radio' (Uta), and other media outlets:

> Last summer, it was really these pictures, these pictures of human beings queuing in front of the public asylum authority, where I thought, now you cannot go on, you cannot look away anymore. (Ida, head of logistics department)

Hence, volunteers entered the shelter with the wish to 'make a difference' (Uta) and to position themselves in the controversial debate about the political decision to not close the borders for refugees in summer 2015:

> Personally, I really wanted to take a stance against that [xenophobia] and say, OK, I see the world in that particular manner. And I want to contribute my share to this. Not that the world necessarily becomes a better place – I do not want to change the world or something – but just enough that I can say I have made a difference. (Uta, volunteer)

Social approbation strengthened the idea of contributing to society in a meaningful way. Take these notes on an exchange with the volunteers' spokesperson Hilmar:

> 'I am more political than ever, even though I was a member of the Green Party for over ten years, a party hack really, also their press officer.' He talks about how he used to go to the district assembly every Tuesday night, 'but I cannot stand this any longer. (…) I say, rather come to the Welcome Shelter for two or three hours. Here you can really have impact.' (field notes, 26 October 2016)

Once public debates shifted, the idea of 'making a difference' that had underpinned the volunteers' self-understanding encountered problems, especially after the Cologne assaults:

> I was shocked what happened there, what foreigners did. Well, I do not want to pigeonhole them. But you do quite a disservice [to volunteer work in refugee support] with that, that's totally clear. (Gaby, volunteer)

While volunteers started with tremendous societal recognition, grim new political realities now inflected their everyday interactions with the public and friends:

> Media plays a very unfortunate role at the moment, you know. Because they overemphasise certain events, true or untrue, and this influences the personal environment of the volunteers, so they have to face some critical questions from their own environment. (Arthur, volunteer)

While some volunteers dropped out as a result, others persevered in their quest to do meaningful work by reframing their work and role as being about integrating foreigners into German society:

> But especially for the generation of the parents or for older people as well, it has to be totally clear what the values we are living up to are and that you have to accept these values. This is, I think, important and I became more aware of this after Cologne, because there it was actually the case that the offenders were mostly foreigners, Northern Africans from the Arabic region. (Gesa, shift supervisor)

Indeed, as the political climate became more hostile, some volunteers became determined to insist on German values vis-à-vis refugees there:

> But we say: We are in Germany here, we do not jump a red light. This is how we are. Also we wait when someone else talks and wait and then it is our turn. When the doctor opens at 10, he opens at 10.... Well, we have to / and they really have some like / educate them a little. Maybe that is the wrong word, but I think it really is like that. (Natascha, volunteer)

Due to the shifting public debate, volunteers reframed their role and work as meaningful: from making a difference to educating refugees into the German society.

Beneficiaries

The 'overflow' also influenced how volunteers related to the refugees. Volunteers reported how 'the smiles on the faces' (Lina) made them experience their work as meaningful. In displaying gratitude, refugees confirmed volunteers' sense of being carers for and helpers of those in need (see also Grant, 2007; Fehr et al., 2017):

> It was really just, well, a friendly and easy contact in which their flight and all their horrible experiences were not in focus, but rather their joy and gratefulness for being able to arrive somewhere. And I really got a lot out of this. (Dora, shift supervisor)

Encounters with grateful refugees allowed volunteers to experience their work as meaningful, as volunteer Bernd observed about his colleagues:

> It gives them a good feeling, doing something meaningful, it's more for themselves, actually. It is a little bit like in Buddhism, karma. You know – if I do something good for other people, it brings me forward at the same time. (field notes, 15 January 2016)

Overall, the beneficiaries' gratitude confirmed the meaningfulness public debate had attached to volunteer work in everyday practice. At the same time, this positioned refugees in a particular light: as persons in need, who gratefully acknowledge the volunteers' efforts.

However, the volunteers' expectations in terms of gratitude were not always met. Especially as months went by, disappointment and frustration arose among refugees as they were stuck in the emergency shelter, without being able to start the new life they had strived for. This frustration left its mark on their relationship with the volunteers. Increasingly, conflicts cropped up. In various encounters, volunteers saw refugees as 'lacking gratitude' (Gesa), being 'pretty demanding' (Uta), and sometimes 'disrespectful' (Merle). A hygiene counter volunteer pointed out:

> Well, some are really thankful for everything, but many have pretty high expectations, like 'If this is not here, I do not want anything' or the like. Or they ask for a specific brand of deodorant or aftershave. (Uta, volunteer)

Refugees' failure to adequately appreciate volunteers' efforts undermined the volunteers' sense of being helpers and carers, especially when refugees tried to outwit volunteers to get more clothes, hygiene articles, or food (e.g. field notes, 11 May 2016). The clothing counter was robbed twice, which Ida described as 'extremely frustrating'. Volunteers connected helping with 'fairness' (Gesa) and 'playing by the rules' (Natascha) – something the refugees' behaviour sometimes challenged:

> I am in the coordination office, working together with the volunteer Hans. The head of the office comes in. Hans asks 'What did I miss last week?' 'A lot', says Katharina, raising her eyebrows. 'The police were here, they bashed each other with a hookah.' She tells us about how she witnessed a group of young male refugees brawling in front of the shelter. Hans

shakes his head. Katharina agrees: 'I was like, what do they do, they fuck up our work completely, if they dash each other's brains out.' (field notes, 31 May 2016)

Consequently, volunteers found it increasingly difficult to align their sense of doing meaningful work with the actual behaviour of some of the refugees, who some came to think of as thoughtless:

> Again and again I am shocked how people just can be so egotistical. I know, this is common and it is not only a problem with refugees. In their case, I can understand this to some extent, because if I lost everything and had nothing left, it might be OK that I just want to get as much as possible. But sometimes I also think where is the solidarity?' (Ida, head of logistics department)

For some volunteers, refugees' behaviour prompted a view of them as pitiful and infantile victims – people so traumatised they do not know better. Lea, a shift supervisor, attributed a refugee's theft of clothing to 'post-traumatic stress disorder' and thought volunteers should be 'understanding of her behaviour'.

Some volunteers compensated for the absent refugee gratitude by introducing rituals of thanking each other (see also Fehr et al., 2017). After an exhausting shift in the kitchen, for instance, the shift supervisor asks the volunteers to gather and says 'I really appreciate very much that you sacrificed your afternoon' (field notes, 16 October 2016). Being deeply frustrated by problematic encounters, others changed departments. The overly demanding refugees caused Uta to abandon the hygiene counter and return to the logistics centre. There she could avoid problematic encounters with beneficiaries while maintaining her sense of doing meaningful work.

An 'us vs. them' mentality (Jörg) increasingly framed some of the volunteers' attitude towards the refugees. This divide became particularly pronounced in departments responsible for distributing resources, as this messenger chat between clothing-counter supervisors illustrates:

> Fritz: Talking about Father Sayed. (…) We are not going to let him take the piss out of us any longer!
>
> Katharina: But Fritz, I do not want to read expressions like this here! That's impolite and inappropriate.
>
> Fritz: You can call it inappropriate or just call a spade a spade.

(Messenger conversation, 7 October 2016)

Some volunteers fiercely continued to relate to the refugees based on 'equality…rules… respect' (Fritz), and criticized them for misbehaviour or traditions they saw as unacceptable, i.e. making six-year olds wear a hijab. Others excused rule-breaking by refugees, citing trauma, mental illness, or normal egotistical 'human behaviour' (Stella). Reframing refugees in that manner allowed these latter volunteers to sustain their sense of meaningfulness by refraining from debate about problematic interactions, confrontation and conflict.

Community

The founding story of the shelter, namely that of an overwhelming number of volunteers tirelessly working together, helped foster an immediate sense of community:

> The atmosphere of the shelter and between the volunteers was already amazing. (…) You just helped where help was needed and this gave me a really good feeling right away. I thought immediately, I am in the right place. Here, you do something very practical, very simple and still it is meaningful. It is useful right away, you do not have to be doubtful if your work is meaningful, you just see it. (Dora, shift supervisor)

Once volunteers entered the shelter, the community fuelled a sense of meaningfulness. One of the two volunteer coordinators depicted the shelter as special because of the strong community: 'What motivates the volunteers is the special atmosphere' (Rita). In an official volunteers' meeting on the shelter's first anniversary, the new director also recognised this:

> I realised that this shelter is very special on my very first day.… The reason for this [is] the volunteers…they created a very special atmosphere here. (Steven Wisch, director of the shelter)

This atmosphere graced activities organised by and for the volunteers: a Christmas party, a 'helpers' party, a 'We say thank you' party, and other rituals of gratitude, such as 'thank you' postcards from the non-profit managing the shelter (see also Fehr et al., 2017). In sum, all this created a community that strengthened volunteers' sense of purpose.

Over time, the community started to fracture, especially as the paid staff working for the non-profit increasingly assumed the shelter's more important tasks. This led to a split between paid and unpaid workers, a common phenomenon in volunteer work (Golden-Biddle and Rao, 1997; Kreutzer and Jäger, 2011). In particular, conflict intensified six months after the shelter opened when a new director was contracted to take care of the 'consolidation phase', as he put it (see Figure 1). The volunteers' feeling of being part of a community with shared goals was further challenged when the new director officially introduced himself only to the paid employees. After a visit from the director, Claas, a clothing counter volunteer ironically remarked 'Wow, he has showed up here. What an honour' (field notes, 6 April 2016). Similarly, volunteers reacted warily when the non-profit established a staff unit for 'volunteer work and integration', seen as taking control over volunteer matters. Rita, one of the new paid coordinators, had been a volunteer and found herself accused of 'defecting to the other side'. As the community fractured, volunteers lost the spirit of togetherness that the shelter's founding story had led them to expect.

With the feeling that paid staff wanted 'to take over' (Julia), some volunteers started to work against them (e.g. by giving wrong information to the press) while others began isolate themselves. This surfaced in particular when the full-time paid volunteer coordinator was hired. Many of the volunteers refused to collaborate with her and sought to reinforce their sense of ownership of the shelter. The paid volunteer coordinator reflected:

> 'At some point I was so stressed out about the meetings, because they [the volunteers] always were down on me. (…) I think this has a lot to do with, well that some of the very engaged volunteers, they really personally identify with their work, with the meaningfulness for and in this volunteer work. For some it is very important to do this work in order to get personal recognition. For some it might be so central that they are freaked out that this might get lost.' (Iris, volunteer coordinator)

Volunteers started to organise formal and informal events for themselves and established a 'refugee council' that worked separately from the one run by paid staff. In so doing, they reasserted their own community and its sense of purpose. Consequently, this reframing of community sharpened the

split between volunteers and paid staff, hampering cooperation and souring relationships with 'distrust' (Fritz).

Task

Volunteer work is casted as 'doing good' (Blackstone, 2009). Being able to do something good can foster a sense of meaningfulness, as extant research shows (Lips-Wiersma and Morris, 2017; Rosso et al., 2010). Although volunteers' tasks like sorting clothes and distributing food were of a mostly menial nature, they provided volunteers with a sense of 'taking action' (Lilli) and 'being in charge of something' (Friedrich). Katharina reflected on this initial hands-on atmosphere in the shelter:

> It was this atmosphere like, we can do this on our own and create something. We just help them now.… This was so great, because it was just like, we can do this, we CAN DO IT attitude. (Katharina, shift supervisor)

Volunteers quickly organised their work into tasks, structures, and hierarchies. There were departments with formalised roles, e.g. 'shift supervisors', 'heads of departments', and 'regulars'. These roles became important sources of meaningfulness for different people: Some volunteers had recently finished university, lost a job, or were confronted by an empty nest or retirement. Volunteer work filled a gap, allowing them to experience a sense of purpose as an active person. As one volunteer put it:

> I have realised that I am more a hands-on kind of guy. (…) I have been looking for a job for approximately one and a half years now. Accordingly, I have a little bit more time to really do something – this is why I volunteer a lot. (Justin, shift supervisor)

Other volunteers framed the work as a counterbalance to paid work (see Rodell, 2013). Thea, otherwise an office worker, said:

> This sorting of donations is so much fun for me. Because it is something – this is kind of manual work, you know. You can just switch off your brain and then your mind wanders in all sorts of directions. (Thea, volunteer)

After some months, decreasing volunteer numbers resulted in constant restructuring, which together with miscommunication, challenged volunteers' sense of meaningfulness. Some felt that

the increasing professionalisation complicated immediate and direct help for the refugees (see Figure 1). For example, in the logistics centre, the volunteer organisation's management professionalised by introducing a sorting scheme that required the re-sorting of several hundred boxes of donated clothing. Dana, a volunteer, described this measure as 'completely senseless'. Because the non-profit needed the original room for storage, her colleague Wolfram spent several weeks in the cellar, carrying heavy boxes of donations from one room into another. During a break from his solitary six-hour shift in the basement, Wolfram reflected on his experience, as reported in this field note:

> Wolfram tells me about the cellar and says the resorting and storing is almost done. I say, wow, that has been a tough one, all alone, no sunlight, physical work. He: 'Yes, I just hope that everything stays like this for a while and not everything is new and all different again, just like it always was before', sighing. He says he needs a break, this is why he went upstairs. 'On a beautiful day like this, it is really hard', he says. (7 June 2016)

This remark illustrates how the constant reorganisation called meaningfulness into question. Interestingly, however, this contextual shift did not necessarily lead to the loss of meaningfulness. In order to sustain meaningfulness, volunteers increasingly framed their work as a service, which allowed them to experience themselves as active persons without having to confront the fact that some of their work did not necessarily help to reach the set goal of the organisation, namely to help the refugees. How else can we explain Wolfram's readiness to carry heavy boxes from one cellar room to another for weeks? Likewise, the following example shows how a volunteer reframed volunteering as meaningful service even though she saw the task at hand as senseless:

> The shift supervisor Paul asks me and Garda to reorganise the storage room for school supplies. (…) We start to sort things, it is a mess. Garda says: 'This does not make any sense. Soon someone comes and re-sorts this in a different way. Always it is like this, but I do what I am told.' After a while, a volunteer from the school mentoring programme comes in: 'What do you do here?' (…) We explain what we have been told. She says that the paid social workers will sort school supplies next week when shelves will be delivered. (…) After she leaves, Garda says: 'This really does not make any sense if they sort it again next week. But I don't care. I do what I am told.' (field notes, 4 February 2016)

It is important to say that not all volunteers coped with reorganisation by reframing their work as a service. Others actively resisted new instructions by ignoring them or inventing their own procedures, sometimes by communicating these on 'unofficial' papers affixed to the walls. These responses to reorganisation made professionalisation problematic, as shift supervisor Dora describes:

> They do not want to hear what we changed and just continue to do their own thing. (…) And they just ignore things we have decided and implemented.' (Dora, shift supervisor)

Overall, the shifting context, here the reorganisation of tasks, did not necessarily lead to a loss of meaningfulness. Instead, volunteers sustained their meaningfulness by framing their work as a service, which allowed them to reinforce their sense of taking action despite menial work, miscommunication and poor organisation. Others resisted professionalisation, which led to inefficiency and frustration among supervisors.

Discussion

This paper set out to explore the influence of shifting societal and organisational contexts on individuals' experience of meaningfulness. We have argued that societal discourses can create an 'overflow' of meaningfulness by framing specific types of work as extraordinarily meaningful. Our analysis showed how this 'overflow' influenced people's constructions of meaningful work. On the one hand, the 'overflow' mobilised people to undertake the type of work framed as exceptionally meaningful. On the other, our findings unravel how the 'overflow' can lead to problematic responses that surface in particular once the societal and organisational context of work shifts. Our results indicate that contextual shifts can not only challenge individuals' understanding of their work as meaningful leading to meaninglessness; they can also trigger subjects to reframe their work in dysfunctional ways in order to sustain the sense of meaningfulness they derived from the 'overflow'.

In shedding light on the influence of contextual shifts on meaningfulness, the paper contributes to extant literature in three ways: First, it adds to the meaningful work literature by pushing forward a socialised understanding of meaningfulness, untangling how societal discourses feed into individuals' experiences of meaningfulness – an area that has been undertheorised so far (Bailey and Madden, 2017). Second, the paper contributes to the emerging literature on the impact of shifting discursive and organisational contexts on meaningfulness (Barrett and Dailey, 2017; Cohen et al, 2018; Long et al., 2016). Studying an extreme case with an ethnographic approach allowed us to explore in situ how contextual shifts influence individuals' constructions of meaningfulness. Based on this in-depth empirical engagement, our paper theorises contextual shifts in drawing on Swidler's (1986) notion of 'settled' and 'unsettled' contexts – an interpretation that may be useful for understanding shifting contexts more generally. Third, in showing how individuals reframe their work in dysfunctional ways to sustain their meaningfulness, our study points to potential consequences of 'too much meaningfulness' (Bailey et al., 2017, p. 427), which are fuelled by the shifting context that lies beyond the control of individuals and organisations. In so doing, it complements the related literature on the dark sides of callings (e.g. Bunderson and Thompson, 2009) with a socialised perspective. In the following, we will unpack these contributions in detail.

Towards a socialised understanding of meaningfulness: The metaphor of 'overflow'

In interpreting meaningfulness as a subjective experience that is culturally and socially co-produced, e.g. by societal discourses, we seek to move extant literature on meaningfulness beyond the focus on the individual and the organisation towards a more socialised and embedded understanding. When we refer to societal discourses, we mean 'mega-discourses' (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000) about meaningful work fuelled by public debates, e.g. in the media. In line with recent studies (Bailey and Madden, 2017; Carton, 2018; Mitra and Buzzanell, 2017), we argue that societal discourses can provide 'discursive resources' (Kuhn et al., 2008) that individuals draw on to construct their work as meaningful. From this point of view, constructions of meaningfulness are understood

as high-tension processes that involve negotiation and translation (Mitra and Buzzanell, 2017). These studies highlight the difficulties individuals encounter when trying to connect everyday work practices with discourses about meaningful work, e.g. when bridging the disparity of 'mopping the floors' and the mission of 'putting a man on the moon' (Carton, 2018).

In our case, individuals did not struggle to align their daily work with societal discourses in the first place. In the beginning, societal discourses constructed the notions of being a good, helpful, and caring citizen of 'the light Germany' who contributes to 'the wave of solidarity' in 'the new summer fairy tale'. These positive notions about work were widely socially accepted and readily available to construct work as meaningful, as our findings show. Only when the context shifted and societal discourses changed, the constructions of meaningfulness turned problematic. We suggest interpreting this phenomenon through the metaphor of 'overflow' of meaningfulness, defined as a stage in which societal discourses frame particular types of work as extraordinarily meaningful. This metaphor highlights how societal discourses fluidly 'pour' into individual experiences of meaningfulness and potentially 'flow over', turning problematic when contexts shift. It allows us to draw attention to the dynamic relation between subjective experiences of meaningfulness and societal discourses (Cornelissen, 2005). In so doing, our paper underscores the relevance of discursive shifts for experiences of meaningfulness.

Theorising contextual shifts: The 'settling' process

Furthermore, our study promises to develop when and how a state of 'overflow' is likely, which helps to understand the nature of contextual shifts more generally. A limited number of studies has explored how contextual shifts challenge individuals' constructions of meaningfulness (Barrett and Dailey, 2017; Cohen et al., 2018; Long et al., 2016, Marchiori and Buzzanell, 2017). However, they mostly study how long-term cultural shifts affect meaningfulness, e.g. generational shifts (Long et al., 2016). This long-term perspective makes it difficult to theorise how contextual shifts and experiences of meaningfulness are intertwined in everyday practice, as contextual shifts are typically

seen as a given (Barrett and Dailey, 2017; Long et al., 2016) or primarily studied through interview accounts (Marchiori and Buzzanell, 2017). Drawing on observational, interview and documentary data enables us to study more closely how contextual shifts flow into subjective experiences of meaningfulness. This allows us to add empirically grounded theoretical explanation to the conflictive nature of contextual shifts.

In our study, changes in societal discourses, in the interaction between volunteers and beneficiaries and in the work processes combined to manifest a disruptive shift, which partially unfolded beyond the control of the organisation and challenged individuals' sense of meaningfulness derived from the 'overflow'. This dynamic can be theorised through Swidler's (1986) conceptualisation of 'unsettled' and 'settled' – or in our case settling – contexts. Following Swidler, unsettled periods lack appropriate taken-for-granted templates for action that can guide individuals on how to make sense of and behave in a situation. As a result, people draw on wider cultural resources for guidance – what we refer to as societal discourses. In settled situations, by contrast, people tend to follow the 'undisputed authority of habit, normality and common sense' (Swidler 1986, p. 281), whereas ideas lose their power to guide action.

While Swidler primarily distinguishes between 'unsettled' and 'settled' states, our study takes an interest in the process of 'settling'. The early phase of the refugee shelter characterised an 'unsettled' situation for refugees, volunteers, the organisation, and society. The momentous decision to not close the borders created an unprecedented situation in which common sense, habit, and normality were suddenly open to question. This levelled the field for societal discourses to guide actions, which explains why so many people were committed to do tasks they would not do under different circumstances.

As the context both at the societal level and within the shelter settled, volunteers struggled to align their sense of meaningfulness with the changed conditions. For some, this shift led to a loss of meaningfulness (see also Barrett and Dailey, 2017; Cohen et al., 2018), which helps explain why volunteer numbers dropped so drastically. For some, it led to a compensation across different

domains, e.g. when making up for lacking refugee gratitude by introducing rituals of thanking each other (see also Fehr et al., 2017). Others tried to find alternate ways of conceptualising their experiences to fit with their ideals of meaningfulness. In a quest to sustain the latter, the volunteers 'reframed' their work in dysfunctional ways. This might help explain potential negative consequences of 'too much' meaningfulness (Bailey et al., 2017).

Individuals' response to 'too much' meaningfulness: 'Reframing'

The emerging literature on the idea of 'too much' meaningfulness mainly locates this problem on the individual level, where it can lead to exploitation (Barcan, 2018; Dempsey and Sanders, 2010) or feelings of imbalance (Lips-Wiersma and Morris, 2017, p. 70), causing a loss of meaningfulness in the end. Similarly, the related literature on callings explains their potential dark sides, e.g. poor work life-balance, low pay, exploitation, bad career decisions and overly high expectations (Berkelaar and Buzzanell, 2015; Bunderson and Thompson, 2009; Dobrow and Thosti-Karas, 2012; Madden et al., 2015; Schabram and Maitlis, 2017), with the 'individual wiring' of people (Bunderson and Thompson, 2009, p. 53). Called individuals, so the argument goes, are willing to endure these problems, because living out their callings enables them to experience their work as fulfilling in the context of their individual biographies.

Our study shows how the problematic consequences of 'too much' meaningfulness do not necessarily have to be wired in individual life stories. Indeed, our paper shows how societal discourses can bring about 'too much' meaningfulness and hamper 'healthy pursuits' (Cardador and Caza, 2012, Schabram and Maitlis, 2017) of meaningfulness at the workplace. As our analysis shows, volunteers sustained their sense of meaningfulness, once it was challenged by contextual shifts, by reframing their work environment. Instead of letting go of ideals of meaningful work fuelled by the 'overflow', individuals reframed the environment to align it with their ideals (e.g. the 'ill-behaved' refugee becomes a 'traumatized victim' and thus even more in need of volunteer help).

This reframing sustained volunteers' meaningfulness; at the same time, it had negative consequences for themselves and their work environment. Some started to mention stress, anxiety, and burnout (see also Barcan, 2018; Bunderson and Thompson, 2009). 'Reframing' might also explain why some volunteers did not provide enough space for refugees to move out of the position of a passive victim and therefore participate in the running of the shelter. In positioning themselves as purveyors of German values, some volunteers took a paternalistic and culturally superior stance vis-à-vis the refugees, reinforcing the social boundary between 'us' and 'them'. In 'reframing' the community, some resisted cooperation with paid staff as well as the professionalisation of the shelter. Therefore, our study suggests that potential dysfunctions of meaningfulness might be caused by an interplay of shifting contextual factors and problematic individual responses to them. Looking at meaningfulness as a subjective experience that is embedded in a wider social context might help to understand more specifically why, when and how meaningfulness becomes 'too much'.

Overall, the evidence of this study suggests that meaningfulness might be heavily contingent upon social context, both societal and organisational. In theorising how contextual shifts and individual experiences are intertwined, we seek to move the meaningful work literature towards studying more closely the social context in which meaningfulness emerges, wanes and becomes problematic. In developing the metaphor of 'overflow', we have argued that societal discourses can be strong drivers of meaningfulness, mobilising and motivating people to work, which turns problematic once the context is settling and ideas lose their power to guide action. If so, individuals might be unable to let go and thus find alternate ways of conceptualising their experience in order to fit their ideals of meaningfulness, leading to complications for themselves, their work and the organisation.

Conclusion

This paper contributes to extant research by showing how societal discourses about extraordinarily meaningful work can become resources for individual constructions of meaningfulness. These are challenged when discourses shift and the context is settling. As a response, individuals tend to reframe their work in dysfunctional ways to sustain their sense of meaningfulness.

Our findings can be transferable to other types of work, which are framed as extraordinarily meaningful. For example, we may find similar dynamics in aid or care work (e.g. Ashforth and Humphreys, 1993; Figley, 2002; Morris and Feldman, 1996), which are often discursively framed as meaningful (Cain, 2012; Deeb-Sossa, 2007; Hebson et al., 2015). Here, the ideal of doing meaningful work by caring for people in need might lead to physical and emotional exhaustion as work realities fail to meet these ideals (e.g. Bunderson and Thompson, 2009; Pavlish and Hunt, 2012), especially when contexts shift under austerity (Baines and Cunningham, 2011; Cohen et al., 2018). Our study points to the necessity of managing expectations of meaningfulness in order to prevent dysfunctional individual responses to shifting contexts in such types of work.

Our insights in relation to meaningfulness in settling contexts may also aid in understanding start-ups. Their early phase is by definition unsettled (Kazanjian, 1988; Rutherford et al., 2003), which might set the stage for high expectations of meaningfulness with respect to spurring innovation, creating wealth or serving the public good (Clarke and Holt, 2010) – expectations that current discourses on start-ups stoke. However, start-ups are prone to shifting contexts as they grow. Arguably, this may lead to similar dynamics of meaningfulness; the changing reality may clash with the ideals people hold with regard to their role, work, community, and the organisation's impact (for a similar argument see Collewaert et al., 2016).

Our study has limitations, offering opportunities for future research. First, our case stems from a unique socio-historic and cultural context, namely the so-called refugee crisis in Germany. Although this extreme case allowed us to reveal the dynamic around the 'overflow', the settling process and the individuals' reframing in a pronounced manner, future research might look at how

smaller contextual shifts affect meaningfulness, e.g. in growing start-ups, in order to elucidate the transferability of our concepts. Second, our case is extreme as far as we look at a work activity, in which meaningfulness is supposed to be a central driver, namely volunteer work. While our findings are arguably transferable to other settings, future studies might explore explicitly how the dynamic of meaningfulness in shifting contexts plays out in paid work, where a lack of meaningfulness might be compensated by economic incentives. A third limitation concerns our methodology: Whereas our study was longitudinal, we interviewed participants only once during the data collection period. The timing of the interview within the settling process might have influenced their accounts. Therefore, we encourage future studies to complement participant observations with several interview periods in order to assess more directly how individuals' constructions of meaningfulness evolve with shifting contexts.

Despite its limitations, our study has significant implications for future research and practice. Exploring meaningfulness as an embedded social phenomenon might offer a fruitful area for future work. An important practical implication is the need to proactively confront and manage expectations around meaningfulness in types of work that are discursively framed as particularly meaningful, e.g. during onboarding. This might prevent individuals' dysfunctional framings of their work, allowing them to cope with changing realities. However, our findings imply that there are limits to managing meaningfulness, especially when its sources lie outside the organisation – and thus beyond managerial control. Broader societal discourses may be a potent way to infuse work with meaningfulness; by the same token, they can lead to struggles, when contexts shift.

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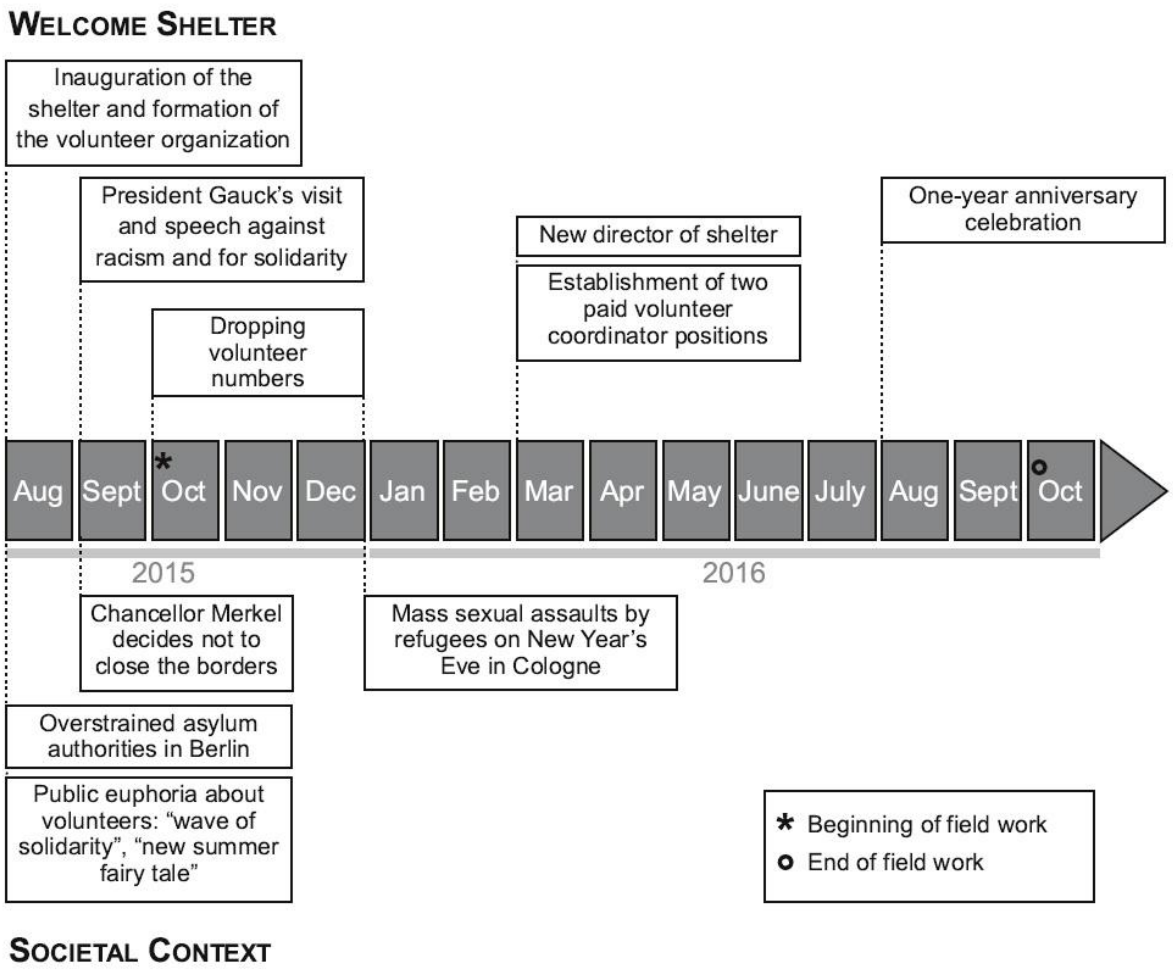
Figures

Figure 1: Timeline of key events within and beyond the Welcome Shelter



Tables

Table I: Overview of collected data

Participant observation	**Formal interviews (R1)**	**Documentary data (R1)**
Researcher 1 (R1): - 1 year in different departments of the volunteer organisation - Detailed field notes on observations and informal interviews *Researcher 2 (R2):* - 3 field visits at the beginning and end of data collection	- 27 volunteers of different age, gender and level of involvement - 2 employees of shelter management (vice manager and volunteer coordinator) - Verbatim transcripts	*In the shelter:* - Social media and messenger conversations - Daily shift plans - Website of volunteer organisation - Newsletters and press releases *About the shelter:* - 83 media outlets (newspaper articles, TV reports)

Table II: Data structure for the category 'society'

First-order themes	Second-order themes	Aggregated dimension
Contextual factors		
Volunteer work as 'summer fairy tale'	'Overflow' of meaningfulness	
Shelter as successful 'showcase' of volunteer work		
Shelter as example of the 'light Germany'		
Celebrity visits		
Social approbation by friends		
Ritualistic thanking by donors		
Volunteers as naïve and selfish 'do-gooders'	Contextual shifts undermining the 'overflow'	'Settling' process
Refugees as potential abusers (Cologne assaults)		
Refugees as potential terrorists (2016 Berlin attack)		
Facing critical questions by friends and family		
Individual experiences of meaningfulness		
Volunteering as 'making a difference'	Sustaining meaningfulness by reframing volunteer work role	
Volunteering as 'contributing one's share'		
Volunteering as 'becoming an active citizen'		
Volunteering as a way to enforce German values		
Volunteering as educating		

Notes

[i] We do not give the exact reference to some of the newspaper articles to protect the shelter's identity.