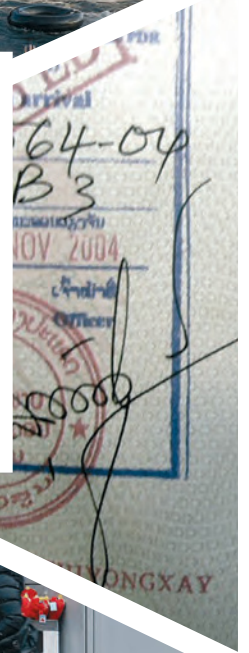




Proceedings of the 2018 ZiF Workshop
**Studying Migration Policies at
the Interface between Empirical
Research and Normative Analysis**
Matthias Hoesch & Lena Laube (eds.)



Nausikaa Schirilla

**Studying Refugee Solidarity as
'Ethics from Below' –
Some Ideas for Further Research**

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DOI: 10.17879/95189438573

This text is based on a talk at the workshop “Studying Migration Policies at the Interface between Empirical Research and Normative Analysis”, held at ZiF Bielefeld, 2018 September 10-12. The text is an Open Access article, published with ULB Münster in 2019 and distributed by MIAMI (<https://miami.uni-muenster.de>) under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence, as part of the *Proceedings of the 2018 ZiF Workshop “Studying Migration Policies at the Interface between Empirical Research and Normative Analysis”*. The complete *Proceedings* are available under doi: 10.17879/85189704253.

The workshop as well as the publication of the proceedings were kindly supported by the Center for Interdisciplinary Research Bielefeld (ZiF), the Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics” Münster, and the Forum Internationale Wissenschaft Bonn (FIW Bonn).

Recommended citation: Schirilla, Nausikaa 2019: “Studying Refugee Solidarity as ‘Ethics from Below’ – Some Ideas for Further Research.” In *Proceedings of the 2018 ZiF Workshop “Studying Migration Policies at the Interface between Empirical Research and Normative Analysis”*, ed. Matthias Hoesch and Lena Laube, ULB Münster (miami.uni-muenster.de), 71–78. doi: 10.17879/95189438573

Studying Refugee Solidarity as 'Ethics from Below' – Some Ideas for Further Research

Nausikaa Schirilla¹

Soziale Arbeit mit Schwerpunkt Migration und interkulturelle Kompetenz,
Katholische Hochschule, Freiburg

Abstract

Since the years 2014/15, there has been a decisive and continuous rise in civil society's commitment for asylum seekers and refugees in Germany. Some studies were conducted on the demographic structure of volunteers, the fields of commitment and on motivations; furthermore, integration policies take into account these civil societies activities on different levels of politics. But up to now there is no link to ethical theories. This paper argues that empirical research on normative attitudes in refugee solidarity might lead to complementary insights concerning migration ethics. I ask if we can conceive refugee solidarity as "ethics from below".

Keywords

Volunteering, Migration Ethics, Refugees

DOI

10.17879/95189438573

Many ethical theories on freedom of migration refer to a human rights' approach, as the right to ask for asylum is laid down in the Universal Declaration of Human rights (§14) and it is specified in the Geneva Convention on Refugees from 1954. Whereas positions arguing for free borders in general are strongly contested, there is a consensus in migration ethics that refugees (persons being threatened by religious, political, ethnic or social persecution) should be allowed – at least to a certain extent – to enter a foreign country and to look for protection (Schlothfeld 2012). But the

¹ Email: nausikaa.schirilla@kh-freiburg.de.

right to ask for asylum is not a right to be granted asylum, so the refugee status is “given” by certain authorities and problems of narrow and wider definitions of refugees arise. That means that many persons regarding themselves as refugees either do not succeed to reach a safe country or, if they do, they might not get the refugee status and face extradition or living illegally in the country of their choice (Khosravi 2010). Thus, new ethical questions arise again concerning their rights, access to work and healthcare, their right to stay, etc.

Further ethical debates concerning free borders are to be found within the framework of egalitarian liberalism and they refer to human rights, human dignity, global rights, global equality and global justice (Carens 2013). The controversial position that is to be found at the core of these debates is whether the sovereignty of national states (or any other given communities) implies “the right to exclude”, as Cassee puts it (2016), to strongly restrict access to a country which means a restriction of the global scope of basic rights and values. Anna Goppel challenged these positions by arguing that there is a certain bias in these approaches as states’ claims to decide on immigration only from the perspectives of their “own citizens“ is taken for granted without giving any grounds or reasoning in public debates (Goppel 2015). On the one hand, some authors take a cosmopolitan stand and argue that the core of the ethical problem of migration is an understanding of global civil society and that “[...] as civilians we are obliged to regard all other civilians as having a fundamental right to freedom of movement” (Frost 2003: 114). On the other hand authors argue against freedom of immigration on the ground of human rights, referring to undemocratic or repressive cultures of certain groups of migrants, or to clashes in society, threats for the welfare states or for societies’ or communities’ identity to be preserved (see the contributions in Cassee/ Goppel 2012). Many of these debates refer to empirical questions that are not well researched yet and are connected to presumptions and arguments shaped by media coverage.

These controversies have to be taken further and claims and presuppositions that are related to social practices, political claims or dominant discourses have to be questioned. Whereas ethical debates on freedom of migration as roughly outlined above aim at grounding decisions on norms and values, people act according to norms and values and they also act in the field of migration. Apart from professionals like social workers or doctors, there is strong movement in civil society in Germany that supports refugees irrespectively of what their legal status is. Human rights`based NGOs and civil societies groups like “Pro Asyl” fight for their rights as equal citizens.

In order to open up new perspectives on normative debates it is interesting, I suggest, to look at how normative controversies are dealt with by agents in the field.

That means to ask how ethical questions are represented in social practices. Some anthropologists take up this perspective and call it the “ethic turn“ in anthropology. Social anthropologists like Veena Das, Didier Fassin and Michael Lambek carried out manifold research on how ethical questions are embedded within certain societal contexts and how ethics is entangled with everyday life (Lambek et al. 2015). Didier Fassin for example argues that there are two strands of anthropological research on ethics. First, some authors are asking what the social constraints of morality are, how norms imposed by society or communities can be perceived in social practices and how moral values are related to the social order (Lambek et al. 2015: 176). The second strand focuses on the individual dimensions of ethical orientations and on the freedom of each person to act according to norms, as well as their experiences and inner conflicts in relation to these norms. According to Fassin, an application of ethical theories to the social sciences and politics raise questions on moral and ethical aspects of human action that are “empirically and normatively impure” (Lambek et al. 2015: 177). The notion of impurity implies that ethical questions cannot be answered in general, they are intertwined with personal or collective interests and different contexts, and might be answered differently depending on the situation. “Morality and ethics are, indeed, always embedded in historical contexts, cultural universes, and social practices.” (Lambek et al. 2015: 178). Referring to the question of whether it was legitimate from an ethical point of view to publish the highly contested Mohamed caricatures in solidarity with the magazine “Charly Hebdo” after the terrorist assault in 2015, Fassin claims that no ethical theory leads to a clear answer due to the “impurity”, e.g. the political and social embeddedness of all possible alternatives. Thus Fassin argues, that in order to think ethically it is not sufficient to base decisions or attitudes on norms and values alone . Therefore, he does not elaborate on ethics, but rather on ethical orientations and realities.

The idea of Fassin does not intend to criticize abstract ethical argumentations and to argue for contextual ethics, nor does it favor applied ethics. The intention of these authors is to see how ethical questions are posed and shaped in various contexts. The focus is on what Michael Lambek calls “the ethical”: “[...] how our lives are deeply and fundamentally ethically informed” or at “an ethical dimension of living” (Lambek et al. 2015: 6). For Lambek, living ethically is to be understood as “a hermeneutic process of interpretation and self-interpretation as people make their way in the world, with the human capacities, cultural resources, and historical circumstances given them.” (Lambek et al. 2015: 6)

Empirical research on ethics carried out by these anthropologists is focused on subjects, and this is different from applied ethics. Research is dealing with ethical

practices, orientations and with internal conflicts of “the ethical”. It is looking at fields of social life where ethical questions (e.g. what is justice) arise and on how subjects and politics deal with these questions. In this perspective ethical orientations in the action of subjects, the way, they theorize their claims of justice, defend the legitimacy of their claims come to the fore.

To give an example I will refer to the study on “Humanitarian Reason” by Fassin (2015). Fassin carried out an analysis of fields of humanitarian commitment and protection of vulnerable groups worldwide. He was looking at legal documents, at motivations and arguments of researchers, activists and NGOs on a(n) (inter-)national level using the methods of document analysis and qualitative interviews with stakeholders and activists. An important outcome of his study on humanitarian commitment is to show that there is a contradiction of values in the field. On the one hand, there are ethical orientations to be observed that aim at a recognition of others as human and equal beings, grounded in an unconditional human solidarity. On the other hand, Fassin depicts attitudes or practices he names “humanitarian governance”, which is based on a particularly deep, unequal relationship between donors and receivers. In this discourse, receivers of help have to be grateful or they have to present their suffering, and this means that there is no reciprocity between helpers and subjects of help. The different moral orientations Fassin describes are interrelated with inequalities in the global world and the working of humanitarian organizations.

Studying Refugee Solidarity in Germany

I suggest it would be interesting to apply this perspective of “the ethical” to volunteering with refugees in Germany. Studying the emerging “welcoming culture” or civil society’s movement (Schiffauer 2018) in order to see if, and how, ethical orientations are working in refugee solidarity could lead to interesting insights. Many tensions described above will certainly reappear – e.g. unequal positioning of refugees and helpers, embeddedness of refugee solidarity in political discourses, the role of egalitarian conceptions of human rights, etc.

In fact, there has been an interesting development in Germany concerning voluntary work with refugees. Since 2014, and mostly in the years 2015 and 2016, between 6% - 11 % of the population were active in either helping newly arrived asylum seekers on a charity basis or supporting them through a more continuous commitment (SI 2017: 59). In the year 2015, when nearly a million asylum seekers entered Germany, many persons were active in mediation with authorities, interpreting, providing accommodation and clothing, organizing social encounters

and exchange, legal help, German courses and many other kinds of help to support the newcomers to settle down in their new environment (SI 2017, Karakayali/ Kleist 2015, 2016, Schiffauer 2018). As a study financed by the Protestant Church of Germany suggests, the figures are quite impressive in relation to other fields of voluntary activities in Germany (SI 2017:59).

As Olaf Kleist and Serhat Karakayali have shown in two studies based on quantitative research and qualitative interviews (Karakayali, Kleist 2015, 2016), the motivation of those solidarity workers is manifold. Their findings suggest that some volunteers are active because of a humanitarian or Samaritan attitude and mostly wanted to “help”. Furthermore, their findings show that motivations that are generally relevant for voluntary work in Germany, mostly personal development, development of competences and social exchange, also play an important role for volunteering with refugees. Besides, the authors state that for certain activists political motivations – mostly to resist rightist movements – were decisive, and this also implied the wish to work for a just society, to contribute to global justice and to realize equal chances of all citizens of the globe. But it would be interesting to see if these motivations change, are interrelated or develop further in course of time.

I do not want to go deeper into the literature on volunteering, but I want to suggest these phenomena are comparable with what Lambek calls “the ethical”, and migration ethics should also take these aspects into account. In order to get deeper insights into the ethical dimensions of the work of civil society’s groups in the field of refugee solidarity, it would be necessary to do research with different methodological approaches and focus on normative orientations and relate them to ethical approaches. It would be interesting to look at ways how volunteers deal with ambivalences and contradictions and how activists view their subjects. Researching their motivation, how they conceive their work, how they relate themselves to the subjects of their work, and what ethical grounds they give for their work might help to explore how normative orientations change and develop in the course of their activities.

Taken from recent literature, three approaches concerning normative orientations of refugee solidarity work could be analyzed: a religious, Samaritan attitude (Collier 2014), orientation towards equal rights and global justice (Carens 2013), or a radical orientation towards the presence of the other, inspired by asymmetric ethical approaches following Levinas, Butler and others (Kelz 2015).

In order to see how these different approaches are interrelated, I will give a speculative example and present a case study from a training course I conducted. A

student presented the case of a volunteer who had always argued in favor of the existing legal order and who was rather apolitical concerning migration and just wanted to help. He became the mentor of a family from Albania. For one and a half years, he supported the family and guided them very closely. In the end, all their children went to school and did fairly well, the father attended German classes and even found work. But the asylum application of the family was rejected, their appeal at court was turned down, their petition rejected and they were facing deportation. Although this volunteer had never questioned the state's right to extradite in general he started to question extraditions starting from this particular case. According to the student who presented the case he said: "This cannot be, that a person like him is deported to [...]. They were doing so well, they did their best to integrate [...]. It is unjust to make them leave our country [...]". Analyzing the normative orientations of that case, I would argue (in a slightly speculative way), that the person involved started from a Samaritan attitude, moved to an orientation towards the presence of the other, because of the closeness of the relation established, and from there developed a stand on global equal rights.

Giving this example, I wanted to show the empirical richness of motivations, experiences and moral orientations that are to be found in this field. Furthermore, I want to hint at developments, social and political practices entangled with ethical questions that are worthwhile to be studied further. There is a field of "the ethical" concerning volunteering with refugees that has to be made visible and to be taken into account.

What do these outlines for further research mean for "studying migration policies at the interface between empirical research and normative analysis" as the guiding question of the conference? First, it is important to note that in research on normative orientations, what subjects express in their daily actions does not replace an ethical theory. But research findings on ethical orientations of volunteers are located at an interface between empirical research and normative theories. So I would like to ask if ethical orientations of volunteers analyzed by in such research might lead to an "ethics from below". As far as I can see this term is not used by Fassin and his colleagues. "Ethics from below" does not replace theoretical considerations on ethical concepts, but it might be used as a complementary approach in further discussions on migration ethics.

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