

**ARTICLE**

# Therapeutic activism: Supporting emotional resilience of volunteers working in a refugee camp

Gillian Hughes<sup>1</sup>  | Charlotte Burck<sup>2</sup>  | Laureline Roncin<sup>3</sup><sup>1</sup>Freedom from Torture, London, UK<sup>2</sup>The Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust, London, UK<sup>3</sup>Help Refugees, London, UK**Correspondence**

Charlotte Burck, The Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust, 120 Belsize Lane, London NW3 5BA, UK.  
Email: cburck@tavi-port.nhs.uk

**Abstract**

We describe the development of an approach offering emotional support to volunteers who responded to the humanitarian crisis that has left thousands of refugees living in precarious and dangerous conditions across Europe. The Refugee Resilience Collective was set up by a group of therapists drawing on social justice approaches, working on the French–English border. It was recognised that the emotional needs of volunteers were being neglected, putting many at risk of secondary traumatisation and “burnout.” We elaborate ways we set about fostering an environment of self-care which, we argue, is crucial to sustaining volunteers. We have offered regular consultations to individuals and teams to nurture resilience and the potential for life-changing growth, to help them manage the challenges of the work and to build their collective resistance to the abusive state system that refugees face. “Doing hope” for others and collective action are crucial components of our approach.

**KEYWORDS**

emotional resilience, humanitarian aid, refugees, social justice, volunteers

The mass migration of refugees into Europe has developed into an international crisis over the last few years which most European governments have been neither willing nor able to support. A growing band of volunteers has mobilised to support and advocate for the refugees who find themselves living in precarious and violent circumstances. Many of the volunteers, motivated by activism and the urge to help in desperate times, are young and inexperienced with little training behind them. This substantial volunteer force is providing essential supplies of food, sleeping bags, and tents, as well as referrals to advocacy and legal representation for those in transit.

They collectively represent a vital political voice which stands in opposition to the hostile environment. Although humanitarian organisations are increasingly recognising that stress and compromised mental health among staff threaten the effectiveness of organisations (Welton-Mitchell, 2013), the emotional needs of the volunteers across Europe have not been prioritised, given that there have been such limited resources to support even those in crisis.

We describe here how, as a team of 10 family therapists and clinical psychologists, we joined this volunteer force in March 2016 when we set up the Refugee Resilience Collective (RRC) in the Calais refugee camp (and later in Dunkerque). Our aim was to offer emotional support both to refugees and the volunteers supporting them. However, over time our work has become increasingly focused on volunteers, as we have struggled with the challenges of being able to offer anything meaningful to refugees who are continually being moved on by police, and as the value of supporting the volunteer community has become ever clearer. We had been aware from the start of our work in the Calais camp of the dangers of secondary traumatisation and possibilities of "burnout" for volunteers, many of whom come to the work without any professional experience or guidelines for managing the effects of witnessing the traumas about which refugees have spoken and were still experiencing.

We share what we have learnt from the multitude of accounts given each week by those that we have supported, from the perspective of the welfare coordinator "on the ground," and from the experience of volunteering ourselves. We hope that this contributes to understanding what it means to volunteer in situations of crisis, illuminates some of the dilemmas and contradictions inherent in this work, and suggests how volunteer communities might strengthen and protect themselves. We argue that it is essential to foster an environment of self-care in contexts of humanitarian aid and social activism in order to facilitate the engagement, energy, and sustaining of volunteers.

Over the three years since we founded RRC and have been visiting northern France in pairs every Friday, we have witnessed a significant shift in attitudes towards self-care within the volunteer community. At the start of our work, people were suspicious about what we could offer and wary that asking for support would be viewed as a representation of their personal failure. However, about 18 months on, the following quote appeared in a prominent position on a wall in the warehouse in Calais where the majority of volunteers working to support refugees, are based.

Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.  
(Audre Lorde, 1988)

## 1 | OUR POSITION

We came to this work from an explicitly political position, feeling compelled to respond to the refugee crisis taking place on our UK doorstep. The volunteer force stands in opposition to the far-right movements which have been burgeoning across Europe, fuelled by the anti-immigrant rhetoric which dominates the majority of our media outlets. Our position, alongside all the dilemmas it raises, is one our team shares overtly with the volunteers we have worked with and has powerfully informed the relationships we have been able to form with them, whether in one-off consultations or over longer periods. Working to support volunteers, coming alongside volunteers, being ourselves volunteers has been a profound learning experience for us.

Our team's theoretical frameworks draw on social constructionist, liberation psychology and narrative approaches (Afuape & Hughes, 2016; Burck & Hughes, 2018; White, 2005). We have all worked for many years with marginalised communities who have experienced abuse and violence. Our position is that the personal and social cannot help being political. Liberation psychology explicitly acknowledges and addresses the impact of oppression, disempowerment and abuse on wellbeing. As with narrative practices, liberation psychology aims to connect people through their shared experiences of oppression and abuse and supports collective social action. Our theoretical

approaches fit with the Calais context because of their explicit focus on social justice and relationships of power (Reynolds, 2010; 2011; Waldegrave, Tamasese, Tuhaka, & Campbell, 2003; Waldegrave & Tamasese, 1994), holding the many layers of multiple and wider systems at their heart (Cronen, Pearce, & Harris, 1982) and emphasising the negotiated and co-constructed relationships with those we work with.

Stepping outside our usual professional contexts has presented considerable challenges to our professional knowledge and orthodoxies—for example, in how we reconceptualise the boundaries of our relationships. Our work with refugees and volunteers has sat within what Rita Giacaman (2018), in the context of the occupied territories of Palestine, has termed the “suffering domain.” It is comprised of exposure to political and other forms of violence, human insecurity, ambiguity, uncertainty, humiliation, deprivation, silencing and violation of human rights. Volunteers regularly bear witness to such accounts and experiences and are themselves increasingly caught up in violent interactions with state authorities. Working within these extreme contexts of suffering has a profound impact on our relationships as both activists and carers. In our efforts to stand alongside those experiencing suffering and abuse, the struggle can easily become a personal one where we, as volunteers, become deeply affected by what we witness. Therefore, in our conversations with volunteers, we continually make explicit the connection between suffering and injustice, but also the forms of resistance which unite people in their responses to injustice. The term “vicarious resilience” describes how humanitarian workers can potentially be transformed in positive ways through the witnessing of strategies of survival and resilience in traumatised individuals (Hernandez-Wolfe, Killian, Engstrom, & Gangsei, 2015). We ourselves saw how the volunteer force had the potential to be strengthened through their work, although this was very often a painful process.

As volunteers ourselves, we have noticed how this traumatising and exhausting environment is at the same time profoundly thought-provoking and offers an extraordinary community of support and solidarity. This work has had a fundamentally transformative impact on us, and we have witnessed how the volunteers have also been profoundly influenced.

## 2 | THE VOLUNTEERS' CONTEXT

The majority of the volunteer organisations in Calais operate out of a large warehouse located at the edge of town where food and practical items are prepared for distribution to refugees. The Calais refugee camp, which was destroyed in October 2016 but held up to 10,000 people at its fullest, the Dunkerque refugee camp, burnt down in March 2017, and, currently, refugees sleeping rough where they can have been supported by a shifting body of volunteers—some who just came for a day, others who stayed for months, a year, or longer. Since the camps were destroyed, refugees have continued to arrive and live in the Calais area, but the French authorities' strategy, intended to prevent another camp from forming, of aggressively moving people on and confiscating their possessions, has meant that people are more scattered, fewer in number, and even more in need. The volunteer community has shrunk, but, at the time of writing, there are still numbers of volunteers offering vital support.

When our RRC team first arrived, we found voluntary organisations that had been founded and had grown organically in response to the crisis in Calais, where very few established NGOs were present (only MSF, Médecins du Monde and Secours Catholique had very small teams in place). We discovered a culture in which volunteers were regularly working 7 days a week, 12 or more hours a day and still feeling they were not doing enough. As nobody had contracts telling them what their expected hours of work were, and there was such an obvious need for help, people found it very difficult to put boundaries around their working day. They worked in extremely demanding circumstances to try to provide essentials for the refugees, often having to ration inadequate supplies, and face anger and disappointment when supplies ran out. When there were not enough volunteers, many felt they had to keep working even when exhausted, driven by the overwhelming need and a wish to make up for the hostile and violent treatment refugees had experienced to date.

Very many of the volunteers were in their 20s, usually with no experience of working with vulnerable populations or in crisis situations. As one volunteer put it, “in the face of no experts taking on this task we are having to make it up as we go along.” The majority of volunteers lived in caravans next to the warehouse or on a nearby campsite, sharing tiny spaces with virtually no privacy. Evenings often involved discussing distressing experiences of the day. Nobody took regular days off and there was limited finance and access to leisure activities which made it difficult to take a break. Many relied heavily on alcohol, which seemed a simple way to relieve stress and be sociable but didn't prove to be effective in managing the emotional impact of what they were witnessing. It was apparent from the start that there was an urgent need for support of some kind for the volunteers.

The CRS (Compagnies Républicaines de Sécurité), the French national police force whose special brief is public order and riot control, were a constant aggravating presence in Calais, and regularly employed tear gas and pepper spray and carried out physical assaults on refugees. Volunteers often witnessed this police brutality and other mistreatment, feeling powerless to intervene to protect refugees, some of whom they had got to know as friends. After the Calais camp was destroyed with the loss of the communities which had formed there, refugees were less protected and the environment became increasingly hostile. To compound the sense of the injustices that volunteers were witnessing, they themselves began to come under attack by the police. The authorities increasingly viewed the volunteers' presence and services as running counter to their efforts to create a hostile environment to discourage refugees from settling. As a consequence, the police found every opportunity to frustrate the efforts of volunteers such as creating increasingly restrictive rules about when they were allowed to distribute food.

Because of these very demanding circumstances, there was a strong sense of community and solidarity amongst the volunteers. Everyone shared a common purpose and had to cooperate closely to deliver the support needed. The sense of community was very powerful, and many volunteers talked of how it was their first experience of working and living alongside others who held the same values as they did, and how bonding and strengthening it felt to be part of something important and meaningful.

### 3 | DEVELOPING WORK WITH VOLUNTEERS

After our team's first encounter with a volunteer who had burst into tears while describing the stress and its effects on herself and others and her request for us to offer some support, we began to build our connections with the volunteer communities. We started by developing a way of offering support that made sense to them. We described our work as similar to our approach to working directly with refugees: supporting resilience and resistance to the effects of witnessing trauma and abuse. This seemed to connect with volunteers' identities as activists. We took care not to use the term therapy as we did not see ourselves as offering this, nor did we want to invite the suggestion that volunteers needed to see us because of a personal weakness—and indeed some volunteers expressed this concern. We therefore began by holding weekly “pit stops” wherever we could find a place in the warehouse or its surrounds where volunteers could come to reflect with others on the week and talk about any issues which had arisen, as there was rarely space to do this in their other meetings. We drew on our systemic and narrative practices, giving people time to talk about the ever-changing context, any particularly challenging incidents and their feeling that they were never doing enough. At times volunteers were very angry about the failure of governments and the callousness of the police, distraught about particularly brutal assaults they had witnessed, and about how this invited individuals' vulnerabilities. We used our narrative practices to help people connect with their values and beliefs, and to invite collective responses to counter the isolating effects that trauma so often has (Denborough, 2008; Lee, 2013). We take the view that resilience is a relational quality, strengthened by community (Smith, 1999; Ungar, 2011), and we often enquired about how the community of volunteers were working together, inviting reflections on what activities were supportive and how these could be strengthened.

These pit stops gave volunteers the opportunity to start talking about the emotional toll the work was taking on them, and an alternative narrative began to emerge that distress was not a sign of weakness, but an inevitable

response to the work. The demands of the work are so great that most volunteers experience significant mood difficulties, poor sleep, intrusive memories or flashbacks. There has been much research on the negative effects of working with traumatised individuals on healthcare professionals, and how burnout and vicarious traumatisation can occur. Burnout is defined by Valent (2002) as arising when an individual is repeatedly unable to reach his or her goals, which leads to frustration and diminishing morale. In Calais the authorities were constantly frustrating the actions of volunteers through confiscating supplies that had been handed out, and the legal and political context itself meant that it was impossible for volunteers to do any more for refugees than offer temporary and minimal respite from the harsh reality. Valent (2002) also describes how vicarious traumatisation (or secondary trauma syndrome) arises when an individual is unable to rescue someone from harm, which leads to distress and guilt. Volunteers often hear accounts of refugees being harmed by security forces or those who are taking advantage of their vulnerable position—and sometimes witness this directly. There is very little that they are able to do to help keep people safe, and this experience is hugely distressing, particularly to inexperienced volunteers who do not have any professional training to help them manage their responses. Volunteers often raised doubts about whether anything they were doing was making a difference, when it was obvious that this was not a viable solution to the issue of refugees seeking safety and a home. The longer the volunteers stayed working in Calais, the more likely they were to raise their doubts and dilemmas and present with exhaustion and feelings of powerlessness.

This period of offering pit stops was important for us; it enabled us to witness the demanding and often distressing experiences of volunteers, alongside our own direct experience of working with refugees, and established our legitimacy as a group who could offer support in a way that made sense. We had many conversations through which we tried to help volunteers develop their resilience and build their personal and collective resources. We often asked questions about beliefs and values (What drew you to Calais?; Which values have connected you with others and how do these sustain you?) or questions which highlighted interactions and moments that had been positive in the midst of so much chaos (What do you think has been important to people (refugees) in your involvement this week? Who else has shared this with you? What have you noticed your team members doing which seemed to make a difference? What do you think people have noticed about you?). These types of narrative question served a number of functions: to help individuals keep connected with their values and motivations so that these might sustain them in feeling hope and purpose in what they were doing; to help people notice small moments of significance so easily overlooked and help them build on these; to introduce a culture of noticing strengths and showing appreciation to reinforce solidarity between volunteers; and to situate their work in the broader context.

In one pit stop, a woman described how she had been part of a group who had planted flowers in tins and had distributed these around the camp. At the time she had been somewhat dismissive of the benefit of this as it seemed far more important to be distributing food or clothes. However, when she returned a week later, she noticed that people had been watering and nurturing the flowers and that these created splashes of beauty amongst the flies and dirt. She was deeply moved by this and understood the flowers as symbols of hope and strength of spirit, a sign that people were able to see beyond their desperate circumstances. This moving account brought forth other examples from volunteers of moments when they had been able to join with refugees in hope. We often discussed how important the less tangible support they were giving might be, and highlighted small moments of interaction which had been meaningful as one human being responding to another and how volunteers at times worked to “do hope” (Weingarten, 2000) with refugees who felt despair to enable them to keep going in dire circumstances.

As the narrative about self-care amongst the different organisations began to shift, the view of taking breaks began to transform—from an act of letting others down to something seen as crucial to allowing the work to be carried on. The pit stops had grown in size, and we started being approached by people who wanted to talk with us individually as well. A welfare coordinator was employed whose task it was to overview the welfare of the volunteers. Experiences had shown how useful it was to get a sense of each individual's personal resources at the start of their volunteering and then do regular “welfare check-ins.” The welfare coordinator was invaluable to our work, taking responsibility for reminding people of when we were coming, encouraging people to make use of our sessions and booking individuals into timed slots to meet with us. If the coordinator was particularly concerned about someone,

they would try to direct the person our way. Some people made regular use of these opportunities to consult, and others just came as a one-off. Alongside our work, the welfare coordinator also continued to reinforce the value of eliciting and noticing small but significant interactions to enable difference and increase resilience.

Carrying out consultations influenced by liberation psychology included referring to our own dilemmas, our position about injustice, our own doubts, and ways we had come to think of these alongside the other volunteers. We worked hard to sustain these consultations as collaborative relationships, acting as “companion” activists with others, identifying issues and resources that could be brought to bear and, where appropriate, bringing expertise from our other work settings. This included being directive at times, encouraging volunteers to view looking after themselves as crucial to being able to continue to work for the well-being of refugees.

## 4 | CONSISTENCY AND COHERENCE

We rapidly learnt how important it was for us to maintain consistency and coherence in our approach. Because we rotated the pairs of the team who visited each week—a practical necessity as team members were employed in the UK—volunteers were unable to meet with the same person if they came for consultation regularly. Individuals who saw several different team members over time reported that this worked well enough for them. Sometimes volunteers would choose to wait until they could meet again with the same team member with whom they had had a particularly significant conversation. What we were told was how important it was to have a confidential space to talk with a trained professional who knew something about the Calais context. However, the meaning of confidentiality was one which we needed to continue to negotiate from time to time, as there were sometimes concerns that we might be connected to “management” or that we would reveal their personal and organisational worries. If particular worries arose in a consultation, we would discuss this with the volunteer and think with them about who best to connect with in our absence to try to ensure their well-being.

As a team, it was important that we shared values, principles and theoretical frameworks to ensure that, although we had individual styles, our approach would be experienced as consistently emphasising individual and collective resilience and maintaining a focus on injustice (Reynolds 2010). It seemed crucial that we were able to offer a consistent presence as a team with volunteers able to count on us being present almost every Friday or, if that was not possible, available by telephone. In the comings and goings and unpredictability of the refugee context this proved to be an extremely important aspect of our team approach.

We had heard individuals’ accounts of their frustrations when trying to obtain emotional support via skype or telephone from practitioners who were unfamiliar with the Calais refugee context, and that at times this lack of understanding felt unbridgeable. As we had direct experience of working within this complex and stressful environment, we were aware of the painful dilemmas involved, which meant that we and the volunteers could also use shortcuts in communicating. Over time, we built up an increasingly nuanced understanding of the challenges that volunteers were facing. As we were not living alongside the volunteers, we moved in and out of the experience, which offered us some helpful distance, space and time for reflection. Visiting Calais in pairs meant we could use the journey home to reflect on experiences of the day, and offer each other mutual support. We also met regularly as a group for supervision with an external consultant, Glenda Fredman, who is a clinical psychologist and systemic psychotherapist. We were acutely aware of the need to support ourselves so that we could be fully available for the volunteers we were meeting with.

Exploring ways in which individuals could incorporate self-care into their daily lives was an issue which often came up in individual consultations. We often invited people to make connections between their emotions and bodily responses. We talked about the pragmatics of looking after themselves—sleep, exercise, breaks. Or we helped people to reconnect with ways they had previously used to cope in the face of difficulties, such as writing, reading, drawing, listening to music or running. We sometimes discussed how to incorporate short mindfulness practices into their day, seeing whether and how they could be used in the field. We also explored possibilities for collective

activities that were sustaining, such as sharing films, having yoga sessions, and making music together. We continued to discuss how people could give self-care some priority to prevent burnout. Notices began to appear on the walls of the warehouse such as—“When did you last take a break?”

Over time, we started to notice a shift in what volunteers brought to their conversations with us, from focusing primarily on their experiences with refugees to talking more about how to manage their relationships with families and friends back in the “outside world,” or with each other, or bigger questions about living meaningful lives, provoked by their experiences here.

## 5 | DILEMMAS AND CONTRADICTIONS IN THIS WORK

We are acutely aware of the isomorphism (White & Russell, 2007) in our relationships with volunteers, the ways in which their dilemmas and tensions resonated with our own, and vice versa. This meant that we could share and grapple with the more problematic dilemmas collaboratively, as well as build on our collective thinking and knowledge.

### 5.1 | A clash of domains; A testing of values

One young female volunteer spoke movingly to one of us about the struggle to stay close to her values when finding herself on distribution and having to tell a 40-year-old man with nothing that she could not give him another pair of boxer shorts. The expectations that many of the volunteers have of what it would mean to try and make a difference for refugees are in the realm of offering humane and respectful relationships and support, a wish to act in the “domain of aesthetics,” which involves being guided by ethics (Lang, Little, & Cronen, 1990). However, volunteer work in a humanitarian crisis is usually focused on the “domain of production,” distributing material resources or failing to be able to do so because of shortfalls in supplies and resources, and means facing one’s inability to provide safety or address injustice. A poor fit between value-driven ideals which volunteers bring to the work and hard facts on the ground often leads to doubts and questions about the value of volunteering. As research shows, this doubting of value or efficacy can be a fast track to burnout (Valent, 2002). Volunteers often brought their struggle with these doubts to us where we could both share the struggles and help elicit ways in which they were making some small important differences and other ways they could honour their values.

### 5.2 | Facing existential questions

Hearing the accounts of people who have lived through very dangerous circumstances and are currently living at the edges of survival provokes questions about the meaning and value of our own lives. The question of how best to live a meaningful life seems to be what drew many volunteers (including ourselves) to Calais in the first place, as if this experience would provide an answer. However, we found ourselves confronted by this question over and over again.

Joining other volunteers who see helping in these extreme circumstances as a worthwhile and meaningful thing to do has been experienced as life-enhancing and brings a sense of validation. Volunteers can also grow through “vicarious resilience” (Hernandez, Gangsei, & Engstrom, 2007), gaining strength through witnessing survival and growth in others. However, as individuals start to feel they have found a place in an accepting community of like-minded people, they also come to question whether they may just be doing this to feel good about themselves rather than actually making a difference for refugees.

One of the more troubling questions concerning the value of the work is whether this is the wrong approach at the wrong level. The refugees in the Calais area want to get to the UK for a number of reasons: many already have family or community connections there; they hope their grasp of English will enable them to settle, study, and work; they believe the UK will provide safety; and their horrendous experiences with tear gas and pepper spray attacks in France mean they view it as a dangerous, racist and hostile country which they want to escape. The UK

government's hostile stance is to stall on valid asylum claims and to fund security measures to stop refugees from reaching the UK. Volunteers are trying to provide the basics needed for people to survive, but are we all shoring up an untenable and unethical situation? The environment is complex. During one incident volunteers learned that some traffickers had been charging refugees for access to the volunteers' distributions of food and resources. It was a shocking realisation that the volunteers might have been unwittingly contributing to traffickers' abusive practices. Whenever conditions deteriorate, everyone feels more hopeless, and questions of how to really make a difference arise more urgently. Allan Wade (1997) describes "small acts of resistance" as being critical in maintaining our ethical coherence in contexts where oppressive structures offer so little opportunity for action. In these moments, small acts of resistance become significant gestures in asserting our values and opposition to abuse. Helping volunteers to notice these moments and for us to do the same, has been helpful in enabling us all to go on. The episode described earlier, where a volunteer noticed how people in the Calais camp were looking after the flowers that volunteers had distributed, was like an act of resistance to the squalor of the camp, and a sign that people were still able to appreciate and nurture beauty in small but significant ways. The idea of "doing hope" for others to sustain their ability to hang on to hope (Weingarten, 2000) was as key for volunteers working with refugees as it was in our work with volunteers. Reminding volunteers of the small ways in which they are joining in resistance to the oppressive context, is an important way to guard against disillusionment and burnout.

In counterbalance to the tendency for despair, we ourselves and the volunteers we met experienced the development of a more critical consciousness about the political and social conditions of inequality—a process of "*conscientización*" (Freire, 1973). The work with refugees in Calais forces people to witness and confront the strategies of oppression which the authorities use to create a hostile environment. For example, seeing the police taking people (including minors) into the police station for questioning and releasing them without their shoes; or using pepper spray on clothes and sleeping bags so that people are unable to use them; or taking away and breaking people's phones—a crucial lifeline to support; or disrupting food distributions. In particularly fraught periods we feel even more urgently the need to intervene at a political level, to lobby for more sane and humane interventions by our government. Refugees too pointed this out to us. When Mawda, the two-year-old daughter of a Kurdish family was shot dead by a Belgian police officer who had given chase to the van in which they were travelling, the families who knew them put it bluntly:

We came to get away from violence and find safety. Instead, constant danger and rejection. Everyone very kind and nice but really you need to be back influencing your government. Make a difference at home.

Although we have no wish to identify with our government, we believe it is an ethical obligation to accept some responsibility for our government's stance (see Daniel, 2012, which makes the same point in a different context), and this pushes us to political activity.

This political consciousness brings home an awareness of our privilege, which many of us had known theoretically or simply taken for granted, but had never experienced so starkly. This is knowledge which can never be unlearned. Some volunteers talked to us of feeling guilty, that they don't deserve to enjoy anything now because of the refugees' suffering. Others felt they needed to do something dramatic such as some action to draw attention to the situation which might lead to their own imprisonment, so that they would then be living the equivalent of some refugees' experiences. Our questions of how this could actually help refugees often led to exploring how they might best be able to use their position of privilege to make a difference, or go on to do socially motivated work in the future or other forms of activism.



### 5.3 | The challenges of translation: Transitioning between different worlds

This heightened consciousness sometimes creates a dislocation from family and friends back home, where life is seen as superficial and mundane in comparison, or where it has opened a chasm between the volunteers' political views and those of others. Volunteers talk about how hard it is to reconnect to people and activities when they leave Calais. There are difficulties of "translation"—how to communicate something of their experiences to those who have not shared them. One volunteer who was struggling with this had decided, in preparing to leave Calais, that she would write to all her family and friends to explain how she would like them to communicate with her about these experiences—not to ask questions in the middle of a family wedding, for example. The development of different ways of dealing with the transition were shared with other volunteers.

Another challenge for volunteers leaving Calais was how to find equally meaningful work, and how to convey what they had learned to potential employers. One suggestion we often made was to create a CV for themselves to outline and describe the skills and knowledges they had acquired. Volunteers rapidly learn "on the job" and through trial and error acquire many new skills, among others: conflict de-escalation, learning to stay attuned to the potential of conflict erupting when distributing scarce resources and how to diffuse this; managing a team comprising both long-term volunteers and inexperienced newcomers; taking responsibility for other people's safety; learning to debrief a team after a stressful episode, persuading their colleagues of the need to take a break; managing complex logistics and so on. "Back home" these volunteers would not have been accepted into roles where they could have acquired this level of skill and experience. Writing a CV serves to identify and highlight their own learning in ways many volunteers had not done before, and we sometimes suggested they ask one of their co-workers to interview them about what they had learned and give them feedback to join in this process. Some of our own conversations involve asking questions of this kind.

We also began offering our support to volunteers who had returned home through skype, if face to face wasn't possible, or putting them in touch with sympathetic like-minded counsellors and therapists near to where they lived, to help with the transition and to continue to find ways to "process" and use some of the traumatic incidents they had witnessed or heard about.

Our own team came and went between these "parallel" worlds, and we ourselves had to find ways to live with the heightened sense of privilege with which we were regularly confronted. Ideas about how to use our position productively and honourably rather than to be paralysed by guilt were crucial. We consider every act of support to the refugees in Calais as a message of support, that not everyone wanted them gone. We view the international volunteer force engaged in supporting refugees in the current international migration crisis as a significant potential force for social transformation, and part of the international system of resistance to polarisation and intolerance which spawns extremism.

### 5.4 | Boundaries and challenging power differences

Working on the ground in a chaotic refugee context unsettles traditional ideas about boundaries. Our team had always worked in settings where there was a clear separation between work and home, which was impossible in this context. The different organisations we worked with had different attitudes to the place of "rules." Some were more anarchic in their approach, with high levels of autonomy and choice about how to conduct relationships, and with a culture of working all hours in response to extreme need. The idea that it might be important to create boundaries around the work, such as switching off phones at night, was viewed as not caring enough. This created tension with other organisations who recognised that this position was often at the expense of safety and risked burnout. These more structured organisations had rules about how to respond in crises, and insisted on volunteers taking breaks and holidays—a position which could at times be experienced as autocratic or even "anti-refugee." Our own position has

been to engage people with the idea that they need to look after themselves to provide the best for refugees, but this has fitted more comfortably with some organisations than others.

The tensions between the English and French organisations and volunteers arise and subside at different times. As police violence increased, so did the tension between the groups, due to differences about how to respond. (We can also see this as an isomorphic phenomenon, with violence in the wider context playing out within personal relationships, and refugees also often becoming more aggressive towards volunteers at these times.) For French citizens, “liberté” (personal freedom) is held as a central core value and profoundly informs French volunteers’ relationship to political protest and to rules: “La grève fait partie de la culture française” (protesting is our national sport), as they would put it. The French volunteers feel it is crucial to witness and protest the increased police attacks on refugees. The English groups are perceived by the French groups as very organised by class and rules. The English organisations privileged spending what is always experienced as limited time distributing food and clothes over joining protests every day. This caused friction, despite the fact that both of these activities were important.

Despite these differences, the various organisations in the warehouse meet very regularly to plan and coordinate their actions, and their shared overarching activist values have been important in helping them navigate flashpoints.

A further troubling question is whether it is possible in this context to transcend the helper–helped relationship or transform it. Distributing food, sleeping bags and clothing, crucial as these are for survival, in itself constructs the refugees as recipients without a sense of having agency themselves. Volunteers sometimes responded to this dilemma by developing relationships with refugees which at times could create confusion. Having refugees as friends made it harder to maintain the boundary between work and rest periods. Some volunteers found, however, that their organisational guidelines around safety and breaks reinforced relationships of power, which they wanted to resist.

Attempts to equalise power differences sometimes led to misunderstandings when volunteers could not deliver on what might have been understood to have been promised, which then re-emphasised the inequalities of opportunity. At other times volunteers put themselves in danger by trying to find a refugee friend or a minor about whom they were concerned late in the evening, without taking on board the risks of encountering armed traffickers or angry and desperate individuals. As with the development of guidelines for welfare, the organisations took on board the crucial need to develop safeguarding guidelines—how to respond to refugees particularly at risk and ways of keeping volunteers themselves safe in order to be able to carry on with the work—and these continue to evolve. There remain difficult and complex issues as volunteers struggle with the meanings that their relationships with refugees have, as they offer humane interactions and hope and believe they can obliterate the inequalities which exist. And strong friendships do develop and are sustained and remain very important for both volunteers and refugees, bonds which are strong because forged in difficult circumstances.

## 5.5 | Community

“We drink, we laugh, we cry, all together. That’s our lives. Standing together, solid, strong, united. Because if we aren’t here, who will be?” Calais Volunteer. (Jurkovic, 2016)

Community and solidarity are an essential antidote to the vicarious traumatising which volunteers can experience through what they witness, because, as Lee (2013) says, trauma can disconnect us from ourselves, our relationships and our communities. The volunteer community in Calais is very close—both physically and emotionally. People have to work closely together in very demanding circumstances, and share cramped living arrangements. The sense of belonging that the community offers sustains people in spite of the huge emotional demands, and it is common to hear people say they have stayed far longer than they intended.

WhatsApp groups have become a crucial part of the community's communication network and functioning, allowing instant notification of a crisis or urgent need, and updating others about the rapidly changing context. It is a powerful signal of community belonging, but poses its own problems by creating an insatiable demand to remain connected and not switch off. When someone leaves for good, however, a ritual has developed where the individual removes themselves from all the networked groups on their day of departure, marking that they really will no longer be part of the community.

The organisations have been placing volunteers randomly into caravans on their arrival, so individuals sometimes find themselves in caravans where men and women are sharing tiny spaces. The close community also means that there are many sexual relationships between people, experienced as a very life-enhancing antidote to some of the grimness of the context but which can increase the intensity of relationships and the pain when there are splits. Individuals also have to manage losing close friendships forged in their small living spaces when people leave the community, and then immediately find themselves sharing with strangers. The organisations have slowly begun to respond by offering volunteers some choice in whom they live with.

The community of volunteers has created its own language, using words whose meanings have emerged from the context: "distro" referring to distribution (delivering food and clothing to the refugees), the "outside world" references what is going on in the rest of the world outside of this context, and "mushkila," meaning problem in Arabic. "Welfare" is used as a verb in community vocabulary, as in "Laureline welfared me today"—one indication that welfare is now an integral part of communal living. Such vocabulary acts as a useful shortcut for communication and serves to reinforce the community identity. One can also see the effect of colonisation by the English language; it is striking that it is always the French volunteers who switch to English whenever an English speaker joins their team, although they are in France. Only two of our team are French speakers. English is often a common language for communication with and among multilingual refugees.

Issues of class did sometimes arise among English volunteers, with some seen as only able to be in Calais thanks to parental financial support, which created inequality with those who had no such support. Issues of racism also arose. Because the volunteer community was almost entirely white, black and minority ethnic volunteers often found they had to manage racism on their own despite the volunteer community's acute awareness of police and right-wing racism towards the refugees. The need of the community to work together and the communal narrative of all being in this together may have contributed to the neglect of such concerns. There were attempts to address inequalities, such as those experienced by LGBTQ, trans and non-binary individuals, perhaps because some group support enabled a stronger voice within the community. People did bring their struggles with racism, sexism and inequality to us in our individual meetings where we were able to acknowledge their experiences and help them identify ways of having a voice in raising the issues. Where we had permission from the volunteers affected, we would raise concerns with the warehouse managers and help them think through how these issues might be addressed. As the volunteer community is motivated by a shared wish to resist inequality and oppression, there was an openness to learning when concerns were able to be raised within the community about inequality in their relationships with each other.

## 6 | ETHICS OF INTERVENING AT DIFFERENT LEVELS

As we have moved to mainly giving up our direct work with refugees and focusing on supporting volunteers, we have questioned what it means to work indirectly to support refugees. We have also reflected on the ethics of intervening at different levels—with individual volunteers, groups, the whole volunteer community, at an organisational level, or by attempting to influence state structures.

Individual consultations are familiar ground for therapists, and this has been a central component of our work. As we have discussed, volunteers witnessing or listening to refugees' traumatic accounts can lead to vicarious traumatisation, or connect them powerfully with their own personal struggles. As one person said in a group

discussion, "I would guess that some of us have experienced some suffering ourselves, which may be one reason we have been drawn to come to Calais at a time when they were in a period of transition, and some seemed to be searching for direction or new meaning in their lives. Some volunteers have used their individual meetings with us to identify learning from their own struggles with poor mental health, and have been able to draw on this learning to help them navigate the demanding context they are in. This individual focus has been important to help volunteers connect with personal enabling and resilience narratives so that they were not overwhelmed by the distress and suffering all around them. We often talked with volunteers about the potential for growth that the Calais work offered—through witnessing the strength of spirit and ability to survive of the refugees they encountered, and by joining with a community of people who shared their values, they were able to develop vicarious resilience (Hernandez et al., 2007).

However, as systemic therapists we view individuals as inseparable from their network of relationships. We have, therefore, at times brought people together in pairs or groups to address concerns arising between them and join in their efforts to resist the abusive practices they witness in their daily work. We have worked to support relational and community resilience. The different perspectives that people bring to these discussions opens up possibilities for change and offers opportunities for connection and solidarity. We have also talked with people about how their individual concerns are connected to the organisational culture in which they are working. This has raised issues of confidentiality as volunteers on the ground were wary that we might report back to their managers. We often offered volunteers joint meetings between them and their managers to address some of these concerns, but these offers have yet to be taken up. Instead we think through with the volunteers on the ground how they can best give feedback and claim the authority of their local knowledge and experience. We have attempted to influence organisational culture in more general ways, and the introduction of more formal structures of self-care, the appointment of volunteer welfare workers and clearer guidelines about time off are examples of positive organisational change. The question of how we can be most useful and at what level we should be intervening confronts us regularly and resonates with what we hear from volunteers who often question whether their work is valuable and makes a real difference. For us all, it is unsettling and unnerving to be part of an oppressive system over which we have little control.

Our interest in liberation practices means that we attend to contexts of power and oppression in our work with people. If we were to focus only on helping individuals to adapt and survive in the challenging context of Calais, we would risk propping up a system that is corrupt and abusive. This continues to be a dilemma which we have partially addressed by supporting the social action of volunteers (e.g., their representations to the Mayor of Calais, their challenging the state's infringement of human rights in court) and adding our own voices to the critique of an oppressive system (through campaigning, demonstrating and writing). It remains a difficult challenge, as we do not want to contribute to shoring people up in an abusive or oppressive context without addressing social change. This is why Freire's (1973) *conscientización*, promoting an increased awareness of strategies of social alienation and oppression by the state, is so important. By inviting volunteers to reflect on the impact of these strategies and of the social context on refugees and their relationship as volunteers, and helping them to feel stronger and more united (Guilfoyle, 2011), our aim is that we will all be more able to enact social change, either in the present or in the future.

## 7 | LEARNING AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The knowledge and skills we have acquired are grounded in working in the context of the refugee camps and, following their destruction, the continued gatherings of refugees on the French–English border, but we think they are relevant to many other contexts involving humanitarian crises. What has been brought home most vividly is the crucial importance of emotional support for volunteers in these contexts. Many crisis organisations are so focused on addressing the needs of those who are directly affected that they often do not include self-care as a central

component of the work. Emotional support, rather than seen as an essential, is mainly viewed as a luxury in a context where there is no room for luxury. In the current hostile climate within Europe, the volunteer community offers not only a vital labour force but also an important political voice and a generation of potential future activists, and it is critical that we are able to support them well. We have tried to help volunteers and their organisations to manage the challenges of the work that can lead to burnout and disillusionment and to nurture the positive aspects of volunteering which have potential for life-changing growth and development.

We have learnt how important it is to enter the system carefully and slowly, to join the “grammar” of the volunteer community. Focusing on eliciting and sustaining resilience, and having conversations with volunteers about forms of resistance to abusive practices has been a central component of our consultations that has fit well with the activist communities. The ideas that small interactions can be significant, that “doing hope” for others is important and that collective action can make a difference sustain both the volunteers and ourselves. We always include an acknowledgement of the impact of the environment in which they are working. We have contributed to the reduction of stigma with regard to their responses (such as difficulties in sleeping, overuse of alcohol, depressive episodes) to what they are witnessing, through naming and reiterating that these are normal responses to an adverse and brutally violent environment. This itself reduces isolation and goes alongside encouraging volunteers to use community support and helping them to connect with others.

Our direct experience of working with refugees in this context has been invaluable. It allows for our identification as companion activists, offering solidarity together with support, which, nevertheless, goes alongside an ability to have some distance to reflect on the work. We have needed to maintain self-reflexivity, an awareness of isomorphism and resonances in the work with that of the volunteers. We all face the same dilemmas and contradictions to which there are no straightforward answers but which are helpful to name as shared struggles.

An important aspect of the work has been to find a fit with the local cultures and traditions of volunteers, and to keep these in mind in particular when tensions arise between different groups in the volunteer community.

Being a team has provided crucial opportunities for learning from our experiences together, for developing our ways of working and offering support to each other. Starting out, it was essential to map who the key organisations were on the ground and to connect with these so that what we offered was coherent and offered consistency.

Volunteers have appreciated being able to reflect on their connections with “home” and how to manage the ways in which they have changed through volunteering. The transition between the volunteer community and what seems like a parallel universe can be stressful, and it is helpful to prepare people for this. The questions raised about how they can now find meaning in “the outside world” have often led to thoughtful and inspiring ideas for the future.

Our systemic/narrative approach has helped us understand the responses of volunteers within the layers of the political and social contexts, from individual to global, and to target our interventions at different levels. It has been important to avoid individualising issues and maintain a focus on resisting and changing intolerable circumstances. Our liberation psychology perspective gives us a framework for understanding and responding to the oppressive and abusive practices that refugees are subjected to and volunteers witness. It has been an ethical and moral imperative to acknowledge this in our conversations with volunteers and give them space to work out how they want to position themselves in their relationships with refugees, the volunteer community and the authorities.

## 8 | CONCLUSION

Work with refugees changes you! We have learned that support for volunteers can help people to make this a productive and life-enhancing change rather than one that leaves them depressed and disillusioned. We have been inspired by the dedication and passion of the volunteers we have met and worked with. They keep us hopeful and have helped develop our vicarious resilience in our work in these contexts. We would argue that we need to develop more therapeutic activism alongside other activisms to meet the current challenges. We believe that the ethical and

moral work of sustaining and nurturing the volunteer response across Europe is a crucial aspect of working for justice in these turbulent times.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We wish to thank all the volunteers who took part in these conversations with us, who inspired us and from whom we learned so much. We also thank the refugees whom we encountered and worked with in the Calais area, which gave us experience that was crucial in the development of the work discussed here. Gillian and Charlotte have authored this article on behalf of the Refugee Resilience Collective, whose members have been the backbone of this work and currently include Esther Usiskin Cohen, Ellie Kavner, Gretchen Siglar, Heleni Andreadi, Julia Granville, Lydia Fransham, Mary Bratley, Sara Portnoy and Sara Barratt, and with Laureline, whose welfare perspective on the ground has been invaluable. We thank Glenda Fredman too, who has helped us reflect on our work.

## ORCID

Gillian Hughes  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6558-5105>

Charlotte Burck  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0294-6751>

## REFERENCES

- Afuape, T., & Hughes, G. (Eds.) (2016). *Liberation practices: Towards emotional wellbeing through dialogue*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.
- Burck, C., & Hughes, G. (2018). Challenges and impossibilities of "standing alongside" in an intolerable context: Learning from refugees and volunteers in the Calais camp. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 23(2), 223–237.
- Cronen, V. E., Pearce, W. B., & Harris, L. M. (1982). The coordinated management of meaning: A theory of communication. In F. E. X. Dance (Ed.), *Human communication theory: Comparative essays* (pp. 61–89). New York: Harper & Row.
- Daniel, G. (2012). With an exile's eye: Developing positions of cultural reflexivity (with a bit of help from feminism). In I.-B. Krause (Ed.), *Culture and reflexivity in systemic psychotherapy. Mutual perspectives* (pp. 91–114). London: Karnac.
- Denborough, D. (2008). *Collective narrative practice: Responding to individuals, groups and communities who have experienced trauma*. Leicester, UK: Dulwich Centre Publications.
- Freire, P. (1973). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Seabury Press.
- Giacaman, R. (2018). The psychosocial health of Palestinian youth: Occupation and resistance. Presentation for The Friends of Birzeit University 40th Anniversary programme. University College London. November 21, 2018.
- Guilfoyle, M. (2011). The ethical subject in poststructural therapy. *Journal of Systemic Therapies*, 30(4), 1–15.
- Hernandez, P., Gangsei, D., & Engstrom, D. (2007). Vicarious resilience: A new concept in work with those who survive trauma. *Family Process*, 46, 229–241. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1545-5300.2007.00206.x>
- Hernandez-Wolfe, P., Killian, K., Engstrom, D., & Gangsei, D. (2015). Vicarious resilience, vicarious trauma and awareness of equity in trauma work. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 55(2), 153–172.
- Jurkovic, T. (2016). A day in the life of a Calais warehouse volunteer. *The Warehouse*. Retrieved from <https://medium.com/thedigitalwarehouse/a-day-in-the-life-of-a-calais-warehouse-volunteer-5b7c1545e9ae>
- Lang, W. P., Little, M., & Cronen, V. (1990). The systemic professional: domains of action and the question of neutrality. *Human Systems, the Journal of Systemic Consultation and Management*, 1, 39–56.
- Lee, P. L. (2013). Making now precious: Narrative conversations with asylum seekers. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, 1, 1–10.
- Lorde, A. (1988). *A burst of light: Essays*. London: Sheba Feminist Publishers.
- Reynolds, V. (2010). Doing justice: A witnessing stance in therapeutic work alongside survivors of torture and political violence. In J. Raskin, S. Bridges, & R. Neimeyer (Eds.), *Studies in meaning 4: Constructivist perspectives on theory, practice, and social justice* (pp. 157–184). New York, NY: Pace University Press.
- Reynolds, V. (2011). Resisting burnout with justice-doing. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, 4, 27–45.
- Smith, G. (1999). Resilience concepts and findings: Implications for family therapy. *Journal of Family Therapy*, 21, 154–158.
- Ungar, M. (2011). The social ecology of resilience: Addressing contextual and cultural ambiguity of a nascent construct. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 81, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1939-0025.2010.01067.x>
- Valent, P. (2002). Diagnosis and treatment of helper stresses, traumas and illnesses. In C. R. Figley (Ed.), *Treating compassion fatigue* (pp. 17–37). New York: Brunner-Routledge.

- Wade, A. (1997). Small acts of living: Everyday resistance to violence and other forms of oppression. *Contemporary Family Therapy*, 19, 23–39. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1026154215299>
- Waldegrave, C., & Tamasese, K. (1994). Some central ideas in the “Just Therapy” approach. *The Family Journal*, 2, 94–103. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1066480794022002>
- Waldegrave, C., Tamasese, K., Tuhaka, F., & Campbell, W. (2003). *Just therapy—A journey. A collection of papers from the just therapy team, New Zealand*. Adelaide, Australia: Dulwich Centre Publications.
- Weingarten, K. (2000). Witnessing, wonder, and hope. *Family Process*, 39, 389–402. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1545-5300.2000.39401.x>
- Welton-Mitchell, C. E. (2013). *UNHCR's mental health and psychosocial support*. Geneva, Switzerland: UNHCR.
- White, M. (2005). Children, trauma and subordinate storyline development. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, 3/4, 10–22.
- White, M. B., & Russell, C. S. (2007). Examining the multi-faceted notion of isomorphism in marriage and family therapy supervision: A quest for conceptual clarity. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 23(3), 315–333.

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES



**Gillian Hughes** is a Clinical Psychologist and Systemic Psychotherapist who has worked primarily in the NHS but is currently Clinical Services Lead (London & SE) for the human rights charity, Freedom from Torture. Throughout her career she has worked mainly in the NHS with marginalized communities as a practitioner and trainer, where she has developed narrative and community/ liberation psychology approaches. She has co-edited *Liberation Practices: Towards Emotional Wellbeing Through Dialogue* (2016).



**Charlotte Burck** is an honorary Consultant Systemic Psychotherapist at the Tavistock & Portman NHS Foundation Trust, London, UK and the Director of the Family Therapy and Systemic Research Centre. She is a systemic psychotherapist, trainer, supervisor and researcher. She has a special interest in working with families who have experienced violence and high conflict. Charlotte is the author of *Multilingual Living. Explorations of Language and Subjectivity*, and co-author of *Gender and Family Therapy*. She is the series co-editor of the Routledge Systemic Thinking and Practice Series and has co-edited a number of systemic books. She is currently exploring ways to interweave film-making into her work to address issues of injustice.



**Laureline Roncin** has been working with refugees for the past 10 years, with NGOs including the Red Cross and Help Refugees and in Asylum Centres in France. She divides her time between working as a psychologist and traveling around the globe. She is currently working in the Child Protective Services in France.