

”Just like in an airport”
- An ethnographic study of the discrete sociality among virtual volunteers

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Abstract

An implicit premise in the expectations towards voluntary organisations formulated by politicians, practitioners and scholars alike, is that sociality between volunteers is a positive, group based face-to-face activity conducive to interpersonal trust and intercultural understanding. Voluntary communities are accordingly idealised as the answer to including the marginalised, countering individualism in late modern western welfare states and promote societal cohesion across socioeconomic segments. Given such moral expectations, that seem to increase with every new policy document issued, the lack of studies that provide detailed accounts and conceptualisations of interaction between volunteers within these “voluntary communities” is curious. The increased digitalisation affecting all spheres, thus also the civil, makes this knowledge gap even more pressing to fill in order to discern how digitalization impacts interpersonal interaction. This paper has two main objectives. Firstly, it argues that the investigation of sociality among volunteers demands civil society scholars to integrate conceptual lenses from the toolbox of cultural and urban sociology where studies of sociality in different spatial constellations constitute a rich and conceptually well-developed tradition. Secondly, the paper demonstrates the usefulness of such a multifocal approach as it explores interaction between virtual voluntary tutors in a digitalized organisation. The term *discrete sociality* is suggested to describe the subtle and delineated interaction between the volunteers while the concept of *log-in volunteering* is proposed and discussed in relation to the term “plug-in volunteering” coined by Eliasoph and Lichterman.

1. Introduction

A quick glance across the latest policy documents, recruitment flyers, articles and other descriptions of volunteering will leave the word “community” stuck in the mind of the reader. “Voluntary communities could represent the way out of loneliness for marginalised citizens” states the chairman of the “voluntary council” - a powerful, political actor in the Danish third sector¹ - the geographical setting for this paper. “At risk citizens can be embraced by voluntary communities”, claims the Danish Centre for Voluntary Social Work – another key player in the civic landscape of Denmark (Grubb & Henriksen 2019). Statements such as these and other narratives describing voluntary communities as “strong”, “committing”, “meaningful” and other needed characteristics in modern liberal welfare states not merely echo the key message in a long line of policy documents issued by Danish governments of any ideological observance the past decades.

¹ Mads Roke on the homepage of the voluntary council: <https://www.frivilligraadet.dk/blog/2018/6/14/blog-test>

They also resonate with a broader political and public faith in voluntary communities and sociality between volunteers that has gained increasingly momentum across western welfare states.

According to these praises, almost any problem, from marginalization to individualization and radicalization can be remedied when the citizens unite in the (allegedly) “strong” or/and “meaningful” voluntary communities. On the web pages of such different actors as voluntary organisations, funds and private banks supporting voluntary organisations, the rhetorical praises are visually reproduced by alluring pictures of smiling groups of volunteers engaged in collective outdoor activities. As comforting as such visual and verbal images may be, they also raise questions. Is this kind of extrovert, group-based being-together attractive to anyone who considers to volunteer or might these images in fact discourage potential volunteers of a more introvert nature? Are volunteers per category a happy, extrovert bunch in a state of permanent dionysian sociality or what does sociality among volunteers look like “off camera”, in everyday organizational life? And finally, given the increased digitalisation across sectors: what does sociality among volunteers look like when volunteering is performed in a less photogenic “face-to-screen” setting by dispersed volunteers rather than in face-to-face proximity? The questions relating to the phenomena of “voluntary communities” or “sociality among volunteers”, are, in short, multiple, but the knowledge and concepts available to explore and answer them are few.

Interestingly, the lack of conceptualization and knowledge is not due to a lack of academic interest. Quite the contrary. A recent review documents that studies on “social capital and civic engagement” are the most cited in the ever more vast field of voluntary research (Ma & Konrath 2018: 1148). Indeed, from Alexis de Toqueville’s observations on how “opinions are recruited” and “the heart is enlarged” in associations (de Toqueville 1980 [1945]: 108) to the celebration of associating at large by Robert Putnam (2000) notions of social capital, solidarity and interaction between volunteers have constituted key pillars in the moral expectations towards volunteering both among politicians and scholars. These expectations towards interaction among volunteers are, however, not matched empirically. While several surveys show that socializing and “having fun” are among the key motivational factors in volunteering (Freise 2014; Fridberg & Henriksen 2014), the same surveys tell us little about how volunteers interact in everyday organizational contexts and how different kinds of interaction are experienced by the volunteers. Danish civil society scholar Anders la Cour thus encourages his peers to pay attention to “the dance” (the sociality among volunteering) rather than “the dancers” and their motivations (la Cour 2014:23). To this I will add: we never dance (or volunteer) in a vacuum; the size and décor of the room matter to how we move and interact, as do the choreography – the formal instructions - and the genre of dance we practice. In other words, a full picture of interaction among volunteers demands that scholars explore the object in context and in everyday organizational life to see how different forms of interaction are enabled in interdependence with the material and formal context of different organizations.

This paper argues that the scarcity of studies on voluntary sociality in part relate to the dominant methodological tradition in third sector research and in part to the dominant theoretical approaches used, where sociality typically plays a minor role. Thereafter it demonstrates how using a combination of insights from political and cultural, urban sociology allows scholars to paint a more nuanced, accurate and conceptually developed picture of different forms of interaction

among volunteers. Based on 1,5 years of field work and 25 interviews with volunteers, using such a multifocal approach, the paper then portraits a form of interaction termed “discrete sociality” among volunteers in a digitalised organization. While such sociality, at first glance, looks like the antithesis to the warm and meaningful voluntary communities cherished in society at large, the potentials of such an odd form of interaction is demonstrated by constrasting it to more “conspicuous sociality” (Grubb & Rosdahl 2006) among volunteers engaged in face-to-face sociality. Seeing interaction among volunteers through a multifocal conceptual framework thus enables the researcher to develop a more fine-tuned idea of what such interaction looks like and how different types of sociality each may hold both potentials and pitfalls. Such knowledge is valuable not merely to scholars seeking to nuance and understand the phenomenon “voluntary communities” but also to practitioners aiming to recruit volunteers for various tasks in settings that might differ from the idealised group based out door community such as your average boy scouts assembly.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. The next section presents a brief introduction to the existing literature on the phenomenon of sociality among volunteers. Then follows a section on the multifocal framework used to explore and conceptualize voluntary interaction. Thereafter a section on the methods used and the case on which the study is based takes up space and then the analysis is presented after which the paper ends by discussing the observations.

2. Studies on sociality between volunteers

According to some of the founding figures in civil society research and their intellectual heirs, face-to-face sociality represents a decisive element to all the praised characteristic clinging to the act of volunteering (Lorentzen & Hustinx 2007:105). Not only is socializing and “having fun” allegedly among the most important motivational factors behind a continue voluntary engagement (Freise 2014:5- 8), according to some, the synergy or “social capital” stemming from such interaction even contributes to the social integration and cohesion in society (Putnam 2000:18-21). Similar side effects are expected from the interaction between volunteers and the ones they help as such interaction may improve mutual understanding and acceptance across socioeconomic segments, usually on separate habitual paths. When Putnam, politicians and practitioners all refer to “voluntary communities” as the all-in-one solution for including the marginalized, countering individualism in late modernity and strengthening democratic participation, both kinds of interaction (between volunteers and between volunteers and beneficiaries) are thus probably included. This paper, however focuses on the interaction between the volunteers amongst themselves.

Regarding this form of interaction, a number of previously mentioned surveys all conclude that being with other volunteers is indeed an important part of what motivate volunteers to continue their work even though what initially brought them to the club house of the association was the concrete activity (Fridberg & Henriksen 2014). In a survey among red cross volunteers, Belgian scholar Lesley Hustinx manages to nuance the overall rosy picture of voluntary communities, by showing how the very sociality that encouraged volunteers to continue their noble task, can be among the key factor that makes them quit, as sociality might entail intra-group hierarchies and intrigues (Hustinx 2010).

Despite such nuances, studies that unpack the “black box” of voluntary interaction in voluntary communities or study “the dance”, to use la Cour’s metaphor once more, are lacking. And while la Cour himself goes some way to explore this dance, the actual focus of his study is face-to-face interaction between volunteers and users of voluntary social work, not the sociality among the volunteers (la Cour 2014). Moreover, despite deploring the lack of studies of “the dance”, la Cour’s bases his conclusion mainly on interviews with volunteers and managers, thus providing narratives of “the dance” but no actual descriptions of the concrete practice and “dancing” in an everyday organisational context. Studies actually diving into the practice and experiences of the volunteers as they interact between themselves and with beneficiaries in an organisational context are thus still in demand (Wilson 2012:201).

In a US context, the social scientists Nina Eliasoph and Paul Lichterman each have produced compelling ethnographical accounts of the interaction between so called plug-in volunteers in different third sector organizations (Eliasoph 2011:117-145, Lichterman 2006). In continuation of la Cour’s metaphor, Lichterman thus points to the loose and awkward choreography between plug-in volunteers who operate in “solo-busyness” in top-down structured organisational contexts:

“Solo busy-ness under a director was what volunteering was supposed to be like. That became even more clear when sudden interruptions to the loose choreography of solo busy-ness puzzled volunteers without prompting us to change the “dance.” Occasionally, directions issued unpredictably and we, though puzzled, would follow them anyway” (Lichterman 2006:546).

As Eliasoph and Lichterman have made their critical studies in an American context that (still) differ significantly from how the third sector is structured in a Scandinavian welfare regime like Denmark, we still need more knowledge on what kind of sociality that is enabled and sustained in such a regime context. And as organizational forms are currently changed under the wave of digitalization, studies dealing with how this new possibility of coordinating and practicing sociality are needed.

3. A composed framework for exploring sociality among volunteers

To advance our knowledge on intra-organizational interaction among volunteers, I take inspiration from Hustinx, who argues for the need of a paradigm shift in third sector research and encourages her peers to look at how certain forms of volunteering is created in interdependence with the institutional and organizational context (Hustinx 2010:167). However, whereas Hustinx (2010) equates the organizational and institutional context with formal policy, regulations and organizational guidelines, this paper considers the organizational context to include both the formal and the material aspect. Organisational context, in this paper, thus refers both to the material aspect, the physical and virtual spaces and artefacts that enable and constrain interacting and experiencing and the formal aspect - the rules and guidelines. Moreover, the organisational context is considered to be embedded in an institutional environment which it reflects, modifies and/or resist.

To grasp both the material and formal aspects of the organisational context, and explore how these aspects in interplay enable different forms of interaction between volunteers, the paper uses a multi-perspective approach rather than attempting to capture all empirical aspects with one selected theory. One important lens is the neo-institutionalist “institutional logics perspective”, (Friedland & Alford 1991, Thornton, Occasio, Lounsbury 2012), which is a fruitful perspective for understanding how an organisational context reflects the institutional environment while influencing the orientation, sense-making and interaction of the organisational actors. Moreover, as Smith convincingly argues, the “ILP” is especially suited for studying hybrid organisational forms, such as the one in question here, where different logics compete and create plural normative frames for the actors involved (Smith 2010). However, even though Hallett and Ventresca stressed that the actors inhabiting the institutions possess the ability to make meaning of the logics guiding their action (Hallett & Ventresca 2006), the actors in most “inhabited” studies, seem predominantly disembodied (Friedland 2018) just as the material grounding of the institutions that they “inhabit” is left out in most accounts. Although “institutional logics” as described by Friedland and Alford (1991) possess both a material and an ideational dimension, the vast majority of studies within the ILP thus mainly explore the ideational, cognitive one (Friedland 2018, Jones, Boxenbaum & Anthony 2013). To investigate how the organizational context enables certain forms of interaction between volunteers, and how the volunteers perform and experience their tutoring within the context, the paper adds a materially sensitive lens to the institutional logics approach. Contrary to many scholars who approaches the material aspects of organizing by way of science and technology studies (STS) (Czarniawska 2014) or the actor network approach (ANT) (Jones et al. 2013) this paper opts for a different approach to including materiality. To grasp how the organisational context and meaning making not only is a matter of linguistic structures, cognition and verbal meaning making and explore how orientations or logics are materially grounded, challenged and experienced by the organizational actors, I follow a special branch of phenomenology dubbed “material phenomenology” by the notable Danish cultural sociologist Henning Bech (Bech 1999, 1998). Building on the phenomenology that Heidegger developed, that dealt with the existential consequences of being-in-the-world, Bech defines the material phenomenology as a non-formalistic approach concerned with how being is materially grounded and historically contingent (Bech 1999). Bech thus argues that being in the world must be studied through a subject-sensitive perspective open to capture how certain modes of experiencing, interacting and socialising come about, and are interdependent with, the concrete material circumstances of a certain period such as urban or virtual spaces. The material phenomenology is particularly sensitive to how tangible and less tangible aspects of the spaces for interaction such as physical infrastructure, décor, atmospheres and smells attune spatial formations and enable interaction and experiencing (Bech 1997). The prefix “material”, then, does not refer to Marxist terminology, but to an approach that is devoted to include materiality and context (Bech 1999). Like its philosophical ancestors, the material phenomenology moreover, invite scholars to approach the subject in question with sensitivity rather than preconstructed categories and favourite theoretical concepts. The prefix “material”, then, does not refer to Marxist terminology, but to an approach that is devoted to including materiality, both in the initial investigations and the representation of the phenomenon. All though developed to illuminate urban life and urban phenomenon I find that this approach, provide a “lens” that has so far been missing in most studies on civil society. First of all it reminds us that even though volunteering often is understood as verbal communication in the abstract sphere of “civil society”, it takes place

in certain rooms, decorated in certain ways with certain atmospheres and possibilities for sociality and staging. This ability to understand how action is shaped in interaction with “materiality” - not just formal rules, I find inspiring. Secondly, the material phenomenology wants to understand how a certain life form, such as volunteering, can be understood in relation to the wider life worlds of the people involved in it. Rather than jumping to the overall frame of late modernity or neoliberalism, when trying to understand the interaction between volunteers the material phenomenological lens lets us consider the more immediate life as world of this group.

Bech’s approach to the study of late modern sociality is intellectually related to a larger family of cultural and urban sociologists who have studied and conceptualized the interplay between sociality and the spatial formations of urban life-worlds with an explorative rather than an a priori morally attuned approach. From this group, that include scholars like Georg Simmel, Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Krakauer and Ulf Hannerz, this paper takes particular inspiration from the conceptualization of sociality among strangers, semi-strangers and familiar strangers in the public and parochial realms developed by Lyn Lofland (1998). The specific concepts will be explained more carefully when they appear in the analysis.

In the following analysis, the neo-institutionalist approach and the material phenomenological/cultural sociological approach are not sought integrated in any permanent way. Instead, the different lenses provided by the perspectives will be used to zoom in on, and discuss, different aspects of the virtual and inter-spatial interactions between volunteers and beneficiaries. Whereas the ILP is a fruitful guide to the patterned modes of orientation at the organisational and interpersonal level, the material phenomenology directs attention to the “illogical”, tangible, less immediately rational and less cognitive phenomena that influences- and is influenced by - organisational interaction such as the material spaces inhabited by volunteers and beneficiaries and the experiencing and non-verbal interaction within the organisation.

4. The methods

In continuation of the theoretical bricolage that constitute the theoretical framework, the empirical basis of the paper is a single cases study based on an eclectic mixture of qualitative methods, namely participant observation, semi structured interviews, focus groups and document analysis. Of these methods, one and a half years of participant observation at multiple, multimodal sites of Project Virtual Tutoring (Marcus 1995) was the primary method as it allows researchers to be among the group in focus (Blumer 1969) which makes it possible to detect patterns in interaction and meaning making across organizational settings of both verbal and non-verbal nature (Luhtakallio & Eliasoph 2014). I thus participated as a volunteer in several training courses, served as virtual tutor for one year and took part in competence courses, social events, online organizing and various meetings, seminars and official events where PVT presented itself to external and internal audiences. The 200 pages of field notes deriving from the analogue and virtual fieldwork were supplemented by semi-structured interviews and focus groups with a total of 18 volunteers and 5 staff members. Finally, analogue and virtual organizational documents, such as project descriptions, quarterly reports and newsletters were collected and reviewed to gain insight into PVT's internal and external storytelling and communication about its purpose, goals and image. The analytical themes presented below were developed inductively through a

process in which central patterns identified during the participant observation served as basis for a systematic vertical and horizontal reading of field notes, interview transcripts and organizational documents to access the substance and prevalence of the theme.

5. The case - Portrait of Project Virtual Tutoring

Project Virtual Tutoring (hereafter PVT) was developed in 2009 by employees at a public library in a large Danish city who wanted to establish a digital, anonymous, flexible and voluntary tutoring option for ethnic minority boys from public schools in socially disadvantaged residential areas. This group was targeted due to its high drop-out rate and lack of interest in the "physical tutoring cafés" that was attributed to the demand for physical presence (and possible stigmatization) at these cafés. In 2010, PVT was launched with the support from a temporary, two-year, state grant. and from 2010 to 2012 PVT established a call-centre in the public library and began recruiting student volunteers from the regional university. In 2012 PVT received the two-year state grant for the second time, which came with a list of quantifiable performance measures to be met and a demand that PVT developed a sustainable business model that would make the project financially independent from state grants. During the next two years, PVT thus entered into partnerships with three public libraries and entered a strategic corporate social responsibility (CSR) partnership with a private ITC company, who provided knowhow and corporate volunteers for PVT, which is typically the case for such partnerships. Moreover, the largest private foundation in Denmark donated a large sum to PVT, conditioned by the term that PVT expanded its service from marginalised pupils to mainstream high school students. Due to these partnerships, donations and the managerial efforts of the entrepreneurial CEO of PVT, the number of call-centres went from one to five during the two-year period while the number of volunteers, homework sessions and opening hours increased significantly. Regarding the organisational form, PVT was formally and legally based in a public institution, but it kept entering into partnerships with both public and private actors while the main task, virtual tutoring, was carried out by volunteers but administered by project-leaders employed by the public library. This paper focuses on the student volunteers. And their interaction in three different departments across Denmark.

The virtual tutoring was carried out on a specially designed virtual "tutoring site" where volunteers and pupils logged in with secure passwords. To receive tutoring, the pupils had to log in, create an anonymous profile and username, define a specific problem they wanted help solving and wait in line in a digital queue. The volunteers logged in with a profile that showed their real first name and the subjects they could help with. Based on this information a project manager, called "flyer" (inspired by the flyers in the control towers in airports) employed by PVT, would match pupils and volunteers based on their academic needs and competences, respectively. The tutoring site allowed for mediated (face-to-screen) interaction via an integrated camera and/or talking via a microphone and/or writing via a chat module integrated into the tutoring site. The students were obliged to take two shifts per month for at least 6 months if they wanted a diploma at the end of their engagement. During the shifts, the volunteers sat together in call-centres; rooms at the three public libraries where PVT resided that were equipped with computers and headsets. The pupils accessed the site from their private computer in their own homes.

6. Analysis

6.1 Checking into Project Virtual Tutoring

Before starting as a virtual tutor at PVT, all volunteers should take part in a four-hour course that provided information about the social and political background of the project and aimed to prepare aspiring volunteers for the technical and pedagogical challenges they might encounter as virtual tutors. This initiation ritual became my entry point to Virtual Homework as well. One of the events that caught my attention during the course was the “check in” exercise that was introduced by the project manager:

“While switching to a slide featuring a pictogram of a plane taking off, the project manager (PM) instructs all the participants, about 15 young women seated quietly around four large tables, to form a large circle on the floor behind the tables. When the circle is formed, the PM asks us to take turns at stating our name, branch of study, motivation for wanting to become a volunteer at Virtual Homework and what we expect from the training course. “Once you've said those things, you are ready to check in, that is, to take a step forward, so eventually, the circle will be closed and smaller. It is actually just like in an airport - just as simple as checking in at an airport” the PM explains, and initiates the round”.



Image # 1. The pictogram shown to accompany the check-in exercise

Just as instructed, everyone stated the things they were asked briefly and without any personal details or stories that might prolong the exercise and steal time away from the rest of the program, which, as we had been informed, was packed. A young woman, studying law, challenged this non-personal format, as she, briefly and without dramatic gestures, shared how no one helped her with homework when she grew up, which is why she wanted to help others in her situation - giving them something she never had herself. I sensed that I was not the only one,

taking a second look at this young well-dressed “resourceful-looking” blond woman, but nobody asked her to elaborate or posed any further questions. The check-in continued and the next young woman provided a more commonly referred narrative behind her motivation to volunteer that combined the possibility of “giving back”, do something meaningful and get some teaching experience on the CV”.

The more I got to know Virtual Homework, the more it became clear that the phrase “just like in an airport” was applicable beyond the idea that had guided the initial icebreaker at the training cross. Across other training courses, shifts as a virtual, visits to the websites where shifts and social events were coordinated and “in real life” social events, the picture of a fragmented, goal directed, individualized form of being together “just like in an airport” slowly formed.

Just like in an airport, accessing this form of volunteering required an initial “security check”, or, in this case, a statement that proved you were qualified and motivated to volunteer. But once you were past these formal boundaries you were not expected to expose a large personal investment to be a welcome part of PVT. In fact, disclosing too much personal information, or even the slightest statement about your background, as the young woman had done, seemed to breach the code of conduct that demanded brief, impersonal, efficient encounters. Just as it would be out of place to share all sorts of personal details when the homeland security officer at an international US airport asks for the purpose of your stay, it seemed irrelevant when entering most settings of PVT; it “slowed down the line” – or the agenda of the day. As for the possibility of engagement in the organization as such, volunteers were more than welcome to organize social events or “competence events”, but not invited to discuss the overall “destination” of the project. As a volunteer, you hardly ever saw the “pilots”, the project managers and top management in charge of setting the course for PVT.

Before starting a shift, the supervisor sometimes would ask everyone to present themselves by stating their name, education, and the courses they were registered to help with. These rounds of introduction were not, however, meant as occasions to form personal bonds either, but rather to improve the working relationship between semi-strangers, and enable the present volunteers to gain an overview of the collective competences available on the shift in case they needed to “pass pupils on” to someone with more apt competences. As volunteers worked in overlapping teams, collective introductions or discussions would often disturb the other team and since most of the interaction with the pupils was chat based, the most common sound was the tapping on keyboards interrupted occasionally by a: “Hallo, My name is...welcome to Virtual Homework, can you hear me?” followed by muffled talking and more tapping. Now and then, there were points of contact, like when the volunteer next to me took a break and we had a brief conversation about our respective educational backgrounds or acute challenges related to the tutoring session we were involved in, but such conversations never developed into deeper or strong relations. Over a period of one year of participating at the same frequency of the volunteers, two times a month, it was rare that I saw a familiar face (besides this flyer) and had longer conversations with other volunteers.

Eliasoph and Lo, note, that actors who try to coordinate interaction in an organization

needs different indications (cues) about what kind of behavior is considered legitimate and appreciated and what this organization or situation is "a case of" (Eliasoph and Lo 2012: 764). Such signs can be especially important when participating in the more recent hybrid organizational forms such as PVT. What is the right behavior in such an organizational context? What can you expect from other participants, and how you participate the right way? At PVT, the formal instructions, provided a number of "cues" to the participant as they, all together conveyed an impression of being in an organisation where interaction between volunteers had the activity, virtual tutoring, and not the forming of personal bonds or strong "community ties", as its main turning point. Moreover, as demonstrated by Eliasoph and Lo, organizational cues need not merely be verbal or formal, but can and may also be materially grounded (ibid.). The very décor of both the physical and digital platforms where volunteers interacted and coordinated their shifts or social events, accordingly sustained the idea of being part of an organisation where efficient, impersonal, well structured, activity focused interaction was the mode of interaction rather the forging of long term personal relations.

Beginning with the physical spaces, the call centres, the furniture in these places consisted exclusively of simple hard wooden chairs in front of desks equipped with stationary computers. Unlike the rooms in the public libraries that surrounded the call-centres where corners with multicoloured lounge furniture invited inhabitants to take a break in groups, the simplistic furniture of the call centres did not invite volunteers to engage in group based dionysian sociality or any other social activity that diverted from the concentrated, sedentary virtual tutoring. In addition, too much activity created unnecessary turbulence in a locale characterized by deep concentration and fragmented mediated interaction via a fragile digital connection. In this way, the material aspect of the organizational context sustained an efficient, task oriented, impersonal mode of being together between the volunteers.



Image #2: picture from one of the call-centres

The material sustaining of a well-structured, efficient and activity-centered form of interaction not only occurred in the physical settings, the call centres. The page used by volunteers to book their shifts, was also structured solely for the purpose of the volunteers being able to book and exchange guards in the simplest, most efficient and least demanding way in terms of personal engagement and interpersonal interaction. If one wanted to change the date for a shift, you were required to contact some of the other volunteers, but even regarding this task, PVT had developed a pre-defined, standard procedure and formulated a short message that minimized the possibility for each volunteer to embark on more creative, personal and potentially time-consuming correspondence to find a replacement. In order to change shifts, volunteers simply must choose five other volunteers by marking them on a digital list of volunteers at the relevant call center. These people would then received a pre-formulated text message saying: "Hey, could you take-over my shift? PVT /date / timeslot / English, Regards, Ane ". The essence of this interaction was to determine which competences other volunteers possessed and whether they could enter one's place, and thanks to the different platforms, one could have clarified these things without worrying about being snappish or rude. Should the same interaction have occurred face to face, such minimal communication could seem improbable but via an online platform, the whole operation of exchanging shifts ran in an efficient and impersonal manner.

In interdependence between the formal instructions and the spaces of both physical and digital nature, PVT thus provided ample cues about how to behave and what to expect from other volunteers in terms of social and disciplinary efforts. In an organization like PVT that is characterized by a high level of temporarily engaged participants, the more informal indications of the organisational culture have no chance of being transmitted across settings via human "cultural transmitters". In such an organization, the existence of multimodal cues, reproduced formally and materially, assist in conveying the idea of "what this organisation is a case of" and how one should interact in it to the steady stream of new-comers. Just by setting foot in the call-centres during opening hours or logging in to the digital platforms designed for PVT, the appropriate way of being "a good voluntary tutor" was thus tangible in the décor and even in the atmosphere. (Eliasoph & Lo 2012).

6.2 Face to face with Putnams dystopia?// Why do they like it?

As I was typing my field notes the day after my first shift as a virtual tutor, I noticed out the corner of my eye the cover of the latest national report on trends in Danish volunteering (Henriksen & Fridberg 2014). On the cover is a photo of a group of gender and ethnically mixed preschool kids, all smiling at a young adult male who is holding a football in one hand while pointing, with the other hand, towards the football with an instructive finger and smiling at the kids. Everyone in the picture wears the same uniform: shorts, t-shirts, knee high socks and trainers as they sit on a big field surrounded by a couple of trees. Indeed, isn't this how many third sector scholars would picture the ideal kind of "voluntary communities"; happy people engaged in active, team-based, instructive, trustful, face-to-face interaction across different generations, ethnic backgrounds and gender and – off course – in fresh air.



Image # 3: front page of national report on volunteering (Friberg & Henriksen, SFI 2014)

If anything, the face-to-screen form of volunteering in a somewhat homogenous group sitting passively on their behinds inside a call-centre seemed like a bad cover version, if not the antithesis, to this picture perfect civic paradise.



Image # 4: Picture of a virtual tutor from a recruitment flyer used by Projekt Virtual Tutoring

In fact, if Putnam had been with me in the field, this is perhaps what we would have concluded, since, according to Putnam, only face-to-face interaction produces the kind of social capital that generalized trust and liberal democracy feeds on. Had la Cour been there as well (as methodologically problematic as such a setup would be) we might even have discussed whether the high levels of rules and regulations in fact made what took place more “work” than “volunteering” as PVT seemed permeated by managerial logics and NPM (la Cour 2014).

Had I gone no further in my attempt to understand volunteering at PVT these initial observations could also have led me to categorize the volunteers as the "archetypal reflexive volunteers" described by Hustinx and Lammertyn:

"The archetypal reflexive volunteer does not participate for the sake of belonging to group-bounded organizations, but is more pragmatically focused on the services offered or activities undertaken" (Hustinx og Lammertyn 2003: 177).

Following the advice of Gubrium and Holstein, who encourage ethnographers to let the voices of the inhabitants "compete for the story" about the field when trying to narrate the phenomenon under inspection (Gubrium & Holstein 1999:563) I decided to consult the volunteers by conducting interviews outside the call center.

6.3 Switching lenses and seeing the qualities of discrete sociality among virtual volunteers

One instructive "native account", that nuanced the image of the "putnamian dystopia" came from Naja, a young medical student, who explained how she liked being at PVT as it made her feel like being part of a certain kind of community:

"Naja: Even though you might not get to know everyone, I still think there is a kind of special community. You share something else. I like that

Ane: Could you try to say more about that? What you said before about how being a volunteer can attribute with something more? Is this something you have experienced at Project Virtual Tutoring?

Naja: Yes it is. In fact, I think that sharing something... like... at Virtual Homework it is very one-on-one, so when you're there, you're actually just there with the person you are helping, but at the same time, you sit next to someone, who are doing the same thing as you are with a pupil, giving what you are giving. So even though you might not necessarily talk to anyone, I still feel that we share something."

So, while appreciating that the main task was one-on-one, face-to-screen tutoring, Naja appreciates the kind of sociality offered by the call centre. It gives her a feeling that she likes, to have this non-verbal community with the rest of the volunteers. This idea of sharing something even when hardly any verbal or physical interaction can be detected is repeated by several other volunteers. One is Jonas, a long term volunteer who has finished his master's degree in economics and is about to go abroad. Jonas tells me that one of the things that made him continue for over a year at Virtual Homework was "a certain atmosphere" in the call centre:

"I can't describe it, but I liked being in the call centre, I really thought that there was a nice atmosphere".

Listening to the volunteers talk about how they enjoy the non-verbal interaction and the atmosphere in the call centre at first confuses me a bit, not least given the fact that both call centres looked like they could have been decorated by a die-hard fraction of some communist party who proscribed any form of visual and individual expressions. This - added

to the limited verbal and physical interaction - made statements like cosy atmosphere puzzling. To understand how the volunteers could appreciate this semi-anonymous form of togetherness and experience an “extra something”, it proved helpful to will switch conceptual frame for a minute. Instead of trying to conceptualize what I saw as volunteering in a civic association through civil society glasses, which mostly directed my attention to all the things that the socialization at PVT was not, I tried on the materially attuned lens offered by material phenomenology.

This manoeuvre proved to advance my understanding of this strange sociality between the volunteers in several ways. First it helped me comprehend, that the anonymous sociality between semi-strangers in the call centre, in many ways was comparable to the sociality in urban and tele-urban places where strangers circulate among each other in a distant, noncommittal sociality (Bech 1997; 1999:5). With this parallel in mind, it was further possible to notice all the ways in which the call centre is comparable to other semi-public, or - in the words of Lofland - “parochial realms” (Lofland 1998:10), like train compartments, fitness centres and other places where strangers take part in an casual interaction subjected to spatial, temporal and institutional boundaries. As we know from such places, you might encounter the same stranger more than once, thus gradually perhaps becoming intimate strangers (Lofland 1998:59), but just like these superficial, yet meaningful, encounters often follows the setting, so did these “intimate secondary relations”(ibid.; 56) between me and the other volunteers. Seen through the material phenomenological lens, the atmosphere and the “something more” could thus be understood as an atmosphere of sociality between semi-strangers in a semi urban space. And although it differs in significant ways from the face-to-face unity said to be found in a group of boy scouts and such traditional outfits, it has its own qualities. One of these is the possibility of helping out strangers in a tele–urban setting while sharing an atmosphere of delimited sociality with more or less intimate strangers. Concerning the material context of this delimited sociality, the material phenomenology furthermore helped me perceive in which ways the décor of the call centre contributed to the institutionalisation of certain interactions. Just like in a fitness centre, where the machines are set up in a way that makes direct eye to eye contact avoidable and yet enables indirect observations via floor to ceiling mirrors, so were the tables and chairs in the call-centre placed in a way, that gave every volunteer her own space for practicing one-on-one virtual tutoring, and yet still be close enough to ask the neighbor for advice.

The point here is, that even this delimited interaction to a certain degree became more comprehensible when approached with some of the tools provided by the cultural sociological toolbox. First of all, the idea of understanding this anonymous interaction as an urban kind of sociality, perhaps urban civility was helpful once to explain the volunteers appreciation of the anonymous relation. Understanding how anonymity and distance can be points of attraction, as students of urban life have documented (Bech 1997) also provided an additional explanation for why the volunteers preferred coming to the call centre and couldn't imagine doing the virtual tutoring at home, even though virtual volunteering is said to make it possible to “volunteer in your pyjama“. Contrary to sitting at home with personal items on the walls behind you, the call centre represents a neutral setting for an anonymous interaction and frames a delimited sociality with peers.

7. Discrete sociality and log-in volunteering

To describe this subtle yet appreciated collaboration and interaction between the volunteers, I would suggest the term “discrete sociality”, thus drawing on the multiple meanings of the word “discrete”. According to the Danish dictionary, discrete means something that “is not conspicuous or attract (unnecessary) attention *and* to a behavior that is” tactful and polite”. In addition, the mathematical meaning of the term “discrete” connotes something that “consists of separate units or parts; discontinued as antonym to continuous”. The concept of discrete sociality thus refers to the subtle, barely visible and considerate interaction among the volunteers which is both polite and respectful towards the peers in the call center and limited to the settings of PVT, mainly the call center, outside of which, none of the volunteers would interact in any continue way

How may we describe the overall kind of volunteering taking place at PVT? One conceptual bid that comes strikingly close to describing the volunteering at PVT is the concept “plug-in style volunteering” conceived by Eliasoph and Lichterman. Just like the volunteers at PVT, the plug-in volunteers are not necessarily there to form bonds with the other volunteers, and are happy to leave the decision making to someone from the management (Lichterman 2006; Eliasoph 2011). Furthermore, the plug-in style volunteering is characterized by some of the same boundaries the characterized the discrete sociality between volunteers at PVT. However, although most of the volunteers at PVT did not know the first thing about the complex organization as a whole, and seemed perfectly fine with handing over any important decision to someone from the administration that they had never seen, many of them, at the same time, were committed for over a year – not only three months. (as the plug-ins). Moreover, contrary to the plug-in volunteers who practice their work “alongside, not collaboratively” (Lichterman 2006: 544), the volunteers at PVT did collaborate, if in a more discrete way, and the material context offered by the call centers contributed to staging the shy and delimited, discrete sociality.

Paraphrasing Lichterman and Eliasoph’s concept, I will therefore suggest that the style of volunteering among the virtual volunteers at PVT could be termed “login-volunteering” thereby indicating the similarities between the two kinds of volunteering but still emphasize that this new form stands out on a number of decisive points. Both concepts suggest an individual form of volunteering that is easy to enter and leave, but the log-in form, at the same time connotes, that once logged in, you are part of a network of semi- strangers who share a fragment and temporary, yet appreciated sociality. The term “log in” also refers to the mediated and asymmetric interaction across space and time that leaves more room for anonymous staging and impression management than the face-to-face tutoring or other forms of “in real life” kinds of volunteering. Furthermore, log in refers to the fragmented presentation of yourself that different social media pages enable. Just as you expose different aspects of your identity depending on whether you are logged in to LinkedIn or Facebook, the call centre primarily is a place for staging the role of a competent and motivated student. Sharing that your girlfriend just broke up or that you feel stressed and alone in your study chamber is as out of place in the call centre as it would be on LinkedIn. Temporal, spatial and formal boundaries interact to provide the opportunity to a deliver a well-defined effort. And just like you would never feel bad about login of Facebook without announcing your exit to all your friends, leaving the call centre is possible without any obligation for long personal

explanations. Besides, the network is there even after you leave, it is not dependent on your personal engagement. Finally there is a possible to choose different levels of engagement. You might be a more voyeuristic kind of participant (like on the social media sites) or you can contribute in different ways by uttering more or less personal details or jokes, the rules of the game, however, are out of reach – for better or for worse.

Off course, saying that the log-in form of volunteering differs from its evil conceptual cousin, the “plug in volunteering”, is not the same as saying that log-in volunteering is the perfect form of volunteering in all aspects conceivable. As with other forms of organizing and practicing volunteering this newly named form, holds both risks and possibilities, but these remain to be further explored.

8. Concluding thoughts

The way “community” as a concept is brought into the political celebration of voluntary work - and - communities, denotes something positive, collaborative, anti-individualistic and boundary spanning. On a closer look, communities may expose part of “the dark side of sociality” such as hierarchies, intrigues and inter-group positioning – all deriving from particular individuals with particular interests. Being part of a “voluntary community” in itself, is thus not unequivocally conducive to acting collective, inclusive or collaborative. At PVT several aspects of the formal and material organisational context seemed, from a first glance, to sustain an individualistic form of volunteering, thus representing the antithesis to the image of voluntary communities as tight collective collaborations across societal borders. At closer inspection, however, it turned out that the mechanisms that sustained an individualized, instrumental kind of volunteering, liberated the volunteers from the pressure of performing socially, as the feature uniting the volunteers was the task, virtual tutoring, not the relation building to other volunteers. To several volunteers, this practical rather than social focus of the being-together at PVT was an attractive feature, as it made sociality an option but not an access-giving norm, for taking part in the voluntary work. Rather than dismissing the kind of individualised interaction between the volunteers at PVT as uncivic or less beneficiary to democracy on the grounds of political sociological theories that celebrate social capital based on face-to-face interaction, the paper introduced an urban sociological approach to discern, discuss and conceptualise the impersonal, subtle and instrumental interaction as “discrete sociality”. Compared to the more extrovert, at times “conspicuous” sociality pertaining to face-to-face interaction that seems a *sine qua non* in the voluntary “communities” celebrated by Putnam, politicians and, the discrete sociality that took place at PVT was thus, less apparently warm, and yet, in some ways, more inclusive. At PVT, sociality and extrovert social behaviour was not a mandatory access ticket but an option that volunteers could engage in depending on their individual social skills and day to day levels of social appetite.

Schizophrenic as it may seem, it turned out that looking at a phenomenon like virtual volunteering through different conceptual lenses, helped asking new questions, seeing new dimensions and tell new stories. The material phenomenology might have been developed for illuminating life forms unfolding in the more obviously urban and tele-urban leisure-world rooms, but as I demonstrated, it proved helpful for understanding the interaction in an almost conspicuously un-aesthetized setting like the call-centre. Conversely, I think it would

be interesting to bring the civil society perspective out for a walk, away from the traditional civic associations and through various more traditional urban spaces and other forms of civic interaction. After all, as Dekker points out, why should we expect civic associations to be the best places for practicing intercultural interaction and learning civic skills? Other settings, such as different urban places or working environments, might be just as important schools of democracy (Dekker 2014:54). I believe that much interesting work waits to be done at the intersection between political and cultural sociology and this paper merely represents a first small step in this path. Much more work need to be done to get a nuanced picture of what the inside of voluntary communities actually offer in different organizational settings and among different groups of volunteers.

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