
SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

Multicultural Voluntarism–The Second-Hand Shop in Bodø, Norway, as Arena for New Encounters

Tone Magnussen

Nordland Research Institute, Bodø, NO

Tma@nforsk.no

The article explores how voluntary activities provide a variety of multicultural encounters among volunteers and migrants and seeks to investigate the potential of such multicultural encounters. In particular, the article focuses upon how encounters physically take place. As a particular kind of meeting that involves conflict and surprise, multicultural encounters represent a potential for people with different backgrounds to come together and develop intercultural understanding through interaction around common interests. Empirically, the article is based on long-term participatory observations in a second-hand store in the city of Bodø, Norway, that plays an important role in the community. Analyses include discussions of how encounters have the potential to rework and transform differences, as well as discussions of the uneasiness in encounters. Analyses point to the productiveness of encounters: their transformative power, from which respect, trust and dialogue are outcomes of negotiation over differences.

Keywords: Voluntarism; Encounter; Integration; Second-hand shop

Introduction

'The long summer of migration' refers to the summer of 2015, when more than 1.3 million refugees crossed the European borders. This massive movement of people through Europe posed a challenge to the capacity of emergency facilities and led to a comprehensive mobilisation of the civic society. A broad movement of volunteers offered time and skills to support refugees across the European continent (Casati 2018; Doidge & Sandri 2019; Fleischmann & Steinhilper 2017; Jensen & Kirchner 2020), and a set of collective practices of solidarity and humanism were gradually coined in public discourse as a 'culture of welcome' (Hamann & Karakayali 2020). In this situation, the mobilisation of the civic society was experienced both as a necessary supplement to resolve humanitarian needs (Sandri 2018; Gunaratnam 2020) and a political protest against governmental policies (Steen Bygballe Jensen & Kircher 2020), where political projects and non-political voluntary aid seem to work in parallel (Parsanoglou 2020).

During the autumn of 2015, Norwegian volunteers were engaged in activities in the many new centres for asylum seekers. Fladmoe (2016) shows that one out of three Norwegians participated actively, by donating money, food or clothing – or through voluntary work.

New ways of organising and cooperating popped up outside the established organisations, and many new initiatives were established with integration as an aim. Studies such as Forde (2019) from a Northern Norwegian context show how new volunteers contributed towards creating new meeting places for cross-cultural interaction and dialogue. Several initiatives, such as language cafes, theatre, dance and music events, emerged after the increase in arrivals of refugees in 2015; most of them being a mix of new volunteers, established voluntary organisations, private companies and the public sector. These initiatives were marked by a motivation among volunteers to create new spaces where encounters could take place.

Seen from the volunteers' point of view, Sandberg & Andersen (2020) refers to an existential crisis arising when volunteers acting upon a humanitarian crisis suddenly experienced that the state of urgency had moved elsewhere. What happened after the crisis to the numerous volunteers around Europe? While some experienced a melancholy of volunteering, because of a loss of sociality, others turned from the exceptional events to the unexceptional everyday struggle and became volunteers in new forms of voluntary migrant work (Mainwaring et al. 2020). I am interested in this transition from crisis and urgency to the unexceptional everyday struggle. An aim is looking deeper into these everyday structures with the second-hand shop as a lens to changes in voluntary work for and with refugees. Based on ethnographic fieldwork carried out in the second-hand shop, owned and operated by Red Cross Bodo, Northern Norway,¹ the article aims at exploring into how voluntary activities can provide a variety of multicultural encounters among volunteers and migrants. As a particular kind of meeting that involves conflict and surprise, multicultural encounters represent a potential for people with different backgrounds to come together and develop intercultural understanding through interaction around common interests. With the second-hand shop as an arena for multicultural encounters, the article raises these questions: How are migrants involved in encounters within the second-hand shop as volunteers and costumers, how is difference produced, destabilised and reworked through encounters, and in what way can these multiple encounters have a potential for contributing towards creating meaningful contact?

Bodo is a coastal city, located in the far north of Norway, with a population of 52,000. The city is a central transport hub in Northern Norway and is the administrative and commercial centre in the county of Nordland. In 2016, Bodo was voted as 'Norways most attractive city'. In Bodo, Red Cross coordinated the extensive civic engagement that arose around two emergency centres for asylum seekers, including collection and distribution of clothes, shoes, and other necessities, running a small cafe and other social and cultural activities. During the months from November 2015 to February 2016, Bodo Red Cross gained a lot of new members and new volunteers, all sharing one important characteristic – they had never been involved in voluntary work before. When the emergency centres closed in February 2016, Red Cross invited volunteers to an open meeting to discuss possibilities for new activities in the field of migration. This led to the establishment of the activity 'Lån en bodøværing' ['Borrow a Bodo local'] – a weekly arena for language training in the library and an expansion of the second-hand shop, *Røde Kors bruktbuikk*. In subsequent years, new activities such as a recycling workshop and different language training courses have been established. In the city, the voluntary commitment seems to have taken a new direction, from a state of urgency to an everyday, supportive human-ness (Mainwaring et al. 2020), where volunteers and voluntary organisations took an active role in creating spaces for encounters between newcomers and established citizens.

¹ This research is part of the research project *Cit-egration* 'Sustainable Diverse Cities: Innovation in Integration'. *Cit-egration* is based on close cooperation between researchers and artists, voluntary organizations and municipalities.

First, I give a brief introduction to the second-hand shop as an arena for multicultural encounters. I then discuss the urban capacity to live with difference, or how we as inhabitants in multicultural cities might forge a civic culture out of difference, with reference to the growing literature on encounters in studies of urban life. Next, I delve deeper into the second-hand shop as an arena for encounters, by presenting empirical material from everyday life in the shop, seen from the perspectives of Norwegian-speaking volunteers and newcomers with a migrant background. In the conclusion, I return to the question of living with difference and argue that urban encounters taking place among volunteers with different backgrounds have a transformative power in creating and recreating diversity, which represents a hopeful future.

Bodø Røde Kors Bruktbutikk: a second-hand store

Bodø Røde Kors Bruktbutikk is located in the very centre of the city, on the high street, in premises that are spacious, light and airy. The aim of the shop is threefold: to contribute to recycling and reuse; to create a meeting point in the middle of the city; and to secure an economic base for financing volunteer activity within Bodø Red Cross. From the very start, the running of the shop has been based entirely on the work of voluntary staff, with a paid volunteer coordinator as general manager. Opening hours are 11 a.m.–5 p.m., five days a week.

The shop is run by a pool of approximately 50 persons. Some have become permanent staff, and work all year round, often on fixed days of the week. This group consists mainly of very vital elderly Norwegian women, most of them retired from ordinary work. A few men also feature among the volunteers. They differ in age, occupational background and motivation for voluntary work. While some are retired after a long working life and still have energy for work, others have been outside the labour market because of health-related issues. In addition, there are many volunteers that 'come and go' for shorter or longer periods. In this latter group, there is a variety of volunteers: people outside the ordinary labour market, immigrants undergoing language training and 'the-not-so-volunteers': people sent to the shop from the labour and welfare administration or other public authorities. Most of the volunteers are recruited through the volunteers' network. They have heard about the opportunity for voluntary work from someone they know, or they have been asked directly to join voluntary work from someone in their network. While this seems to be the pattern among Norwegian volunteers, immigrants are recruited differently. They seek out the shop 'because we are Red Cross', the coordinator tells. Some of the immigrants have experience from the Red Cross in their home country, and the shop is 'the easiest place for voluntary work when you don't know the Norwegian language'. In recent years, there has been a significant increase in migrants who want to volunteer in the shop.

Living with difference

The capacity to live with difference, or how we might forge a civic culture out of difference, has led to a growing literature on encounters in studies of urban life. Valentine (2008) refers to what is called 'a cosmopolitan turn' in research about the multicultural city, where the city's potential for new hybrid cultures and ways of living together with difference is emphasised. She argues against the many studies of urban encounters that tend to reproduce the assumption that contact with 'others' translates into respect for difference. As an alternative, she introduces the term 'meaningful contact' – which she describes as 'contact that actually changes and translates beyond the specifics of the individual moment into a more general positive respect for (...) others' (Valentine 2008: 325). What is needed is knowledge of how multicultural encounters take place and how these encounters may lead to trust and dialogue.

To understand what is going on when people meet in multicultural cities, the concept encounters (Valentine 2008; Wilson & Darling 2016), micro-publics (Amin 2002) and convivial encounters (Gilroy 2004) seem to be suitable. Sara Ahmed (2000) make use of encounters to describe a particular kind of meeting; a meeting that involves conflict and surprise; 'the encounter is premised on the absence of a knowledge that would allow one to control the encounter, or to predict its outcome' (Ahmed 2000: 8). This surprising and potentially conflicting aspect of encounters underlines how encounters can contain transforming and changing elements.

Amin (2002) and Gilroy (2004) turn attention to everyday life and argue that copresence in public spaces alone is not enough to create spaces for encounters. These spaces must be constituted in such a way that cultural exchange, cultural destabilisation and transformation could be possible outcomes. This might be best achieved by what Amin terms 'micro-publics' – spaces such as libraries, community centres, schools, sports clubs and workplaces, and what Gilroy describes as convivial encounters. In Gilroy's words, conviviality refers to the processes of cohabitation and interaction that have made multiculturalism an ordinary feature of social life. Conviviality is a state of encounter that is more than free mingling in public spaces; conviviality describes encounters with a certain intent or purpose (Gilroy 2004; Fincher & Iveson 2008). As forms of encounter, convivial encounters may be quite fragile and fleeting, and depend on certain settings in which urban inhabitants can explore shared identifications through shared activities. These organised social interfaces of groups of people represent sites of purposeful and organised activity, where people from different backgrounds are brought together and can develop intercultural understanding through interaction and exchange around common interests.

Micro-publics have a transforming potential, Amin argues, because they contribute to social destabilisation, they can transfer a wider, inter-cultural understanding. This may provide opportunities to break out of fixed patterns of interaction and learn new ways of being and relating. Valentine has a critical view to this question and points to that encounters experienced as positive meetings between majority and minority tends to be just individual encounters; 'in the context of negative encounters minority individuals are perceived to represent members of a wider social group, but in positive encounters minority individuals tend to be read only as individuals' (Valentine 2008: 332). Matejskova and Leitner (2011) follow this up by warning against over-optimistic assumptions about how encounters across differences are automatically regarded as meaningful. They argue that cities accommodate a variety of spaces for encounters that facilitate and support different kinds of encounters, ranging from the superficial and fleeting to the close and sustained. All these kinds of encounters co-exist within the city but hold varying potential for negotiations across differences.

Wilson & Darling (2016) emphasise encounters as a distinct form of relations among people living in 'throwtogetherness' (Massey 2005) in an urban context where the stranger (Ahmed 2000) is one of the city's defining figures. Encounters are fundamentally about difference and are related to negotiations of unknown others. A focus on the taking place of encounters makes it possible to carry out a detailing of the local contexts in which differences are encountered. Wilson & Darling (2016) argue to move away from the assumption that encounters are simply about the meeting of difference and focus upon how encounters can make and transform difference in unpredictable ways: 'encounters can destabilise, rework and produce difference as much as they can maintain it' (Wilson & Darling 2016: 11). Encounters represent arenas for negotiations of borders, tolerance, and acceptance for cultural diversity. This might lead to conflict, confrontation, or new forms of connections between people. In this perspective, the city is not just a place where existing differences meet; encounters that take place can create and re-create diversity. As such, encounters play a vital role in producing

space. In this way, Wilson & Darling makes connections to Valentine's concept of meaningful contact, as they argue against a normative agenda in the discussion of urban encounters. Some encounters should not be defined as 'good' or 'better' compared with others; such evaluations appear as both arbitrary and problematic.

The focus in the paper is upon the transformative element of encounters, following Wilson & Darling (2014) who argue that encounters centre on maintenance, production and transformation of diversity. Encounters provide arenas for negotiations of boundaries tolerance for and acceptance of cultural diversity and might lead to conflict and confrontation, as well as to new connections between people. In this way, the city is not just a place where existing diversities meet; the encounters that take place can create and recreate diversity.

Methods: active participation through voluntary work in the shop

One Friday morning, I showed up for my first shift in the shop, wearing the bright red t-shirt with the Red Cross logo and the words 'I am a volunteer' printed on the back. I met Ruth, the volunteer in charge that day, introduced myself, and was immediately put into action. Cleaning and tidying the many shelves filled with china glassware and all kinds of kitchen utensils was my task for the day. Meanwhile, Ruth worked at the checkout counter while a handful of volunteers arrived – all in their red t-shirts – and started working in the storeroom and different parts of the shop. I said hello and introduced myself as a researcher and long-term member of Red Cross, as well as explaining my reason for being there, and experienced an instant sense of being made welcome.

I conducted the ethnographic fieldwork in 2018 and 2019, spending nine Fridays from March to July in the shop, followed by an invitation to join the volunteer staff as 'ordinary volunteer' for a week in August. I have spent more than 100 hours in the shop making participant observation. During the fieldwork, I combined the surprisingly hard physical shop work with getting to know the volunteers and the daily routines in the shop. Based on a participatory action research approach (Kindon et al. 2010) focusing upon the relationships between people and place as a central inquiry, I looked for and found diverse and different tasks in the shop that represented possibilities for questions, conversations and discussions. This approach treats participants as competent and reflexive agents and challenges power structures. Doing fieldwork based on these principles represents a connection between people, participation and place, and therefore suitable to capture the social relations of everyday life that constitute encounters (Wilson & Darling 2018).

After surprisingly few shifts, I felt like a part of the voluntary team and was included in all manner of small talk and discussions, in the shop, the storage room and the coffee breaks, and this affected how I observed and participated. I was often referred to as 'the researcher' and used every occasion to present and re-present the project I was working on, emphasising a focus upon how cross-cultural meetings are taking place. These presentations also included information concerning consent, where the right to participate only voluntarily was always emphasised. Choices about modes and degrees of participation were not just made by me as a researcher but negotiated with the other participants – volunteers in the shop. My approach was to be as open-minded and unprejudiced as possible, and by observing and participating gaining knowledge of the shop as an arena for all kinds of encounters (Alvesson & Sköldbberg 1994). An inductive approach, with room for creativity, ideas and hunches, became my way into the social life of the shop. Taking part in the daily life in the shop called for an active role in the activities performed, and therefore involved what Wilson (2013) calls observant participation as well as participant observation. An implication is that you participate not only as a researcher but also as a human being demanding exploration of your own prejudices and comfort zones. This kind of participation implies participating as a subject in conversations

with others, instead of placing yourself on the outside, as a stranger, viewing the conversation as an object (Skjervheim 1996). My guiding principle was: take an active part in social interaction but avoid being so active that my presence changed the interaction in particular ways (Fangen 2008). As I got to know the volunteers and their habits, it became easier to conduct on-the-spot interviews, on the move (Kofod et al. 2017) or in moments that suddenly occurred between tasks. Approximately 25–30 on-the-spot interviews were conducted. In these settings, conversations were based on occurrences in the shop and ended up as reflections and discussions of these. These settings represented opportunities for a collaborative process where volunteers acted as competent and reflexive agents in conversations that alternated between discussions of action and reflections over them (Kindon et al. 2010). This ongoing dialogue became an important arena for negotiations of the meanings of information generated together.

Being a volunteer—motivations and relations

Volunteering can be defined as 'any activity in which time is given freely to benefit another person, group or cause' (Wilson 2000: 215). Volunteering is part of a cluster of helping behaviours, characterised by more commitment than spontaneous assistance. In Norway, the level and volume of voluntary contribution has been stable over time. In 2014, 61% of the population had carried out voluntary work for organisations within the last 12 months (Folkestad et al. 2015). Recruiting to voluntary work is network-based, often through weak ties and acquaintances (Wollebæk et al. 2015). Surveys among volunteers show that their main motivation for voluntary work is the possibility to learn something new and be able to act according to one's values. In addition, the surveys show that the organisation one volunteers for is less important for the volunteers. A possible interpretation of these findings is an ongoing individualisation of voluntarism in which individual motivation and self-realisation become more important than belonging to organisational collectives (Wollebæk et al. 2015).

Volunteers are often described as the 'lifeblood' of charity shops because they perform two main functions: fundraising and providing a link between the charity and the general public (Horne & Maddrell 2002). This latter function means that volunteers bring added value to the shop by acting as a primary link between other people in the locality and the charity. Through these social relations, the volunteers mediate between the charity and the community, embedding both the functional and symbolic space of the charity shop within the locality. Volunteers are an important part of how the shop can play a community role by providing somewhere for people to meet. In this perspective, the voluntary staff are of fundamental importance concerning the facilitation of encounters, creating space for cross-cultural interaction and dialogue. Whether this happens, and the shop becomes a space for co-existence across differences, will depend on the attitude of the manager and the goodwill of the volunteers (Horne & Maddrell 2002).

When volunteers in the study carried out by Horne and Maddrell (2002) among volunteers in British charity shops were asked why they had chosen to work in the shop, the answers fell into two groups: they wanted to do something useful and to meet other people. This clear expression of motivation for voluntary work in the shop represents a potential for the shop to play an important community role (Horne & Maddrell 2002), one in which the shop provides a place for a variety of people to meet or take part in social interaction, which includes volunteers and customers. In this way, the second-hand shop represents a space for urban encounters (Valentine 2008) with a certain potential for meaningful contact that may provide opportunities for breaking out of fixed patterns of interaction and creating new ones. The social community role is visible in all parts of daily life in the shop. During my fieldwork, it became clear that the second-hand shop in Bodø is an arena where costumers meet their

neighbour, relative or colleague as a volunteer. This turns shopping into a social and relational activity. Some costumers – migrants as well as Norwegian-born – are regulars and come to the shop almost every day, primarily for a chat with the volunteers. These social and relational aspects of everyday life in the shop represent what Amin (2002) defines as a micro-public; the shop is framing a set of activities beyond selling and buying.

Balancing economic, social and environmental issues

The second-hand shop – *Bodø Røde Kors Bruktbutikk* – established in 2007 is an important fund-raiser for Red Cross Bodø. Selling a wide range of donated goods, the shop represents a site of alternative consumption, accommodating alternative systems of exchange or cycles of production. Being a second-hand shop means being a part of a network of exchange and redistribution that stretches out locally, nationally and internationally. The shop is characterised by some distinctive dilemmas regarding strategy and organisation, seen from the boards² point of view: Should the shop maximise profit for the charity or provide cheap goods to the needy? Should volunteers be replaced with paid staff? Yet another question concerns sustainability: should the shop be just another retail-offering niche, or should it take on extra responsibilities? During my fieldwork, where I attended staff meetings and conducted informal interviews with the voluntary staff, it became clear that all these dilemmas seem to be present in this second-hand shop and are discussed among volunteers.

The shop is balancing between the social needs of the volunteers and the overall task of raising funds for the charity, as the volunteers are giving legitimacy to the process of converting donations into profit. In Bodø Røde Kors Bruktbutikk, this art of balancing becomes visible through the saying 'the customer is always the centre of attention'. This influences the work – all activities in the shop are organised around the customer – and represents some limits, and possibilities, for multicultural encounters that might lead to interaction and integration. On a regular day, the voluntary staff in the shop consists of a mix of Norwegian-speaking volunteers – often retired from ordinary jobs, and newcomers, with a motivation for combining voluntary work with informal language training. A somewhat common situation among volunteers in the shop is a group of Norwegian volunteers and newcomers working together at the back of the shop, where they team up to rearrange shelves and tidy up. Language training is an integrated part of the task being performed, as small talk about everyday life, or more structured, where newcomers ask questions and are given answers and explanations from volunteers who speak Norwegian fluently. As I noticed during my fieldwork, a Norwegian-speaking volunteer is suddenly called to help a customer, and the non-Norwegian speakers are left alone, fulfilling their task, but without the opportunity for language training. This shows the fluidity of the encounters – situations suddenly change because of the demand to prioritise the customers and their needs.

Sometimes 'the customer in centre' suddenly calls for a variety of competencies, including language skills. For example, one afternoon in the shop the following happened: The elderly Norwegian-speaking volunteer at the cash point doesn't understand customers speaking only a foreign language; an Arabic-speaking, quiet and very modest volunteer most elegantly helps in the situation. On the other hand, there are several locations within the shop where one can work, meet and cooperate withdrawn from customers and their needs. On Mondays, the shop is closed and there are no urgent customer needs that must be fulfilled. The storage room, the coffee room and the delivery van represent other locations where one can work in an orderly and quiet manner without disturbance from customers.

² The board of Bodø Red Cross consists of seven members, elected by the members of Bodø Red Cross in an annual meeting. Board members represent different sections of Red Cross, such as emergency service and care.

How encounters maintain and produce difference

Encounters take different shapes and forms. Some of the encounters are open and inviting among equals – others are more awkward and imbalanced. The elderly Norwegian-speaking women constitute the core of the voluntary staff. They experience an implicit expectation from the board and paid coordinators that, as a part of their voluntary shop work, they will carry out language training for volunteers who are newcomers to the country. Often this turns out very well, volunteers team up in groups and language training becomes an integrated and quite natural part of the working process. While sorting out the content of donated bags, exchanging words for clothes, the condition they are in and how they are to be sorted, language training come easily.

At the same time, the fact that Norwegian is the 'work language' creates certain structural frames for encounters. Anna, one of the core volunteers in her 60s and volunteering for 5 years, expresses how this sometimes makes her feel uncomfortable. 'I don't like to order anybody around, but I have to. I have to make myself very clear when language skills are poor.' She works mainly at the checkout counter; the centre of the shop, where information is exchanged, calls are made and customers are served. These tasks call for coordination, and when Anna needs help to carry items to the customer's car or to check out something in the storeroom, she calls for it. The way she asks differs according to actual language skills. Although another Norwegian-speaking core volunteer is addressed in this way: 'Per, could you please help me? I need these boxes to be carried out to the storeroom', she needs to express herself differently to a newcomer, to be understood: 'Mahmoud – to the storeroom', the words are accompanied by a distinct body language. This very clear way of expressing a need comes with a feeling of uneasiness – she doesn't like ordering other volunteers around. Working in the shop for several years, Anna has grown accustomed to this way of communicating, and even if she sees that it works and that language skills improve over time, the sense of an awkward imbalance is still there. From Anna's point of view, she is forced into a pattern that maintains difference, instead of doing what she would like to do: reworking and negotiating differences (Wilson & Darling 2016). Some encounters tend to limit meaningful contact that has a potential to change and translate differences (Valentine 2008) and lead instead to the maintenance of differences. Being an experienced volunteer, Anna knows that this sense of structural constraint has to do with certain positions and tasks in the shop. During the daily coffee break in the backroom, she is a dedicated participant in cross-cultural conversations.

For some of the volunteers, the invisible work of including non-Norwegian speakers in shop work represents what they define as an extra workload. Ella, another core volunteer, says this at the end of a hectic day in the shop: 'Am I allowed to say this? I am totally exhausted after working with this new girl who doesn't know a word of Norwegian.' Ella has been working at the back of the store, arranging some new items into shelves and teamed up with a new volunteer. Although she has extensive experience in situations like this and uses all kinds of body language to get the job done, she finds it still a very demanding situation.

As experienced volunteers, Anna and Ella perceive that they are given responsibility for training and inclusion of newcomers. They take on this responsibility as part of their voluntary tasks, even if this sometimes leads to frustration and feelings of uneasiness. Bringing these experiences into micro-conversations among volunteers, and in conversations with the paid coordinators, seems to work as a way to process and handle these dilemmas. The frustrating situations seem to be based on language differences that create unease and insecurity among all the volunteers working in the shop. A lack of Norwegian language skills challenges the way voluntary work is organised in the shop and leads to continuous and repeated discussions, especially among the Norwegian-speaking volunteers. This recurring focus upon language differences relates to Leitner's (2012) study of immigrants in small-town America.

She finds that lack of language skills makes immigrants an obstacle to harmonious relations; 'In other words, the Other is made responsible for removing herself or himself from belonging due to language differences' (Leitner 2012: 12). There are some traces of this understanding of responsibilities for language skills among the Norwegian-speaking volunteers, where immigrants are seen as 'the Other'. This is expressed through statements given in informal conversations among the Norwegian-speaking group of volunteers such as: 'He has really worked with his Norwegian skills' and 'It's difficult to understand her Norwegian, and she has been living here for years'. At the same time, there seems to be a shared understanding among Norwegian-speaking volunteers of the shop as a platform for working to reduce language differences.

Encounters that destabilise

A story being told among the Norwegian-speaking volunteers in the shop relates to how things used to be – and what has changed. The story has been passed on to me in different versions, and on different occasions during my fieldwork in the shop. One essential element in this story is about 'the foreigners'. In the early years of the shop, it was considered hard to work with foreigners; newcomers to the country, with limited knowledge of the Norwegian language. Among newcomers to the city, volunteering in the shop has been considered an important arena for combining informal language training and voluntary work. Some of the volunteers declined to work with 'the foreigners', and this led to a rather awkward situation in the shop. When asked about what led to this situation, one of the experienced volunteers answers: 'We didn't know any better. It was tiring and exhausting with all the newcomers.' Another volunteer reflects on this: 'The way we treated newcomers became a culture – it was an attitude that clung to the walls in the old shop.'

The Norwegian-speaking volunteers explain that today this is different. The reserved and sceptical attitude towards voluntary migrants has changed. One volunteer put it like this: 'Moving the shop to the new location created a mood change'. By way of example, she points to the moving process as a new start. The shop was going through a makeover, which included both the physical layout and the restructuring of the work. In the old shop, every volunteer had her domain or sphere of authority, where she could set her own rules. There was a lack of common guidelines, including how voluntary migrants should be received. The working environment in the shop was challenging, and the organisation gave high priority to improving this. A new organisational model was worked out in close cooperation between volunteers, the paid coordinators and the board. This model contains written guidelines, a voluntary shop manager and daily support from a paid volunteer coordinator acting as a general manager.

Mira, one of the migrants among the volunteers, has played an important role in the parallel process of destabilising the relations between migrants and Norwegian-speaking volunteers. She has taken an active role in the shop's informal life and has spent a great deal of time in the coffee room, making waffles and talking to fellow volunteers. In this way, Mira's story from a life as a refugee has become known to the volunteers, and Mira as a person has become friends with several of the elderly ladies. She has been invited to their homes, she has joined in with their celebration of the National Day and she has even attended a 'Dansegalla' – a large dance party with several bands playing – with one of her friends from the second-hand store. Through daily encounters in the shop, scepticism has been moderated (Bygnes 2019; Whyte, Larsen & Olwig 2018), with a resulting mood change. In some way, Mira represents an empirical example of the transformative power that encounters represent. Here, personal contact through sustained and close encounters among volunteers led to destabilisation and change in individual opinions. Mira – and other migrant volunteers – became a part of the daily life of the shop, and not some kind of disruption that creates an extra workload for

the other volunteers. Wilson & Darling (2016) argues that encounters are distinct genres of contact where maintenance, production and the reworking of difference occur. The material from the second-hand shop shows how encounters with difference might bring positive changes given the ability to make, transform and value differences. In Mira's case, this is exactly what has happened; difference is being brought into the multitude of encounters that the shop represents and transformed in a way that contributes to cross-cultural respect, trust and dialogue. The way differences are being negotiated in these everyday encounters in the shop represents a powerful transformation.

This change, based on actual encounters, could be understood in different ways. Whyte et al. (2018) explain these processes as a kind of pragmatism, placed outside the two poles of humanitarianism and xenophobia. Refugees entering a new country are often assigned a humanitarian role where they need help. Through meaningful contact (Valentine 2008), this role can be broadened, with opportunities to become incorporated into social life. Most volunteers in the migrant group are motivated by the opportunity to combine voluntary work with informal on-the-job training. A rather small group of migrants might be considered not-so-volunteers, being sent to the shop as a part of formal language training, or from the labour and welfare administration. In Mira's story above, encounters in the shop led her to be seen not only as a refugee but also as a shop worker, a friend and an eager dancer. This potential to rework difference through encounters seems to be more important when even more immigrants are signing up as volunteers in the shop.

Reworking differences – creating productive encounters

Everyone in the shop spoke warmly about Sami, telling me how skilled he was in his voluntary work and how nice it was to work alongside him. 'It's a pity that he is not much here nowadays', one of the elderly volunteers said. One day, Sami signed up for a shift in the shop, and we got to know each other.³ 'I am very grateful to Red Cross', Sami says. He came to Norway some years ago, as an asylum seeker from the Middle East and spent his first period in Bodo at an asylum centre on the outskirts of the city. 'I was feeling an absolute hopelessness. There was nothing I could do, except wait. I was depressed and spent most of the day sleeping.'

Sami recalls how a visit from a Red Cross volunteer at the asylum centre changed this. He was told that they needed more hands at the shop, and so he decided to give it a try. 'At first, I picked up cardboard boxes, pressed them into small squares and made them ready for rubbish collecting. It was the only thing I could do, not knowing the Norwegian language.' Sami liked the work, being a part of a working community, and taking part in meaningful activities. He soon identified which barriers had to be overcome to advance in the shop and get to perform other tasks: language skills. He started very methodically: 'I realized that I needed to learn Norwegian and used every possibility in the shop to improve my Norwegian. I worked side by side with Norwegian-speaking volunteers, and learned all the words about money, change, discount and prices.' For Sami, voluntary work provided an opportunity to multiple encounters with other volunteers. 'It's where I learned about and became a part of the society', he says. 'It's where I became something other than an asylum seeker. I am Sami, and my co-workers like me for who I am.' After working shifts in the store for almost a year, Sami's life changed. He got his residence permit, started language training and got himself a paid part-time job in a grocery shop.

What becomes clear in Sami's story is the way he insisted on bringing difference into the encounters – his insufficient skills in Norwegian and his lack of experience from voluntary work. He invested time and energy in the shop work and identified a lack of language skills

³ The story of Sami is partly based on conversations, and partly on a speech that Sami held in a conference on integration. Sami is not his actual name.

as the main barrier to creating encounters where differences could be brought forward and negotiated (Valentine 2008). In the throwntogetherness of volunteers in the shop, Sami was able to create and take part in the encounters that became arenas for negotiating and remodelling cultural differences. He took an active part in destabilising and productive encounters (Wilson & Darling 2016): where respect, trust and dialogue were outcomes of negotiations over differences.

One topic that often comes up in conversations among volunteers is skills in mending, repairing and restoration. Work in the shop leads to the exchange and discussion of practical skills and experiences, often connected to donations to the shop, which arrive in different degrees of disrepair. These objects often need mending in some way or another. The volunteers, with their different backgrounds, possess a variety of skills. Some can mend objects with basic tools and their homemade spare parts. Others use their formal skills and repair objects under regulations. Skills like these are highly appreciated among the volunteers. For example, when one male volunteer with of Eastern European background succeeded in repairing a donated item with no more than a wire cutter and a piece of leftover metal, this prompted admiration from the elderly Norwegian volunteers – as well as reflections over changes; ‘I am fascinated by what he makes out of almost nothing.’ These almost speechless practical encounters, where skilled hands do their work, represent another form of encounter where skills are being recognised and approved across cultural boundaries and generations. The skilled newcomers are greeted with smiles, admiration and other body languages, which they seem to appreciate. The elderly women remember such skilled men from their childhood: ‘We have a lot to learn from newcomers. They are not used to our way of life, where we can just throw away items that stop working and buy new ones.’ Female Norwegian-speaking volunteers talk about this quite often, and the conversations often end with: ‘We have a lot to learn.’ As a result of the visibility of these skills, a group of volunteers has initiated a workshop for mending and repairing where the skilled volunteers act as instructors.

Conclusion

Voluntary activities within Bodo Rode Kors Bruktbutikk have been the framework for an investigation of urban multicultural encounters. The shop represents an arena of thrown-togetherness (Massey 2005), where people from different backgrounds are thrown together in a multitude of ways, as volunteers, costumers and donors. As a micro-public (Amin 2002), the shop represents purposeful organised activity where interaction and exchange provide people with an opportunity to meet and develop intercultural understanding. As such, the shop represents an arena with a transforming potential, a possibility for the development of intercultural understanding through interaction.

Encounters can destabilise, rework and produce difference, as well as maintaining it (Wilson & Darling 2011), and represent a potential for transformation of difference into diversity. The empirical material from the shop shows how all these elements of encounters seem to be visible at the same time. Although some encounters lead to maintenance and production of difference, other encounters destabilise elements of difference; yet another form of encounters seem to have the potential to rework difference. As a perspective in analysing the actual encounters taking place within the second-hand shop, encounters act as very productive. Analysis of the empirical material shows how different encounters provide arenas for the negotiation of limits, tolerance and acceptance of cultural diversity, which might lead to conflict and confrontation, as well as new connections between people. In this way, the second-hand shop is not just a place where existing diversities meet; the encounters that take place have the potential to also create and recreate diversity.

Several writers, such as Matejskova & Leitner (2011), represent a more critical approach to theories of how encounters between residents and recent immigrants may destabilise

and rework differences. They argue that sustained and close encounters engender positive attitudes towards individual immigrants, but these are not scaled up to the group. Broader processes such as marginalisation and deeply entrenched unequal power relations make it difficult to make optimistic assumptions about how encounters across difference can contribute to decreasing difference. This critical approach to the transforming potential of encounters is in accordance with Ahmed (2000) and her comprehension of difference. She points to a tension between the incorporation and refusal of difference, and to how the majority tends to define difference as 'our difference'. This leads to an understanding where 'it is a difference that belongs to the inclusive we of the nation. The claiming of difference as that which 'we' have involves the erasure of differences that cannot be absorbed into this 'we' (Ahmed 2000: 96). Seen in this perspective, multiculturalism can involve a double and contradictory process, by seeking to differentiate between strangers whose appearance of difference can be claimed by the nation and strangers whose difference may be dangerous to the nation.

Sandercock (2010) argues for positive examples of learning to live with difference and asks: how can migrants be integrated into cities that are not used to thinking about themselves as multicultural? Generating capacity to live and work with diversity requires all the daily negotiations of difference that take place in micro-publics – all the everyday spaces where people share common projects. This involves shared activities, not only sharing of public space. To live with difference, new notions of multicultural citizenship are needed. Developing new urban citizenship requires openness from the host society to being redefined in the process of migrant integration, to a new 'we'.

Findings from Bodø Røde Kors bruktbuikk support Sandercock's arguments. In the shop, volunteers with different backgrounds are being brought together through meaningful contact. With the many practical tasks in the shop as a framework, personal contact through sustained and close encounters among volunteers has led to destabilisation and change in individual opinions. The role of newcomers to the shop has been broadened and led this group of volunteers to be seen not only as newcomers to the country but as friends, skilled workers or even dancers. A sense of equality has been negotiated through the multiple and close encounters taking place in the shop. The second-hand shop with its diverse pool of volunteers represents an arena where differences are being reworked and negotiated in everyday encounters in multicultural cities and transformed in a way that contributes to cross-cultural respect, trust and dialogue. Despite the presence of structural limitations such as language skills and position in the labour market, this transformative power represents the hopeful aspects of encounters as a way of living with differences in multicultural cities.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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