



"I have never felt so significant to someone":

The experience of professionals volunteering with refugee mothers from Ukraine and their children

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Introduction

The Russo-Ukrainian War has created a large-scale humanitarian crisis, with millions of refugees in need of urgent humanitarian assistance within Ukraine and in various asylum countries. This article will present the voices of professional volunteers from the fields of education, therapy, and welfare (most from Israel), describing their volunteering experience and encounters with Ukrainian refugee mothers and their children. In particular, the article will present voices relevant for emergency work during the current situation, resulting in new insights and practical recommendations for emergency volunteer work in Israel.

The article is based on recent master's research (2023) conducted at the NEVET–Greenhouse of Context-Informed Research and Training for Children in Need at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem's Paul Baerwald School of Social Work and Social Welfare. The research was conducted in collaboration with Early Starters International (ESI), an international humanitarian educational organization focusing on early childhood education for children in emergency situations worldwide. ESI's operations are based on the concept that children experiencing trauma and displacement can benefit from an educational-

therapeutic process in a transformative space that enhances their and their mothers' sense of security. The organization has established over 20 educational-therapeutic spaces for refugee children from Ukraine and their mothers in different countries. Following the outbreak of war in Israel on October 7, 2023, the organization established 17 educational-therapeutic spaces for displaced residents from the Gaza Envelope and northern Israel.

In terms of the theoretical frameworks employed, the study was guided by the Context-Informed Perspective (Nadan & Roer-Strier, 2020), the salutogenic approach (Mittelmark et al., 2017), and approaches and research on ongoing collective trauma, resilience, and recovery.

Methodology

The study employed a phenomenological-qualitative method, collecting data through semi-structured in-depth interviews with 15 professionals who had volunteered in the educational-therapeutic spaces established by ESI. Thirteen of them were Israelis from Ukraine, Russia, or the Former Soviet Union and/or descendants of Holocaust survivors. Two of the volunteer professionals were women refugees from Ukraine. Study participants were asked about their perceptions of the consequences of the Russo-Ukrainian War for refugee mothers and their children and about their volunteering experiences. The data was analyzed using thematic analysis. All names used are pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality.

A Complex Experience: Aspects of Trauma and Resilience in the Volunteering Experience

Aspects of trauma and emotional upheaval

The descriptions provided by the study participants indicate that their decision to take action to help the refugees stemmed from complex motives, including past traumas and a desire to work to oppose injustice. The volunteering was accompanied by the concerns and diverse attitudes of their families.

The outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian war was described by most of the study participants as a significant factor that instilled them with a strong sense of discomfort and a need to take action. Their motivations for action were also influenced by elements of their

identity. Most of the interviewees also noted that their drive to volunteer was also connected to their aspiration to act to further social justice. Daniel, for example, explained:

I am Jewish, and I also had an experience with anti-Semitism in the Soviet army and where I lived in the Soviet Union. This was my declaration: I am Jewish [...] and I care! I care! If it's not fair, I call for Tikkun Olam [repairing the world]. I am not a religious person, but I strongly identify with Jewish wisdom and philosophy. Tikkun Olam is very important to me.

Some of the study participants described the concerns they had before volunteering with trauma survivors, which were related to their lack of knowledge and experience and to their ability to provide effective assistance to refugees. Esther expressed her concerns as follows:

[Before my first volunteering experience] I was afraid [...] that I would show up, that they would have wasted money on me, having bought me a ticket and a place to stay and that I wouldn't do anything useful. That's what I mostly was worried about. And after the first volunteering, I knew I would manage. But the demands are also constantly increasing, and I'm demanding more of myself. So, there is always some challenge in which I don't know if I will succeed.

The families of the volunteers received the decision to volunteer with different attitudes. Travelling to the war zone, or even just to countries neighboring Ukraine, in order to volunteer, was perceived as a life-threatening situation, which was reflected in the difficulty of some families to support the decision of the volunteers.

Most of the study participants reported a deep sense of identification with the traumas of the refugee mothers and their children. Participants who had emigrated from the Former Soviet Union identified a similarity between the difficulties imposed by the authorities on those who sought to emigrate in the past and the injustice and cruelty used against Ukrainians today. Like the refugees, these study participants were also torn from their homes and homeland at a young age, and were sometimes even separated from family members who were left behind. Anna shared her feelings:

It's terribly hard, it brings back memories of how I immigrated to Israel...I had grandmothers who were left behind, who I have not seen since I left... So that is the main reason why I'm doing this; I want to win.

Another aspect of the emotional turmoil experienced by the study participants manifested in associations with the Holocaust that emerged in half of the participants. According to Omer:

The moment we reached the border for the first time, I think that was a serious shock. People standing with all their belongings, confused and not knowing. The moment when people like you and me become refugees. It was quite shocking.

The initial encounter with the refugees stirred feelings of helplessness and guilt among some of the study participants. For example, Daniel described his volunteering experience at the outset of the hostilities:

At the beginning of the war, I felt like I couldn't do anything, that I had no control...I was overcome with fear and a sense of helplessness because I didn't know how to help – especially in the beginning...A lot of "survivor's guilt," that I live in a great place, I have children, no one bombed me, everything is fine, I have a job...So my motivation [to volunteer] was to reduce my survivors guilt, as it is very strong, and to feel like I can control something.

Like Daniel, other volunteers also noted that their desire to volunteer stemmed from their a sense of helplessness. Another aspect of this feeling of guilt was the better conditions provided for the volunteers in comparison to the refugees, and the former's need for self-comfort during the volunteering period.

Aspects of resilience and empowerment in the volunteer experience

Along with the profound emotional turmoil experienced by the study participants, most described a highly empowering experience of doing something valuable, which gave them a sense of satisfaction and pride. Alona noted:

The speed of the impact, this speed of seeing a change, and I could really see a change [...] It's a feeling that I haven't had in my life. I have never before felt so significant to someone else...I was suddenly able to be very significant and useful, thanks to who I am and what I was doing...This is something that gave me such...a sense of value for the significance of what we did there.

As noted, many interviewees came to volunteer with concerns regarding their ability to be effective and to assist the refugees. As a result of their meaningful and valuable work, they described feelings of elation, satisfaction, and pride that they had not previously experienced.

Personal Insights and Renewed Appreciation for Life

All the study participants elaborated, in a deeply moving manner, on the personal insights and renewed appreciation for life they gained through volunteering. For example, Alexander recounted:

I think it colored [things], and I still remind myself to be careful about it, but it's terribly difficult; it colors everything else with a less significant color...You feel like you are there at ...historic moments, part of a historical process. I can help these children, and not just one, and not two; hundreds and thousands. What can really be compared to this? What in my life will ever compare to this?!

Most of the study participants shared the view that volunteering provided an answer to their personal needs. For instance, Noam explained:

It's a kind of mission, a kind of coming full-circle for me...The fact that I help children somehow fulfils my need....I encountered it as a mother, from the place of my role as a mother and of what my children need more from me as a mother. It recharges batteries that I had long forgotten I needed.

Repeat volunteering

All of the study participants described their volunteering with the refugees as a highly meaningful experience that caused them to want to continue engaging the topic through repeat volunteering, or even through employment. Fourteen study participants have continued their activity with ESI, with half returning as volunteers (in most cases, more than two volunteering sessions) and half becoming ESI team members, sometimes at the cost of leaving their previous jobs. The interviewees described an intensification of the emotional experience during the second volunteering session. The range of feelings expanded, and the sense of satisfaction and meaning continued to grow. This emotional intensification, which develops from one volunteering session to another, is one of the driving forces causing volunteers to return and to volunteer again. This is how Alona described her second volunteering experience:

The experience there was different from the previous one – more, much more, thousands of times more than I thought possible, thousands of times more intense than the previous one, thousands of times more meaningful, thousands of times more startling, as if it was more and more in every possible way. And now I'm asking: when is the next time?

Conclusion

The study participants described a complex and empowering experience embedded in volunteering and meeting with refugees. This experience began with their urge to take action at the outbreak of the war, and it was related to the need to act and control the situation, to the identity and roots of the volunteers, and to their desire to work for social justice.

The participants' initial experience of volunteering was accompanied by the concerns and the differing attitudes of their families. Their first encounter with the refugees was accompanied by intense emotional turmoil, including identification and association with the Holocaust, feelings of helplessness and guilt, and the need to unload emotions. During the duration of the volunteering, volunteers developed a personal sense of doing something valuable and meaningful, which enhanced their feelings of satisfaction and pride. The effects of the experience continued even after the conclusion of the volunteering term and the return to normal life, resulting in a desire to volunteer again.

The Context-Informed Perspective (Nadan & Roer-Strier, 2020) argues for the complexity of human experiences and explains simultaneous feelings of high levels of satisfaction, helplessness, fear, and emotional turmoil. The research findings suggest that volunteers simultaneously recognize many different contexts that both connect them to and differentiate them from the refugee experience. The study findings are consistent with salutogenic theories indicating that the greater the understanding and the control of events, the greater the sense of optimism and coherence that contributes to well-being (Mittelmark et al., 2017).

The findings also resonate with findings from a systematic literature review on vicarious post-traumatic growth, which included studies involving 1,600 professionals (Tsirimokou et al., 2023). This review found significant reciprocal relationships between professionals and those receiving their services in a dynamic process from suffering to growth. As the professionals recognized their contribution to the wellbeing of others, their confidence in their professional abilities increased. These findings constitute support for the process described by the research participants, which led to their desire to volunteer again.

Recommendations

The study participants proposed various recommendations, highlighting the importance of professional management of the volunteer array within an organization to promote volunteer engagement, enhance volunteer performance, and increase volunteer organizational affinity.

Recommendations relevant to the current situation in Israel include:

Comprehensive organizational support for promoting the wellbeing of volunteers and reducing psychosocial risk factors associated with volunteering – Study participants emphasized that their positive volunteering experience was based, among other things, on the manner in which the organization managed the volunteer array and on the comprehensive organizational support, including the organization's commitment to maintaining volunteers' emotional and physical wellbeing. This comprehensive support was based on frequent conversations with the organization's representative during the period of volunteering, in which they received relevant information, problem-solving advice, and in-depth emotional support.

Additionally, research (Tsirimokou et al., 2023) has suggest that it is important for organizations to train volunteers to identify vicarious trauma, to allow them to express it in a safe emotional space, and to equip them with coping and self-care skills, such as stress relief activities during volunteering. Furthermore, the current study findings suggest that organizations should incorporate into their volunteer training a reference to the positive aspects of providing aid and to the factors of resilience and growth that can stem from crisis events.

Another recommendation for promoting the psychological wellbeing of volunteers is related to organizational actions taken at the completion of a volunteering period. The study findings indicate that the volunteering experience continues to influence the volunteer even after it ends, and that volunteers experience liminality and a need for a transitional period allowing them to process the complex emotional experience they have undergone. Most recommended that the completion of the volunteering period be accompanied by a personal meeting with a qualified therapeutic professional to enable them to process the experience. Some recommended that the organization also hold support-group meetings involving additional volunteers.

The development of awareness and cultural competence in volunteers – During the duration of the volunteering period, the volunteers had multicultural encounters with a heterogeneous population. It is therefore recommended that organizations work to increase the awareness, among their teams and professionals, of the various cultural contexts of volunteer subjects and to enhance their cultural competence regarding attitudes and practices (Corin, Langer, & Nadan, 2012). This includes developing their self-awareness of their various identities and intersections, and their use of context-informed and socially constructed concepts (Nadan & Roer-Strier, 2020).

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