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Too much of a good thing? Excessive meaningfulness in voluntary work in a German refugee shelter

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Meaningful work



- **Functionalist paradigm:** Meaningfulness can be managed (Nillsen, Earl, Elizondo, & Wadlington, 2014; Pratt & Ashforth, 2007; Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Grant et al., 2009)
 - **Subjectivist paradigm:** Meaningfulness as subjective experience (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Bailey & Madden, 2015; Vuori, San, & Kira, 2012)
 - **Integrative frameworks:** Interplay of objective and subjective factors (Chalofsky, 2003; Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009; Rosso et al., 2010; Yeoman, 2014)
- **Shared Assumption: Lack of meaningfulness**

Excessive meaningfulness



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- Specific types of work are societally framed as particularly meaningful
 - Excessive: Imagery of meaningfulness overdetermines situations, activities and interactions with others
- **voluntary work**, start-up work, entrepreneurial work, academia, vocational work

Voluntary work



- **Doing good:** Identity as helpers (Cnaan et al., 1996; Cunningham, 2010; Grönlund, 2011; Kornberger, 2007))
- **Being in a community of helpers** (Wilderom & Miner, 1991; Proteau & Wolff, 2008; Hustinx & Lammertyn, 2003; O'Toole & Grey, 2016)
- **Working autonomously** (Haski-Leventhal & Bargal, 2008; Hustinx, 2010; Eliasoph, 2014)

Refugee crisis: The context of our case



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A summer fairy tale?

- 2015: Sudden influx of refugees
- Failing public authorities
- Millions of volunteers ensure primary care



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Our case



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A former townhall as a...



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... refugee shelter

- 2015: Emergency shelter for 1200 refugees
- Prime example for outburst of solidarity
- Beginning: Several hundred volunteers a day
- End of data collection: 15-30 volunteers a day

Data collection

- **Participant observation:** 12 months in different departments with focus on voluntary work
- **Interviews:** 29 semi-structured interviews with volunteers and paid employees
- **Documents:** Shift plans, pictures, leaflets, media coverage

Data analysis

- Open coding in Atlas.ti
- Clustering of open codes
- Dynamics of meaningfulness:
 - Constructions
 - Breakdowns
 - Reactions after breakdowns

Meaningfulness as emergent theme



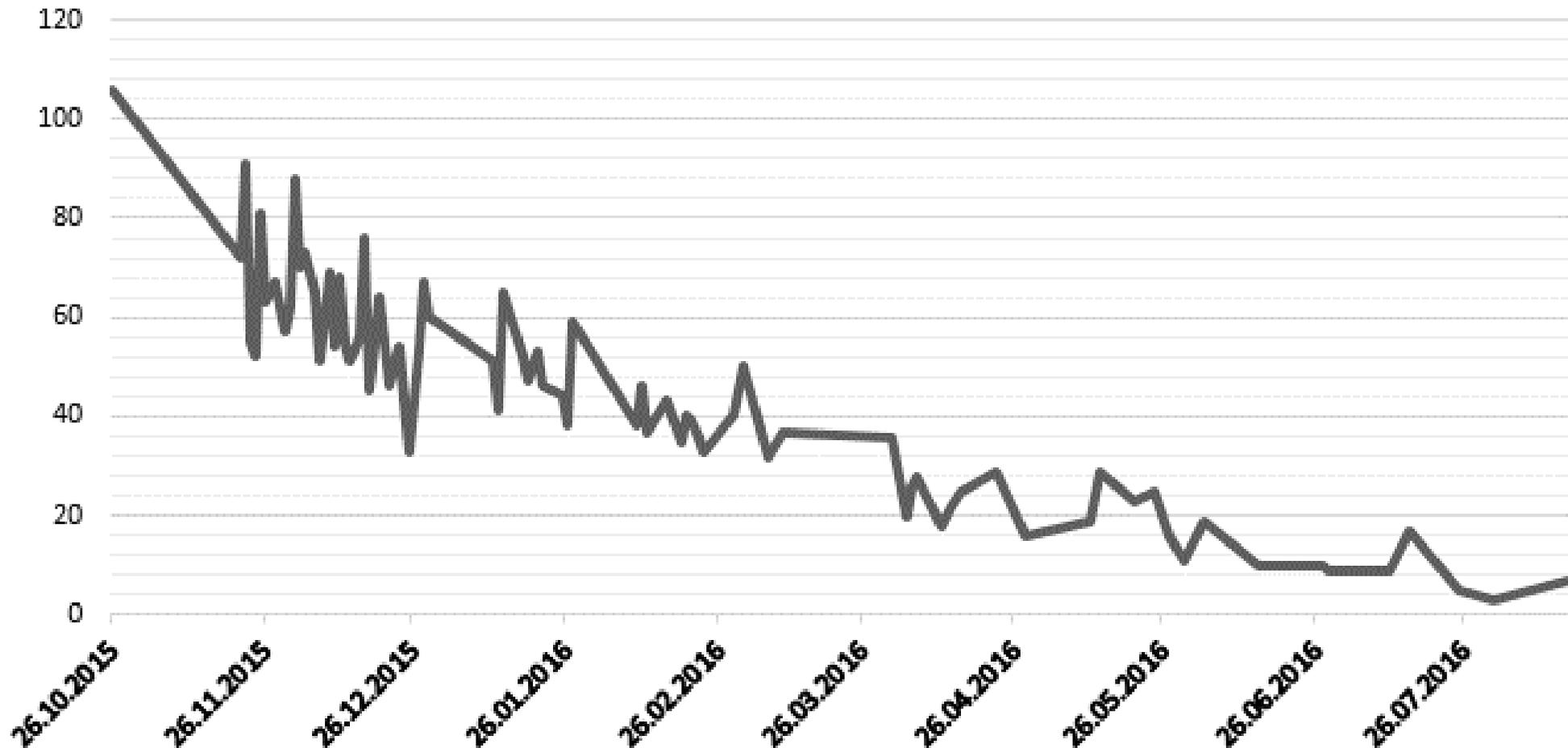
*“I wanted to do something meaningful. Meaningful for me and maybe also for my fellow human beings”
(Justin, 28, interviewee)*

*“I had a little bit more spare time and I said, well, how can you use that in a meaningful way.”
(Tom, 62, interviewee)*

Decrease in volunteer numbers



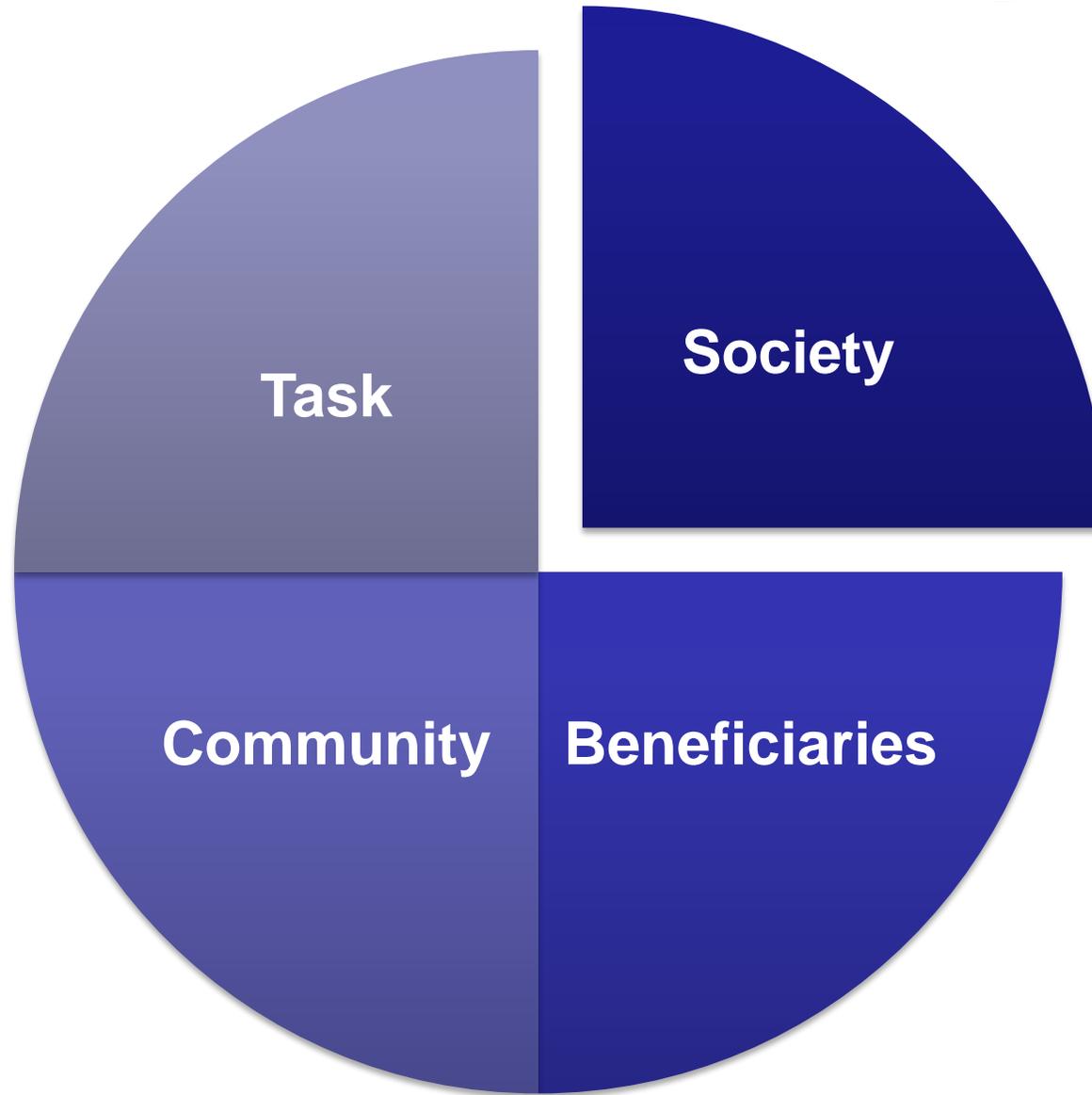
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Dimensions of meaningfulness



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Context



- Huge interest by media and wider public
 - Articles, TV shows, visits by politicians or celebrities
 - *“There is light Germany that is shining against the backdrop of dark Germany.”*
(President of Germany during visit)
- Positive images attached to voluntary work:
Hope, solidarity, enactment of humanitarian values

Meaningfulness-making



Volunteers frame their work as meaningful act of citizenry:

- *“Make a difference”*
- *“Doing one’s share”*

“Personally, I really wanted to take a stance against that [xenophobia] and say, okay, I see the world in that particular manner. And I want to contribute my share to this.” (Uta, 54, interviewee)

Meaningfulness-breaking: Shifting public debate



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“Well, I was surprised, obviously. And I was shocked what happened there. That foreigners did / Well I do not want to pigeonhole them. But you do quite a disservice with that, that's totally clear. When a right-wing mob comes and claims certain things and then they behave exactly like this, that is difficult.”

(Birgit, 52, interviewee)

Meaningfulness-breaking: Lack of impact



*“the [political] situation is as bad as last summer again,
just as if we have not done anything.”*

(Katharina, field contact)

Struggles for meaningfulness



“I think we have to teach them values. More like, this is how WE roll” (Doria, 32, interviewee)

- Excessive meaningfulness makes it impossible to let go of the imagery of voluntary work as meaningful
- Result:
 - Reinforcement of “us“ and “them”
 - Paternalism towards refugees
 - Depoliticisation of voluntary work



Discussion: Negative effects of excessive meaningfulness

- **Productive:**

- Societal imageries mobilizes people
- Organizations can use them as a reservoir of meaningfulness

- **Destructive:**

- Fixation of problematic roles
- Closure towards renewal
- Failing to see and deal with complexity beyond the imagery



Discussion: Dynamics of meaningfulness

Changing contexts (Swidler, 1986):

- “**Unsettled**” (crisis, chaos, change): Space for excessive meaningfulness
 - “**Settled**” (normality, everyday life): Excessive meaningfulness turns problematic
- Excessive meaningfulness makes it hard to successfully move from unsettled to settled contexts

Contributions



- Not only lack, also excess of meaningfulness can become problematic for individuals and organizations
- Excess might be particular problematic when moving from “unsettled” to “settled” contexts
- Societal imageries of work beyond organizational control heavily feed into the experience of meaningfulness

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