

# **Volunteering, social cohesion and race: the German Technical Relief Service**

## **Abstract**

This paper contributes to the debate on whether volunteering influences social cohesion, and argues that issues of race equality should be considered in this discussion. Whilst the German government, like other European states, promotes volunteering as a way of improving social cohesion, discussions on social cohesion in Germany tend not to mention race explicitly, whilst studies on volunteering tend to neglect to explore race at all. When they do, race is simply considered a factor influencing engagement, rather than a structural issue. Employing the example of the German Technical Relief Service for civil defence, the paper explores race relations and representation in Germany, where discussions on race generally remain taboo, drawing on theories of structural racism and whiteness. The paper concludes that it cannot be unproblematically assumed that volunteering leads to social cohesion in an ethnically diverse society if racial inequalities are not addressed.

## **Keywords**

Volunteering, social cohesion, race, structures of whiteness, racial discrimination, homogenous state.

## **Introduction**

Western governments increasingly seek to encourage populations to give their time freely and volunteer. One of the main reasons for this is the belief that volunteering increases

participation in democratic processes as the numbers who vote in elections, and support political organisations, continue to fall (Heidemann, 2010; Putnam, 2000). It is also assumed that volunteering promotes social cohesion, generally regarded as an important feature of a successful democratic society (European Union, 2010: 165; Federal Ministry of the Interior, 2014).

Debates on social cohesion in Germany tend to focus mostly on economic inequality, trust, respect for social rules, and regional identification (e.g. Bertelmanns Stiftung, 2014). They tend not explicitly to focus on race relations. Despite this, discussions around (a perceived lack of?) social cohesion in Germany tend to be underpinned by (unacknowledged) assumptions that cohesion is prevented by groups of people of non-west European heritage, whose lifestyles are incompatible with Europeans (e.g. Terkessidis, 2004). Race, therefore, is implicitly present in these debates.

This paper considers volunteering in the field of emergency preparedness and disaster relief, taking the German Technical Relief Service (THW) as a case study for an exploration of the connections between volunteering, social cohesion, and race. The THW is a technical volunteer force for civil defence and disaster assistance engaged both nationally and internationally. Its main task is to lead clean-up and rescue operations after disasters such as flooding and storms. Currently the THW is experiencing recruitment problems and is particularly targeting young people from migrant backgrounds as a group which has traditionally been under-represented in that organisation.

The term ‘people from migrant backgrounds’ is a translation of the German ‘Leute mit Migrationshintergrund’ and in fact refers to a heterogeneous group. This is the current term

used to refer to all those for who Germany is home, and who are themselves first generation migrants, or whose family members have migrated to Germany since 1945. It includes large number of former so-called guestworkers and their families, invited to come to Germany to rebuild the state after the Second World War. These people are mostly of Turkish, Greek, Spanish and Italian origin, and were expected to work and return to their home countries. It also includes Aussiedler, ethnic Germans from the ex-Soviet Union, who have arrived since the Fall of Communism. It equally refers to significant groups of asylum seekers and refugees from the former countries of Yugoslavia, Iran and the Middle East, and several African countries. The term and related policies tend to group these populations together and do not differentiate between visible and non-visible minorities, those born in Germany to minority parents and those born abroad, nor types of migration. Some of those included in the category have German citizenship and some do not. Whilst it is problematic that so many distinct groups are referred to as a homogeneous group, there is currently no alternative terminology. Indeed, the term is an illustration of the way in which these populations continue to be positioned outside Germanness, paradoxically implicitly a racialised position, the racial subtext of which is silenced.

In Germany, discussions of race tend to remain taboo and racism viewed as aberrant, violent acts associated with extreme groups such as Neo-Nazis (Chin et al., 2009). Equally, most research which links race and volunteering considers race as a variable, but does not consider the impact of racial structures on volunteers and organisations (Craig, 2011). This paper offers an analysis of the culture of the THW and its strategies to recruit more individuals from a migrant background in the light of critical theories of structural racism, and finds that the organisation perpetuates a culture of whiteness and discriminatory racial structures. It is in fact unclear whether the state can have any impact on levels of volunteering (see e.g.

Mohan, 2012). However my aim is not to argue that the eradication of racism will raise numbers of people from migrant backgrounds who volunteer- even if that were possible. Rather my aim is to problematise both volunteering cultures and assumptions around social cohesion which fail to recognise wider racial structures.

### **Social cohesion and volunteering in Germany**

There are various definitions of social cohesion, which shift according to context.

Understandings tend to include economic, educational, and inclusion factors. It is defined by the United Nations Volunteers (2011) as, ‘an absence of severe inequalities in terms of income or wealth and an absence of racial, religious or ethnic tensions; or other forms of polarization.’(p.4). The OECD (2011) defines social cohesion as a society which ‘works towards the well-being of all its members, fights exclusion and marginalisation, creates a sense of belonging, promotes trust, and offers its members the opportunity of upward mobility’ (p.17). In the social sciences it has been argued that the definition shifts depending on the dominant notion of the state: if a given state is viewed as homogenous, homogeneity (cultural, ethnic, linguistic, religious) will be seen as socially cohesive, whilst heterogeneity will inevitably be regarded as damaging to social cohesion (Green et al., 2006).

The German Federal Ministry of the Interior (2014) promotes volunteering as an activity which makes a positive contribution to social cohesion in order to preserve the democratic system. The notion that democratic practices can be learned in civil society organisations is not new (Dewey, 2008; Riekman, 2011) and the German state has long recognised the potential of learning for democratic participation and cohesion (Heidemann, 2010; Riekman, 2011). After the defeat of National Socialism in 1945, the programme of ‘re-education’ trained German citizens in democratic participation, a key aspect of which was civic learning,

an important function of the clubs and youth organisations formed at the time (Riekmann, 2011), explicitly linking volunteering and democratic practices. Partially due to the bad press which formal learning has had in the last fifteen years because of Germany's poor PISA<sup>i</sup> results, much attention has been given to learning in informal settings, which, it is argued, can provide young people with the learning they need to participate fully in a democratic society and which, allegedly, is not provided by formal schooling (Prein et al 2009).

Western states continue to encourage populations to volunteer and claim benefits for democratic participation and social cohesion despite research which challenges the assumption that there is an automatic link. In fact, as Putnam (2000) pointed out some time ago, those '...voluntary organisations that are ideologically homogeneous may reinforce members' views and isolate them from potentially enlightening alternative viewpoints' (p.341). Eliasoph (2013) found that contrary to widespread belief, volunteering does not tend to benefit the disadvantaged, it simply increases advantage for the socially advantaged.

### **Volunteering and race**

Compared to other EU Member States, Germany has a comparatively high level of adults involved in volunteer work (EU, 2010:7). There is an ongoing debate on whether there is actually a decline in volunteering in the western world, or whether people volunteer differently, less in collective and institutionalised organisations and more individual and flexible types of engagement (Anheier and Salamon, 1999; McCulloch, 2014), although this shift has also been critiqued for being too simplistic (Hustinx and Meijs, 2011). The evidence is, in fact, inconclusive (McCulloch, 2014), and there are even figures to show that volunteering is increasing in both Germany (Heidemann, 2010) and throughout the EU (EU, 2010). However, studies agree that not all social groups volunteer at the same rate. In

Germany, volunteering is more common among men, than women. Moreover, studies agree that among ‘immigrants’ far fewer are engaged in voluntary work, although many more claim to aspire to it (Heidemann, 2010: 17) (the author does not explain whether he is referring to those born abroad, or those from migrant backgrounds). Since currently, approximately 16 million people residing in Germany are from a migrant background, and around 7 million of these do not hold German citizenship (Federal Ministry of the Interior, 2011b), this is an issue of major importance.

Race is rarely mentioned in research on volunteering. However, where race is mentioned, it is not addressed critically as a structural issue, only as a factor affecting civic engagement (in e.g. Foster-Bey, 2008; Yates and Youniss, 1998) with little in-depth discussion of why race should affect volunteering rates. This leaves open the possibility of levels of volunteering being mistakenly linked to perceived essentialised characteristics of diverse ethnic groups. Geissler’s (2012) study alone has identified racism in the THW, however, whilst this fills an important gap, it does not consider race issues within the context of structural racism.

Previous research on volunteering suggests that ‘[t]he less socially privileged a person is, the less likely they are to volunteer’ (Eliasoph, 2013:131) and as explained below, people from migrant backgrounds in Germany tend to experience high levels of disadvantage. The higher the social class an individual belongs to, the more likely s/he is to volunteer (Eliasoph, 2013; Musick et al., 2000; Putnam, 2000). Equally, there is a positive correlation between education levels and the tendency to volunteer (EU, 2010; Putnam, 2000). Those on higher incomes are more likely to volunteer, partially because they have extra disposable income, but also because they are more likely to be asked directly and to have the social status and skills which mean they are comfortable doing so (Musick et al., 2000; Putnam, 2000; Wilson

and Musick, 1997). These factors are likely to have some applicability in the case of the THW. It is quite common at present for organisations to be making an effort to recruit volunteers from socially marginalised groups, however, they are not always successful but there is little analysis of why this might be the case (Haski-Leventhal et al, 2010).

### **The Technical Relief Service**

The THW in its present form was founded in 1953 and is a Federal Institute of the Ministry of the Interior. As such, it is state-run and state-funded. 99% of the almost 80,000 individuals active in the THW are volunteers. About 850 have a paid position, mostly females in administrative positions, and males in expert areas and management positions (THW, 2009). ‘Active Helpers’ in the THW provide 120 hours’ service a year and are aged between 17 and 60. There are also ‘Reserve Helpers’, previously ‘Active Helpers’, who only assist in emergencies; ‘Old Helpers’, who are over 60, and only perform certain tasks; and ‘Young Helpers’, aged between 10 and 17 (Krueger, 2007: 157).

The organisation has its own training school, the THW Bundesschule, and formal training is taken very seriously. To become an Active Helper, a basic qualification is taken locally, which takes one to two years. A higher qualification is available for those wanting to use more specialised equipment, go abroad with the THW, or train for a leadership position, but students are required to go to one of two THW schools to gain this. Individual modules take between two and ten days to complete (THW, 2013a and b). The training is quite flexible timewise. Whilst they train, members’ wages are paid and their employers are paid to cover their absence. The training is also free of cost. In addition, the qualification can be transferred to other organisations and professions, depending on relevance.

There are no exact figures available about the extent to which individuals from migrant backgrounds are under-represented at the THW as, like other state organisations in Germany, the THW does not ethnically monitor. It is perhaps also worth noting that only 10% of members are female, although it is beyond the remit of this paper to consider this as well (however see Kruger, 2007 for a discussion of THW practices which are potentially exclusionary of women). In response to recruitment problems, there is a vigorous campaign to attract new volunteers, involving increased engagement with schools, universities and youth clubs, and open days at the local THW (Reichenbach, 2012).

Two main reasons are normally cited for the recruitment problems currently experienced by the THW. Firstly, the abolition of compulsory military and community service in 2011, which previously provided the THW with significant numbers of ‘Active Helpers’ (Federal Office of Disaster Assistance and Civil Protection [FODACP], 2011). The young men who came to the THW through community service cannot in fact technically be referred to as ‘volunteers’, since their engagement was not 100% voluntary although this is mostly not made explicit in brochures, leaflets or other advertising material. It is difficult to obtain exact figures, however Krueger (2007) argues that up to 45% of the so-called ‘volunteers’ were actually performing community service. However, she also points out that often those who were already in the THW as youngsters chose this activity for their community service, and that those placed in the THW eventually became volunteers after their community service came to an end (Krueger, 2007: 155). The abolition of compulsory military service will no doubt affect numbers at the THW, although at the time of writing, figures are not yet available.



The second reason most often cited for the recruitment problems is demographic change (FODACP, 2011; Hartmann and Krapf, 2009; Wuerger, 2009). The three aspects of demographic change most commonly mentioned are: an ageing population, an increasingly mobile population, and – most importantly for this paper - an increasing number of German residents and citizens from a migrant background (Wuerger, 2009) who traditionally do not volunteer for the THW. No differentiation is made between the different populations and groups to whom this term refers, neither in official literature, nor in the interviews conducted for this paper. So whilst a more nuanced story could perhaps be told if further research was conducted which did differentiate, this does not detract from my main argument: the way in which this heterogeneous group is positioned linguistically, socially, economically and politically as non-German, as I explain below, has a very real impact on participation and cohesion.

### **German attitudes to race and theoretical positions**

There are complex reasons for the lack of public debate around race in Germany. Firstly, due to the impact of the racial politics of the Nazis there is a reluctance to see the racial aspects of current discourses and policies around immigration (Chin et al., 2009; Hund, 2006). In addition, politicians and the media have, until recently, denied that Germany is a country of immigration (Terkessidis, 2004). Whilst there is increasing (official) acceptance that Germany is, indeed, a country of immigration, these issues still tend to be considered without reference to issues of race (Ha, 2012). There is an assumption that racism was mostly eradicated in Germany through the programme of re-education, or that racism is a phenomenon of other countries, most notably the US. The process of re-education however did not focus strongly on race issues, despite the fact that Nazism was a racial ideology.

Whilst Germans were encouraged to participate in a democratic system, it has been argued that racist attitudes were left intact (Ericksen, 2012).

The fact that race is taboo does not remove racial discrimination, it merely renders the topic difficult to discuss, as a framework for understanding has been removed. Whilst there are significant differences between and within the different ethnic, social and religious groups, in general individuals from a migrant background in Germany experience considerable disadvantage. For example, they under-achieve in formal education (Allemann-Ghionda and Pfeiffer, 2008), are more likely to be unemployed, are over-represented in low-paid, precarious work (Terkessidis, 2004; Ha, 2012), and experience a lack of opportunity (Solanke, 2009). This is often explained away as biological or cultural deficiency (e.g. Sarrazin, 2010), rather than recognised as structural disadvantage (Friedrich, 2011).

However, recent research has argued that discrimination on the grounds of race is endemic in Germany as in other western nations and the German state defines itself in racialised ways (Chin et al., 2009; Linke, 1999). For example, despite recent changes, racial notions are explicitly tied to national identity through 'jus sanguinis' (the principle of descent), which is used to determine citizenship rights as opposed to the territorial principle of 'jus soli' (Federal Ministry of the Interior, 2011; Honohan, 2012). As in other western nations, Germanness is perceived as white (Linke, 1999). As Terkessidis (2004) argues, 'German' is a description of ethnicity, not citizenship (p.210). Representations of refugees, migrants and guestworkers are confused, and frequently associated with images of floods and rising tides, against which Germany is portrayed as needing to defend itself. In these images of otherness and difference, race is a subtext (Linke, 1999). Germanness and non-whiteness are continually positioned as incompatible (Wollrad, 2005), and Germans from migrant backgrounds are often referred to as *Auslaender*, or foreigners, which for many serves only to

underline their exclusion from Germanness (Solanke, 2009). People from migrant backgrounds report incessant microaggressions (Solanke, 2009), which take the form of covert racism, small incidents of racial ‘othering’ and differential treatment. An Anti-discrimination Law (the AGG) was not introduced in Germany until 2006, comparatively late, and even then, hotly contested by those who argued that there is no discrimination in Germany, so no need for a law. Whilst the law does address discrimination on racial grounds, recent research shows that the law is rarely used as it is inadequate and contains too many loopholes to be effective (e.g. Arnold and Falconer-Stout, 2014).

Theories of white supremacy (sometimes referred to as white privilege or dominance), whilst more common in the US, have started to be employed in European contexts to theorise a racism often neglected in national contexts such as Germany which tend to focus more on citizenship or religion (Garner, 2006; Wollrad, 2005). Arndt (2009) writes of a European system of white privilege, shaped by a history of colonialism, the taboos around race meaning that European whiteness has become an ‘invisible norm’ (p.27). The notion of white supremacy is employed by scholars to analyse and expose a deeply ingrained system of race inequality present in all institutional arrangements and social interaction, even when implicit or unwitting, which ensures disadvantage for those seen as racial minorities, and privileges for those politically designated as white. There are those who might argue that the notion of white privilege is inappropriate to describe social hierarchies in Germany, where many of those who experience discrimination would be considered white, phenotypically. However, white privilege does not refer to skin colour, rather to a system of structural discrimination which shapes identities and interaction. As others have argued, Jewish and Irish people have all been considered as racially inferior historically in the US (Ignatiev, 1997), as have East Europeans and Jews in Germany (Ha, 2012), despite their fairer skin tones.

These racialised structures which privilege whiteness mean that people from migrant backgrounds in Germany tend to be marginalised, disadvantaged and ‘othered’ (Solanke, 2009). This ‘othering’ “reduces, essentialises, naturalises and fixes ‘difference’” (Hall, 1997: 258), allowing groups to be homogenised and “symbolically fixes boundaries and excludes what does not belong”, creating norms which bind together those who are ‘normal’ into an imagined community, and portrays outsiders as “polluted, dangerous, taboo” (Hall, 1997: 258). People from migrant backgrounds are hypervisible subjects, receiving a high level of media and political attention, yet marginalised (Mirza, 2006). Assumptions of cultural deficit, where racial minorities are assumed to lack social and cultural capital, are common. Their knowledges, skills, values, aspirations, and behaviours are de-valued (Terkessidis, 2004; Yosso, 2005). Where there is an assumption of cultural deficiency, disadvantage is assumed to be the fault of the ethnic group, the family or the individual and blamed on ethnic or ‘cultural’ factors. Such assumptions mask structural inequalities in social systems, which are generally assumed to be equitable, and tend to be so common and deeply ingrained that members of the majority culture make them without realising.

## **Methodology**

The methodological approach used in this study combines archival research with a study of websites and media reports. Reports on the THW’s campaign to recruit more people from migrant backgrounds, the THW law, representations of the THW on the internet, leaflets about the THW and other academic studies on the THW were consulted. The archival research was conducted at the Archive of the German Federal Office for Civil Protection and Disaster Assistance, Bonn. I also draw upon a number of interviews, conducted with four civil servants at the FOCPDA and two at the THW. This research was part of a larger ESRC-funded study entitled ‘Mass Population Response to Critical Infrastructure Collapse’ (2012-

15) which compared the state's approach to preparing the population for disasters in the UK, US, New Zealand, Japan and Germany. This paper focuses on one aspect of the German state's approach to disaster preparedness, the THW, and the implications for race equality. Although it would have been beneficial to conduct further interviews, including with volunteers and those from migrant backgrounds, this study only funded archival research and a small number of interviews with state and business representatives.

The data was analysed twice. Firstly, it was analysed for the wider project, the findings from which are beyond the remit of this paper. A second analysis was conducted which focussed specifically on the THW, their recruitment issues and race inequality. The following research questions were posed for the second analysis: Does the wider culture of the THW appear to encourage democratic learning and social cohesion? How does the THW represent itself with regards to recruiting those from non-traditional backgrounds? How are people from migrant backgrounds represented in the literature? I identified discourses which would either resonate with, or challenge those around people from migrant backgrounds which dominate in Germany, discussed above. The interviewees were only asked why they considered there to be a shortage of volunteers and did not talk about race explicitly. As well as analysing the THW's own literature, reports of meetings and advertising materials, I also re-analysed the existing academic literature on the THW through a race theory lens. As race tended not to be made explicit, neither in the interviews nor mostly in the existing academic literature, drawing on theories of white supremacy detailed above enables me to reveal the (often veiled and silenced) racial structures underpinning the culture of the THW and German society more widely.

### **Racial structures and the THW**

A race analysis drawing on theories of whiteness and structural racism suggests that the THW is failing to attract volunteers from migrant backgrounds for three further reasons than those explicitly identified by the THW and FOCPDA (both in their reports and literature, and in general in the interviews conducted for this project). Firstly, the culture of the organisation as closed and hierarchical meaning it is perhaps perceived as white space; secondly, a misanalysis by civil servants and senior staff at the THW and FOCPDA of the reasons why this group is under-represented, assuming that there are deficits on the behalf of the minorities rather than reasons connected to the organisation itself; and thirdly, the approach to targeted recruitment, which reactivates longstanding discourses which privilege whiteness.

### *THW Culture*

The THW is a Federal Institute of the Ministry of the Interior, and is therefore a state institution: state-run, legally regulated by the THW Law (Federal Ministry of Justice, 2013), and state-financed, which is not only unusual for a volunteer organisation (De Hart and Dekker, 1999), but also means that it is historically and politically closely linked to the German state. Although many of the participants in a 2007 study claimed not to be aware of this (Krueger, 2007: 158), taking into account the racial structures in German society, it may indeed be an issue, even if only implicitly, for people from migrant backgrounds, positioned as outside a homogenous Germanness.

Moreover, as the interviewees pointed out, the THW is a very hierarchical organisation with formal structures (Dienel, 2013; Krueger, 2007), and almost military-style organisation (Geissler, 2012). It is tightly regulated, with formal and fixed status distinctions between the volunteers and leaders, and the volunteers themselves. Indeed, 'Active Helpers' are required to fulfil specific characteristics, including having their permanent residence in Germany,

being available for the THW in both peace times and to defend the country, they must not have been dishonourably discharged from another disaster assistance organisation, they have to declare their support for the democratic state and rule of law, they must not have had a prison sentence for more than one year unless it is a suspended sentence, and cannot have been excluded from voting (Krueger, 2007). In addition, Krueger's (2007) study shows that many of the THW's everyday terms are borrowed from the military. Indeed, Geissler (2012) argues that relationships in the THW are defined by a superior/inferior structure, and among those from migrant backgrounds who join the THW, relationships fail in part because of a lack of equality in the organisation. I would argue that it is possible that such a closed and hierarchical organisation appeals less to individuals from migrant backgrounds, who are disadvantaged by a system of white supremacy.

The interviewees emphasised that despite being a national organisation, the THW is very tied to local communities and is often perceived as closed network. It is particularly popular in certain rural areas, forming an important part of life, and being connected to traditions of uniform-wearing, male bonding and rural celebrations (see also Dienel, 2013; Krueger, 2007). It is also a family organisation, based on close friendships and personal support, and these family links mean that membership in the organisation is often inherited, from father to son (Krueger, 2007:173). As was made clear in the interviews, whilst these connections to the local offer many advantages, they also make it more difficult for those without these connections to join. Geissler (2012) reports a high level of resistance to the inclusion of migrant groups among local members, due to the way in which they believe it will affect community feeling. Geissler's study also found that individuals from migrant backgrounds tend not to approach because they think they are not wanted, and view civil protection organisations as 'very closed'. Moreover, even when they do join the THW, it has been

reported that they experience high levels of ‘everyday racism’ (Geissler, 2012). It could be argued that as the THW is generally a white space (with few members from migrant backgrounds) this racism and resistance to racialised members is an example of the white majority group attempting to defend their traditionally white space by inflicting various microaggressions (Solanke, 2009) upon those viewed as ‘other’. As Puwar (2004) has argued, those designated as ‘other’ entering any traditionally white space are likely to be regarded as ‘space invaders’.

### *Assumptions of cultural deficit*

When examining the reasons for the under-representation of minorities, civil protection organisations’ approaches display an assumption of cultural deficit about people from migrant backgrounds. In a recent debate involving members of several different civil defence organisations, one of the main reasons given for the under-representation of individuals from migrant backgrounds is that their ability to speak German is not good enough (Geier, 2012). Equally much of the literature by the organisations themselves seems to assume that individuals from migrant backgrounds do not understand the volunteering system in Germany (Wuerger, 2009:7-8), or do not understand volunteering in civil protection (Federal Ministry of the Interior, 2011:8; Geier, 2012). This seems to be based on an assumption that people from migrant backgrounds are very recent migrants to Germany, and thus ignores the millions who have been brought up in Germany, reactivating longstanding discourses which assume that Germany is not a country of immigration, and that those from migrant backgrounds are ‘foreign’. It is however, not only an example of deficit thinking, it is also unlikely to be the case that people from migrant backgrounds do not understand volunteering in civil protection. Indeed, other research argues that whilst migrants are influenced by their country of origin, their attitudes are more influenced by their country of residence when



engaging socially (Voicu, 2014), and volunteering organisations of various kinds exist all over the world (Anheier and Salamon 1999: 46). As Geissler (2012) argues, migrants may indeed volunteer in high numbers among neighbours, friends and family, however, there is lack of data on their social engagement within what she refers to as their ‘own communities’. It is far more likely that migrants do not wish to join the THW for a complex number of reasons, or it is made difficult for them to join.

The recruitment problems are attributed to what is referred to as ‘demographic change’. The use of this discourse links it with widespread and ongoing debates about a (perceived) ‘population crisis’ involving high birth rates among non-ethnic Germans, and low birth-rates among ethnic Germans (e.g. Sarrazin, 2010). These debates have been identified as racist in that they suggest that the German nation (imagined as made up of ethnic Germans) is threatened by the growth in number of those from migrant backgrounds, who are, it is argued, less successful in education, more likely to live on state benefits, and therefore also a threat to the German economy (as reported by e.g. Friedrich, 2011).

### *Recruitment strategies*

Despite the fact that women and non-white individuals appear in many of the THW’s brochures nowadays, their numbers remain low. Geissler (2012) argues, ‘[p]eople from migrant backgrounds rarely feel that flyers, information or adverts are meant for them’ (p. 98), although she does not explain why this is. An analysis of some of the recruitment materials through the lens of white privilege suggests that they reactivate longstanding racial stereotypes.

Firstly, the materials tend to essentialise and ‘other’ those from migrant backgrounds. As stated in a publication from the FOCPDA ‘... the number of people who come from migrant backgrounds is set to increase, and disaster assistance organisations are already often faced with situations where intercultural and linguistic competences are a necessity, a situation which in the future will only become more frequent’ (Wuerger, 2009: 7-8). Here there is an assumption that this group will automatically have intercultural and linguistic competences beyond German. Whilst this is possible, it also emphasises this group’s ‘otherness’ (Terkessidis, 2004).

The materials also seem to build on the longstanding discourses of perceived incompatibility between Germans and those from migrant backgrounds, again reifying ‘difference’. For example, the title of a meeting in Berlin to address the recruitment of individuals from migrant backgrounds was: ‘Community without shared values- which way should we go?’ (Wuerger, 2009:7). At a debate on the same topic, it was argued individuals from migrant backgrounds have different social values (culturally directed) when it comes to social engagement (Geier, 2012), which calls upon these same discourses of incompatibility and fixed ‘difference’.

Such essentialising language is employed equally by other organisations in civil protection. For example, the volunteer fire service runs a programme specifically aimed at raising the number of minority ethnic people in the fire service, called ‘Our world is colourful’ (Mohn, 2009: 19), which, it could be argued, ‘others’ visible minorities by drawing attention to their phenotype and further contributing to their hypervisibility. As others have argued, a person’s race tends to be mentioned only if she or he belongs to an ethnic minority, thus marking them as different (Mirza, 2006).

Equally some of the THW's recruitment strategies and materials reveal further deficit assumptions. For example, some materials contained an implicit assumption that individuals from migrant backgrounds are not well-integrated into society, a common assumption among Germans (Moenkedieck, 2007). A collaborative project presented on the website for the Ministry of the Interior between a secondary school in Berlin, and the THW, initiated in 2009, is called Integration by Technology, and aimed specifically at pupils from migrant backgrounds (Federal Ministry of the Interior, 2014). Indeed, employing such language, this project explicitly recalls dominant discourses which assume that those from migrant backgrounds are unintegrated in mainstream society by choice, and live in so-called parallel societies (Moenkedieck, 2007). A similar assumption is implied in the following quote, which appears in a report on the topic produced for the FOCPDA:

Volunteering is not only useful to the general public, it is also of use to those who volunteer, whose integration will be supported by participating in community life. People from migrant backgrounds can not only make contact with others through their volunteering work, they also have the opportunity to view themselves as part of an important community. They also acquire knowledge and skills which could improve their employability and the possibility of qualifications which could improve their chances in the labour market. (Wuerger, 2009: 7-8)

In this report too it is assumed that people from migrant backgrounds are not integrated; and that volunteering will help them become integrated. However, as already mentioned, other research has shown that volunteering does not tend to benefit volunteers who are disadvantaged themselves (Eliasoph, 2013). Equally, it silences the racism experienced by

those who have joined the THW, research which suggests that people from migrant backgrounds tend to experience social exclusion rather integration at the THW (Geissler, 2012). It also places the responsibility for not volunteering (and not being integrated) on the individual, which masks these structural issues.

The FOCPSA report also assumes that volunteering leads to employment. Firstly this suggests that individuals from migrant backgrounds are unemployed or underemployed due to a lack of skills and qualifications, rather than the increasingly well-documented complex patterns of race discrimination in the education system and labour market (Fangen and Paasche, 2013; Ha, 2012) which also assumes a deficit on the part of the individual and masks structural discrimination. Secondly, whilst it is widely believed that volunteering can be a stepping stone to paid employment or promotion in one's career, as others have argued, there is very little actual evidence to support the idea that volunteering leads directly to jobs, or improvement in the quality of these jobs (Kamerade and Paine, 2014). Moreover, Geissler (2012) found that there has been very little encouragement in Germany among charities and at local council level to get people from migrant communities into paid positions in charities, or elsewhere. The quote also seems to make a connection between integration (or lack of it) and employment, via volunteering, which mirrors dominant discourses that assume that social inclusion is achieved through employment only. This again, masks complex structural issues which impact upon individuals' participation and inclusion (Nichols and Ralston, 2011), such as racism.

Furthermore, those from migrant backgrounds themselves, and groups representing those from migrant backgrounds are under-represented when it comes to discussing the issue and therefore influencing the recruitment strategies. A glance, for example, over the report on the

‘Symposium on volunteering in civil protection. Challenges for helpers in times of demographic change, a shortage of financial resources and increasing disasters’ (Universitaet Witten/Herdecke, 2012) reveals (in the many photos from the event at least, including audience shots, podium shots and lunchtime pictures) not a single non-white person. People from migrant backgrounds themselves are generally excluded from the conversation.

### **Conclusion: Volunteering, social cohesion and race**

Needless to say, the THW should not be considered representative of volunteering organisations in Germany. Indeed, as suggested in this study, it is, in some ways, quite an unusual organisation. However, as Germany relies on volunteers for civil defence and disaster assistance, issues of social cohesion, and therefore race, are of considerable importance.

This study suggests the THW is a very homogeneous organisation, which contributes to ‘othering’, essentialising and cultural deficit discourses about those from migrant backgrounds. Its structures are undemocratic and do not emphasise equality. As a federal office of the state, it is perhaps unsurprising that a notion of homogenous white Germanness persists at the THW, reflecting wider structures of racial exclusion in Germany and the dominant notion of the state as homogenous. Accepting that social cohesion is understood as homogeneity in states which perceive themselves as homogenous, the THW could indeed be misrecognised as promoting social cohesion, as the structures of racial exclusion will not be recognised as such. These structures persist unaddressed, partly because the population mostly lacks the tools to deal with them, lacking the terminology and framework to perceive Germany as a racialised nation, and laws to address racial discrimination.

Equally, it could be argued that the unprecedented and relatively recent focus on attracting members from migrant backgrounds in any western state is potentially an example of interest convergence (Bell, 1992), rather than an effort to enhance social cohesion. This means that the interests of minority groups are only promoted by the majority when their own interests are served. In this case, the active recruitment of those from migrant backgrounds is linked to falling numbers of volunteers, and to the realisation that so-called ‘intercultural competencies’ are necessary for civil protection organisations to conduct their work effectively, rather than genuine push for social cohesion. However, rather than training existing members in intercultural competencies, the organisations focus on recruiting those who (it is believed) already own such competencies. The theory of interest convergence suggests had there been plenty of white volunteers, there would have been very little concern around the under-representation of those from migrant backgrounds. If the German state is to attract significant numbers of residents from migrant backgrounds to volunteer, this is no straightforward task, in a country which, like other European countries, defines itself along racial lines.

Lange’s recent (2012) work shows that under certain conditions, learning, either formal or informal is actually more likely to promote ethnic divisions than to limit them. If we apply this to the informal learning which takes place in voluntary organisations, it is likely to promote ethnic divisions under the following conditions when combined with the following background factors: the scarcity of resources, environments where the political institutions are ineffective at protecting basic rights, and settings where there are existing ethnic divisions. In the German case, whilst it cannot be argued that resources are scarce, it could indeed be argued that there are existing ethnic divisions, and that basic rights of white Germans are better protected than those of individuals from migrant backgrounds. This is not

to suggest that Germany is on the way to mass ethnic violence again but rather to point out that volunteering does not have a straight forward function, and it cannot be unproblematically assumed that volunteering leads to social cohesion in an ethnically diverse society if racial inequalities are not addressed.

In this paper I have argued that wider structures of race inequality and the way in which organisations fuel or resist these should be taken into account when considering voluntary work as a potential engine of social cohesion. This is a field in which little research has as yet been conducted. Further research might explore the views of volunteers from migrant or minority backgrounds themselves; whether some organisations are more inclusive than others and why; or how the different discourses around race in different European countries influence volunteering experiences.

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<sup>i</sup> The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is a triennial international survey which aims to evaluate education systems worldwide by testing the skills and knowledge of 15-year-old students. (OECD, 2016)