


Bringing care in: The meaning of care in refugee solidarity movements

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Abstract

This article investigates the meaning that refugee solidarity activists supporting people on the move across the Western Balkans migratory route and at the Italian–French border attribute to the notion of ‘care’, which they use to define their solidarity practices, particularly in the aftermath of the global pandemic. By means of a content analysis of in-depth interviews with representatives of grassroots solidarity groups, the article demonstrates that ‘care’ is conceived of as having a political character, as it responds to both the crisis of health care and the restrictions on freedom of movement; a non-hierarchical connotation, which informs in- and out-group relationships; and a transformative orientation, as acts of care prefigure a society in which freedom of movement and health rights are granted to all, in contrast to the existing model of migration governance.

Keywords: care, refugee, solidarity, movements, meanings, borders

1. Introduction

In 2020, the global health emergency placed issues such as access to vaccines and medical treatment at the forefront of public debate, focusing public attention on the right to cure and health care as universal rights. In parallel, progressive social movements started to resort to the notion of ‘care’ in their campaigns, using it as a bridging frame to connect visions of health rights with other concerns (Della Porta and Lavizzari 2022). Campaigns advocated for the right to health care and access to medicine for all, regardless of age, ethnicity, income, or legal status, demanding that people be placed before profits. The register of care was repeatedly used by social movements to refer to both a form of practice (‘care work’), meaning a set of strategies and actions aimed at reducing inequalities in the provision of healthcare, and an ethical obligation (‘the ethic of care’) informing those actions, based on trust, reciprocity, and solidarity (Montes and Paris Pombo 2019). It is in the social movement milieu of Southern Europe in particular that care as a political concept has been widely used, for instance amongst the anti-eviction movements in Spain (Santos 2020), healthcare activism in Italy (Della Porta and Lavizzari 2022), and the movement of social clinics providing primary healthcare for free in Greece (Cabot 2016).

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In the field of refugee solidarity activism, the concept of care had already been adopted before the 2015 refugee reception crisis to refer to acts of humanitarian volunteerism towards people on the move in refugee camps (Fassin 2005; Fassin and D'Halluin 2005). This liberal vision of humanitarian care, which is typical of humanitarianism, was subsequently questioned by scholars for being apolitical and enforcing asymmetric power relations. Instead, a more radical approach to care has been proposed, which calls into question power asymmetries between the providers and recipients of aid and strives to change the hierarchies embedded in humanitarian care and the larger political context while also resorting to oppositional practices (Sandri 2018; Crafter and Rosen 2020). This form of care provision, which is also called abolitionist care, is most commonly employed by informal groups engaged in what has been termed 'solidarity humanitarianism' (Rozakou 2017) or 'vernacular humanitarianism' (Brković 2020). Indeed, the notion of care has gained renewed prominence in the aftermath of the 2015 refugee reception crisis and subsequently in the critical juncture of the pandemic, when care has been foregrounded as a keyword to identify concrete practices of solidarity that consisted in sanitary assistance, such as the treatment of wounds and injured feet, as well as the provision of food and non-food items (NFI) like stoves, clothes, and mobile showers to people on the move. This discursive explosion of care across the landscape provoked criticism from certain scholars, who noted that it had been drained of its original meaning to the extent that care had become a buzzword (Chatzidakis et al. 2020b) and a 'slippery word' (Martin et al. 2015). As some scholars pointed out, the extensive use of the notion of care brought about phenomena such as the *carewashing* of corporations, who present themselves as socially responsible simply to increase their legitimacy, while they are in fact contributing to reproducing inequality and ecological destruction (Chatzidakis et al. 2020b).

While the existing literature has explored the contested notion of care, it has devoted scant attention to investigating the meanings that solidarians¹ attribute to it. To that end, this article explores the meaning-making work of solidarians supporting people on the move,² active along the Western Balkans migratory route, specifically at the Bosnian–Croatian and Italian–Slovenian borders, as well as the Italian–French border, to illustrate the meanings that they attribute to it. The guiding questions of this article are thus: Why do refugee solidarity activists frame their solidarity practices as 'acts of care'? What meanings do they assign to the concept of care?

In this paper, we articulate a key finding: as we illustrate below, care for solidarians has a threefold meaning, namely, it is conceived as a non-hierarchical, political, and transformative practice. The non-hierarchical approach underpinning care work informs in-group and out-group relationships; care is conceived as having a political connotation, for it responds to the crisis in health care and the restrictions on freedom of movement; and it has a prefigurative character, as acts of care overcome existing inequalities in practice by prefiguring a world where freedom of movement and health care are granted to all. Our examination of the meanings attributed from below to the praxis of care adds to the literature on contentious collective action and to the emerging field of 'solidarity studies' (Filippi et al. 2021). Specifically, this study contributes to the conceptual debate dealing with the contested meaning of care and solidarity action in the fields of humanitarianism and social movement studies, which conceive of them as either aiming at political and social change or at reproducing existing power asymmetries. This article thus helps to further our understanding of 'care' with a vision from the grassroots by arguing that the notion as articulated by activists in the refugee solidarity field is partially detached from the humanitarian concept of the term, given that it is conceived of as having political, transformative, and non-hierarchical connotations. By delving into the meaning-making work of refugee solidarity movements and drawing on an in-depth content analysis of fifteen interviews with solidarians³ active along various nodes of the Western Balkans migratory route (namely at the Bosnian–Croatian and at the Italian–Slovenian border) and the Italian–French border, we outline the different meanings that they attribute to the notion of care, which they use to refer to their solidarity practices.

In what follows, we begin by reviewing the literature dealing with refugee solidarity activism and the conceptual debate surrounding the contested meanings of solidarity and care. Following

this, we outline the background and context in which this analysis took place, before discussing the methods used to collect and analyse the data. Thereafter, we present the results of the content analysis. We conclude by considering the findings in light of the literature and outlining a future research agenda to contribute towards a more refined conceptualization of the meaning of care in social movement studies.

2. The multiple meanings and ambiguous effects of solidarity and care in refugee solidarity movements

Are solidarity acts contentious and transformative, or do they instead reproduce power asymmetries and the status quo? Do they hold a political meaning, or are they just a depoliticized form of humanitarian volunteering? The debate on the ambivalence of solidarity has gained renewed prominence in the aftermath of the 2015 reception crisis (Rea et al. 2019). Ever since this point, we have witnessed the emergence of a fast-growing body of literature dealing with migration and refugee solidarity, which employs the concept of solidarity on a large scale (Ataç et al. 2016; Agustín and Jørgensen 2018, 2019; Bauder and Juffs 2020; Bauder 2021). This growing scholarship reflects the fact that grassroots solidarity groups providing support to people on the move across Europe have intensified their activities since 2015 (Agustín and Jørgensen 2018; Della Porta 2018; Milan 2023; Milan and Chiodi 2023). From as far back as the early 2000s, scholars have distinguished between solidarity movements and other types of social movements based on the motives that drove the engagement of their members. Specifically, scholars underlined how participants in solidarity activism do not benefit directly from the outcome of their involvement (Giugni 2001; Passy and Giugni 2001), given that their actions are 'collective, altruist, and political' (Passy 2001). Subsequently, scholars moved the debate forward by focusing on the contentious dimension of solidarity. Agustín and Jørgensen (2019) distinguished refugee solidarity actors from other movement actors based on the fact that the former moved into the field of autonomous solidarity. In their view, solidarity is conceived of as a relational and spatial practice that is contentious insofar as it rejects unjust politics. However, a clear categorization between solidarity actors is not possible as almost all scholars acknowledge the blurred boundaries that exist between different typologies of actors, which often tend to overlap. Recent studies have stressed how solidarity initiatives and political claim-making positions are not necessarily two separate forms of action but are profoundly related and go beyond humanitarianism (Ambrosini 2022). According to Ambrosini (2022), solidarity activities can have a deep political meaning, even when they do not have an explicit political motivation, especially because they challenge national borders, oppose state policies, weaken immigration restrictions, and are constantly targeted by anti-refugee actors and public authorities (Tazzioli 2018). From this perspective, they can be considered to be contentious.

Another strand of scholarship advanced a critical reflection of the term by pointing to the ambiguity of the language of solidarity, which they deem can be used to obscure power relations, running the risk of reinforcing and reproducing hierarchies and alterities (Tazzioli and Walters 2019). In a similar vein, Fleischmann (2020) has resorted to the concept of 'contested solidarity' to explain how solidarity is an elusive concept, shaped by social imaginaries that are contested by different actors, which can entail ideals for a better society and foster transformative relationships. According to the author, in migration societies, solidarity is deeply connected with power asymmetries but can forge collectivity across differences (Fleischmann 2020). Along similar lines, Monforte and Steinhilper (2023) reflect on the ambivalences of solidarity, stressing the fact that acts of presence enacted by solidarity groups, conceived as a means of bringing about some normality and short-term relief in a space of exception such as refugee camps, run the risk of reproducing and amplifying 'distinctions and hierarchies based on the apparent and immediate needs of refugees' (p. 8), differentiating between refugees depending on their immediate needs. Similarly, the daily presence of solidarians in the field and the energy-consuming everyday work to fulfil basic needs are likely to jeopardize the organization of a political struggle for a

better future. The special issue curated by Farahani (2021) also delves deeper into the dilemmas raised by acts of solidarity by exploring the connection between private lives and refugee hosting. The study sheds light on the fact that the act of hospitality towards refugees in private houses raises an expectation for the guests to reciprocate feelings of gratitude and affection towards the host. In this way, it can reproduce the broader power relations it aims to fight against, replicating the same disparity and power asymmetries between the host and the guest that it is attempting to overcome and therefore reflecting historical understandings of gender, race, and class differences.

Alongside solidarity, the concept of care has been widely used in the refugee solidarity field since the start of the 2020s. While some scholars observed that in the 2015 reception crisis the notion of 'hospitality' was outflanked by solidarity as the dominant mode of engagement with refugees (Papataxiarchis 2016), in this article we start from the observation that grassroots solidarity groups increasingly define their solidarity practices as 'care work', especially since the advent of the pandemic. The centrality of care had previously emerged in a number of studies regarding solidarity practices along the US–Mexico border, framed in terms of an abolitionist gesture—'abolitionist care' (Medel 2017), as well as in articles investigating collective action supporting migrants at the same border (Montes and Paris Pombo 2019). In the field of autonomous solidarity, the term 'care' has been foregrounded and gained new prominence in the wake of the global pandemic and is used in refugee solidarity activism to refer to concrete acts of solidarity towards people on the move, in particular the provision of first aid.

Originally, care was defined as 'a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our "world" so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment' (Fisher and Tronto 1990, 40). The feminist theorist Tronto distinguished between 'caring for', which refers mostly to hands-on care; 'caring about', which describes emotional investment and attachment to others; and 'caring with', which looks at how individuals mobilize politically to support others and help to transform the world. As Fisher and Tronto (1990) noted, the feminist movement re-appropriated and re-signified the notion of care, which up until that point belonged to the private dimension. Since the early 2000s, feminist movements have attempted to rethink the concept of care from a 'privatized, feminized, and therefore devalued domain' (Glenn 2000: 84), taking it out of the private sphere, related mostly to the centrality of women in reproduction, in order to bring it into the public realm. Glenn stresses that care, as a practice, entails creating/generating a relationship of interdependence (p. 87), thus calling for 'care to be defamiliarized' (p. 89) in order to transform it into a public or communal responsibility. This stance brought about the politicization of the concept of care (Tronto 1996). More recently, grassroots feminist precarity groups involved in the Spanish anti-austerity movements proposed the neologism 'care-tizenship' ('cuida/danía' in Spanish), which evokes a different notion of political belonging forged by caring relationships (Casas-Cortes 2019). The concept of care has also been applied to climate justice and environmental movements such as Extinction Rebellion, whose slogan 'self-care, people care, planet care' built on an ethic of care. The 'regenerative culture' that the movement endorses, which challenges the 'fundamentally uncaring and destructive' relations of modern Western society, informs the ideology, strategy and organization of the movement (Westwell and Bunting 2020). In their *Care Manifesto*, Chatzidakis et al. (2020a) advanced the notion of 'universal care', which they argue should be placed at the centre of every scale of life, and which they define as 'our ability to provide the political, social, material, and emotional conditions that allow for the vast majority of people and living creatures on this planet to thrive—along with the planet itself' (Chatzidakis et al. 2020b: 893).

Care has also been defined in the literature as an interdependent relationship involving both physical and emotional labour (Bowlby 2012) and ethical questions (Crafter and Rosen 2020). In their work on refugee solidarity movements, the authors refer to 'informal care' as the response to the specific needs of people on the move that governments and aid agencies are not fulfilling (p. 231), stressing the difference between it and the necessary care provided by state actors and

aid agencies. They also underline how the provision of care denotes a concrete activity with physical and emotional entanglements. In his work on housing struggle movements, Santos (2020) distinguishes between three types of care work, which he claims contribute to strengthening internal movement solidarity, and defines them as emotional, identity and participatory. In his view, emotional care refers to 'emotional work' that originates from interactions between activists and facilitates mobilization; identity care consists of the relationships between members that affect their identities; and participatory care concerns the efforts carried out with the goal of reducing the costs and risks associated with participating in an action. Nevertheless, the wider use of the term 'care' runs the risk of emptying it of its original radical meaning. Some scholars put forward a critical vision of care, pointing out that the concept carries with it ethical and emotional complexities (Farahani 2021) and brings about contradictory emotions, aside from ambiguity, as for instance private hospitality does not necessarily disrupt the conditional character of hospitality (Monforte et al. 2021). Similarly, other scholars argue that solidarity clinics in Greece (Cabot 2016; Bonanno 2023), tasked with the distribution of pharmaceuticals, reproduced the same modes of care and of citizenship implemented at the state level, therefore ultimately representing 'just' a third healthcare provider alongside the public and private healthcare system. Ticktin (2011) outlines the complexities produced by the incorporation of care and compassion into the policies of immigration and border management. Specifically, she illustrates how the regime of care, which underpins humanitarian immigration practices in France, led the state to interpret issues of immigration through a medical lens. As a result of the 1998 introduction of the 'illness clause' in French law, those already in France who had life-threatening pathologies were granted legal status if they were declared unable to receive proper treatment in their home countries. This provision disenfranchised the majority of migrants deemed not to be in a life-threatening condition. In a similar vein, she raises a warning about the concept of innocence, which has been used to separate those who are worthy of compassion from those who are considered unworthy. The former category covers children and refugees, while the latter encompasses racialized adults and economic migrants. Ticktin argues that this distinction created by 'innocence' purports to separate the deserving from the undeserving, the 'real', innocent refugees perceived as being vulnerable to economic migrants, who are portrayed as threatening to undermine European security and values. Associating innocence with purity and vulnerability 'establishes also a hierarchical relationship between those who care and those who are cared for' (Ticktin 2016: 3). In so doing, innocence also enforces a dichotomy between saviours and victims, depriving the saviours of any responsibility for the conditions they have contributed to creating, which has forced people to flee their countries, de-responsibilizing them and perpetuating the very conditions of crisis. Aside from immigration policies, informal support initiatives also run the risk of creating categories and hierarchies of need, dividing the 'deserving' recipients of aid from the potentially unworthy others (Drotbohm and Dilger 2024).

It emerges thus that both concepts of solidarity and care bring with them controversial and contested meanings according to the existing scholarship, which continues to critically reflect upon the power asymmetries and political ambiguities that they can produce (Drotbohm and Dilger 2024). However, what has not been explored so far in the literature are the meanings that those who engaged in providing concrete and immediate support to people on the move attribute to the notion of care, which they often resort to as a common register to refer to their solidarity actions. Before disentangling the meaning of care for refugee solidarity activists, the next section will explain the context in which the analysis takes place.

3. Background and context of the study

Since 2015, the Western Balkans have become the main transit route for those attempting to reach Europe by land or via the Eastern Mediterranean route, from Turkey to the Greek islands (Milan and Pirro 2018). Due to the closure of the so-called Balkan corridor in 2016, people on the move were left with no legal and safe possibility to cross borders in order to lodge an asylum

claim. Following movement restrictions, thousands of people originating mainly in Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Kurdistan, Turkey, and Pakistan found themselves stuck at European borders, which they were unable to cross. They, therefore, engaged in the 'game', a dangerous and risky practice that consists of crossing the border at night and tackling barbed-wire fences. Even prior to this period, large-scale solidarity movements emerged and played a key role in assisting people on the move in their journey (El-Shaarawi and Razza 2019; Milan 2019; Cantat 2021), aiding people in transit who found themselves outside of the official reception system, living in makeshift settlements and abandoned buildings. However, following the increase in violence at the borders, as well as a rise in attempts to make the crossing at night, one of the most important forms of solidarity consisted in healing wounds caused by the police, engaging in 'the gesture of treating and medicating wounded feet'⁴ of young males arriving in Trieste, the Italian city close to the Slovenian border, from the Balkan route after being beaten up by the police during the long walk through the mountains. Other acts of care at borders consisted of distributing clothes and food at the Italian–French border, where the Kesha Nya collective, amongst others, dispensed breakfast on a daily basis to people on the move who had been detained by the police during their attempts to cross the border overnight. Due to the escalating violence and pushbacks by Croatian and Hungarian police at the borders with Serbia, since spring 2018, the most commonly used passage has become the one that passes through Bosnia and Herzegovina. The canton of Una-Sana in the North-Western part of the country has turned into a bottleneck, a place of both stasis and passage. Subsequently, the pandemic brought about a strengthening of border controls, which rendered transit along this route increasingly dangerous.

People on the move traversing the Western Balkans route enter Italy via the city of Trieste, located on its eastern border with Slovenia. From there, they very often continue their journey towards France, crossing the Italian–French border through the town of Ventimiglia, located on the Ligurian coast, 6 km from the border. Since 2015, the borders in this area have been constantly becoming both more numerous and more heavily reinforced. This process had already commenced as early as 2011 (Casella Colombeau 2020), and since the 2015 reinforcement of border controls, it has also radically reshaped the social landscape of the place from what it had become following the Schengen liberalization of circulation. Ever since this point, France has reintroduced border controls with the declared aim of impeding unauthorized people from accessing its territory. Over time, the whole area has become militarized by the activation of checkpoints and surveillance devices, including the use of drones to intercept people transiting to France. The city of Ventimiglia has become a central node on the coastal side (Amigoni et al. 2021). For many, Ventimiglia has become a compulsory stop along the route towards France or other European destinations, a bottleneck in the underground network of circulation (Giliberti and Queirolo Palmas 2020; Queirolo-Palmas and Rahola 2020), where solidarity practices and actions, as well as clandestine border crossings and police pushbacks, have never stopped. Following the routes taken by people in transit across the Western Balkans route, we thus find ourselves examining the Eastern Italian border with Slovenia and the Western border with France, focusing on the ramifications of solidarity within Italian territory that can be found in the cities of Trieste and Ventimiglia. In these cities, people on the move who are attempting to cross borders find themselves stranded and forced to temporarily settle in urban spaces in precarious conditions.

In the critical juncture of the pandemic, newly emerging evidence made it apparent the extent to which the social field, with its issues related to social reproduction, affective ties, care of relationships and of the planet, had been commodified by the neoliberal system (Chatzidakis et al. 2020b). The pandemic has been defined as 'above all a crisis of care' (Chatzidakis et al. 2020b: 889), which brought issues concerning inequalities related to the access to health rights and public health provisions into the public debate. The pandemic shed light on the crisis of care and revealed a care deficit (Kussy et al. 2023) that affected the most vulnerable categories of the population. Amongst these, people on the move can be seen as particularly vulnerable due to the fact that they were not only unable to access medical assistance but were also prevented from

crossing national borders in order to continue their migratory journey. In the case under examination here, solidarians made efforts to compensate for the lack of medical care and increase restrictions on freedom of movement for people on the move. The cases of Trieste and Ventimiglia are illustrative. Domestic authorities persisted in approaching their arrivals as an emergency, demonstrating their unwillingness to provide essential services to people in transit during the pandemic. Hence, grassroots solidarity groups found themselves having to devote time and energy to substituting (or supporting) institutions in providing emergency medical care, as the pandemic had 'brought about the total collapse of all social welfare services'⁵. In Trieste, during the middle of the pandemic, the mayor decided to close the city's day-care centre for homeless people, where migrants could also go for assistance and to take a shower⁶. In Ventimiglia, in July 2020, the mayor chose to close the reception camp run by the Red Cross.⁷ As a result, refugee solidarity groups increasingly turned into service providers, as they were involved in the provision of basic services, such as food and NFI distribution, the supply of firewood and stoves during wintertime, as well as medical assistance, at the expense of advocacy-oriented activities and/or the organization of protests. They thus switched 'from a more political mobilization to a mobilization of "doing"' (Zamponi and Bosi 2018). The situation deteriorated following the (illegal) pushbacks against migrants at the Italian–Slovenian border in late 2020, and the increased levels of violence perpetrated against them, which caused wounds and scars that needed to be treated medically. Consequently, solidarians provided medical support through what they termed 'caring practices' and made reference to care in the field of health, a central concern for the population at large.

4. Methodology, data collection, analysis, and positionality

The study is based on fifteen in-depth interviews, carried out both in the field and through online meetings, conducted between 2020 and 2022 with representatives and/or spokespeople of twelve grassroots solidarity groups supporting people on the move active along various nodes of the Western Balkans migratory route (namely at the Bosnian–Croatian and at the Italian–Slovenian border) and the Italian–French border. We employed a semi-structured interview guide, which included a set of questions dealing with the social and political contexts in which these groups were acting, the actions and initiatives they engaged in, the networks they were embedded in, their visions, and the values that motivated their actions. The interviews were carried out in English and Italian, transcribed, and analysed. When conducted in Italian, the quotes presented are our translation. Additionally, we employed participant observation on several occasions and continuously exchanged information while not in the field. We also engaged in informal conversations with refugee solidarity activists and consulted online material, including the webpages and social media pages of each group (such as Facebook and Instagram), along with press statements and interviews that activists and volunteers released to the media.

The grassroots groups interviewed have been carefully chosen by purposeful sampling in an attempt to cover groups that belong to the category of 'autonomous solidarity', according to the typology elaborated by Agustín and Jørgensen (2018), providing support to people on the move at the above-mentioned border crossings. Many groups have been active in these territories for years, mostly since 2015, while others have started participating more recently, especially following the worsening of refugee conditions in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2018. The participants were approached through gatekeepers (often group representatives) or directly (in the case of informal networks). All of these grassroots organizations and informal aid groups come from different European countries and are mostly composed of young people aged between 18 and 30—although in some cases, participation is more heterogeneous and includes activists over the age of 50. In the sampling, we included both international and domestic solidarity groups to portray the heterogeneity of the situation, the kinds of actions carried out and the interactions between the various different groups. All of the organizations engaged with and interviewed are active in the distribution of food and NFI, aimed at fulfilling basic needs, offering medical support, and at

times organizing cultural and recreational activities for stranded people on the move. In relation to qualitative content analysis, we have analysed the transcripts by means of coding, a process that consists of identifying a passage in the text, searching for and categorizing concepts, and finding relationships between them. The codes we applied enabled us to organize our data to examine and analyse them in a structured way, assigning categories to disclose our respondents' interpretations of reality. A set of questions in the interview guide asked participants to reflect on the concepts of 'solidarity' and 'care' and the meaning they attribute to these terms. The answers to these questions and the ensuing conversations form the basis of the discussion.

Throughout our research, matters regarding positionality, power, and privilege have been at the centre of our concerns and reflections, as well as questions related to attachment and bias (Jordan and Moser 2020). Since 2020, one of the authors has collaborated with a number of NGOs working in support of people on the move in Greece and Bosnia and Herzegovina. This connection made the access to the field easier and helped foster relationships of trust with the different solidarity actors. All of the interactions and relationships, as well as all of the material collected and discussed, were affected by our position and role as volunteer/activist-researcher, and insider/outsider in many situations, as well as educated women who had the possibility to leave the context at any time. As noted by many scholars, the establishment of a participatory role within a research community can grant the researcher exclusive perspectives into the 'community's unwritten rules and interactions' (Johnson et al. 2006; McMorran 2012). This aspect can foster the building of relationship by eliminating the 'stigma associated with an outsider's status' (ibid.). Thanks to this position, we had the possibility to gather data and challenge hegemonic ideologies while also gaining privileged insights and access to the context analysed. On the other hand, one of the main challenges was to be aware of the risk of our research being affected by so-called possible 'activist blinders' as well as bias related to personal experiences and relationships. Our position as both 'insiders', meaning experts engaged in the field in support of people on the move, and 'outsiders', since one of the authors only volunteered on an occasional basis, enabled us to relate to the experiences of respondents while making them feel at ease when discussing issues of common concern and shared personal trajectories.

5. The meaning of care for refugee solidarity activists

Our analysis shows that refugee solidarity actors that resort to the concept of care in their discourses, defining their solidarity actions as 'care practices', attribute a threefold meaning to it, as illustrated below:

5.1 The non-hierarchical principle of caring and informing everyday activities

The first element that emerges from our analysis is that solidararians conceive of care as a non-hierarchical principle informing the interaction between members of the group and towards people on the move—although in practice the boundaries between the two are sometimes blurred. In this regard, one respondent defined solidarity actions as 'embedded in a context of care and mutual respect',⁸ which aim to mitigate the discrimination and violence perpetuated against people on the move, something that became amplified during the pandemic. Another activist claimed that the relationships with people on the move take place on a 'non-hierarchical basis and following a very human approach'.⁹ Care, therefore, comes to define a non-hierarchical approach that informs the relationships with people on the move in a way that is based on horizontality and reciprocity and strives to overcome power asymmetries. In their narratives, solidararians endorse a position where 'there is no separation between subject and object of care, giver and recipient' (Ticktin 2024: 68).

For this reason, solidarity actions translate into the practical possibility granted to people on the move to procure food in an autonomous way, by means of vouchers that can be spent in local markets¹⁰ while also sharing the responsibilities of cooking and cleaning communal spaces.

This is the case of the caring practices of hosting refugees in Ventimiglia. The common spaces of the house are shared by both activists and people on the move in a way that attempts to overcome power asymmetries, as well as the perspective that conceives of people on the move as service users. In this regard, two representatives of the 20K collective outline how their practices differ from the traditional practice of food distribution, in which people on the move hold a passive role, to one that enhances and values their active contribution, as explained in the following excerpt:

We host people on the move directly in the same house where we live. Although it is difficult at times, we try to overturn dynamics or at least reduce asymmetries of power, overcoming the idea of [people on the move] as service users, an idea that some of them have interiorized. (...) We bring forward a view in which you share the responsibility of space management, of cleaning, cooking, ... in the house. And this is an important reversal, in my opinion, with respect to the practice of 'queuing up, eating, leaving'. (...) In so doing, the dynamics are completely reversed¹¹.

The same non-hierarchical principle is applied in the self-managed social space 'Upupa', located on the outskirts of Ventimiglia, close to a bridge under which several people on the move found shelter following the closure of the reception camp run by the Red Cross. In this centre, activists and refugees have the possibility to 'make a coffee on their own, without asking, or standing in line', the activists explain. This allows them the possibility of self-management, of autonomy, and of regulating themselves according to their needs. The same happens with the possibility of autonomously taking a shower by means of mobile showers and the self-management of these utilities, without having to queue in line to wait to take a shower once a week, as is the case with the shower service provided by traditional humanitarian organizations.

The non-hierarchical principle of care also informs in-group dynamics, as it is translated into the act of taking emotional responsibility for peers and exercising empathy. As one activist of the Kesha Nya collective explains, she chooses to engage in the group because of the horizontal approach that she defines as follows:

It is very non-hierarchical, everybody gets a lot of space to do things, to put forward their initiatives ... And it comes from a very humane approach ... Being equal, trying to be as equal as you can with the people on the move. Me personally, I just really like this non-hierarchical set-up ...

Some groups adopted caring practices borrowed from the feminist movement(s) in their daily activities, such as the *ronda emotiva* (emotional round) during group assemblies, a tool that allows participants to share the emotional burden of being exposed to the everyday violence of the borders with their peers.¹² Other collectives formed working groups devoted to in-group care work, intended as the practice of caring for the other members of the collective. In this way, the attention to relationships that the ethics of care entails informs not only the relationship with people on the move but also the daily relationships with other activists—where solidarity is conceived of as a relational process practiced in proximity with others and based on the centrality of relationships.

Furthermore, caring also means caring about the personal and migratory history of people on the move, as well as reflecting on the broader context in which this phenomenon takes place and the causes that force individuals to leave their countries. In this regard, one respondent explains that the volunteer medical staff, composed of doctors and nurses, participated in the *La Strada Si.Cura* collective—which means both 'Safe Street' and 'The street must be cared for'—reflect upon the position of privilege from which they act. Formed in April 2020, the group is composed of medical staff providing health care to people on the move either stranded in or passing through Trieste. The members of the collective, almost all female, have an activist background and are, or have been, involved in feminist collectives and/or social centres in the region, a contact that helped them to bring the narrative and practices of care into their activities. For them, caring also means talking about colonialism and decolonization, taking responsibility,

acknowledging Western privilege, and acting in a way that reverses these dynamics, as a member of the group illustrates:

We have a political approach to our medical action: we are responsible for what we see and how privileged we are to observe things, and thus we feel the responsibility to act. As far as the medical part is concerned, we reject any hierarchical structure, the first thing that is important for us is to have a discussion in a collective manner, by means of an assembly in which there is room for everyone.¹³

This non-hierarchical attitude drives them to approach the patient as a person capable of self-determination, as one interviewee explains in the following words:

We want to distance ourselves from an approach to humanitarian medicine that is very welfarist, self-referential and privileged. We want to free ourselves from this and to place ourselves on the same level as these people in recognition of their self-determination ... in recognition of the fact that they don't need saving: people whose right to healthcare we not only want to guarantee, but who we want to give a voice back to. This is the scope of our work: to recognize that we belong to a different type of health professionals.

Care thus means acting in a way that overcomes power asymmetries both towards peers and people on the move.

5.2 The political connotation of care

As has already emerged in previous studies on solidarity movements, solidararians attribute a political connotation to their care work. Care for them is not only the act of implementing health rights but also a way to provide a political response to the health crisis spawned by the COVID-19 global pandemic and to the restrictions on freedom of movement affecting people on the move more than others. With their solidarity actions, solidararians provide a political answer to the inaction of the government and of local authorities.

One of the most prominent examples of this is the care work conducted by solidararians and associations that meet daily in the central square in front of Trieste train station, which they have renamed 'World Square' (*Piazza del Mondo*) (Filippi et al. 2023). What had started as a 'care group' around the charismatic figures of Lorena Fornasir and Gianandrea Franchi, two elderly volunteers based in Trieste, recently developed into an association known as *La linea d'ombra* (the Shadow line), which is engaged in healing the wounded feet of people on the move traversing the Slovenian border, who have often also experienced police violence. The group reclaims the political connotation of this act by defining care work as 'a clear challenge to violence on the border'.¹⁴ In the words of Ticktin, this form of care 'is about a politics of repair, not one of saving or rescuing' (2024: 69), in a way that challenges the root causes of inequality and injustice. Similarly, the solidararians interviewed frame their actions as caring practices that have a political connotation as they are carried out to grant access to medication, to enforce the right to be cured, as well as the right to be taken care of, not only from a medical point of view. In their opinion, medical caring practices are imbued with a political meaning, as they approach 'the patient as human being, repudiating any forms of welfarism and Sunday volunteering, self-referential voluntarism (...)'.¹⁵ Caring actions are thus performed not as a mere act of giving, but one of mutual caring about people and their needs in a non-hierarchical way, in a context in which such actions risk ending up assisting people on the move in a hierarchical and apolitical, self-referential manner.

The same right to be taken care of motivated one of the respondents to engage in food provision to people on the move at the French-Italian border with the Keshu Nya collective. As the activist recounts, she conceives of solidarity as a political action informed by the ethics of care. As she recalls:

I would love people to feel they are taken care of ... we are looking at the human connection. I would say it is really important for me to at least make sure that somebody cares [about them]

... that people on the move can see that somebody cares, that they are not being left alone with their troubles.

From the interviews, it emerges that all the groups interviewed conceive of their solidarity actions as a caring practice formed by 'both political and street work; the distribution of food, clothes, blankets, hygiene products on the one hand (...) and a more political, much more militant part (demonstrations, etc.) on the other hand', as the solidarians of Bozen Solidarity elucidate, in a way that overcomes the dichotomy between humanitarian and political action, blurring the lines between the two. Furthermore, the members of the *Collettivo Rotte Balcaniche Alto Vicentino* (*Collective of the Balkan Route in the upper Vicenza area*) revendicated their acts of solidarity as political deeds. They resorted to the notion of care, which they conceive as being 'very concrete and very practical', to stress the contentious character of their actions, as a representative of the group explains:

When caring practices become something that is persecuted by the law, something that becomes forbidden, something bad, caring becomes a political choice, a choice that is perhaps even obligatory. Therefore, disobeying the impositions led us and has always led us to go down to those places and do things that we shouldn't do, from repairing the squats to living in the squats, to staying with them [people on the move] and therefore to healing them, to keeping them warm, to talking to these people ... These things were forbidden, they were and are even more forbidden now, and so it seems almost an automatic thing to disobey and look for all possible ways to help these people move.

In a similar vein, one of the founders of the NGO *Kompass*, whose members aid migrants stranded in Sarajevo and Bihać in Bosnia and Herzegovina, frames their activity as having a political character, as she explains: 'Honestly, I'm not a humanitarian worker ... What I'm doing for me personally is a very political act. I don't want to be humanitarian worker and I don't want to have a humanitarian organization'. Therefore, 'every sleeping bag, every shoe that we give is a political act. I know why I give it. I know what it represents to me'. The humanitarian frame is thus rejected to embrace a political one.

5.3 The prefigurative orientation of care: building the counter-border

Besides reclaiming the non-hierarchical and political connotation of their care work, another finding of this study is that solidarians conceive of their acts as having a prefigurative power. Caring actions are framed in a way that intends to subvert the order of a society based on the exploitation of humans and resources, and aims at enacting real change in the relationships involved, therefore prefiguring in practice the society as they believe it must be. Their actions thus hold a transformative, prefigurative meaning. As Yates (2021) claims, the concept of prefiguration 'refers to the future-oriented construction of political alternatives or of attempts to reflect political goals or values in social movement processes' (p. 1033). Prefiguring means, thus both imagining an alternative and putting it into practice in the everyday activity of social movements. The activists interviewed prefigure a different vision of the border, one that does not hamper people from crossing it according to the passport they hold or the colour of their skin, but one that can be safely and legally crossed. For this reason, they engage in creating a tight network of solidarity actors that assist people on the move across borders, which a member of *La Linea d'ombra* defined as an attempt to build 'a counter-border that in Italy ideally goes from Trieste to Ventimiglia'.

In engaging in care work, solidarians embody an alternative social arrangement that prefigures a world in which freedom of movement, health rights, and equal possibilities are respected, at odds with the current system that discriminates between people according to their passport or skin colour, and exercises violence against them. In approaching people on the move as 'human beings, taking into consideration their judicial, economic, social, cultural, political, and geographical situation', as explained by a representative of *La Strada Si.Cura*, the solidarians of the medical staff prefigure another type of health care that overcomes health inequalities and

grants health provisions to all human beings, regardless of their origin and legal status. Similarly, in the act of ‘supporting people on the move that do not decide to stay, but rather to continue their migratory path’, as said by a representative of *La Linea d’Ombra*, solidarians enforce a system in which people are granted the freedom of movement even without a valid passport, acting against ‘the injustice of a border that allows us to come and go everywhere with our passport in their countries while it does not enable them to do it normally’. With their caring acts, they thus prefigure an alternative to the existing situation, contributing to creating in practice a ‘bridge towards Europe, a bridge of legality that allows to move without being tortured’, as claimed by a representative of *Bozen Solidarity*, and also prefiguring through these acts an alternative to the current system of migration governance.

6. Conclusions

In this article, we have investigated the meaning that solidarians supporting people on the move at the European border crossings attribute to their solidarity practices, which they term ‘care work’. By means of participant observation and the content analysis of in-depth interviews with people engaged in autonomous solidarity groups, we have explored the meanings they attribute to ‘care’ and revealed that it holds a threefold meaning: it is conceived of as a non-hierarchical principle that informs in-group and out-group relationships; it holds a political connotation; and it has a prefigurative orientation. Building on previous literature that has explored the political meaning of solidarity, our contribution provides a vision from the grassroots, namely by delving into the meaning-making work of refugee solidarity activism and arguing that the concept of care was re-signified by them to attribute to it also a non-hierarchical and prefigurative connotation. Furthermore, we illustrate that the ethics and language of ‘care’ acquired centrality at the critical juncture of the pandemic. Solidarity practices entailing sanitary assistance and medical care intensified in the mutated environment of the 2020 COVID pandemic, in which the idea that human beings had to take care of each other gained prominence. Moreover, the closure of borders rendered care practices central to the action of solidarity groups. Yet solidarians did reclaim the non-hierarchical, political, and prefigurative connotation of their actions. Further research could reflect upon the use of the term in other types of social movements besides the field of refugee solidarity activism. Another avenue of research might look, in a comparative manner, at the caring practices and discourses of refugee solidarity actors in contexts outside of Europe.

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ENDNOTES

1. Throughout the article, we use the terms ‘refugee solidarity activists’ and ‘solidarians’ interchangeability (Rozakou 2016) to denote independent volunteers and activists who mobilized to provide first aid and assistance to people on the move across Europe in the aftermath of the 2015 ‘long summer of migration’ (Hamersak and others 2020).
2. While mass-media reports usually adopt the term ‘refugees’ to refer both to asylum seekers and migrants, we acknowledge that the terms ‘refugee’ and ‘asylum seeker’ have different meanings. Following the approach taken by Carling (2015) throughout this article, the expressions ‘migrants’, ‘refugees’, ‘asylum seekers’, and ‘people on the move/in transit’ will be used interchangeably to refer to individuals who have fled their countries in a bid to escape war or as a result of economic deprivation, regardless of whether they have lodged an asylum claim or have been granted international protection under the 1951 Refugee Convention on the Status of Refugees (UNHCR 1951).
3. We use the category of ‘solidarians’ (Rozakou 2016) to denote independent volunteers and activists who mobilized to provide first aid and assistance to people on the move across Europe in the aftermath of the 2015 ‘long summer of migration’ (Hamersak and others 2020).
4. Interview with a representative of The Shadow Line/*La linea d’ombra*. Trieste, 27 February 2021.
5. Interview with La Strada Si.Cura. Trieste, 27 February 2021.

6. <https://ilpiccolo.gelocal.it/trieste/cronaca/2019/06/20/news/chiude-il-centro-diurno-per-clochard-e-migranti-sara-un-punto-giovani-1.34517945> (accessed April 30, 2023). Also <https://www.rainews.it/tgr/fvg/video/2020/03/fvg-senzatetto-migranti-coronavirus-trieste-05b54a4b-4523-48fc-882e-1c804e3d71b5.html> (accessed 3 April 2023).
7. https://www.ansa.it/liguria/notizie/2020/07/30/chiude-campo-roja-a-ventimiglia_b793dfe3-39bc-4846-b08b-ccb5dd93d.html (accessed 3 August 2023).
8. Interview with a spokesperson of the campaign Lesvos Calling/Open your borders. Padua, online, 31 March 2021.
9. Interview with two solidarians of Kesha Niya. Breil-sur-Roya, 14 May 2022.
10. Interview with No Name Kitchen. Online, 25 November 2020.
11. Interview with two solidarians of 20K collective. Ventimiglia, 13 May 2022.
12. Interview with two solidarians of 20K collective. Ventimiglia, 13 May 2022.
13. Interview with a representative of La Strada Si.Cura. Trieste, 27 February 2021.
14. Interview with a representative of The Shadow Line/La linea d'ombra. Trieste, 27 February 2021.
15. Interview with a representative of La Strada Si.Cura. Trieste, 27 February 2021.

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