

# “Care in Crisis: Ethnographic Perspectives on Humanitarianism” – Conference Report

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## Introduction

Care is an intrinsic part of ordinary everyday life and a key foundation of social belonging. Encompassing both social practices and emotional ties (Drotbohm & Alber 2015), care defines and creates relationships and, according to the new kinship studies, relatedness and social belonging (Carsten 2000). At the same time, care is also entangled with the notion of “crisis,” with the state of exception (Agamben 1998) or situations of emergency that legitimize specific forms of humanitarian intervention. When care is mostly needed and desired it may not be easily obtained (Drotbohm 2015: 93) and people’s ‘deservingness’ can become critical (Fassin 2007; Ticktin 2006). Humanitarian intervention is thus politically shaped in a paternalistic fashion, and re-configures representations of suffering and institutional responses.

For the conference “Care in Crisis – Ethnographic Perspectives on Humanitarianism” held at Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz (JGU) from February 22 to 24, 2018, **Heike Drotbohm** (JGU Mainz) and **Hannah Brown** (Durham University) invited contributors from different fields of study, ranging from medical anthropology to migration and refugee studies. Their aim was to focus on “care in crisis” in a double sense: on giving care in crisis situations, but also on the notion of care undergoing crisis, in the sense that shared knowledge can be questioned in moments of radical social transformations. Discussing knowledge production, materiality and social relations that emerge through practices of care-giving in humanitarian settings, many conference contributions revealed that responses to crises are not limited to humanitarian institutions, and pointed to the importance of taking everyday practices of non-professional care-givers into account.

## “Care beyond innocence” and local caring practices

In two keynotes, **Miriam Ticktin** (New School for Social Research) and **Oliver Bakewell** (University of Manchester) shared their reflections on care that are not based on notions of innocence and that take account of non-institutionalized, local caring practices. Miriam Ticktin critically analyzed how the attribution of care is often related to imaginaries of ‘innocence’. She traced the history of contemporary humanitarianism, which addresses individual, “unjustified and innocent suffering” in a de-politicizing and de-historicizing way (Ticktin 2011). According to Ticktin, humanitarian actors have used innocence to distinguish between those deserving and those undeserving of care. Following the question whether “non-innocent care” can exist, Ticktin suggested drawing inspiration from the US sanctuary movement. While the protection of illegalized immigrants in the US has been central to the movement, recently many have called for the creation of sanctuary spaces for women, children, and LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer) persons. Drawing on the example of the sanctuary movement, Ticktin asked for a vision of sanctuary care that does not

differentiate the deserving from the undeserving.

Based on examples from the Zambian-Angolan borderland and from West Africans who had returned from Libya after the fall of Gadhafi, Oliver Bakewell showed that the realm of caring practices in situations of crises goes beyond institutionalized humanitarian action. He focused on the responses of local populations in Zambia who, despite being poor themselves, have integrated refugees from Angola into their villages. In the West African case, Bakewell argued that villagers became relevant actors in the reception of former migrants when humanitarian organizations started to return them “home” from North African refugee camps. In conclusion, Bakewell called for a differentiation between the “humanitarian” and the “humane” in order to shed light on the different facets of actions ranging from institutionalized humanitarian activity to everyday practices of care.

### **Emerging knowledge, materialities and socialities**

In three sessions, the conference participants drew on rich ethnographic material to discuss knowledge production, materiality and social relations in humanitarian contexts. The starting point of the first session was an understanding of humanitarianism as a sphere of translation that mediates between ethical principles, organizational aims and bureaucratic routines. Three papers addressed the intrinsic ambiguities of this mediation. **Cristiana Giordano** (UC Davis) focused on the process of *sbarco* (disembarkation) that people rescued at sea go through in the South of Italy. With reference to heterotopias as spaces of radical otherness, she opened up *sbarco* in order to show an assemblage of sites, rules, places and processes that go beyond the humanitarian intervention of disembarkation itself. **Andrea Steinke** (Freie Universität Berlin) compared two faith-based organizations active in post-earthquake Haiti to explore the relationalities between faith identity and professionalization or ‘necessary narratives’ in humanitarian conduct, including humanity, impartiality and neutrality. **Žarna Brković** (University of Regensburg) discussed the ways in which employees of an Internally Displaced People’s (IDP) camp in Montenegro tried to change its ‘permanently temporary residents’ into modern EU subjects by insisting on following the rules while simultaneously providing boundary-blurring personal care. The discussant of the first session, **Katharina Inhetveen** (University of Siegen) focused on the translatable and the untranslatable, on how these categories include/exclude, shift and interact across different contexts, and consequently, on the need for systematic comparison of humanitarian practices in different localities.

In the second session, the contributors reflected on materialities emerging in humanitarian contexts. In the words of discussant **Amanda Hammar** (University of Copenhagen), they discerned how looking at ‘things’ could help reveal tensions. With ethnographic material from the Chad-Sudan border, **Andrea Behrends** (Freie Universität Berlin) focused on a list written by people living in the borderland in order to become eligible for humanitarian aid (Cabot 2013), and on a biometric registration procedure in refugee camps. She examined how these materialities question clear-cut distinctions between refugees and others. **Tom Scott-Smith** (University of Oxford) aimed at challenging the general interpretation of humanitarian technologies as either “fluid” or “immutable mobiles” (Latour 1986). He proposed to broaden the spectrum of qualities attributed to these technologies and explored the example

of the malnutrition treatment paste Plumpy'nut®, which he described as materially and conceptually sticky. **Adia Benton** (Northwestern University) focused on the exhibition of the Ebola epidemic and the humanitarian responses to it in different museums in the United States and in a planned exposition in Sierra Leone. According to Amanda Hammar, all three presentations brought up notions of fluidity and fixity, be it in form of seemingly fixed categorizations that ultimately proofed fluid in a context of biometrical control, or in the attempts of exhibit curators to give a readable shape to the Ebola epidemic.

In the third and final session, which focused on changing social relations in humanitarian settings, **Pia Maier** (University of Konstanz) presented a paper on the relation of care and emotion in trauma training within German and Nicaraguan organizations. In 'work on emotion' exercises, she argued, participants are mainly cared for through adopting a new emotion vocabulary that addresses diverging interpretations of trauma and helps to explain the unexplainable. **Elisabeth Kirtsoglou** (Durham University) discussed local understandings and practices vis-à-vis formal regimes of care, as well as empathy as a radically transformative political technology in the humanitarian landscape of state and non-state actors concerned with refugees in Greece in 2015-2016. Her critical reading of spontaneous volunteering revealed a system in which empathy and understandings of what it means to be a potentially vulnerable human-being became the prevalent affective dimensions of emerging socialities. **Simon Turner** (University of Copenhagen) focused on the nature and dynamics of the Danish 'Venligboerne' movement of refugee-assisting volunteers. Although these volunteers work in a highly politicized field, they insist on being a-political, ordinary citizens that wish to bring 'warmth' to a 'cold bureaucracy' by compassionate, spontaneous action. Finally, **Maria Lidola** (University of Konstanz) presented a paper on Cuba's medical cooperation with Brazil. She discussed how interactions between Cuban and Brazilian health professionals and patients involve negotiations around moral responsibility, humanitarian emotion and professional recognition. These negotiations are shaped by (post)colonial imaginaries of help-givers and -receivers, as well as intimate bodily and emotional interactions that comprise categories of race, nationality, class and gender. The discussant of the third session, **Hansjörg Dilger** (Freie Universität Berlin) identified four connecting threads in the current myriad of humanitarian actors and crisis contexts: emplacement; temporality; the political, economic and embodied aspects of care; and researchers' ambivalent positionality. He called on scholars to examine the ways in which intimacy as well as alienation and mistrust shape care in crisis, and to focus on embodied aspects of affective economies through sensory ethnography (Pink 2009).

## **Perspectives (1): Representation and research ethics**

Throughout the conference, discussions focused on several crucial yet controversial themes. The participants debated constructive forms of representation when discussing migrant artefact exhibitions that many suspected to estheticize suffering, rather than to make it intelligible in a caring way, and to re-storying instead of restoring migrant histories, without taking colonial histories and racialized geographies into account. Furthermore, the participants expressed self-critique in a discussion on research ethics: How can scholars study refugees and refugee movements, including the moral dilemmas of activists and those providing humanitarian care, without slipping into a morally depreciative attitude? How can one combine an analysis-oriented

approach with a political positioning, and, ultimately, what is the value of studying suffering unless scholars themselves take a stance?

## **Perspectives (2): Biographies and Context**

Ultimately, Heike Drotbohm summarized, scholars need to focus on and carefully explore biographies and context. When the discussion turned to actors, many participants called for taking a multiplicity of them into account, e.g. givers and receivers of care, users and producers of materialities, and central as well as seemingly peripheral actors; their differing reactions (including resistance) to and perceptions of particular technologies; and the distinction between individual and institutional practices and decisions. Concerning localities, the conference participants pleaded for a stronger contextualization of caring practices, as well as of their own analytic concepts. For example, 'trauma' aka the unsayable might work in a western context, while in others, it might be more fruitful to examine the 'unfeelable'. Instead of focusing on the humane and the humanitarian, which emerged from the same ethical human rights project, one could also choose to examine gift giving and local moral economies in a spirit of "ordinary ethics" (Lambek 2010).

## **Perspectives (3): Humanitarianism outside the aid box**

Towards the end of the conference, Heike Drotbohm drew the conclusion that humanitarianism had moved out of the formal aid box and is provided by a diversified set of actors, who simultaneously tend to reproduce and reinscribe the political, material and social logics of institutionalized care. As many of the contributors showed, new realities have recently brought new actors to the fore, who have often taken over the tasks and responsibilities of humanitarian institutions without being trained as humanitarian workers. Their non-institutionalized, everyday practices might take center stage in future research on humanitarianism, with care as a useful analytical tool to take a broad range of activities and relationships into consideration.

## **Bio notes**

**Franziska Reiffen** is a PhD candidate at the Department of Anthropology and African Studies (ifeas), Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz. Drawing on ethnographic research in Buenos Aires, Argentina, she examines practices of place making in situations of displacement that concern migrants, as well as lower middle-class Argentinians. Her research interests include (South-South) migration, with a regional focus on South America, research on displacement and post-migration studies.

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