

The Changing Shape of Concern:
Volunteers Caring for Immigrants in Detention

Mark S Igra

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Reading Committee:

Katherine Stovel, Chair

Sarah Quinn

Jelani Ince

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Mark S Igra

University of Washington

Abstract

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Mark S Igra

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Katherine Stovel

Department of Sociology

This dissertation examines the evolution of the Shape of Concern, “a pattern of attention and emotional response to others based on the attributes and situations of those others”. Even committed universalists must prioritize how they allocate their limited ability to provide care, and their choices provide information about their shape of concern. This qualitative study based on two years of participant observation and interviews with 64 volunteers who provide care for immigrants in detention in the Western and Southern United States has three key findings. First, rather than being motivated by personal similarity between the carer and the cared-for, motivation is often found in the parallels of prior relationships between the carer and others. Second, almost all of the U.S. born volunteers had lived abroad, which changed the way they saw themselves as Americans and heightened their attention to immigrants. Third, personal choices to join and leave religious and volunteer organizations reflected a desire to act on pre-existing values and led to subsequent transformation in the shape of concern. This study confirms key tenets of the Life Course Framework: Linked Lives, Time and Place of experience, and Personal Agency all shape the self.

Table of contents

Acknowledgements	3
Preface	5
1 Introduction	9
2 The Shape of Concern	39
3 Study Organizations in the Context of U.S. Immigration Detention	74
4 Volunteering	91
5 The Volunteers	110
6 Immigrant Identity and Relational Empathy	122
7 Living Abroad and the Shape of Concern	153
8 Spiritual Capital and the Secular Moral Imaginary	184
9 Service or Solidarity	216
10 Conclusion	252
References	266
Appendices	292
A Qualitative Data and Methods	292

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Preface

Not long ago I went to a reunion where I ran into a friend from high school and college who I hadn't seen for decades. In the intervening years, Stuart had become a wealthy and successful investment banker. When I told him that I was studying why people volunteered to help detained immigrants who they did not know and to whom they had no social connection, Stuart said something like "I think people always do stuff because they get something out of it. They are volunteering because it makes them feel good." I said, "I agree. But the next question is, *why do some people* feel compelled to help even though most people don't seem to care?"

I don't assume that the people in this study are "built different" and are somehow born with levels of empathy and compassion that make them respond to a population that is often vilified in American discourse. Still, by reaching out to help a widely vilified population, they do seem to have a different "shape of concern" than many of their peers. Certainly, the people in this study have universalist values; they have a general view that people have intrinsic worth regardless of their place of birth. That's a common value, but it's not possible to provide care for everyone. Many volunteers specifically choose to spend their time providing care for people

with whom they have no cultural connection.

I've been asked why I care about this topic. A reader should be skeptical of my answer. Like the people I interview for this study, my answers may be self-serving, and my motivations are shaped by intertwined patterns of thinking, feeling, and experience that can't be completely untangled. But here's a story. I wouldn't exist if people did not, over and over, care for people who were outside their socially predictable circle of concern.

When my mom was little, her family was forced to live in a ghetto in a small town in what is now Ukraine. Her father, a physician, had already been killed¹ when my mom's former nanny helped my mother and grandmother escape the ghetto. One small, disconnected, act at a time, a series of people aided my mother's and grandmother's survival, including a woman who began supplying false papers after her disabled son had been taken by the Nazis. My mom met my father, also a Jew born in pre-WWII Poland, in Australia, where they both ended up after their time as post-war refugees. During the war, each of my parents were jailed for traveling without papers – my father separated from his mother and told he might never see her again, just like many migrant children under the Trump administration.

As I write this, a wave of mass deportation has begun in America. Immigration detention centers are imprisoning more people than ever in United States history. Thousands of people at the Republican National Convention gleefully cheered as they held up signs reading “Mass Deportation Now.” Many of the volunteers in my study are superficially similar to the people

¹My grandmother had no way of knowing his fate at the time, but my grandfather was taken by train to Belzec (Arad 1987), where he, and everyone else who arrived with him, were sent directly to gas chambers.

holding up those signs – white Americans who grew up in a similar socioeconomic milieu – but have opposite views. Demography is not destiny.

It is true that people's behavior and interests can often be predicted by distributions of capitals, by culture and social belonging. When I started in sociology, I did a lot of quantitative work that showed how distributions of resources and homophilous social networks really do reproduce inequality. In that kind of work, unusual relationships and people who go against the grain are consigned to the residuals, not so much errors as “unexplained variance.”

What is the source of that variance? An old saw says, “economics is all about how people make choices [and] sociology is about why they don't have any choices to make” (James Duesenberry quoted in Vaisey and Valentino 2018:68). But a sociology that focuses entirely on what Kieran Healy has called “evil functionalism” (Traldi 2024:54), the idea that structures, culture and systems of meaning produce subjects destined to reproduce systems of oppression, misses the way small differences in interest, experience and opportunity blossom into different ways of perceiving responsibilities and obligations to others. A qualitative study like this attempts to at least describe, and hopefully explain, some of that unexplained variance.

The motives of the volunteers in this study aren't pure. Many of them asserted that their motivations were entirely selfish. An important sociological lesson confirmed in this study is that there is no such thing as pure motivation. Patterns of attention and emotion are products of personal histories of social experience, and they drive action according to the available opportunities. The opportunities provided by organizations satisfy the needs of volunteers, but are not necessarily aligned with the long term best interests of the people they help. Volunteer

organizations have sometimes been called out for assuaging guilt and channeling energy into making harmful systems invisible and tolerable to outsiders rather than addressing the causes of harm (Eliasoph 2011). This is an important and accurate critique, and I demonstrate some of the ways this happens. But I also show that in addition to assuaging guilt, engaging in these organizations can, at least sometimes, create new understandings of how those systems work, the realities of their effects, and a more visceral and motivating commitment.

1 Introduction

“VICTORY” The text from Meredith came at 1:20 AM. The victory she was celebrating was that she had managed to get Diego a hotel room, so he wouldn’t spend the night at a bus stop. Volunteers at Western Immigrant Advocates (WIA) didn’t usually use their own credit card to book hotel rooms in the middle of the night, but our experience with Diego had been unusual since we met him ten hours earlier.

That afternoon Meredith and I had been volunteering at the WIA Welcome Center, which comprised two tape-patched tents and a porta-potty on a muddy grass strip outside the fence of a for-profit immigration detention center, along with an RV parked on the street. An ICE officer called the Welcome Center phone and asked me to meet Diego at the gate. That had never happened before in more than a year volunteering.

The other half-dozen immigrants we greeted that autumn day in 2023 arrived the usual way. They walked the half-block to the Welcome Center with their paperwork and plastic bag of belongings in hand, and we tried to get them what they needed for the next step of the journey: first and foremost access to phones and WiFi to contact family, but also food,

weather-appropriate clothing, help buying tickets, and rides to the airport or a temporary stay at the WIA hospitality house across town. That day's guests were mostly people who had sought asylum at a border, including an assertive, talkative man from Romania, and three young Sikh men who couldn't decide whether to try to get tickets to fly to family around the country or just get a ride to the nearest Gurdwara. WIA calls the people who come to the Welcome Center "guests," highlighting the fact that the immigrants were to be treated with gracious hospitality that the U.S. denied them, but also an implicit reminder that this was a temporary connection. One way or another, the guests and the volunteers would be gone by late evening.

We helped the guests in our usual, slightly chaotic, way. Meredith sat on a chair in a tent, juggling browser tabs on her laptop, trying to find flights for our Sikh guests, tilting her reading glasses over her pyramid of frizzy reddish hair when she turned to ask questions in Hindi. As a 50-ish white American woman, she was a demographic match for the typical volunteer. Speaking Hindi while dodging broken-English mansplaining from a Romanian was unusual, but the fact that she had lived abroad and spoke multiple languages was par for the course. Helene, a recently retired government employee who had just returned from a month-long kayak trip, struggled to print out boarding passes in the RV. Mike was the tall, robust older man who maintained the RV. He came by later to drive guests where they needed to go.

Diego was already set to go. Thanks to his lawyer, a ticket for an overnight bus trip was waiting for him in the RV. His clothes were fit for the autumn weather: a padded flannel shirt and jeans with embroidered back pockets. He had family at his destination who offered to send a Moneygram over to Walmart so he'd have some cash. But Diego wasn't well. He was a

broad-chested man with thinning dark hair, but despite being over six feet tall, he walked the half block to the Welcome Center extremely slowly and deliberately. I offered to carry his plastic bag, and he responded nearly inaudibly. The bag was surprisingly heavy. I wasn't sure exactly what was in it, but I did see bottles of medication.

It wasn't until he sat down in a folding chair, took a Coke out of the cooler and started to talk that I understood why Diego had a lawyer, a bus ticket, and an escort out of detention. Diego, who came to the US from Mexico as a child, said detention had been awful. His tone grew anguished as he said, "The guards in there, they would yell at me." He slammed the fingers of one hand against his temple as he said, "I have some mental problems, and they would call me 'idiot' and 'dummy'." The call from ICE made sense now. Diego was free after months of detention thanks to the "Franco" ruling, where a court found that immigrant with severe cognitive issues who had been detained for 5 years was entitled to counsel, even when most immigrants had no such right (Antonio 2013).

The volunteers printed boarding passes for our guests for flights booked by families, or ones we booked with credit card information families sent to WIA. I took the Romanian man and a couple of other guests to the airport. TSA was always puzzled by the cheap-looking ICE IDs asylum seekers had to use after ICE confiscated passports pending final case adjudication, but in the end they accepted them. Mike dropped two of the Sikhs at a Gurdwara about 25 miles away. Helene and Meredith stayed behind to close up, drop a guest at the hospitality house, and bring Diego to Walmart and the bus. Unlike the TSA, Walmart wouldn't accept the ICE ID, so Helene and Meredith dropped Diego at the bus stop with food from the Welcome Center

and cash from their wallets. Meredith told me there was a Spanish speaking family at the bus who agreed to help Diego out, just in case.

After midnight I noticed a message from Meredith. Diego had somehow missed the bus, which was scheduled to leave 2 hours earlier. He didn't have a phone, but asked someone to call Meredith, who had given Diego her number. Meredith and I texted as she made phone calls. Nobody was answering at the hospitality house. I was less than an hour away, I offered to come get him. She found a hotel near the bus stop, but it was pricey. I knew she didn't have a high-paying job, but she said we could figure out how to split the cost later. The "VICTORY" text came after she confirmed Diego had made it there safely. Diego's lawyer and a WIA staff member helped to get him to the bus home the next night.

This dissertation does not focus on why someone like Meredith would be up in the middle of the night after giving her phone number to a large man with "mental problems" who had been in detention earlier that day. Over a few hours she had established a sense of sympathy and direct inter-personal responsibility for Diego. Nor do I ask why a stranger at a bus stop would help Diego call Meredith. There is already a substantial literature on when and why people help when they encounter others who are in immediate need of assistance (Batson 2011; Callero, Howard, and Piliavin 1987; Dovidio et al. 1997).

I volunteered at WIA to find out why Meredith and other volunteers waited at the detention center in the first place, regardless of who might be released. I also wanted to find out why others volunteered to visit immigrants still in detention, establishing relationships even when they knew that most of those relationships ended with deportation for the immigrant and a

sense of powerlessness and loss for the volunteer. Most volunteers weren't from immigrant families. They came from a wide variety of religious traditions, and most had no prior ties to one another or WIA. Why did they go out of their way to provide care for people they had never met, who weren't part of their community, who were widely derided in public discourse, and who will never be able to reciprocate?

1.1 Care and the Shape of Concern

Carol Gilligan ([1982] 2003) found that the moral obligation to care for others is rooted in the “psychological logic of relationships” (Gilligan [1982] 2003:73), but the volunteers in this study have no pre-existing relationships to the people they provide care for. Jane Tronto (1993) responded to Gilligan by making the case for a more inclusive ethic of care that extended beyond personal relationships and could help guide policy. Yet Tronto recognized that the scope of care is often constrained by boundaries of identity:

Whether we can conceive of a way to think of morality that extends some form of sympathy further than our own group remains perhaps the fundamental moral question for contemporary life. (Tronto 1993:35)

The question remains compelling. As Daniel Engster noted in a 25th anniversary appreciation of Tronto's seminal work, “How people can be prodded to expand their circles of care to include individuals from what they consider to be out-groups remains an important question that care theorists have yet to address adequately.” (Kaufman-Osborn et al. 2018:9).

In describing expanding circles of care, Engster echoes a pervasive trope. A variety of research traditions identify “universalists” as those who extend care to the outer edges of concentric circles broadening from family to community, identity group, nation, and the world (Crimston et al. 2016; Enke, Rodríguez-Padilla, and Zimmermann 2023; Graham et al. 2017; Reed and Aquino 2003; Singer 1981; Vaisey 2021; Vaisey and Miles 2014; Waytz et al. 2019). Yet even a committed universalist with ample resources is confronted with constraints. Attention is finite. Acts of care are limited in scope and provided person to person. One cannot provide care to the universe, even if one has universalist values. As widening circles of concern encounter limited resources, abstractions about the extent of the moral circle aren’t sufficient to describe how people allocate their limited capacity to provide care.

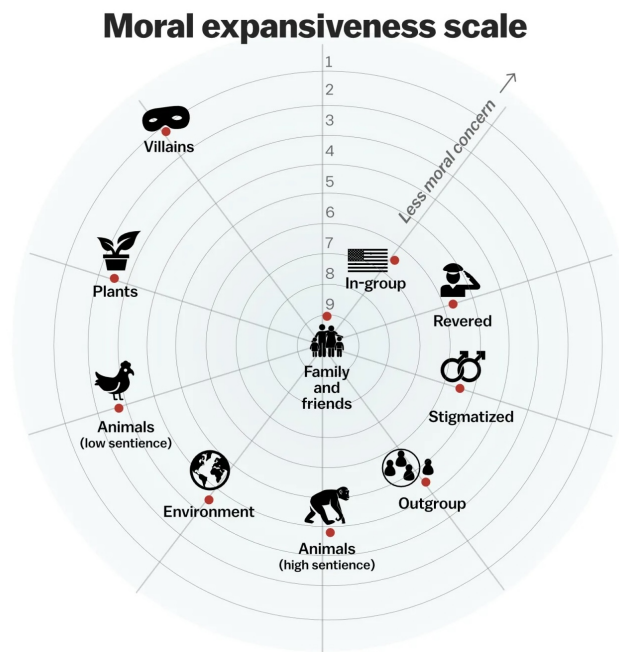


Figure 1.1: Example of circles of concern. Moral Expansiveness Scale from Crimston et al. 2016, image from Samuel (2019)

Rather than imagining concern as a circular pool, deepest in the middle and shallower farther out, a more apt metaphor might be a mountain lake, subject to rockslides and wind, with water occasionally cresting an edge and creating streams that lead to unexpected pools below. Structure matters. Rocks are unyielding, and water won't flow without a channel, but understanding the complexity of the lived social terrain is essential to understanding where care is likely to be volunteered.

Aliza Luft (2020) has highlighted that much social psychological research into morality ignores the critical insight that moral systems are not simply about judging actions, but instead about judging which actions are admirable, obligatory, or forbidden *for particular subsets of people*. She notes that tests of trolley problems, where subjects can decide to save people by switching a trolley onto a different track, there was wide variation of who should be saved (Awad et al. 2018). In some cultures homeless people were as “valuable” as executives, but in more unequal societies, executives were given preference. “In other words, the same action, when enacted against differently categorized people, can be considered more or less moral by the same individual” (Luft 2020:9). Yet these classifications and judgments are rooted in tendencies acquired unconsciously through a lifetime of experience. To effectively study how care is allocated we must understand the way those patterns of categorization and moral classification, often implicit and automatic, are formed in social life.

Responding to Luft's call to center classification in the study of morality brings me to the central question in this dissertation: “*How does one become the sort of person that classifies detained immigrants as deserving of care, and is motivated to help them?*” I view the answer to

this question as a specific case of a broader inquiry into the factors that contribute to the *shape of concern*. The shape of concern is *a pattern of attention and emotional response to others based on the attributes and situations of those others*.

My conception of the shape of concern is similar to Hochschild's (2013) suggestion that empathy is patterned into what she called "empathy maps", tacit moral understandings and feeling rules that "draw boundaries around high-empathy, low-empathy, and no-empathy zones" (Hochschild 2013:38). For Hochschild, empathy is a practice that people may consciously seek to cultivate across these boundaries. However, Hochschild's concept has seen little empirical uptake, and, as Hochschild acknowledges, care may be motivated by emotions other than empathy, such as guilt or a sense of obligation or responsibility. I conceive the shape of concern as encompassing the whole variety of emotional motivators for care.

Of course, social scientists have had much to say about the forces that affect patterns of "vision and division" (Bourdieu 1998:1), ranging from class (Engels [1878] 1962) to religion (Durkheim [1912] 1995), nation (Anderson 2016), the state (Bourdieu 2014), culture (Gramsci 1971), commerce (Hirschman 2013), and access economic and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984), shaped by culture and race (Lamont 2009), along with gender and intersecting relations to power (Hill Collins 2009; Sweet 2020). Many of these approaches reveal the ways that people's internalized understandings of the world are formed by existing social structure and reproduce the structures that shaped them. These embodied understandings and ways of being in the world – the "habitus" to use Bourdieu's term – are so deeply seated that people's explanations for their actions, often justified in terms of their own values, typically represent socially acceptable

forms of explanation rather than true causal stories (Martin and Lembo 2020; Mills 1940; Tilly 2006; Vaisey 2009). Lived experience continually shapes the sort of person one is, and what situations motivate action, but attempting to separate motivations as being grounded distinctively in values, interests, identities, or preferences misrepresents the highly imbricated nature of human motivation (Abrutyn and Lizardo 2024).

While sociological theories of embodied culture and motivation have been supported by research in physiology and neurology showing the deeply intertwined nature of emotion and motivation, those theories have little to say about how people end up pursuing unusual or idiosyncratic paths, or about why people might provide care for previously unknown others across the divisions of class, race, religion, nation, and incarceration that often demarcate boundaries of concern.

1.2 Why This Case

I focus on volunteers providing care because the ability to provide care is necessarily a limited resource, and thus providing care to some people and not others is in some sense a measure of prioritization, even if no conscious sense of prioritization is involved. The moral responsibility for care has been described as a product of interpersonal relationships, and as a core responsibility of the state, yet in many cases non-profit organizations fill the gap between what personal connections are able to provide, and what government – and the voters – are willing to do.

Carol Gilligan ([1982] 2003) was one of the first modern social scientists to argue that moral

frameworks integrate emotion in a deep way. In contrast to Kohlberg (1977), who argued that morality in its highest form was limited to theories of justice and fairness based in “universality, ideals and impersonality” (Flanagan and Jackson 1987), Gilligan identified an ethic of care among women she interviewed. Gilligan argued that, compared to the men who comprised the subjects of Kohlberg’s studies, women were more concerned with morality that attended to the particular needs of others in the context of personal relationships. For Gilligan ([1982] 2003:10), “the logic underlying an ethic of care is a psychological logic of relationships, which contrasts with the formal logic of fairness that informs the justice approach.”

Gopnik (2023:58) agrees that caregiving “does not fit well into the standard conceptual frameworks of philosophy, politics, and economics.” While caregiving is generally viewed as morally exemplary, a utilitarian ethics leads one to a Singer-like advocacy of euthanasia when costs of caring exceed benefits. Even the principles that undergird social contract approaches to ethics do not fit the morality of care well, because reciprocity is not expected in many caring relationships. Similarly, the Kantian moral imperative does not provide the space for different rules for different people, while the limitations of capacity to provide care demands such differentiation. Interpersonal care requires picking and choosing among people who require care.

These aspects of care reflect the difficulty of attempting to define moral foundations in the absence of defining categories of people. In the model developed by Gilligan, care was both a moral category and a set of concrete tasks largely performed by a category of people (women), motivated by psychological drivers embedded in the logic of relationships, on behalf of another

category of people (those with whom the women are in relationship).

1.2.1 Care and the state

Tronto (1993) both recognized the universal human need for care and decried the fact that in modern society the obligation to provide care fell almost entirely on women. She argued that the gendered ethic of care seen by Gilligan was a product of particular social structure, and that rather than being constrained to the private sphere and relegated to women, care should be a focus of politics and policy. Tronto pointed out that before the hegemony of market morality limited the morality of care to the home, none other than Adam Smith argued that care for unknown others should be an important moral motivation for men.¹ Tronto argued that the popular framing of care as private, women's work, "perpetuates forms of racial, gender, and class exploitation while, at the same time, veiling their operation" (Kaufman-Osborn et al. 2018:3).

In highlighting the case for care as a political project, Tronto clarified the process of care, dividing it into four discrete concepts: caring about, taking care of, care giving, and care receiving (Tronto 1993:107). In Tronto's taxonomy, *caring about* goes beyond taking an unemotional interest in a person or group of people, but involves both the recognition that care is needed and a desire to do something to provide it. *Taking care of* involves taking responsibility that care is provided, but not necessarily providing the care personally. *Care-*

¹See also Brown (2015), who argues that the completely self-interested individual is a neoliberal rather than a classical liberal invention.

giving involves direct provision of care and implies personal interaction with those in need. Finally *care-receiving* involves an actual positive response in the experience of the targets of care giving. Note that these responsibilities need not fall on the same people. Political battles may rely on the fact that at least some of the population can be induced to care *about* the welfare of those who will benefit from policies, but *taking care* that policy is implemented and *care-giving* are not the responsibility of the voters.

In the United States, government responsibility for taking care of subsets of the population arose in the post Civil War era (Skocpol 1992). The American welfare state has roots in battles over whether the sacrifices of civil war veterans and their families made them deserving of government payments and services. The limits of this support were clear from the beginning: “No matter how materially needy, the morally undeserving or less deserving were not the nation’s responsibility” (Skocpol 1992:151). Group classifications and the politics of care became intertwined in battles over who deserves such care, and spawned an academic literature on the contested nature of deservingness (Oorschot 2000; Oorschot and Roosma 2017; Skocpol 1992).

Gilligan’s theory of care locates the impetus to care in kinship and direct relationships, and other theories expand the scope of care to the realm of fictive kinship, like that provided through shared community, identity, or religion (Durkheim [1912] 1995; Hill Collins 2009). The volunteers in this case violate assumptions of shared community and group solidarity because they offer services to people they do not know, who are not and will not become members of their local community, and from whom they cannot expect future reciprocity.

While the trope that America is a “nation of immigrants” is widely touted, both Democratic and Republican administrations expanded immigrant detention as rhetoric from both parties divided “good immigrants” from the bad ones who have crossed the border without permission or have committed crimes, and are subject to detention and removal (Shah 2024). The merging of criminal and immigration law, known as “crimmigration”, commonly targeting black and brown men from the Global South, reinforces existing boundaries of care based on race and criminality (Garcia Hernandez 2013; Golash-Boza and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2013; Menjívar, Gómez Cervantes, and Alvord 2018; Stumpf 2006). Research shows that immigrants and people who do not speak English are widely felt to be outside the “boundaries of obligation” of the American community (Wong 2010). For most Americans, immigrants in detention are distinctly not part of the national community, but volunteers pro-actively help them, nonetheless.²

1.2.2 Care and Volunteering

A decision to volunteer helps to reveal the shape of concern because it highlights a point in time where potential volunteers make an explicit choice that affects future action. We cannot discern the shape of concern without seeing the way it affects behavior, but most action is habitual, and most choices are made relatively automatically within a given situation. The choice to volunteer indicates that volunteers have encountered some sort of problem (experienced as affect or emotion), and that they felt helping immigrants in detention would help solve that problem.

²Attitudes toward immigration seem to be softening as Trump’s violent 2nd term enforcement regime has changed attitudes on immigration (Morris 2026).

That choice is obviously affected by available time and resources and the opportunities provided organizations, but it also reveals personal motivation. Beyond that, there is very little we can know in advance. We cannot know in advance the nature of the problem (or set of problems) volunteers sought to solve – indeed volunteers may not have a full awareness of them. We also do not know if long-term volunteering indicates that the problems being solved are the same ones that brought them to volunteering in the first place. Those are empirical questions that this study helps to address.

In focusing on volunteering to provide cross-group care, this study can be compared with studies of what McCarthy and Zald (1977) labeled “conscience constituents” in collective action, but differs from many such studies in two ways. Microsociological studies of collective action have largely focused on the proximate forces that cause people who are similarly situated to take different paths. For example, McAdam’s (1986) work on the role of biographical availability in participating in high-risk social action begins with a pool of people who have already indicated their interest in participating in Freedom Summer, rather than asking how they became the sort of person who would have that interest in the first place.

More directly comparable are studies of the development of an “oppositional consciousness” among the privileged, as Nepstad (2007) and Smith (1996) did regarding Catholic support for the Central American peace movement. Nepstad’s study described how people who were already involved in a solidary community came to a new consciousness based on shared connections to trusted others. Smith noted that people who had been on mission in Central America brought information about American-sponsored destruction back to churches, even

when such information was not available via mainstream news. The fact that the people who were reporting the information were already engaged in a religious community with shared culture engendered trust and enabled “cognitive accessibility” on the part of parishioners who received the reports. In that case existing community solidarity, underlying ethical commitments and resources combined to provide motivation for volunteers and opportunities for action.

Yet the volunteers in the current study do not come from a solidary group. The detention centers where they operate are in places where volunteers would not encounter them in daily life, and far from the border communities where historically large numbers of asylum seekers were attracting attention at the time of this study. The volunteers are mostly women, but many are men. Some come from immigrant families, but most have deep American roots. Politically they largely range from centrist Democrats to Democratic Socialists, though a few are non-political and one was once active in Libertarian politics. They share no religious tradition. They are agnostic, atheist and religious, representing traditions including Catholic, Mainline Protestant, Unitarian, Quaker, Evangelical Christian, and Jewish, yet they work together around a shared mission. Though a plurality of volunteers are religious “nones” – agnostics, atheists, and people who call themselves spiritual but not religious – religion is an important part of this story, with religious organizations instrumental in creating the organizations that support immigrants in detention, as well as organizing and recruiting volunteers. In this case, social boundaries that often limit the extent of caring behavior are not only bridged from volunteers to those being helped, but also among volunteers. The diversity of these volunteers in terms of some common markers of identity makes the fact that they collaborated a more compelling object of study.

1.2.3 Critique of Volunteer Care

While I use volunteer provision of care as a proxy for a shape of concern, I acknowledge that provision of care is not always oriented towards the well-being of individuals being cared for, or the long term benefit of the groups to which they belong. Care-providing non-profits have been criticized for being sites where powerful donors and volunteers both exercise control over behaviors of those being helped. People may volunteer as a way to associate themselves with a moral position while focusing on “do-able” tasks and “avoiding politics” in ways that impede structural change (Eliasoph 2003).

As Mauss ([1925] 2002) pointed out, gift giving is often a way of establishing a status hierarchy and prolonged dependency. At the level of the individual, many people derive a “psychological wage” from relative group position (Blumer 1958; Du Bois [1935] 1983), and establishing one’s own group as the *helper* while an outgroup requires help is a manifestation of power relations. This implicit power relation in helping also explains why people are unwilling to *accept* help from out-group members when they consider group-based power relationships illegitimate (Nadler and Halabi 2006). For Bourdieu (1990), the feelings of warm glow people receive from charitable volunteering are a “subjective truth” that hides the “objective truth” of how charity perpetuates domination.

Still, I argue that the case under study offers an excellent opportunity to understand the “subjective truth” of an internalized shape of concern. After all, it is this subjective truth that underlies action. In addition, this case gave me the opportunity to study secondary questions

about how the practice of care might reinforce or undermine understandings of the power relations implicit in care. I outline these secondary questions below.

1.3 Methods and Data

The qualitative research in this study was highly influenced by the *abductive* process advocated by Timmermans and Tavory (Tavory and Timmermans 2013, 2014; Timmermans and Tavory 2022). In contrast to both the grounded theory approach, which emphasizes analysis unconstrained by prior theory (Charmaz 2014), and the extended case method that attempts to deepen understanding of a “favorite theory” (Burawoy 1998:16), the abductive approach recommends coming to qualitative work with theories in hand and being on the lookout for “surprises”. These surprises – unexpected observations not accounted for by prior theory – lead to re-theorization and validation in subsequent cases.

I originally hypothesized that prioritization of immigrants in detention was rooted not in a sense of universalism, but in more specific identities. I proposed three ideal types of social identity that could explain volunteering on behalf of detained immigrants: identification with the person being helped (these are my people), identification as a member of a religious group who helps immigrants (my people help strangers), and identification as a political opponent of those who caused harms to immigrants (the enemy of my enemy is my friend). Each of these could help explain attention to immigrants in detention, an emotional activation to help and awareness of opportunities to provide services.

However, in my initial rounds of participant observation and interviews at WIA, two key surprises stood out that pointed towards a need for richer theorization. First, nearly all of the volunteers had lived abroad at some time in their life, compared to a very small portion of Americans have done so overall. These volunteers often felt a strong sense of guilt over American behavior in world affairs and in the treatment of immigrants. Second, religious engagement was critical to enabling volunteering for many volunteers, but not in the straightforward way implied by the rubric “my people help strangers.” Most of the volunteers had undergone at least one major change in religious affiliation during their lives, usually due to a desire to find a religious context that better fit their pre-existing moral commitments. The set of who would become “my people” was actively chosen by the volunteers.

These findings highlight two key limitations to an identity-based approach to explaining volunteer behavior. First because broad identity categories cannot adequately narrow down the potential set of volunteers even after accounting for differences in information and biographical availability, it is important to identify finer-grained patterns in the life course that might explain attention to and motivation to help immigrants in detention. Second, social identities, religious or otherwise, are not fixed aspects of a person. The patterns of attention, categorization, and emotion that we label as identity evolve over time. As with changes in religious affiliation, some of this evolution occurs because of explicit choices people make to place themselves in social contexts that provide opportunities for action and further change. It became clear that the relevant question was not of the form “Why do volunteers decide to help immigrants in detention?”, but instead “How does one become the sort of person that classifies detained

immigrants as deserving of care, and is motivated to help them?” Given the emphasis on change, I adopted a theoretical framework based on the life course model (Elder 1994) that I describe below and in Chapter 2.

Following the abductive process of validating surprising findings in new contexts, I did further study with organizations connected to a second detention center in the rural South. The broad religious and political context of this region differs from the West, with higher rates of religious involvement and a larger anti-immigrant Republican vote. Partly due to the remote location of the Southern detention center, the services provided by WIA, along additional services of providing support to families of immigrants in detention, were provided by cooperating organizations. The organization I call Casa de Visitantes del Sud (CV) provides material aid for immigrants in detention, hospitality for their families in the form of food and a place to stay, and coordinates volunteers who visit detained immigrants a house near the detention center. Welcoming was done by an organization I call Southern Welcome (SW) out of a large airport where ICE dropped immigrants who were released from detention. The patterns of living abroad and religious change highlighted above are consistent in both the South and the West, and the additional interviews confirmed other patterns common across the two contexts.

In all I conducted 75 interviews of 68 people, with primary semi-structured interviews lasting from 37 minutes to 3 hours 15 minutes, with a mean time of 1 hour 20 minutes. I interviewed 46 people in the West and 22 in the South. I volunteered for 52 shifts (typically 5-8 hours each) at the WIA Welcome Center over two years. Additionally, I visited and corresponded with

a detained person at the detention center who was fighting his deportation order for about a year and attended his immigration court hearing. I attended bimonthly “community meetings”, featuring guest speakers both online and in person. I spent three long evenings (6-8 hours each) working with the Southern Welcome group at the airport. On two separate weekends I spent full days (about 12 hours each) at the CV house with volunteers and families visiting the detention center.

1.4 Key Findings

Based on interviews and two years of participant observation at WIA, CV and SW, I argue that the shape of concern varies on the basis of relationships, cultural and organizational contexts, and personal choices to engage in contexts that can lead to new understandings. I make the following claims about the evolution of the shape of concern.

First, I find support for the claims of some sociologists (Abbott and Burkitt 2023) and philosophers of care (Gopnik 2023; Schwitzgebel 2025) that care for unknown others is often modeled on existing caring relationships. Rather than being motivated by personal similarity between the carer and the cared-for, motivation is found in the parallels between *relationships* between the carer and others. In this study, a set of young highly educated American-born Latina volunteers stood out from the other mostly older, largely non-Latine white volunteers. Yet it would be reductive to explain their volunteering in terms of their attributes rather than their experiences. These women repeatedly referred to their family and community experience

with the immigrant detention system as highly salient factors in their decision to aid immigrants in detention. This is notable because other volunteers, who were neither Latine nor from immigrant families, also cited their prior and existing relationships with immigrants subject to detention as contributing to their attention to, and concern for immigrants who they did not yet know.

Second, following the familiar social scientific concept that self-judgement is founded in the judgment of others – expressed in terms of the generalized other (Mead 2015), impartial spectator (Smith [1759] 2009), or looking glass self (Cooley 1902) – an unusual shape of concern can derive from internalizing judgment from a different set of people from the norm. Almost all of the volunteers from American families had lived abroad at some time in their life, compared to a very small portion of Americans have done so overall. These volunteers often expressed a strong sense of guilt over American behavior in world affairs and in the treatment of immigrants. Many of their stories make it clear that this guilt was partly a response to the experience of being *seen* as American through non-American eyes.

Third, experience in organizations affects the shape of concern by guiding attention, providing opportunities for action, and norms of behavior. In many cases these organizations were religious organizations that emphasized care for immigrants and supported the organizations in this study. Yet experience in other educational, political, and volunteer organizational contexts also provided information about volunteer opportunities, models of care and styles of interaction that people incorporated into their repertoire of action. Organizations not only provide opportunities for action, they are also “arenas in which preferences and values are

discovered” (Clemens 1997:11).

Fourth, reflecting a central theme in the sociology of the life course (Elder 1994; Elder, Johnson, and Crosnoe 2003; Hitlin and Elder 2007), I find that agency and contingency are important factors in development of the shape of concern. People actively seek organizational and social contexts where they feel that they can pursue personal interests, including a desire to act on their moral commitments. In pursuing these interests, people encounter new models of action and relationships that can recursively deepen interest and reshape concern. In this study, more than half of the volunteers had a major change in their religious affiliation during their life – some of them multiple times – in search of religious contexts that better matched their moral commitments. Many participated in religious organizations, though they were personally non-believers, in order to be in a place that allowed them to act on their non-religious values. People make choices about the organizations they join, those organizations provide information, resources and opportunities for action that further affect patterns of attention and emotional activation.

1.5 Continuing Change and Secondary Questions

I claim that the shape of concern is shaped by inter-personal relationships and experience in organizational contexts, and continues to evolve with experience. It follows that this process continues after people begin volunteering. Extended time in the field gave me the opportunity to observe how volunteers responded to a new set of relationships and organizational context. I

also had the opportunity to see the way an organization reacted to the competing and evolving priorities of volunteers, their organizational imperatives to maintain funding, and the needs of the people they claim to serve.

Volunteer organizations that provide care are often criticized for “putting bandaids on problems that require surgery” (Eliasoph 2013:8) and focusing on providing opportunities for volunteers to feel good about themselves rather than solving the broader conditions that underlie the need. On the other hand, the practice of care can change the perceptions and priorities of carers, both through their interactions with the people for whom they care, and through their interactions with other volunteers. Providing care can lead to what Jane Addams (1899) called “perplexity,” and support for broader political and social change that mitigates the need for care.

However, we know little about how different practices of care and organizational structures might align with these different possible trajectories for volunteers. WIA offers multiple modes of care, including short-term “welcoming” interactions that typically last only one evening as described in Meredith’s experience above. Those encounters may be stressful in the moment, but generally yield a sense of accomplishment and a feeling of “warm glow” among volunteers who complete a small, doable task. In contrast, other people volunteered in the visitation program managed by Noreen, a long-time volunteer. Volunteers who visit immigrants in detention develop relationships that often end with the immigrant being deported. Volunteers often describe this experience as leaving them depleted and sad.

This leads me to several secondary questions: “Are there important differences between the

volunteers who provide different types of care?”, “How do the different types of care shape subsequent patterns of concern and action?”, and “How do organizations sustain volunteering when experiences are emotionally costly to volunteers?”

In my second year volunteering at WIA I had the “luck” as a researcher to be present at a time of turmoil when funding was in short supply and WIA encountered competition from an activist organization that disdained WIA’s non-confrontational approach to helping. Under organizational stress, distinct positions and motivations underlying different practices of care became more clear.

Within WIA I found that there was indeed a correlation between the type of care people provided and their commitment to a larger project of abolition of immigration detention. Those who did short-term welcoming were likely to either be less interested in structural change or argue that it should happen elsewhere first, as they continued to offer services that they often found personally gratifying.

On the other hand, visitors who entered into long term relationships with immigrants in detention favored contentious political action aimed at shutting down detention. Noreen sought to build a “community of visitors” who could support one another, centered on a monthly immigration book group. Though almost completely composed of “nice white ladies”, the visitation group cultivated an abolitionist vision that became incompatible with the non-political organization that had originally facilitated its work. The relative homogeneity of these volunteers may have allowed them to more easily develop the solidarity that helped sustain them through the disappointments their work frequently delivered.

I find that that for at least some volunteers, extended relationships with people in detention and with their activist peers contributes to a changed understanding of the relationship between care and activism. I also find that in order to be sustained, emotionally costly care depends on being in community. Those communities may rely more on shared outlooks and understandings among care givers than similarity with people for whom they provide care.

1.6 Structure of this Dissertation

The rest of this dissertation proceeds as follows.

Chapter 2 argues that the shape of concern is an important sociological concept. I explain why the metaphor of circles of concern extending to universalism is insufficient to explain care that extends across identity boundaries. In the pragmatist tradition volunteering is a form of motivated problem solving, where problems are experienced as emotions that have been shaped by lived experience. The chapter describes sociological approaches that contribute to understanding the “sort of person” one becomes, based on the life course model, relationships, experience in social contexts, and pragmatist conceptions of how internalized moral sense stems from the judgment of others.

Chapter 3 places the organizations that provide care to immigrants in detention into the context of the rapid expansion of immigrant detention starting in the mid 1980s and continuing into the present. Organizations that provide care for immigrants in detention are small by any standards, and especially compared to the political, structural, cultural, and financial forces

that have supported the expansion of immigration detention for the last 45 years.

Chapter 4 uses extended vignettes to describe the different types of volunteering people do across the three organizations in this study. Some volunteers welcome immigrants released from detention and help get them where they are going. Some of the volunteers are “Worldly Liberals” who want to provide help but are not politically active in opposing detention. Others are activists who view helping as part of a larger goal of shutting down immigrant detention. Chapter 5 provides a statistical breakdown of volunteers. The modal volunteer is a retired white woman. Politically, volunteers are largely split between Progressives and Liberals. Volunteers from immigrant families tend to be both younger and more ideologically progressive than other volunteers. Religion does not align with ideology or immigrant status. Volunteers who welcome released immigrants outside detention centers experience warm glow and a sense of accomplishment, while volunteers who visit immigrants inside detention center often deal with negative emotions. Visitation volunteers are almost all ideologically progressive and politically active, whereas welcoming volunteers are split between progressives and liberals.

In Chapter 6, I argue that while the identity model “these are my people,” built on the assumption “I care for other people who are similar to me” explains care in many circumstances, a *relational* model built on the assumption “I care for other people who are similar to the people I already care about,” explains both identity preferences and other cases where prior emotionally-laden relationships contribute to the shape of concern. These meaningful relationships may cross identity groups, and explain attachment to volunteering for some people who do not come from immigrant families.

In Chapter 7, I show that the vast majority of non-immigrant volunteers in my study had lived abroad for extended periods as children of expats, as students, or as expats themselves. This is true even though only a small percentage of Americans, even ones with the high education levels of the volunteers, have ever lived abroad. Many of these volunteers cited guilt and moral outrage over American action, particularly as embodied in the excesses of Trump's immigration policy, as motivating emotions. I argue that this sense of guilt may be related to an internalized awareness of judgment from non-Americans, rooted in their time abroad.

Chapter 8 turns to the role of religion in motivating volunteers. Religious institutions were critical in enabling volunteering, yet many volunteers had changed their religious affiliation during their lives. I argue that rather than religious engagement leading to valuing the stranger, it was often a desire to find a place to put existing values into action that led people to join religious organizations, even in cases when they were non-believers. In both their efforts to travel and their choices to leave and join religious institutions, people's personal affect and interest shaped their life course. Those choices may not have led directly to their "decisions" to volunteer, but still illustrate the ways that personal agency can shape "the sort of person" one becomes, through a chosen social context, which then provides opportunities for action. The shape of concern for many volunteers was, if only partially and indirectly, self-made.

Volunteerism can have a dark side, reinforcing power relations and relieving pressure to change an unhealthy status quo, instead providing individuals and organizations incentive to preserve it (Eliasoph 2013). The limits and contradictions of care are the subject of Chapter 9. The organization where I did most of my research prioritized assistance as opposed to resistance,

leading to divisive conflict both within the organization and with an abolitionist group that viewed the volunteers as collaborators. Yet much as participation in collective action changes people (Polletta and Jasper 2001), volunteers who provided care for immigrants in detention, particularly those who did visitation over extended periods, came to new understandings of both themselves and the systems they were fighting, forming a new group with a more activist bent.

1.7 Limitations and Conclusion

The limitations of a small qualitative study performed at two locations over a period of two years, in the wake of a global pandemic, at a time of rapid swings in immigration policy are not difficult to identify. This type of study is useful for finding gaps in existing theories, providing grist for new theorization, and tentatively testing new approaches. Rather than attempting to exhaustively enumerate limitations, it is more useful to highlight a few important ones.

First, by beginning with a group of people who have made a relatively unusual decision, this study is in some sense “selecting on the dependent variable”, and it cannot answer the question of what causes some people to volunteer and other people not to do so. There may be many other people who have similar patterns of thoughts and feelings to the volunteers and do not volunteer because they have limited availability or access to information. By beginning with volunteers I can only address differences and commonalities within that pool along with attributes and life courses that stand out against the broader population as a whole. The fact

that I begin with that limited pool leaves out a wide variety of structural forces that powerfully shape the resources, opportunities, life courses, and dispositions that put people in a position to make a choice to volunteer.

Second, this study does not address why people adopt the broad moral frameworks and ideologies that are the products of practice and cultural contexts. While the new sociology of morality rejects the Durkheimian conception that morality is a social fact established at the level of society, morality is, inescapably, established and enacted via shared social practice. Like a large subset of the American public, the volunteers in this study would likely all endorse a version universalism. Indeed, many explain their volunteering as a way to enact their universalist values. The primary question is why, within that shared moral framework, relatively small variations in attention, emotion, and opportunity translate into acts of care for particular subsets of people. Even within their narrow field the volunteers form a moral community not as free-floating individuals, but via shared practice.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, this study only glancingly addresses whether the care provided by volunteers is effective for anything other than their own needs. We cannot assume that volunteers solving their own problems by providing care necessarily address the needs of immigrants in detention. In focusing on the shape of concern for volunteers, this dissertation largely leaves the forces that made care necessary in the first place out of frame. Scholars have done excellent work explaining the causes of migration rooted in colonialism (Mayblin 2021), neoliberalism (Faist 2016) and climate change (Falzon, Roberts, and Brulle 2021). Others have focused on the systems of history and dynamics of immigration detention (García Hernández

2019; Minian 2024), and resistance to immigration policy (de Graauw, Gleeson, and Bada 2020; Gleeson and Sampat 2018; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2008; Yukich 2013; Yukich, Fulton, and Wood 2020).

The immigrant stories that appear here via my experiences and those of other volunteers are vague, as I did not seek or receive permission to study this vulnerable population. In any case, I cannot do their stories justice. As members of the volunteer book group described in Chapter 9 know, migrants have told their own stories.

The care volunteers provided to immigrants is fleeting and small compared to the trauma that drove many immigrants to leave their homes, and that they experienced during migration and detention. One of the volunteers I interviewed likened his actions to “a thimbleful of sand” on the beach, amid the historical tides driving migration. This dissertation focuses on a small number of people equipped with thimbles, and asks what motivates them to act across social boundaries in ways that many theories dismiss. Despite the limits of the current research, in an era where a popularly elected American President is making good on his promises for “bloody” (Frum 2024) mass detention and deportation, understanding how people might be motivated to care for people who are detained is important beyond the realm of academic research.

2 The Shape of Concern

In this chapter, I explain why I believe the shape of concern is an important aspect of the sociology of morality, particularly as a correction for the ubiquitous invocation of moral circles as a description of how moral regard is allocated, and as an extension and correction to models that place social identity at the root of social action.

Because this dissertation explores the shape of concern in the context of volunteering, I will describe resource and functional approaches to volunteering which establish important associations between resources, discursive reasons and volunteering even while missing the richness I seek in this discussion. I offer pragmatist conception of the decision to volunteer as a form of problem solving, where emotions are central to the understanding of how people perceive problems and the different ways those may map onto solutions in light of resources, availability and repertoires of action. I then turn to three frameworks for understanding how the “sort of person” one is evolves: the life course framework (Elder et al. 2003), engagement in organizational fields (Clemens 1997; Fligstein and McAdam 2011) and models based on the internalized judgment of others as expressed in identity theory (Burke and Stets 2023; Hitlin

2003, 2011) and concepts of stigma (Abrutyn and Zhang 2024).

2.1 Moral Circles

The metaphor of the moral circle is widely used by philosophers, social psychologists and some sociologists to define the boundaries of what entities (people, animals and nature) are to be included in the application of moral principles. In *The Expanding Circle*, the philosopher Peter Singer (1981) argued that evolutionary accounts that focus on the role of inter-group competition to explain intra-group morality ignore the potential for reason to reshape moral choices. For “rational, social beings whether on earth or in some remote galaxy” the logical endpoint is to expand the moral circle to include “all beings with the capacity to feel pleasure and pain” (Singer 1981:120).

Moral psychologists are less interested in defining proper moral behavior than in measuring variation in personal morality. Crimston et al. (2016) developed the “Moral Expansiveness Scale” to provide a single number representing a “breadth of moral concern” as shown in Figure 2.1. Their survey asks respondents to place 30 different types of people/animals into concentric circles of concern ranging from “Inner Circle of Moral Concern” to “Outside the Moral Boundary”. Breadth of concern is taken to be an average placement. Notably, “Refugees” were considered an “out-group” in this study, and “Villains” including the category “Terrorists” were found to merit much less moral concern than plants.¹

¹This ranking seems to be intuitively understood by political actors. The Trump administration falsely and retroactively labeled Kilmar Ábrego García a “terrorist” after he had been illegally deported due to an

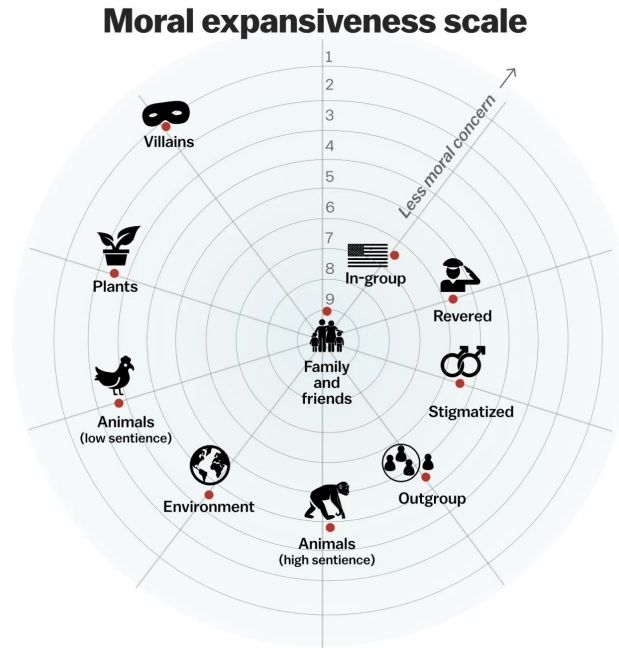


Figure 2.1: Moral expansiveness scale from Crimston et al. (2016), image from Samuel (2019).

In work including the prominent moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt, Waytz et al. (2019) not only use the metaphor of the moral circle to describe their findings, but their survey instrument informs survey-takers that an image of concentric circles “*demonstrates* that people have different types of moral circles.” (Supplementary note 4, emphasis mine). These were presented to respondents in the form of a circle even though they represent a one-dimensional, pre-defined hierarchy ranging from immediate family and extended family through a number of steps including all the people you have ever met, all people in your country, down to “inert entities such as rocks”. This survey is seen to demonstrate moral differences between ideological conservatives and liberals, but it also demonstrates that the moral circle metaphor has a grip on moral psychologists who presume pertinent categories that define radii of moral

“administrative error”.

concern.

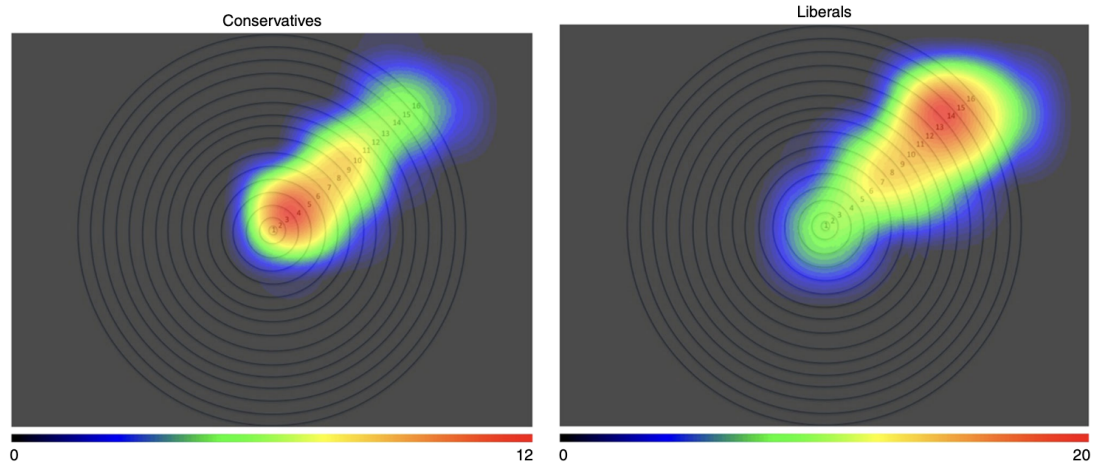


Fig. 5 Heatmaps indicating highest moral allocation by ideology, Study 3a. Source data are provided as a Source Data file. *Note.* The highest value on the heatmap scale is 20 units for liberals, and 12 units for conservatives. Moral circle rings, from inner to outer, are described as follows: (1) all of your immediate family, (2) all of your extended family, (3) all of your closest friends, (4) all of your friends (including distant ones), (5) all of your acquaintances, (6) all people you have ever met, (7) all people in your country, (8) all people on your continent, (9) all people on all continents, (10) all mammals, (11) all amphibians, reptiles, mammals, fish, and birds, (12) all animals on earth including paramecia and amoebae, (13) all animals in the universe, including alien lifeforms, (14) all living things in the universe including plants and trees, (15) all natural things in the universe including inert entities such as rocks, (16) all things in existence

Figure 2.2: Moral circle presentation from Waytz et al. (2019). Figure based on a single response from each survey participant clicking the highest level in a pre-defined hierarchy of moral concern. Color scales differ between diagrams.

Prominent figures in the sociology of morality have embraced a different import from social psychology – the Schwartz Value system (Schwartz et al. 2012; Schwartz and Bardi 2001; Schwartz and Cieciuch 2022). Leading sociologists who study values believe that values are “motivating and applicable across situations, thereby making them *important* for action” (Miles 2015:681), are stable throughout adulthood (Kiley and Vaisey 2020) and may even represent “the core of personal identity” (Hitlin 2003:118). This value theory organizes values across two fundamental dimensions: Self-Enhancement vs Self-Transcendence on one axis and Openness to Change versus Conservation on the other as reproduced in Figure 2.3. Self-Transcendence includes both Universalism and a more narrowly targeted category of Benevolence.

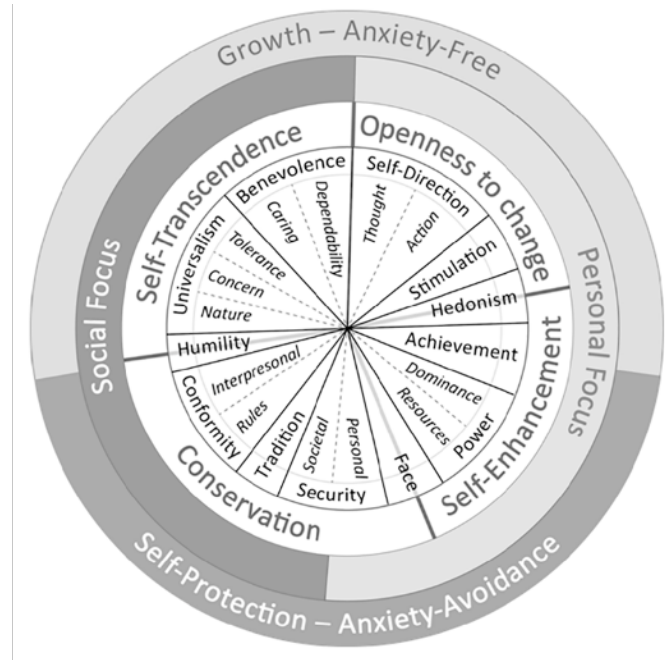


Figure 2.3: Schwartz value simplex from Schwartz and Cieciuch (2022).

Benevolence encompasses the value of “Caring,” a central concern of this study. While defined in publications as “Devotion to the well-being of ingroup members” (Schwartz and Cieciuch 2022:1007), one should use caution in taking this definition of benevolence at face value. In fact, the instrument used to measure values has no questions about an “ingroup”. Benevolence is determined with respect to questions about the importance of “family”, “friends” and “dear ones” in the latest version of the instrument (Schwartz et al. 2012; Schwartz and Cieciuch 2022). By contrast questions about Universalism are phrased in terms of “all the worlds people”, “everyone”, “people he/she doesn’t know”, and “people who are different from him/her.” Very simply, the modern social psychological conception of values has nothing to say about how people might value *some* people they don’t know versus others. Universal-

ism includes all people, whereas care is presumed to be the province of direct interpersonal relationships.

The placement of “family”, “friends” and “dear ones” as the basis of values of care in the Schwartz system is understandable given that obligations toward kin are at the core of the morality of care as formulated by Carol Gilligan. Of course, actual blood kin are not the only ones for whom people provide voluntary care. Durkheim not only highlighted the role of religion in the classification of sacred and profane objects and action, but also observed the way shared religious experience created a category of people and classified members of the in-group as having special status and obligations toward one another as fictive kin.

[I]f we say they regard one another as being of the same family, it is because they acknowledge reciprocal obligations identical to those that have been incumbent on kin in all ages: obligations of help, vengeance, not marrying one another, and so forth (Durkheim [1912] 1995:100).

A large body of experimental research shows in-group preference even in the absence of fictive kinship ties. Social identity research demonstrates that preference for in-group members and opposition to rival groups even when those groups are arbitrary (Sherif 1988; Tajfel 1982). A preference for helping in-group members, even when the in-group is minimally defined, begins in early childhood (Over 2018). English football (soccer) fans preferentially provide help for people who are fans of the same team, and for other football fans over non-fans (Levine et al. 2005). American undergrads are more likely to take on painful tasks to help those who are

similar to themselves (Batson et al. 1981). Motivation to help in-group members is provided both by an increased likelihood of feeling emotions of anger over mistreatment of a group member (Batson, Chao, and Givens 2008) and empathy driven helping (Stürmer, Snyder, and Omoto 2005). In addition to these seemingly internalized motivators for supporting in-groups, external pressures encourage so-called pro-social behaviors toward in-group members – as when people are more likely to help co-ethnics in their community in cases when their actions will be revealed to others (Habyarimana 2009).

While these experimental results would seem to support the concept of moral circles established in survey data, they actually draw much of it into question. If it is indeed easy to establish in-group preferences with minimally-defined groups, then one should question whether the preferences expressed in surveys hold up under real-world situations where people are cross pressured by the many identities and roles they inhabit. If preferences for helping others are swayed by “identities” like being a fan of a particular soccer team, as well as ethnicity, religion, nationality and political ideology, and (arguably²) values of universalism and achievement, then statements about preferences for an in-group are not informative. Which in-group? What are its boundaries? In what situations? These are empirical questions, unanswerable in surveys or controlled experiments.

In their study of moral expansiveness Crimston et al. (2016:649) note that “an expansive moral world could take multiple forms, and there may be particular patterns held by different

²Whether values matter for action is a matter of active debate (Hitlin 2011; Martin and Lembo 2020, 2022; Vaisey 2021) that I address below.

sections of the community.” To understand how different sections of the community might come to have different patterns – what I call shapes of concern – one would have to look more deeply at the experiences that cause different sections of the community to regard people as differentially entitled to care.

2.2 Defining the Shape of Concern

I define the shape of concern as *a pattern of attention and emotional response to others based on the attributes and situations of those others*. I do not assume, as theories of moral circles do, that people possess a hierarchy of identifications that guide their concern for others and likelihood of providing care. Both potential care givers, potential receivers, and situations that might prompt care are too complex to make such assumptions meaningful in explaining action.

The shape of concern is an important component of morality as properly understood. While the classical moral sociology of Durkheim defined morality as a social fact established at the level of society, and much of 20th century sociology treated morality as simply a product of power relations, the “New Sociology of Morality” (Hitlin and Vaisey 2013) regards morality as varied within society, subject to change, and transmitted, exercised, and contested via practice (Abbott 2019; Abend 2008; Hitlin and Vaisey 2013). The consensus view is that conceptions of right and wrong are socially determined and important for behavior, but largely acquired and put into practice in everyday social situations, as guided by affect and emotion. Along with researchers from related fields, sociologists agree that moral behavior is largely the province of

automatic Type I thinking, with occasional recourse to more deliberative Type II cognition. When invoked, deliberation is often used to justify subconscious decisions using socially acceptable frameworks (Dromi, Hitlin, and Luft 2023; Haidt 2001; Vaisey 2009).

Emotion is at the core of morality. The social psychologist Jonathan Haidt and his collaborators developed the influential concept of emotion-based “moral foundations” of care, fairness, loyalty, authority and purity, by demonstrating that people made moral judgments about the acceptability of actions on the basis of emotions. Haidt asked for people’s judgments about hypothetical moral dilemmas. One example is a vignette about Mark and Julie, college-age siblings who decide to engage in well-protected sex a single time as they travel to France on summer vacation. Many subjects regarded the siblings’ actions as “wrong”, but couldn’t explain why they came to that judgment, a paradox Haidt dubbed “moral dumbfounding.” People’s judgments were not based on principles, but on how they *felt* about the action.

Approaching morality from the field of experimental philosophy, Joshua Greene (2013) accepted the premise that most moral decision making is automatic and based on emotion. However, using a set of trolley problems, Greene demonstrated that sometimes people will re-think their intuitive responses in light of higher-level values. He likened morality to a camera with both automatic and manual settings. In keeping with a pragmatist conception of human behavior, most of the time people operate on automatic, but occasionally people can and do rely on principles to override their automated response.

While these studies are compatible with many sociologists’ views on the nature of decision making, they do little to explain the roots of moral behavior in the real world. Two specific

critiques are pertinent here. First, in focusing on the point of “decision” they ignore the forces that shaped the decider, including the fact that emotional responses are complex products of social experience. Second, they ignore the ways that feelings about which actions are right and wrong are shaped by feelings about the *people* performing the actions, eliding the more complicated questions of to what groups one feels one should be loyal, whose authority should be respected, and to whom one is obligated to provide care.

In his critique of “decisionism” within and outside sociology, Abend (2019) points out several different ways focusing on decisions misses the mark. Iris Murdoch emphasized that patterns of attention shape judgment in a slow and barely perceptible process. Abend quotes Murdoch ([1957] 1996:250) noting that “[h]ow we see and describe the world is morals too.” (Abend 2019:65) In this view, “Choice and judgment moments are epiphenomenal. Their psychological prehistories are the real motors of morality: a person’s attention, vision, perception, discernment, and experience; her thinking, feeling, and understanding.” (Abend 2019:66).

Luft (2020) emphasizes that moral decision making is not only based on rapid Type I evaluation of actions, but also on rapid emotional judgment of *the people* and relationships in a situation. She argues that if Haidt’s vignette above were presented as Lakeisha and Jamaal on a work break at a call center, or elderly siblings Ethel and Bernard, or Ethel and Lucille, moral judgments might be very different. For Luft (2020:2), “moral judgment is not simply about actions but about situations and relationships.” This judgment extends beyond judgment about how others should act to how we should act towards others. “[C]lassification is related

to moral judgment because how we classify categories of people informs how we think and feel we ought to treat them” (Luft 2020:8).

This variation in moral regard is central to the shape of concern and an important aspect of the sort of person one becomes over a lifetime of development

2.3 Development of the Shape of Concern

In this work I follow Abbott’s (2019) relational model of moral development, which has roots in the pragmatist tradition of Mead (2015). This framework posits an emotion-based self (Boyns 2006) constructed through social relations that has much in common with Bourdieu’s concept of habitus. In both frameworks “our capacity for intuitive responsiveness, our practical sense of sound moral comportment, is founded upon our thorough habituation into generalised expectations of action” (Abbott 2019:123). As with Bourdieu’s habitus, what seem to be rules of moral conduct are not strict rules, but are in fact, “practical schemes, opaque to their possessors, varying according to the logic of the situation” (Bourdieu 1990:12).

Abbott finds two reasons to prefer a pragmatist approach over the Bourdieusian model. First, he argues that Bourdieu prioritizes the effect of “objective relations” defined in terms of allocation of capitals over “empirical relations” between people. To Abbott and many other advocates of a relational approach, such “objective relations” must themselves be built upon concrete “empirical” experience in social interaction. More importantly for this work, Abbott argues – along with sociologists of morality who have embraced the concept of habitus (Ignatow

2009; Sayer 2005) – that Bourdieu’s practice theory understates the possibility of reflexivity and moral commitments to change the trajectory of people’s lives through creative problem solving.

That kind of problem solving is a key component of a pragmatist approach. In a pragmatist interpretation of social mechanisms, most activity is guided by habitual action, but when faced with a problem, people exhibit creativity in search of solutions that align with their socially constructed sense of meaning and habits of thought along with available opportunities and resources (Gross 2009).

Most of the time emotional responses to others’ needs are transmuted into habitual action without conscious decision making, as when a parent picks up a crying infant or pedestrians avoid eye contact with someone asking for money on the street. These in-the-moment responses might be entirely automatic or, as in the symbolic interactionist tradition, involve resorting to a practical sense of appropriate options to correct one’s behavior within a situation in response to emotional cues. However, sometimes an emotion represents a problem that cannot be resolved through habitual action or pragmatic choices within the present situation. In those cases people attempt to resolve their problem through creative reflection and a change to their habitual behavior. Hitlin and Elder (2007) call the choices that affect life outside of the current situation “life course agency.”

In this dissertation, the decision to volunteer highlights a point in time where potential volunteers diverge from habitual action. This divergence indicates that volunteers have encountered some sort of problem that required a new mode of action, and that they felt helping immigrants

in detention would help solve that problem. Beyond that, there is very little we can know in advance. We cannot know in advance the nature of the problem (or set of problems) volunteers sought to solve – indeed volunteers may not have a full awareness of them. We also do not know if long-term volunteering indicates that the problems being solved are the same ones that brought them to volunteering in the first place. Those are empirical questions that this study helps to address.

Figure 2.4 shows the primary parts of a model that I will explain and justify throughout this dissertation. The shape of concern is an aspect of the self and the product of a lifetime of social interaction. When information about the experiences of others arrives (often via relationships and social context), attention is paid (or not), and emotions are activated as embodied in the shape of concern in conjunction with other interests and desires. According to a pragmatist model of the self, if those emotions become a problem that cannot be solved via habitual action, an attempt to solve the problem in ways that seem appropriate and possible is made.

It is important not to treat the shape of concern as a differentiated cognitive construct that triggers emotion. The shape of concern *is* an emotional response to other people's needs, attributes, and situations. The science of motivation underscores that at a biological level, motivation operates through affective systems, in other words, feelings (Abrutyn and Lizardo 2024; Panksepp 2004). Affect is consciously experienced as emotions that are culturally variable and prompt behavior based on opportunities and resources. Emotion provides both information that a problem needs to be solved and clues about the type of solution that might be available. As Damasio (1994) has shown, without an *affective* response, a cognitive understanding of

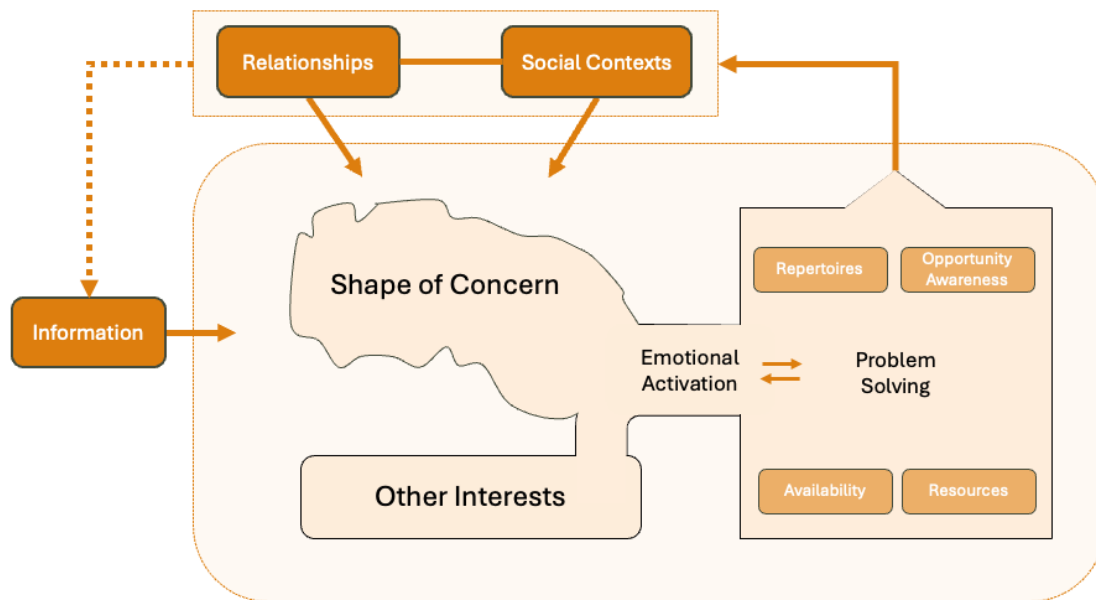


Figure 2.4: Model of the shape of concern. The shape of concern evolves through rounds of problem solving as people respond to emotion by making choices subject to opportunities.

a situation is insufficient to motivate action. In a sense, problem solving should be seen as feeling-solving, where desire/aversion for future emotional states is an important motivation in itself.

A decision to volunteer depends on the potential volunteer's availability (McAdam 1986), their awareness of volunteering opportunities, access to resources, whether volunteering advances other interests, and whether volunteering is part of an implicitly understood repertoire of appropriate actions (Clemens 1997).³ Each of these factors are themselves shaped by the social contexts the potential volunteers have inhabited. Importantly, the decision to volunteer engages the person in a new social context with the potential to form new relationships which further may further modify the shape of concern.

Note that the types of information people receive and the opportunities to respond by volunteering largely depend on social context. This means that the sort of person who volunteers is the sort of person who is already in a social context that gives them access to that information. Indeed, the question of "how one becomes a sort of person" implies not a static shape of concern, but one that evolves in response to relationships and social contexts over the life course (Elder 1994).

³Factors like opportunities, resources and repertoires also depend on social contexts and relationships, but the connections are hidden here.

2.3.1 A Life Course Model of Development of the Shape of Concern

The sociology of the life course is explicitly concerned with how the interaction of life stages with historically situated cultural experience shapes the self (Elder 1994; Elder et al. 2003). Rooted in studies of differences in life trajectories amongst people who experienced the Great Depression and World War II at different points in their lives, the life course approach highlights several themes implicated in the formation of the shape of concern, as highlighted in Table 2.1.

First, the life course approach argues that the intersections of particular life stages with historically variable social contexts is a critical factor in shaping the self. These historical contexts shape lived experience and align with broader cultural understandings and discourses, which can shape personal moral understandings. For example Tugal (2017) calls on a “Gramsci-inspired revision of Bourdieu” to describe how hegemonic discourses (in his case neoliberalism) intersect with field-specific practices to yield distinct attitudes towards charity.

In the current study, the large percentage of “baby-boomers” in the volunteer pool reflects a group that came of age with the late stages of the Vietnam War, and cold-war era U.S. involvement in Central America. Many of the volunteers date disaffection with U.S. government and concern with the effects of U.S. policy on people in other countries to that era. Yet this was also an era where interest convergence prompted by the Cold War (Bell 1980) led to the cultural primacy of a universalist discourse in American civil religion that continued through the Obama era (Gorski 2019). These discourses shaped the way Americans thought about themselves and their country. As I discuss in chapters Chapter 7, the mismatch between a sense

of what an American “should be” instilled by civil religion and the behavior of America in practice was reflected in personal feelings of guilt among many volunteers.

Second, the life course approach emphasizes the importance of human agency and contingency in shaping the self. Given the strong role of social context in the formation of preferences, access to resources, and the internalization of habitual behavior, some analytical approaches assign little importance to agency. As Abend (2019:2) asserts, by the time people make a choice, “most of the business of choosing is already over.” But even though *most* of the business of choosing (labeled problem solving in Figure 2.4) is guided by socially determined factors, choice still matters for subsequent life trajectories. Just as contingency matters in comparative historical analysis when small changes result in increasing returns that lock in path dependence (Pierson 2000), so too can individuals’ contingent decisions shape subsequent lives in large ways. For example, McAdam (1989) found that participants in Freedom Summer who differed from peers only in their availability at the time of the decision to volunteer were more politically active, had lower marriage rates, and lower incomes than their “no show” peers twenty years later.

Sometimes people make life course decisions in response to emotional motivations that have no clear external cause. Abrutyn and Lizardo (2024) argue that though much of motivation is the product of social situations, we should not ignore the role of intrinsic affective drives in personal motivation. Citing research on the neurology of motivation (Panksepp 2004), they note that people have drives to explore and play that can lead people to try new things.

These seemingly small choices in the moment can snowball into long-term motivating

interests. Martin and Lembo explicitly tie a pattern of increasing returns to the shaping one's interests and the sort of person one becomes

Given the sort of person one is, there is something that can awaken interest, and pull one in, increasing investment and thereby deepening interest [...] It is precisely by becoming one sort of person as opposed to another that we develop the capacity to be interested (Martin and Lembo 2020:87)

Below I offer three examples of the way life experience may lead to a distinct shape of concern that extends beyond markers of social identity. The first is “relational empathy,” the idea that in addition to caring about people with a shared identity, people care about others who are similar to those they already care for. The second is “unusual impartial spectators,” which involves motivation related to the *judgment* of people who are differently situated from oneself. Third, engagement in organizational life – including but not limited to religious organizations – can change subjectivities via practices that connect people to unknown others.

Table 2.1: Principles of Life Course Theory (Elder et al. 2003:29–31), as applied in this dissertation. Ordering and emphasis my own.

Principle	Application
Time and Place The life course of individuals is embedded and shaped by the historical times and places they experience over their lifetime	Cold War interest convergence drove perceptions of America that were tarnished by living in places with different views of America. (Ch. 7)

Principle	Application
Linked Lives Lives are lived interdependently, and socio-historical influences are expressed through this network of shared relationships	Relationships with family and others subject to ICE-era detention drive <i>relational empathy</i> . (Ch. 6)
Agency Individuals construct their own life course through the choices and actions they take <i>within the opportunities and constraints of history and social circumstance</i>	Choices to travel and join religious and volunteer organizations shaped volunteers' emotions, understandings and subsequent choices (Ch 7, 8, 9)
Life-Span Development Human development and aging are lifelong processes	Volunteers continued to change understandings and modes of action in response to volunteering. (Ch. 9)
Timing The developmental antecedents and consequences of life transitions, events, and behavioral patterns vary according to their timing in a person's life	Travel and religious transitions in young adulthood compounded as choices continued over time.

2.3.2 Relational Empathy

Abbott and Burkitt (2023) argue that to understand the formation of the moral boundaries beyond those defined by self-identity we must understand the emotions inherent in *relationships*, and how those emotions and relationships are instrumental in shaping personal moral classification. As an example of the way relationships might inform changes in the moral self they cite relative changes in moral evaluation of LGBTQ rights in recent decades, which studies argue changed in response to personal relationships with people who came out as LGBTQ (Garretson 2018). They argue that “emotions should be understood as reflecting ‘patterns of relationship’, which, as with moral habituations and sentiments, come to be part of our embodied experience” (Abbott

and Burkitt 2023:341).

The idea that concern is rooted in relationships, and care for unknown others stems from parallels to existing relationships is an old one, dating to Confucian scholar Mengzi in the 4th century BCE. Mengzi held that the challenge for a state and its rulers was to extend concern that they had for their own families to the populace at large (Schwitzgebel 2025). Schwitzgebel (2025) has argued that what he calls “Mengzian extension” is a more accurate description of the way that people actually allocate care than “Golden Rule” thinking where people place themselves in the position of the person that they might care for, and is more likely to produce appropriate care.

Circular metaphors of moral concern place the self at the center and assume that people care about others differentially based on direct relationships or similarity to self. But relational empathy implies a *relational* model of care, rather than one based in *identity*. A relational model of care proposes that we will care about people whose are similar to *the people we already care about*. These are subtly, but importantly different concepts.

Of course it is true that care is first experienced and often modeled on family responsibilities, and families usually consist of people who are similar with regard to attributed identities as well as shared practices that often underlie felt identity. But family relationships cross identity boundaries in two ways. First, families also consist of people with different social positions both inside and outside the family context including differences in gender, sexuality, ethnicity and immigration status. Second, close knit relations of care define the scope of fictive family and serve as models for further caring relationships.

Patricia Hill Collins (2009) recognized the power of fictive kinship to induce obligations of care to a broader group. Collins argues that Black women's experiences as "othermothers" in networks of fictive kin "can stimulate a more generalized ethic of caring and personal accountability among African-American women. These women not only feel accountable to their own kin, they experience a bond with all of the Black community's children" (Hill Collins 2009:205).

Another example of this sort of relational empathy can be found in hospice volunteers who typically volunteer subsequent to the death of a loved one. Provision of care for a loved one redefines "how one understands oneself as a mortal and moral being" (Baugher 2015:308) and reveals "caring capacities" that are used as a resource for others in a similar situation (Baugher 2015). In some sense these acts of care can be seen as examples of *role identity* – inhabiting the role of a helper – rather than social identity. A caring role identity is premised on the structural equivalence of relationships between the carer and the person being cared for (Lorrain and White 1971; Stryker 1980). The extent that a carer internalizes the attributes and situations of alters into that caring role establishes a distinct shape of concern.

Directly pertinent to this study are close personal relationships with people who have different *legal* status and are thus subject to detention. These relationships are a given in mixed status families, but also may be found within communities of care or "fictive" families that include people who might be subject to detention. These relationships are a focus of Chapter 6.

2.3.3 Unusual Impartial Spectators

Mead's conception of the generalized other was presaged by Adam Smith who posited an internalized "impartial spectator" whose imagined response to situations guided our own. In fact, over a century before Cooley proposed the "looking glass self", Smith used the same metaphor, saying that imagining how others see us "is the only looking-glass by which we can, in some measure, with the eyes of other people, scrutinize the propriety of our own conduct." (Smith [1759] 2009:132). But who is the impartial spectator? What side of ourselves does the looking-glass reflect?

Smith's own description of the impartial spectator draws attention to the idea that the spectator, while perceived as impartial, is in fact observing from a particular social position. If the self incorporates the internalized judgment of others, we must ask which others are salient to judgment. For Smith the goal was to comport himself in a way that would yield positive judgment of other Scottish men who constitute "those who are about him" (Smith [1759] 2009:13), and thus are extremely likely to share a view of who is valued. In valuing the opinion of people in a similar station, Smith's view of who might deserve care is likely to be conventional. The extent that people have an unusual shape of concern may depend on the internalized judgment of others who are different from "those who are about him" in everyday life. To use Cooley's metaphor, their looking glass may be positioned at an unusual angle.

Note that the emotions inherent in self-judgment, most notably guilt and pride, are distinct

from empathy for the subject of care. These motivations might lead people to take actions that alleviate guilt or generate pride without great concern for how effective those actions may be in the provision of care.

In Chapter 7 I will argue that living abroad is one source of a changed perspective; those who have lived abroad become aware of judgments from outsiders.

2.3.4 Organizational contexts

In his study of the 1980s movement for Central American peace, Smith (1996) described not only how information about Central American oppression of regime critics reached the United States, but also why that information was trusted by the people who received it. Smith (1996) argues that in order to be activated by news of human rights violations, religious participants in the Central American Peace movement needed to be “culturally and socially situated so that these violations are likely to become high priorities in their personal relevance-structures” (Smith 1996:165).

Smith noted that people who had been on mission in Central America brought information about American-sponsored destruction back to churches, even when such information was not available via mainstream news. The fact that the people who were reporting the information were already engaged in a religious community with shared culture enabled “cognitive accessibility” on the part of parishioners who received the reports. Missioners served as a connection between communities that were otherwise not in contact with one another. Cognitive accessibility

involved not just being aware of the message about conditions but access to a trusted messenger with a shared culture. In this case the information environment that congregations provided, coupled with shared religion and network connections provided an impetus for special concern for people suffering under US policy in Nicaragua and El Salvador.

While the case above can be seen as a specific to a religious community, in many ways it represents a process that spans organizational types, as highlighted in calls for analyzing religion within a practice framework (Ammerman 2020). Studies find that volunteering through religious organizations depends on social networks and participation with an organizational context rather than religious belief (Becker and Dhingra 2001; Beyerlein and Hipp 2006).

Organizations take on different forms (Clemens 1993; DiMaggio and Powell 1983) and group styles (Carlsen, Toubøl, and Ralund 2021; Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; Lichterman 2006) that constrain, shape, and enable actors within the organization and the possibilities for action by the organization itself. Clemens' (1997) study of the rise of the women's suffrage movement demonstrates how individuals come to master a set of "templates, scripts, recipes, or models for social interaction" (1997:11) by acting in organizational contexts. Experience in organizations provides people with an "organizational repertoire" that they can apply in new situations.

Yet people do not simply incorporate the structure and procedures of an organization into their repertoire. Clemens notes that beyond serving as a way to achieve immediate goals and solve problems, organizations are "arenas in which preferences and values are discovered" (1997:11). A similar theme appears in the broader collective action literature which highlights

that collective identities are both a cause of social movements and a product of participation in social movements (Polletta and Jasper 2001). In this sense simply acting in the way prescribed by an organization becomes an “immanent good” that satisfies people’s desires. A collective identity can be as simple as “we are people who do these sorts of things in this particular way” (Clemens 1997:50). In this sense, the “cognitive accessibility” cited by Smith might in many cases be a *result* of practices instituted by leaders in the wake of news from Central America rather than a cause of those practices.

The sociology of organizational fields comes into play in this study in two ways. First, I find that many volunteers seek out both religious contexts based not on religious beliefs, but because of the sorts of actions they enable. Secondly, I find that different templates and scripts for care within the primary organization in this study both formed and revealed distinct motivations within the group. These topics are the central themes of Chapter 9, which details rifts in the organization that corresponded to different visions of care.

2.4 From Concern to Volunteering

I maintain that the case of volunteers helping immigrants in detention is a useful case in which to study the shape of concern. Yet emotional activation is only one component in the decision to volunteer. Studies of volunteering have often been characterized by a *resources* approach that emphasizes consistent observed relationships between access to resources like education, income, and religion and levels of volunteering or using a *functional* approach, that explains

the act of volunteering as a considered pursuit of benefits.

2.4.1 Who volunteers?

Perhaps the most salient fact about volunteering is that, despite the model of civic involvement dating back to Tocqueville (Tocqueville [1840] 2009), most Americans *don't* volunteer, with surveys showing that only about 25% of Americans volunteered over a year long period (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2016). Many sociological studies of volunteering are rooted in a “resources” or “capitals” approach, arguing that specific resources are necessary to have the skills required by volunteer organizations, the biographical availability to do the work, and the kinds of social contacts that position one to be asked. These consistent predictors include education, income, stage in life course, and religious practice. While these studies show strong regularities in identifying attributes and behaviors correlated with volunteering, the causal mechanisms are less clear.

Education: Wilson and Musick (Musick and Wilson 2008:122) note that “few findings are as robust as that which shows a positive association between years of schooling and adult volunteering.” Thirty-nine percent of college graduates in the United States volunteer, more than twice the rate of high school graduates (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2016). Surprisingly, given the many plausible mechanisms by which education might affect rates of volunteering, it is not clear whether the association with education is causal – it may simply be the case that the sort of people who are more likely to go to college are also more likely to volunteer due

social factors independent of education Egerton (2002).

Life Stage: The highest rates of volunteering are found in people in midlife with school-age children – these people tend to have high resources, high opportunities for volunteering, and a high interest in volunteering on behalf of organizations that serve their children (Musick and Wilson 2008:222). Retirement does *not* lead to higher rates of volunteering, though it does lead to more hours spent volunteering for those who already do so (Morrow-Howell 2010; Tang 2016). While there are certainly changes in volunteering over the life course, perhaps the most notable finding is that a tendency to volunteer is fairly stable beginning in early adulthood, with the odds of volunteering in a given time period 8 times higher for those who volunteered in an earlier period than for those who didn't (Oesterle, Johnson, and Mortimer 2004).

Income: Income and volunteering are also positively related, despite rational choice arguments that the opportunity cost of volunteering is higher for high-income people (Wilson 2000). The effect of income appears to operate through two mechanisms – increased memberships in associations and an increased likelihood of being asked to volunteer. In regressions controlling for those variables, the income no longer is associated with increased volunteering (Musick and Wilson 2008:131), and in some longitudinal studies that isolate income from these other factors, rising income has a negative relationship to volunteering (Lup and Booth 2019).

Religion: If education is one of the most reliable predictors of volunteering, the other one is religious engagement. Indeed, in the United States, over 40% of all volunteering is on behalf of religious congregations (Musick and Wilson 2008:309). Most studies find that religious *belief* and *prayer* are not associated with increased volunteering (Becker and Dhingra 2001; Beyerlein

and Hipp 2006; Guo et al. 2013), and that only engagement with a congregation yields higher levels of volunteering (though see Bennett (2015) and Einolf (2011) for counterexamples). Edgell Becker and Dhingra (2001) argue that “Social networks, rather than beliefs, dominate as the mechanism leading to volunteering, and it is the social networks formed within congregations that make congregation members more likely to volunteer” (Becker and Dhingra 2001:329). Other studies find that lower levels of volunteering among the non-religious are an artifact of labeling individuals unlikely to join *any* organization – religious or otherwise – as non-religious Speed and Edgell (2023).

From a resource perspective we can say that the sort of person who volunteers is most likely to come from a high-income, educated group, and is likely to be embedded in social networks that encourage volunteering. As we will see, this general description fits the volunteers in this study quite well, but does not distinguish them from other volunteers in any other field.

2.4.2 Functional Motivations in volunteering

Social psychological research into volunteering has largely been focused on predefined categories of motivation to volunteer and to sustain volunteering. In many of these studies, volunteering is said to be *functional* for volunteers. In a number of studies a Volunteer Functional Inventory (VFI) has been used to assesses six presumed categories of motivation: 1) Values – pursuing humanitarian or altruistic goals, 2) Understanding – seeking to gain knowledge; 3) Enhancement – seeking to improve one’s self esteem by feeling needed; 4) Career –

enhancing skills that will be useful at work; 5) Social – seeking social approval from respected others; 6) Protective – help dealing with personal problems. (Clary et al. 1998; Clary, Snyder, and Stukas 1996; Mennino, Snyder, and Omoto 2010; Omoto and Snyder 1995).

A large national survey found the Values function earning the highest scores for motivation overall (Clary et al. 1996). However when assessing *persistence* of volunteering, value motivation seems to have little predictive power, while higher levels of motivation associated with personal goals like esteem enhancement and understanding have been shown to be linked to increased length of service (Omoto and Snyder 1995), as has identifying as a member of the group being served (Stürmer et al. 2005). However, if answers to questions about motivation tend to reveal culturally available “toolkits” of explanation, surveys with pre-defined categories like this are probably even less revealing. In the case of the VFI, there is “no clear theoretical basis for the functions or their overall number; the functions cannot be shown to be exhaustive or exclusive; and they are not all at the same level of generality” (Wilson 2012:181).

2.5 Four A’s: Attention, Activation, Awareness and Availability

In this section I fill in the rough model provided by Figure 2.4 and offer three ideal types of pathways to volunteering that I hypothesized as I began the study. I argue that any explanation of volunteers behavior must account for at least the following four things.

1. Attention to the situation of people in detention
2. Emotional Activation by their predicament

3. Awareness of volunteering opportunities
4. Biographical Availability to volunteer as described by McAdam

As a mnemonic, one might call this the “4A” model. This work focuses on the development of patterns of attention, emotional activation and opportunity awareness.

At the beginning of this project I identified three ideal types of motivation: *These are my people*, *My people help strangers*, and *The enemy of my enemy is my friend*. While the evidence in this study points toward patterns in the life course rather than distinct identities as underlying motivation to care, these ideal types are useful for understanding some patterns of attention, emotional activation and opportunity awareness that might drive volunteering as shown in Table 2.2

Table 2.2: Ideal types of motivation and their mapping to Attention, Emotional Activation and Opportunity Awareness

	Emotional Activation	Sources of Attention	Opportunity Awareness
These are my people	Empathy	Experience of self/family	Social/Organizational Connections
My people help strangers	Duty, Status	Religious Institutions	Religious Institutions
The enemy of my enemy is my friend	Moral Outrage	Public Media	Political connections, Independent Search

2.5.1 Attention and Opportunity Awareness

Sources of attention to immigrants in detention and awareness of opportunities to help are often linked. For people from mixed status immigrant families and those living in immigrant communities, social interaction with other immigrants and engagement in immigrant organizations offer sources of information in the context of daily life. Ethnic and immigrant associations not only facilitate attention, but also are sources of information about opportunities to help.

For people who attend religious services, attention to immigrants in detention is often provided through church leadership, and opportunities to help are also often presented in a religious context. The organizations in this study are all officially non-religious, but religious groups were involved in their founding and support, and the organizations continue to recruit through church-based bloc recruitment providing both attention to immigrants in detention and awareness of opportunities to volunteer. Note that because attention and opportunity awareness are provided in the context of religious attendance, we would not expect this pathway to be operative to religious believers who do not attend services.

During the time period of this study, religious organizations were heavily involved in providing a charitable model of care to large numbers of asylum seekers in border regions in Arizona, California, and Texas (Ingram 2025; Jennewin 2025; Towle 2024), where the large number of asylum seekers were more visible and heavily covered in the local press. That was not the case in the areas where this study was done.

Generalized attention to immigrant detention has at times been provided through the news

media and amplified via political opponents. An example of this effect might be seen in the breadth of protests against Trump immigration policy (Chokshi and Fandos 2017). During his first term, Trump’s “Muslim Ban” and family separation policies were widely reported in the press, and activated citizens in a way the extensive deportations under Barack Obama (who immigration activists called “the deporter in chief.”), never did. Those angry at Trump for other reasons were also motivated to bring attention to Trump’s unpopular immigration policy.

Political and media attention to immigrant detention is not necessarily linked to awareness of opportunities to volunteer to provide care, though some volunteers in this study first encountered WIA during participation in protests at the detention center, and CV has been engaged both in providing care for immigrants and political protests against detention. In the second Trump term, media coverage of resistance to immigration policy has led to related coverage of new volunteer care organizations that have sprung up in response to the expansion of immigrant detention (Ahl and Munoz 2025; Moini and Finn 2026).

2.5.2 Emotional Activation

For people from immigrant families, emotional activation is most likely to be of the form long studied by Batson and colleagues as the empathy-altruism mechanism (Batson et al. 1981; Batson et al. 1997; Batson 2011). Batson defines empathy not as feeling the same thing as an alter, but feeling *for* an alter in a way that makes one motivated to relieve their suffering. His studies carefully separate motivations to help driven by feelings of personal distress (which can

be avoided by other means than helping), egoism, and even following moral strictures, from those driven by a genuine desire to help relieve suffering.

In one of the few studies of people who volunteer at immigrant and refugee nonprofits in the United States, Ferris et al. (2024) find that 30% of volunteers are immigrants, compared to 14% of U.S. residents overall. In this study the people from immigrant families who provide care are almost all U.S. citizens, meaning volunteers in this study are closer to “Conscience Constituents” than “Beneficiary Constituents” in the terminology of social movements.

Several explanations have been offered for emotional activation among religious believers in response to harsh treatment of immigrants. Nawyn (2006) observes that Christian and Jewish refugee aid groups use biblical admonitions to care for the stranger to activate support as a way to link religious commitment to a sense of shared responsibility for immigrants. Through interviews with deeply religious faith workers in Christian immigrant support organizations operating at the U.S. Mexico border, Menjivar (2006:119) found that leaders’ responses to border violence are “clearly based on socially engaged readings of scripture and Bible passages.” However, there is strong reason to believe that much of the motivation of individual volunteers can be found in shared social practices rather than religious beliefs. Emotional motivations may be found in pride in upholding norms of behavior promulgated by the church.

For political opponents, emotional activation would likely be provided in the form of “moral outrage”, defined as anger over others’ moral transgressions (Haidt 2002). Moral outrage results from “interactions between long-standing affective commitments or moral emotions and short-run reflex emotions that tap into those as background” (Jasper 2011:297). Jasper and

Poulson (1995) found that such outrage can provide sufficient motivation for people to engage with protest movements even absent the social ties that usually bring people into collective action. Similarly, “moral shocks” were used to explain support for refugees in Austria including “self-recruitment in the absence of networks or previous experience of volunteerism” (Milan 2018:185).

Yet anger would not directly explain helping behavior, which might result from moral outrage coupled with *frustration* at a lack of power to make substantive change. Puka (1990) has described the emphasis on caring behavior among women as just such a reaction to lack of structural power. In Hungary, where citizens have low confidence in the efficacy of political action, Kende et al. (2017) found helping refugees was a response to what they call “opinion based identity,” where a salient group identity was established based on moral convictions and opposition to the government.

While moral outrage may be sufficient to initiate engagement in collective action, researchers point out that the anger people feel is almost invariably not due to concern for others, but how the moral violation affects or might come to affect the person who feels outrage (Jiménez-Leal and Cortissoz-Mora 2024). This may lead to volunteering as a form of personal moral cleansing, rather than volunteering directed to solving (O’Connor, Effron, and Lucas 2020; O’Mara et al. 2011; Rothschild and Keefer 2017). I return to this idea in later chapters.

2.6 Conclusion

In this chapter I argued that the model of moral circles propounded by philosophers and social psychologists is a poor model for the shape of concern reflected in the practice of care. Instead I argue that the moral motivation to supply care to some people and not others represents a shape of concern, and must be found in the sort of person one is, as embodied in an emotionally motivated self.

I defined the shape of concern as a pattern of attention and emotional response to others based on the attributes and situations of those others. This is an integral component of an emotion-based self, which evolves over the life course. The choice to volunteer represents a form of problem solving for volunteers, where they respond to emotions that help constitute their shape of concern.

I argue that to understand the development of the shape of concern one must consider development over the whole life course, including the broad cultural contexts in which people come of age, and the way contingent choices people make lead them onto paths of action that have large effects on who they become. Personal relationships, how individuals conceive of the ‘generalized other’, and the organizational contexts they inhabit are important factors in forming a shape of concern.

I closed the chapter with three ideal typical pathways to supporting immigrants in detention.

3 Study Organizations in the Context of U.S. Immigration Detention

As of February 2026, over 65,000 people without U.S. citizenship were being held in over 200 different Department of Homeland Security detention locations in the United States (TRAC 2026). The facilities in the “Immigration Prison Archipelago” (García Hernández 2019:87) include local jails that have signed “Intergovernmental Service Agreements” with the Department of Homeland Security as well as facilities run by the federal government, but over 60% of detained immigrants are held in large privately contracted detention centers that hold up to 2000 immigrants each. Though often given euphemistic names like “ICE Processing Centers”, these detention centers are prisons with guards, restrictions on movement and the use of segregated confinement as punishment. Despite progressive Congress members’ calls for closure of private immigration centers due to “egregious abuses”, including “Unnecessary medical interventions, forced labor, abuse of solitary confinement, and intimidation” (Jayapal and Smith 2024), and other problems extensively documented in whistleblower reports (Government Accountability

Project 2024), use of private detention centers expanded during the Biden administration and growth has continued in the second Trump administration.

Immigrants are detained for a variety of reasons. During the period of this study, people in detention included asylum seekers waiting for credible fear interviews after crossing the border and turning themselves over to Customs and Border Patrol agents, people who did not have visas and were picked up in immigration raids anywhere in the United States, people who were arrested by local law-enforcement authorities and turned over to immigration enforcement as a result of cooperation agreements with the department of Homeland Security, as well as people convicted of a broad range of crimes awaiting immigration hearings to determine if they will be deported after serving time. People held in immigration detention have only minimal legal rights. In particular, the doctrine of “entry fiction” prevents people who are physically in the United States without having legally entered from exercising rights that are granted to legal residents, including the right to legal counsel (García Hernández 2019:25).

3.1 Modern Immigration Detention

While detention of would-be immigrants has a long history, immigrants to the U.S. – with the important exception of Mexican migrant workers who remained vulnerable to shifting U.S. policies – were generally not held in detention from 1954 until 1980 (Minian 2024). The modern system of immigrant detention has its roots in the 1980 migration of approximately 124,000 Cuban immigrants to the U.S. in the Mariel Boatlift, and the arrival of approximately

10,000 Haitians who arrived at roughly the same time (García Hernández 2019; Minian 2024). The large and widely reported wave of immigration from Cuba and Haiti set the stage for an expansion of immigration detention pursued by administrations of both parties that has continued for 45 years, and is accelerating in the second Trump administration.

Reagan Era: In an effort to discourage further migration, the Reagan administration initiated the “Mass Immigration Emergency Plan” in 1983, aiming to establish a network of immigration detention centers that could hold up to 10,000 people (Shah 2024). That same year, Tom Beasley, the former chairman of the Tennessee Republican Party, sought venture capital funding to start Corrections Corporation of America (CCA, now CoreCivic) as a for-profit private prison provider (Minian 2024:153). In 1986 Reagan signed the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), giving amnesty to 2.7 million undocumented immigrants while simultaneously enabling detention and deportation for legally admitted immigrants who had committed crimes. The passage of that law was an example of a repeated pattern in the broader field of the American immigration system – attempts at liberalization in one part of the field were accompanied by increased levels of enforcement and detention. In a sign of the rapid rise in the influence of private prisons operators, IRCA also required the Immigration and Naturalization Service to consider privately operated detention centers before building its own.

The Reagan era also marked the beginnings of a resistance movement against immigration policy. The 1980’s sanctuary movement rose in tandem with the Central American Peace movement, and attempted to provide safety to migrants fleeing the political violence in Central America. This movement was initiated by Quaker and Catholic activists and supported by a

variety of religious groups as well as non-religious allies (Barba and Castillo-Ramos 2021; Christerson et al. 2023; Cunningham 1995; Perla and Coutin 2009). In the next chapter I introduce Natasha, who was involved in that movement as a young woman, and became a volunteer and board member at Casa de Visitantes more than 20 years later.

Clinton expansion: While Reagan kick-started the modern immigration detention system, Bill Clinton laid the groundwork for a massive expansion. Two laws Clinton signed in 1996, the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRAIRA) and the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act (AEDPA), contributed to the increase in immigrant detention and “linger like a perpetual dark cloud” (Shah 2024 Ch. 1) for immigration activists. IIRAIRA provided for the deportation of U.S. permanent residents (green card holders) convicted of an aggravated felony and required them to be held in detention while they awaited their deportation case to be decided.

In the late 1990’s, a coalition of immigration legal defense groups formed Detention Watch Network to coordinate monitoring the growing network of immigration detention centers. This may have been the first non-profit organization to focus specifically on immigration detention. In its early days DWN was a reformist group focused on ensuring that the detention system respected the law and immigrant rights. The group would later evolve to advocate detention only as a last resort, and then still later for abolition of immigration detention and prison generally (Shah 2024).

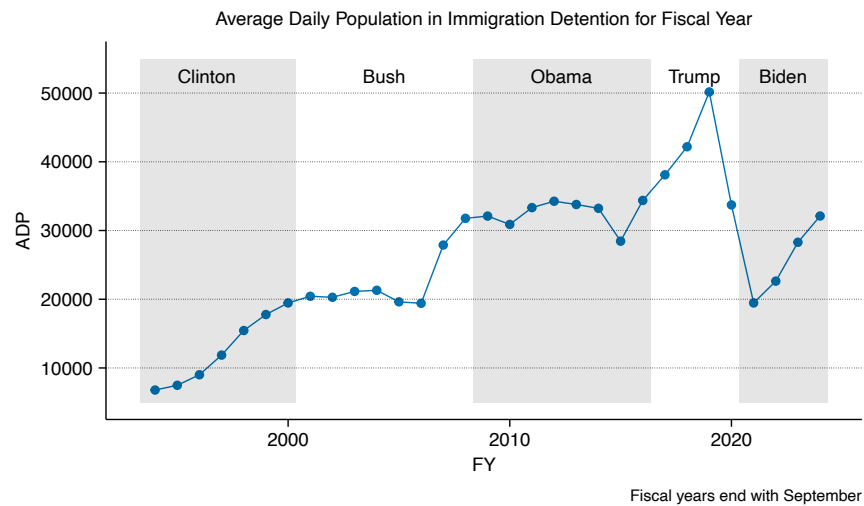


Figure 3.1: Average Daily Population in Immigration Detention for Fiscal Year.

3.2 Response to 9/11 and the Formation of WIA and CV

The September 11, 2001 attacks led to cultural, political, and legal changes that accelerated immigration detention. With the passage of the 2002 Homeland Security Act, the Immigration and Customs Enforcement branch of the newly formed Department of Homeland Security became the first agency focused on immigration arrests, detainment and deportation throughout the country.

In late 2005, the U.S. House of Representatives passed the Sensenbrenner Bill which would have further expanded immigration detention, criminalizing living in the U.S. without documentation as well as assisting undocumented Americans. This aggressive bill triggered widespread protest among religious and immigrant advocates, who created the “New Sanctuary Move-

ment.” The organizations managed to block the bill, but were unable to secure passage of broader immigration reform measures or sustain a unified national movement (Yukich 2013). Attempts at comprehensive immigration reform that would have traded a path to naturalization for some undocumented immigrants in exchange for even more enforcement divided advocates and failed to overcome nativist objections in both the G.W. Bush and Obama administrations (Shah 2024). Some argue that the protests, “fuelled a nativist backlash, epitomised by, but not restricted to, the election of Donald Trump to the presidency in 2016” (Bloemraad and Voss 2020:684). Early in his first term, Trump’s aggressive approach “had a chilling effect on the immigrant rights movement” (Zepeda-Millán and Wallace 2018:4).

Immigrant detention continued to accelerate in the wake of the protests. In 2008, the Secure Communities program debuted a fingerprint database that allowed local law enforcement to identify immigrants and turn them over to ICE. By 2013 the system was active in 3000 counties, and the resulting detentions and deportations earned Obama the sobriquet of “Deporter in Chief” (Blitzer 2024).

Both Western Immigrant Advocates and Casa de Visitantes have their roots in the post 9/11 expansion of immigrant detention. They both support immigrants in detention centers opened by private for-profit prison operators during the George W. Bush administration. Both organizations registered as non-profits during the first Obama presidency, and both operated as all-volunteer organizations without paid staff for years afterward.

While private immigration detention companies have grown nationally and consolidated, organizations that provide care to immigrants in detention like WIA and CV are typically small

and focused on local or regional detention centers. The non-profit Freedom for Immigrants maintains a resource directory for people in detention and their families, including categories for legal resources, advocacy groups, visitation/mutual aid and post-release services available at close to 100 different facilities where immigrants are detained (Freedom for Immigrants 2025). While some organizations providing legal resources serve immigrants in detention regionally and have revenues of over 10 million dollars a year, those providing visitation, mutual aid, and post-release services are almost all small. There are no such services listed for many immigration detention sites. Changes to the list show significant turnover in the small organizations that provide care, and some aid organizations still on the list in 2024 seemed to be defunct.

3.2.1 Formation of WIA

WIA has its roots in a collaboration among people who worked with immigrants in what was then a newly opened, post 9/11, detention center. The detention center was sited in a light industrial area of a town about an hour away from where ICE had previously held immigration hearings.

Kari was a lawyer who coordinated a court watch project, and the driving force behind the formation of WIA as an independent organization. When the immigration detention center opened, Kari took on the task of recruiting people to do court observation in at the newly opened detention center.

The leader of an evangelical refugee support organization I'll call Western Evangelical Refugee Service (WERS), faced a similar problem. It was important to him that immigrants in detention had access to religious services. He reached out other faith leaders who could do so for other religious groups, and included Kari as someone supporting immigrants in the detention center. Together they convened a series of meetings including an immigrant legal assistance group, a Jesuit priest from a progressive Catholic parish, and leaders of United Methodist churches in the area.

Kari told me that WERS was primarily concerned with providing religious services, but "the Catholics mostly, and the United Methodists, were wondering about how do we do the social services side." The provision of social services began with people waiting outside the detention center in their cars, in case any immigrants were released and needed help. Several years after the original meeting, Kari led the incorporation of WIA as a nonprofit focused on providing those services.

WIA was formed as an explicitly non-political organization, focused on helping and not on advocacy to change the system. Kari told me, "if your organization is there to serve immigrants in detention ...and you can just read the mission statement straight up, that's what it is... Stay on point. We are here to serve the immigrants in detention."

While WIA was officially a secular non-profit, it relied on local churches and synagogues for bloc recruitment of volunteers in addition to recruiting volunteers at local colleges, public celebrations, and street fairs. The evangelical organization WERS continues to cooperate with WIA, staffing the welcome center one day each week, but WIA operates independently, with

separate funding, board and volunteers.

Shortly after its formation, WIA started providing services to help the immigrants while they were still in detention. They made their contact information available to the detention center, and people in detention could contact them to request a volunteer to visit or request funds to use the paid phones in the detention center.

As WIA grew, it rented a house a couple of miles away from the detention center to serve as an organizational office and a “hospitality house”, using a term with echoes of Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker, a tradition still resonant in the then progressive Catholic parish that was the religious home of a number of volunteers.

3.2.2 Formation of Casa de Visitantes

Casa de Visitantes provides services near a detention center located on the outskirts of a small town in a sparsely populated rural county over an hour from any population center. The immigrants detained in the center constituted nearly one-third of the county population. A group of religiously-engaged immigration activists – “Mennonites and Catholics” as one of the original group described it – were already trying to bring attention to the issues of immigrant detention when they noted the need to help families who traveled to visit loved ones in detention. Alejandro, an immigrant from El Salvador and one of the founders of CV, said families would relate their difficulties visiting, telling him

‘I drove many hours, you know, I slept in the parking lot of this gas station here

in the town’ or, you know, ‘My loved one has been deported. He’s the only the bread winner, you know, he was taken in a raid.’ I mean, all those stories that we heard from people and made us think about, like, what what is the best thing we could do to support and welcome and, you know, be supportive in solidarity with the families.

In contrast to WIA, which was explicitly non-political and officially non-religious, the founders of Casa de Visitantes (CV) conceived their organization as a multi-denominational religious ministry that in addition to serving immigrants and their families, sought to close the privately run detention center where they provided services. The group rented a small dilapidated house near the detention center as a ministry to serve immigrants in detention and their families.

Every weekend a lead volunteer and one or two others travel to the house to provide services for immigrants in detention and hospitality and material aid for their families in the form of social support, food, gas money, and a place to stay. CV volunteers visit detained immigrants themselves and arrange visits for others who might come to the detention center only once as part of church groups, other civic organizations, or independently.

Unlike WIA, which was started earlier by people already in their 50s and 60s, many of whom have aged out of active involvement, the founders of CV were a generation younger, and many remain involved. One of the founders, Elías, created a separate church-based organization to offer temporary housing and transition services to asylum seekers. Alejandro told me that

though CV was originally conceived as a ministry, evangelization was never a goal. As it grew, CV evolved into a secular organization with volunteers from a variety of faith traditions as well as non-believers, a transition I cover in Chapter 8.

3.3 The Asylum Wave and the Trump I Era

Starting in 2014, a wave of immigrants fleeing violence in the so-called Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras and seeking asylum in the United States changed the nature of immigration detention. When a non-citizen requests asylum within the United States or at the border, they must be granted a credible fear interview to determine if they have a credible fear of persecution in their home country based on their race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in specific targeted subgroups. If a determination of credible fear is granted, they may apply for asylum and have their claim individually heard in immigration court. Most such claims are denied, though the rates of acceptance vary greatly based on policies of the administration (immigration court is managed by the executive branch) and by region. ¹

As shown in Figure 3.3, prior to 2014 the vast majority of immigrants in detention either opted for “voluntary departure” at their own expense or were deported. With the rise in the detention of legal asylum seekers, a far greater proportion were released into the U.S. pending

¹Asylum seekers released from Border Patrol or ICE custody face grim odds of gaining asylum even after passing credible fear interviews. Rates have long differed regionally. At points during the Biden administration asylum denial rates were below 50%, but rates of denial rose to over 65% toward the end of the Biden administration, and then rose to nearly 80% in the first months of the Trump administration (Kocher 2025).

asylum hearings.

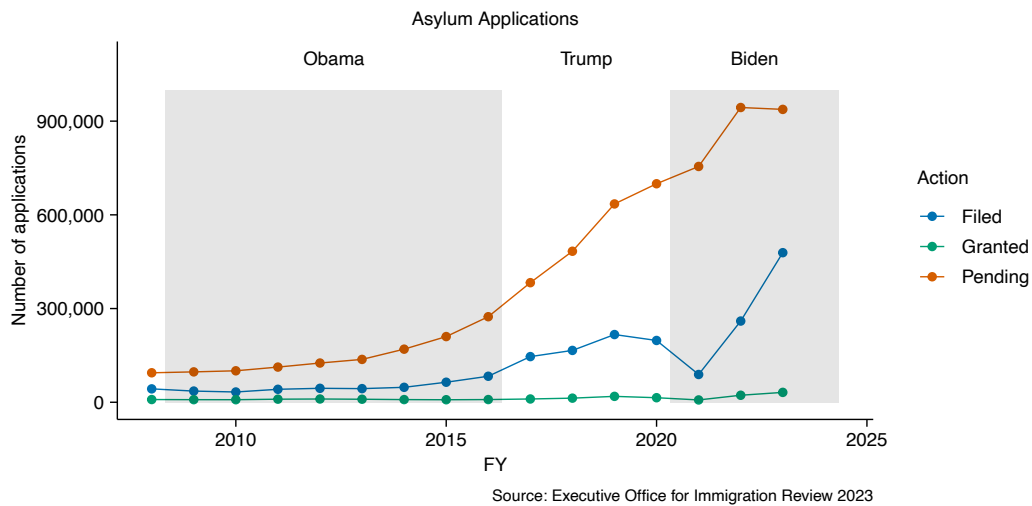
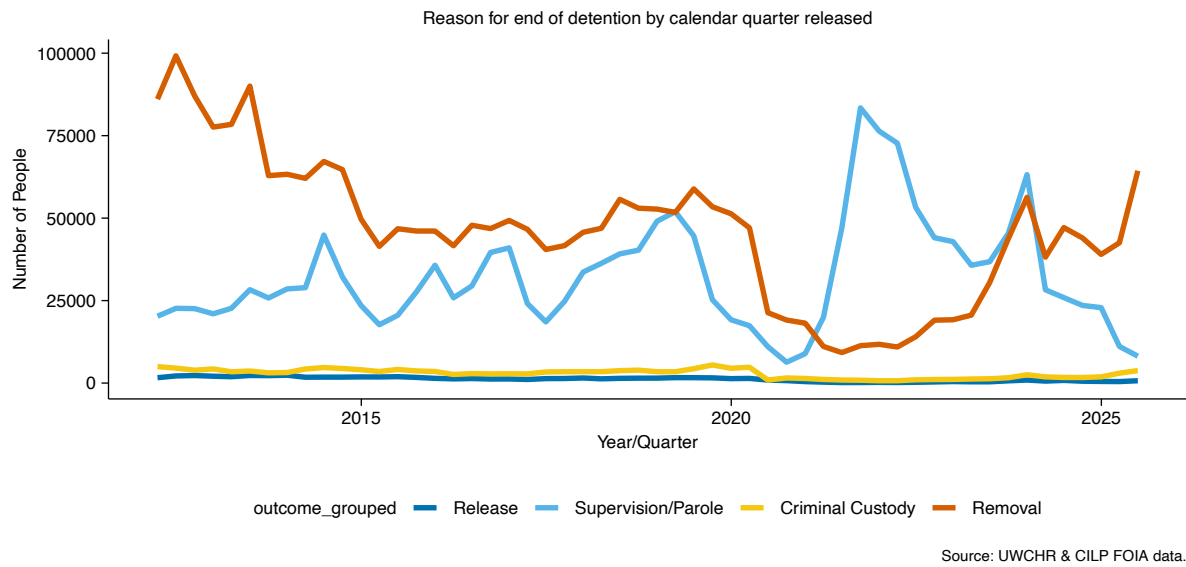


Figure 3.2: Asylum applications filed, granted and pending by fiscal year

In 2016 Donald Trump campaigned on an explicitly anti-immigrant, pro-detention and deportation platform. Under his administration, immigrant detention rose to the highest level in history, with on average over 50,000 people held at detention centers over Fiscal Year 2019 (October 2018 through September 2019) (Department of Homeland Security 2022), a number that will be greatly eclipsed in Trump’s second term during Fiscal Year 2026.

Expanding on efforts of the Obama years, the first Trump administration attempted a number of maneuvers to lower the number of people entering the United States requesting asylum. The Spring 2018 family separation policy, where children were taken from asylum-seeking parents and placed in detention centers without any due process, brought national attention and protest



(a) Source: UWCHR/CILP FOIA data

Figure 3.3: Reason for end of detention by calendar quarter released

and was ruled illegal within a few months (Towle 2024).

3.3.1 Effects on WIA and CV

Trump’s child separation policies brought attention to the excesses of the immigration detention system. Leaders at both WIA and CV told me that they received a wave of volunteer interest in the wake of the attention to child separation, and I interviewed a number of people who began volunteering at WIA after their attention was captured by news coverage of the crisis. Some refugee service organizations experienced a similar surge of volunteers in response to the child separation, even though they served immigrants who had been formally admitted to the U.S. and were not subject to detention (Frazier 2022).

In addition to an increase in the number of volunteers, the organizations' revenues grew during Trump's first term. WIA was able to purchase a larger recreational vehicle as a base for the Welcome Center. A private donor purchased and donated a house near the detention center to serve as CV's new home.

WIA hired its first part-time employee, Edie, an American born Latina, during the first Trump administration. Edie was named full-time executive director five years later.

While both organizations grew in response to the child separation crisis, the Trump era highlighted a divergence in state politics between the liberal West and the more conservative South. In the South, the state government embraced enhanced immigration enforcement and counties supported local officials' cooperation with ICE. In the West, where state bond programs had facilitated the construction of the detention center during the prior decade, a new state law attempted to close private detention centers. That law was rejected by the courts.

3.4 Covid-19, Southern Welcome and the Biden Era

While both WIA and CV were formed during the build-up of immigration detention in the post 9/11 era, Southern Welcome (SW) formed in direct response to disruptions during the COVID-19 epidemic. COVID-19 spread widely through immigration detention centers and lawsuits led to releases in 2020, reducing the number of people in ICE detention to levels unseen for 15 years (Wolf 2021). ICE is required to bring released immigrants to public transportation "as appropriate and necessary" (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement 2025:19), and

with the closure of nearest bus station, ICE fulfilled its obligation by dropping released asylum seekers at the international airport over 100 miles away from the detention center. Responding to the sudden appearance of a groups of immigrants without support, Elías, the entrepreneurial religious immigration activist who helped found CV, leveraged his organization and ties in the immigrant advocacy community to start the group that would become Southern Welcome.

Elías told me he decided to spin SW off as an independent organization when demands on his time became onerous. An early volunteer leader surmised that an additional reason for the spin-off was Elías' discomfort with the fact that SW volunteers were disproportionately older white women serving immigrants of color, presenting an image of dependency-based charity that Elías wanted to keep at arms' distance. After a short period as an independent non-profit, Southern Welcome found a home as a division of a larger civic service non-profit which hired a new volunteer coordinator.

During the COVID-19 epidemic, the Trump and Biden administrations utilized Title 42 of the immigration code, which allows immigration restrictions based on public health emergencies, to turn away 2.9 million attempted entries at the border (Office of Homeland Security Statistics 2025). As the COVID crisis eased, the number of people who crossed the border seeking asylum grew. Over one million migrants from around the world requested asylum in Fiscal Year 2023 alone (Office of Homeland Security Statistics 2025). In towns near the border in Texas, Arizona and California, ad-hoc citizens groups and existing charitable organizations responded to the influx of asylum seekers by providing care and help with transportation for immigrants released from Border Patrol custody (Ingram 2025; Jennewin 2025; Towle 2024).

As with prior administrations, the Biden administration sent a large number of asylum seekers to immigrant detention to await credible fear interviews. Approximately one million people were transferred from Customs and Border Patrol custody to longer term ICE detention during his term (Office of Homeland Security Statistics 2025). Most of those were eventually released pending asylum hearings, for which the wait extended years.²

Though the detention centers that WIA, CV and SW served are not near the border, thousands of asylum seekers were transferred to those centers at government expense before being released. The Biden administration offered some FEMA funding to support organizations helping asylum seekers, and SW was able to secure some indirect funding through that program. WIA and CV did not receive any such funding.

Later in his term, Biden instituted a series of aggressive measures designed to stem the flow of asylum seekers. Starting in 2024 the number of migrants receiving admission dropped precipitously, while detained populations continued to rise as fewer and fewer migrants were released from detention. With the second Trump administration, asylum seekers are no longer attempting to cross the border, and the number of releases from immigrant detention have fallen drastically as shown in Figure 3.3. With the second Trump administration releasing few migrants and no funding, SW is no longer operating regularly.

²CBP is legally required to release border crossers in 72 hours. There are many documented cases of CBP violating this rule (Ordoñez and Farrington 2021). CBP detention is its own site of abuse, with frigid detention cells known as hieleras (refrigerators) and lack of privacy or bedding (Cantor 2015).

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter placed the creation of the organizations in this study into the context of the broader history of the modern U.S. immigration detention system. Beginning with the Mariel Boatlift in 1980, the United States instituted a series of expansions of the Immigration Detention system, and expanded the criteria under which immigrants could be detained. These laws, implemented by both Democratic and Republican administrations, contained explicit provisions encouraging the growth of a private prison industry to build and operate detention centers. The creation of the Department of Homeland Security and Immigration and Customs Enforcement in the wake of 9/11, combined with programs to incentivize local law enforcement to participate in immigration enforcement yielded large rises in immigration detention and deportation through the George W. Bush, Obama, and first Trump administration.

Two organizations in this study, WIA and CV, were formed in response to the post-9/11 creation of new privately operated immigration detention centers in their area. Both organizations were initially all-volunteer organizations that grew to hire staff. The third organization in this study, Southern Welcome, was created in response to the large number of released immigrants during the COVID epidemic and the large number of asylum seekers released from detention in its wake. WIA and CV continue to operate, while Southern Welcome ceased operations in the second Trump term.

In the next chapter I describe the volunteer experience in these organizations.

4 Volunteering

The experience of volunteering to provide care is very different depending on whether volunteers are focused on hospitality toward immigrants who have been released from detention or visiting and maintaining a relationship with immigrants who are still detained.

As I'll show, welcoming immigrants who have been released is much more immediately rewarding than visiting immigrants in detention and helping their families.

4.1 Outside the detention center: Welcoming

I opened the introduction with a description of one day's experience at the Welcome Center, where I volunteered for about two years. This section should fill in some of the gaps. Each weekday the lead volunteer arrived midafternoon to prepare the Welcome Center to greet guests, loosely following the instructions in the handbook maintained by Kathy, who worked as a lead volunteer every week or so. Kathy had started volunteering five years before we met, when she found out about the detention center and WIA through her Friends (Quaker) meeting. Kathy's

kids were grown, and she and her husband had recently returned from 10 years working and living abroad, so she thought that finding WIA was “kismet.” From behind her wire rimmed glasses she exuded a quiet, but confident competence that was reflected in the clear instructions for everything from setting up the space to firing up the generator and disbursing petty cash.

Those instructions were roughly followed by the rotating lead volunteer who unlocked the RV and opened the Welcome Center each weekday afternoon: unzip and roll up the flap of the tents, unlock the porta-potty, wipe down plastic tables, place baskets of snacks and shoelaces on one, chargers, phones and a WiFi hotspot on another, set out folding chairs, and set clipboards, and a mug full of pens and scissors (for cutting off ICE wristbands immigrants were required to wear in detention), on a high narrow table at the open flap of a tent in preparation for guests’ arrival.

Volunteers kept an eye open for movement at the chain link gate, and someone would walk down the sidewalk to greet the guests halfway – often with a warm “somos voluntarios,” and let the guests know two things: that WIA wasn’t the government, and that volunteers were there to help them reach their families or other people who could support them. Sometimes guests would be released in a big group 10 or more at a time, on some days in isolated bunches, or one at a time, and then later on, after Biden cracked down on asylum seekers, volunteers would huddle around a propane heater exchanging travel stories, trying to make sense of changes in policy, or reading on their phones, and nobody at all would be released. WIA eventually established a relationship with an ICE officer who would tell them when releases were done for the day, and let them know roughly how many people would be released the next day, but

this wasn't a firm number, so even when no releases were expected, a couple of volunteers waited every weekday.

Volunteers made sure guests had any food and clothing they needed. Gloves, hats and warm jackets were a priority in the winter. Guests were usually released in the clothes they had worn when they were taken in – in one case a man was wearing the paint-spattered clothes and reflective vest he was wearing when taken from a construction site. Asylum seekers were almost always released in the light clothes in which they had crossed from Mexico, though they had been sent to a detention facility hundreds of miles from the border, and could be released amid mid-winter rain and near-freezing temperatures.

The top priority for volunteers was to provide chargers and WiFi access or loaner phones to help guests contact family and friends. Those voice and video calls were often accompanied by joy or tears or both, but the purpose of those calls, from the point of view of WIA, was to make sure that immigrants who were released had a plan to get to people who could support them. Velcroed to the inside of the tent were laminated instructions in a dozen languages with instructions on how to buy a ticket that left the airport late enough that guests wouldn't miss a flight.

My first day volunteering in 2022 I volunteered with Joanie, John and Abigail, all experienced volunteers. Abigail was a retired physician, an Anglo woman whose Spanish language skills had attracted a largely Spanish-speaking patient panel. Joanie was also a retired white woman who started volunteering through her Jesuit parish. John, who had been an educator at that parish, told me he had gotten a strong response when he asked for volunteers in the wake of

Trump's child separation efforts.

The nine men (no women) released that day were from South America, Central America, Central Asia, India and Nepal. John had spent a couple of years in Central America and joked warmly in Spanish with one of the 9 men. At one point John and Joanie stood by the RV chatting about Spanish language podcasts Joanie might enjoy, including a dramatization of Jesus' life. It was common for volunteers to chat with one another while guests spent their time talking to loved ones on their phones, talking among themselves, sitting quietly, or checking social media and watching pop-music videos from their home countries.

John stopped volunteering soon after I started, but I would volunteer with Joanie, Kathy, and Abigail a number of times over the next two years, enjoying their company – and the cookies Abigail often baked for guests and volunteers – in the downtime while we waited for immigrants to be released or were talking to their families. Abigail, Joanie and Kathy were in many ways exemplars of the modal Welcome Center volunteer during the time I was there: educated, retired white women. They were what I call “Worldly Liberals.”¹ The Worldly Liberals, many of whom were in a similar age group, had adopted the view of American Civil Religion (Gorski 2019) as espoused by Obama – a flawed country with underlying ideals of equality and freedom. The mismatch between the treatment of immigrants (particularly under Donald Trump) and their idealized American moral identity was one of the key motivations for the Worldly Liberals, as I discuss in Chapter 7.

¹“Worldly Liberal” sounds similar to Tarrow’s (2001) “Rooted Cosmopolitan”, but unlike Tarrow’s rooted cosmopolitans who use local networks to shape conditions abroad, I argue instead Chapter 7 that experiences abroad drive local action.

On that first day, I tried to be helpful, getting backpacks for the guests checking in at the front table, and getting them online. When I gave a guest from Nepal a backpack, he said something about a battery. He pulled up the bottom of his pants leg, exposing the ankle bracelet with a row of LEDs. He had been released, but was not free, now enrolled in Alternatives to Detention, monitoring programs that send profits to companies who could track people's locations, without the expense of providing them food or housing. He had left the battery charger in the holding room where he had been before getting released and knew that if the tracking device failed, he could be returned to detention. I walked back into the detention center visitors' entrance with our understandably nervous guest and explained the situation to the guard at the front desk, who looked at our guest and said, "well I guess you'll have to go back inside then." A feeble joke that, luckily, I wasn't sure our guest understood. The guard called someone on the phone, and 10 minutes later a woman came out and told him "Well now you've got to go back in." Same feeble joke, but this time she handed him a bag with the charger.

Later that day a man with a red ID card was released. Unlike the blue ID cards the other men had, indicating that they had no criminal record and were likely seeking asylum, a red card indicated that the guest had been detained subsequent to a felony conviction. WIA had rules that women could not transport felons alone, so I accompanied Abigail and our guest to the bus in Abigail's sparkling clean Toyota Prius with a Medicines Sans Frontieres sticker on the window.

Soon I would start driving people places at the end of my shift, usually bringing them to the

airport and guiding people through security. Some guests had never flown and needed help understanding the signage, and others waved me off. Sometimes I drove people directly to meet family and friends.

I often enjoyed those drives, as I got a chance to talk to people a little after the stress of figuring out their immediate next move was done. I understood the satisfaction that many volunteers received from their work, and fought to hang on to, as I describe in Chapter 9.

One day I drove a man from Eritrea to an Ethiopian restaurant to meet a relative who worked there. I had greeted him at the table and was shocked when he listed Hebrew as a language he spoke. Though my limited biblical Hebrew was of no help communicating, he told me in English that he had spent 10 years trying to get asylum in Israel, and failing there had traveled by boat to Brazil, crossing the Darien gap on foot.

Another day I was the driver for a woman from Somalia. Having spent 4 years in Kenya before coming to the U.S. to request asylum, she spoke good English. She told me the detention center was the safest place she had been in years. I drove her to an apartment in a complex where other Somalis lived. Seeing the conservative dress of other Somalis walking by, she sighed, shook her head, and said, “So many Somalis.” She asked to use the car mirror and made sure her hair was completely tucked under her hat. The woman she was staying with met her at the car with long skirts to wear over her jeans.

I once drove a man who had just won his asylum case to a church pre-school where his wife met him with a babe in arms and his young daughter who was holding flowers and a red-white-and-blue balloon.

4.1.1 Southern Welcome

At Southern Welcome, the tasks were similar to the WIA Welcome Center, though conducted evenings and late nights in a busy airport. The first time I visited Southern Welcome I met Reba, one of the original Southern Welcome volunteers, at the airport on a slow day where she could show me the ropes. Now that Reba was in her 50's, the energy she had once poured into her triathlon workouts had been more recently transferred to volunteering and protests she started attending in the wake of Trump's election, which she said "radicalized" her. She told me she still had the sign from the 2017 protest against the Muslim ban, and had subsequently and protested against the expansion of incarceration and policing in her state in the wake of the murder of George Floyd. She said, "I mean, really, the wanting to push back on these policies [pushes her palms away from her body] and like the injustice and anger that I felt towards these policies is in my body and the way to let it out is to do something physical."

While no triathlon, volunteering at the airport did involve a fair bit of walking. On most days that started with a trip to an airport garage to load a wagon with supplies from the trailer SW parked there and pulling it to the closet sized space near the airport chapel that served as the SW "office". The next step was to greet immigrants at the curb for departures. That's where detention center employees drove their unmarked white vans with cages inside.

After meetings with representatives from SW and airport management – which preferred not to have unescorted groups of asylum seekers suddenly appear at a confusing international airport – the detention center agreed to give SW notice when their vans left the detention center

for the airport.

One volunteer told me it was part of the “standard script” to, “make it very clear that [the released immigrants] have agency because they really haven’t had agency for possibly months, maybe a year, maybe longer, to make their own decisions about their movement. And so we wanna absolutely stress to them that you don’t have to come with us. We are here as a volunteer to help you and to help you navigate this airport. And here’s a few of the things that we’ll provide to you if you wanna come with us.” Almost all of the immigrants chose to come with SW volunteers.

On most days SW could use an airport meeting room to hand out pizza and clothing and organize communication, but on some days guests ate SW-supplied pizza, charged their devices, and spoke to family while sitting on the floor on an airport mezzanine, uneasily sharing the space with the new Army recruits who assembled there for their trip to basic training. One immigrant asked me if the young woman in an Army sweatshirt sitting on the floor near him was an immigration officer.

Many of the travelers greeted by SW had information about tickets that their families had purchased for them, but they didn’t have boarding passes. Volunteers helped guests with their tickets and boarding passes and escorted them through security in groups near the time their flights left. TSA had a special process for people with nonstandard identification, and volunteers knew the drill and the best way to get through the airport.

The SW volunteers came to be fixtures at the airport. Over time, volunteers developed relationships with airport staff, including with ticket agents who would sometimes help them

find the best deal in the common case that a flight previously booked by family left before a traveler could get to the gates. One volunteer told me that after a she received “no cred” trying to accompany a guest TSA at security, “I was like, well, I can fix that. I’m gonna go make a name badge that has the [SW] logo and my name that says airport accompaniment volunteer on it. And the minute you have that, they’re like, oh, come on through.” She referred to the badge and clipboard as an “authority hack”; SW badges and lanyards would frequently attract American travelers who had a question about where to go.

This feeling of competence became quite motivating for some volunteers. Candace was Reba’s sister, and became one of the most dedicated volunteers at the airport. A tech-savvy, skinny white woman in her 50s with pulled-back gray hair who surreptitiously sucked on a vape pen in the airport, Candace would browse eBay searching for good deals on phones to buy for immigrants on her own time. SW eventually hired Candace for a part time job not long before Trump was re-elected and SW shut down. When I asked Candace why she volunteered, she told me that I should probably interview “someone with more empathy,” since her motivations were entirely selfish: “I guess I like the airport scene, and I like feeling needed. I like feeling useful.”

This answer may be somewhat backwards, because at the time Candace started volunteering she didn’t know that she would come to like the “airport scene.” Despite her insistence that she had little empathy, Candace had previously been in a relationship with a Latin American man who had overstayed his visa and could have been deported, perhaps supplying her with the “relational empathy” that is a focus of Chapter 6. They married and Candace helped him

fill out his visa application. Still, Candace's observation that she liked the scene, and liked feeling useful points to the sense of satisfaction many welcoming volunteers shared.

4.2 Near the detention center: Hospitality

At Casa de Visitantes, below a sign on the wall saying, “when you have more than you need build a longer table not a higher wall”, is a long table that can seat 20 people. When I arrived there one Saturday morning, Natasha, a woman in her early 60s, was sitting at the table going over visitation procedures with four students who had driven several hours to be there. Natasha was explaining that visitors could bring nothing but their identification into the detention center, that after talking to one of the people who had requested a visitor they would come back and debrief, and they would be expected to write a letter to the person they visited. Those letters were to contain no promises of future action; the folks at CV had learned that good intentions often didn't withstand everyday life far away from the detention center.

Natasha was running the house this weekend with two old friends from her Unitarian Universalist church. The three non-Latine women spoke good Spanish, had lived in Spanish-speaking countries, and called themselves the “three amigas.” Even though they had since moved to different cities, they continued to converge on the house to volunteer together several weekends a year. Natasha had been an immigration activist all the way back to the days of the 1980s sanctuary movement, when she moved to Nicaragua for a year to support the revolution. When she met Alejandro, one of the CV founders, more than a decade earlier, it was easy for

her to decide to support CV. She even served on the board, as perhaps the first non-religious member. Natasha insisted that she was a non-believer; her family joined the Unitarian church for community when her children were young.

I went with the students that morning, driving by the small town square surrounded by empty store fronts on the way to the detention center, which was hidden behind a line of trees on a two-lane highway outside of town. The detention center had the feel of a prison from the moment one was buzzed through two gates in the high chain link fence. The waiting room in WIA's detention center had the feel of a shabby doctor's office behind high security, but here there were only a few metal benches facing a fenced-in guard in the waiting room, where visitors sometimes waited for hours. High on one wall were 8x10 photos of company officials, 5 white men and the African-American warden. In a surreal touch, a large TV mounted on the wall behind the guard silently played *Roller Boogie*, a disco-era roller-skating movie starring Linda Blair as "a rebellious rich kid who falls in love with an ambitious, poor street skater" (Lester 1979).

One of the students that day was Gloria, who was working on her PhD in clinical counseling. After visiting that day, Gloria decided to become a regular volunteer. When I spoke to her a month later, she told me she grew up in a Southern factory town where her parents worked opposite 12 hour shifts, and like most of the workers, were migrants from Mexico. She was very aware of the social dynamics in the town where "I like grew up around a lot of people who looked like me. But I also grew up in a town where like pretty much anyone and any sort of

leadership was not Latinx.² The majority are still white.” Like several of the other young Latina volunteers I interviewed, Gloria’s family had direct experience with the ICE-era immigration system. When Gloria was growing up, neighbors would send out messages alerting families to the locations of roadblocks looking for undocumented immigrants. She told me that she felt “the privilege of never being super directly impacted by the detention center,” but she said her aunt left the country of her own accord after being pulled over for driving without a license. Both Gloria and Natasha saw immigration detention as part of a larger global system of oppression. Gloria had been organizing protests around Palestine and told me that had influenced her decision to do work, “in a very immediate way with like communities that I also directly relate to.”

Visiting immigrants in detention and providing a way for interested outsiders to do so were only a fraction of the responsibilities of CV volunteers. A large part of what they did was support the families and loved ones of people in detention. There is room in the house for several families to stay over Friday or Saturday night so that they can break up a long trip or return to the detention center a second day. There’s a small playground out back for kids.

While CV maintains a robust social media presence, many families visiting the detention center do not know about the house. CV volunteers aren’t permitted to talk about their services in the detention center waiting room, but they have cards with the CV address to hand out to visitors they encounter outside, and word got around.³ This day, several families came by the

²Gloria was the only person I interviewed who used the term Latinx. Others used the term “Latino”, or occasionally “Hispanic” to describe their background. I use Latine as a non-gendered form that avoids the controversial “x” ending. (Freeland 2024)

³On one visit I was with Alejandro when he spoke in Spanish to a family who was waiting outside, and handed

house around lunch and dinner time. Some had already met, and some had been to the house before.

The amigas served casseroles they had pre-made, store bought enchiladas, and salads for dinner. The families talked among themselves and with the volunteers. A woman with her daughter said that she was going to have to figure out how to visit her husband now that she knew he was to be deported. A family of six who had driven eight hours to be there was planning to drive another couple of hours to stay with relatives. Two teen boys sat at the table resting their heads on their arms while looking at their phones. A recent university graduate had driven with her mom to visit her father, who had been picked up a couple of days before. When visitors left the house, volunteers offered them food for the road and a gift card for gas.

At the end of the weekend volunteers do the laundry, clean the sheets and create a to do list for the next week's crew, then they start a long drive back home. A number of volunteers told me that they arrive exhausted from being on duty all weekend, and it takes them many weeks to recover the impetus to return.

4.3 Inside the Detention Center: Visitation

Two years after I began working at the Welcome Center outside the detention facility, I was the only person in the visitors section of a courtroom on the inside. Bartolo was seated on the

them a card. I felt that they eyed me suspiciously as a non-Latino. Alejandro said perhaps that was true, but also people are often wary about the motives of people who give out free meals to strangers. In any case, the family did not visit that evening.

business side of the courtroom, wearing the reddish scrubs that the detention center assigned to immigrants who had been convicted of felonies in the U.S. Bartolo sat alone at the “defense” table. He had no lawyer. Bartolo’s graying mustache was neatly trimmed as usual. He looked nervous but surprisingly hale, considering his poorly controlled diabetes and the fact that he rarely took advantage of opportunities to go outside into the prison yard. His disease had already cost him some toes, and he had told me he appreciated the time alone in the pod when others went to the yard.

I had been visiting and writing Bartolo in the detention center for the previous 6 months, after he let WIA know that he’d appreciate a visitor.⁴ Before I started visiting Bartolo, I had been into the visitation area only once, with Noreen. Noreen was the outgoing, white-haired volunteer who had organized WIA’s visitation program for years. Noreen’s penchant for turquoise jewelry reflected her roots in Arizona. The fact that she organized an immigration book group may have reflected her advanced degree in the humanities.

Noreen seemed very comfortable with the visiting procedures. We signed in with a guard who checked the names of the people we were visiting, traded our drivers licenses for badges, locked our belongings in a small locker, and went through the metal detector to the waiting room. The guard made a call and 15 minutes later buzzed us in through the heavy door to the visiting section - a row of white cinderblock carrels with black handsets to talk across the plexiglass dividing visitors from people in detention. On that first visit I sat in one carrel to

⁴WIA’s contact information was available on a shared tablet computer used to provide information to people detained in the detention center. The tablet did not support internet connections. CV also makes their contact information available in the Southern detention center.

talk to a loquacious, heavily tattooed man Noreen had been visiting for many months. He had served time on a felony conviction and was fighting deportation.⁵ Noreen sat down the row chatting with a Salvadoran whose right-wing politics she abhorred. To Noreen they were both trapped in a detention system she thought shouldn't exist.

After I signed up to visit Bartolo, I got used to the routine. I'd spend 45 minutes to an hour talking to Bartolo through the uncomfortable black handset. Down the row of windows there would occasionally be wives and girlfriends and families of men in detention. Though there were women in the detention center, I never saw any on the other side of the glass, probably because visitation times were segregated by security level.

English was Bartolo's best language – he had lived in the U.S. for nearly 50 years, since before he can remember – but we sometimes struggled to engage. I had also migrated to the U.S. with my family as a child, but my father was a medical resident, not a farm worker. I had worked in tech and academia, Bartolo had worked in agriculture and for a cartel. Bartolo always asked how my family was doing. He was estranged from his wife and children, and had been unhoused at the time of his arrest. Bartolo had worked for a while at a used car lot, and we had cars as an interest in common, but I sensed he was disappointed when he found out I drove an old Prius. In general I got the feeling that Bartolo would have had a lot more fun than I did with the resources at my disposal. We would chat about what was going on inside – the increasing crowding, a fight between Sureños and Norteños, and his immigration case with

⁵He claimed he had been wrongly convicted of a crime, so I'll not describe it here. Noreen hoped I would visit him while she was out of town, but I was greatly discomfited by his crime and found his alternate explanation for the evidence against him unconvincing, so I did not do so. Noreen's commitment to nonjudgmental support clearly exceeded mine.

which I was little help.

Bartolo's prior conviction was for a property crime that had nothing to do with his experience in the cartel that operated in both his home town in the U.S. and the town he and his parents left in Mexico. I had heard why Bartolo had been in prison in another state, but as he discussed his conviction with the judge, I realized I hadn't heard the whole story. Then again, I withheld information from Bartolo; despite our chats and indirect correspondence he didn't have my primary phone number or my home address. Bartolo told the judge he had previously worked with the cartel, that they threatened him when he chose to leave their employ, that he had skipped town, and that he was afraid to be deported to Mexico where the cartel would find it easy to track him down and exact retribution.

The government attorney, like the immigration judge an executive branch employee, seemed to be only occasionally engaged, editing documents on the courtroom computer while the judge questioned Bartolo about his estranged family, his whereabouts after leaving the cartel, and the threats he received. The bailiff, wearing a polo shirt with the logo of the private detention center operator, dozed intermittently. After a surprisingly thorough review, (by contrast, the judge had adjudicated 19 asylum cases in a few hours that morning), the judge declared that given the cartel's apparent disinterest in the U.S., Bartolo's risk of harm in Mexico was less than 50%, his crime was serious, and that unless Bartolo wanted to appeal, he'd be scheduled for deportation. Bartolo wanted to appeal. As the bailiff signaled for me to exit, Bartolo said "thank you for coming."⁶

⁶Bartolo's experience was an example of what Barak (2023) characterizes as the "Slow Violence of Immigration

I gathered lists of legal resources for Bartolo and sent them along, but he told me that they had not responded. My own message to an immigration law non-profit was answered with an automatic reply followed by a one-sentence email with no commitment. Still with the help of a jailhouse lawyer, Bartolo appealed his case.

By this time, Noreen had already left WIA and started her own group of visitors – events I mentioned in the Introduction and detail in Chapter 9. I donated money to Noreen’s group, and they arranged small deposits to Bartolo’s account monthly. At an online group meeting people discussed services that might be available in Mexico. Noreen said people with English skills could often find work there.

I figured I would transfer more money to help Bartolo get on his feet in the likely case his appeal failed, but a couple of weeks after my last visit I got a text from Noreen. She was trying to send money, and he wasn’t listed in the system. I looked Bartolo up in the online detainee locator, and he was at a large tent facility that had been hastily erected on an army base near the Mexico border after Trump’s second election. The next day he didn’t appear in the system at all. Bartolo knew how to request a deportation backpack with clothing from WIA, but he didn’t even have time to get one. I felt nauseated and guilty for visiting infrequently and not transferring more money earlier. Bartolo never reached out via the phone number I gave him or by mail.

My experiences visiting resonated with those I had heard from other volunteers. Unlike

Court.” Barak finds that immigrants generally do not take issue with the procedural aspects of immigration court, which are often respected in form, but instead the substantive injustice underlying those rules.

short-term welcoming, which left volunteers with a sense of satisfaction, long-term visiting is often disheartening for volunteers and ends in potential disaster for the people they visit. Connections are made, and then broken. Visiting gives one insight into the conditions of detention and the processes that pass for a system of justice in the context of immigration detention, but the process does not necessarily make one want to come back again.

4.4 Looking Forward

In this chapter I provided some background on the kind of work volunteers do, and the environments in which they do it. Like other volunteers, I found the short-term interactions welcoming outside the detention center rewarding, providing a chance to help people without having to deal with the reality of the conditions inside. On the other hand, visiting immigrants in detention was disheartening. These differing experiences, and how they correlated with different commitments to volunteering are a central topic of Chapter 9.

The volunteers I introduced in this chapter appear again in later chapters, along with other volunteers who have similar experiences in their life course. In Chapter 7 Abigail and Kathy describe their decisions to travel abroad as young women, and the effect of that travel on their future paths. Joanie and John will feature in the Chapter 8, which focuses on religion and religious change – Joanie as someone who changed her religious environment as an adult to find places that she felt represented her values, and John as someone whose pursuit of a just world had always been tied to his religious practice.

Natasha represents a different group than Worldly Liberals, one I refer to as the (Mostly Aging) Activists. Like Abigail and Kathy, Natasha was shaped by travel as a young woman, in her case inspired by a worldly family friend who broadened her horizons. Much to the chagrin of that friend, she came away from them committed to a leftist internationalist politics. In Chapter 7 I will talk about her story in more detail. Noreen, also an activist, is a central figure in Chapter 9, which covers how she came to WIA, and how she left.

Gloria is one of a several highly-educated young U.S.-born Latinas who stood out among the grayer crowd of volunteers. These volunteers stand out demographically, but lived experience, not demographics, underlies the shape of concern. Chapter 6 explores the meaningful relationships with immigrants subject to detention that underlie the attention and emotional response of these volunteers. Though from a very different demographic, Candace also had prior relationships with people who had been subject to detention. Chapter 6 is focused on the way relationships with people subject to detention.

In the next short chapter, I provide some demographic information about the full set of volunteers that I interviewed for this dissertation.

5 The Volunteers

The previous chapter introduced a few volunteers of the more than 100 I met at Western Immigrant Advocates (WIA), Casa de Visitantes (CV), and Southern Welcome (SW). I met volunteers while working alongside them, at WIA's bimonthly meetings, and at ad-hoc events hosted by the WIA. However, many of the findings in this study are derived from data collected via interviews with 68 people associated with the organizations, almost all of whom were present or former volunteers. This chapter provides a quantitative overview of the volunteers I interviewed in terms of their age, religion, and political orientation.

5.1 Interviews

I interviewed 68 people, with primary semi-structured interviews lasting from 37 minutes to 3 hours 15 minutes, with a mean time of 1 hour 20 minutes. I interviewed 46 people in the West and 22 in the South. In the West I did 17 interviews in person, usually talking outside coffee shops where we met, and the rest over zoom. In the South, I conducted only two interviews in

person, but I had met 11 of them while they were working at SW or CV.

The interview guide (See Qualitative Data Appendix) included questions about life history, religious affiliation, processes of awareness of volunteering, and experiences volunteering with a focus on emotions. The life history portion of the interview was often involved as I inquired about family, religious background, time spent abroad, and others whose influences seemed subjectively important to volunteers. Often, the open-ended question “How have you spent your time as an adult?” led to extended discussions about important life course events and detailed follow up questions. Interviews with group leaders included additional questions about the founding and operations of their group.

5.1.1 Interview Recruitment

In each organization, recruitment to interview involved with asking key organization insiders for support in finding volunteers to interview and extending with interviews I arranged with people I recruited after participating in organization activities with them.

At WIA my first interview was in June 2022 with Thomas, the board chair from 2019 until 2023, who led the organization through the COVID era. He sent an email to all volunteers asking if they were interested in being interviewed, yielding 11 who responded and agreed to be interviewed, including two board members at the time. After I began volunteering I had access to contact information from all Welcome Center volunteers, and requested interviews with frequent Welcome Center volunteers as well as other volunteers who were in key roles.

In addition I sought out organizational leadership over time. Including Kari, the founder, I interviewed four Board chairs who served from 2010-2024. I interviewed the paid Executive Director and volunteer coordinator. In addition to long term volunteers, I interviewed several Welcome Center volunteers who, as it turned out, volunteered for only a few months, all people in their twenties.

In early 2024, there was a rift in WIA when Noreen, the volunteer who led the book club and visitation program, left WIA after conflicts with Edie, the Executive Director at the time. I had previously interviewed Noreen and interviewed her again in the wake of her departure to start an independent visitation group, which included some WIA volunteers. I did 13 initial interviews after the rift, including one with the board chair who had recently ascended to that role, and one with a member of Noreen's independent group who had not volunteered with WIA. I also did short followup interviews with three other key informants after that time. Of the 81 people I met from WIA, I interviewed 44, and I am confident my interviews represent a good cross-section of volunteers.

In the South I interviewed 22 people, 9 from CV, 12 from SW, and Elías, who had been involved with founding CV, SW and the organization he currently runs, providing church-based housing and services for asylum seekers.

I began by contacting Alejandro, an immigrant from Central America who is the Executive Director of CV and who was one of the group of original volunteers who formed the organization along with Elías. Alejandro connected me to Reba, one of the original volunteers at SW, who I interviewed over zoom. I spoke to Olivia, the volunteer coordinator of SW (a former

volunteer, herself) and arranged a round of participant observation with each organization prior to additional interviews.

My first round of interviews with SW was recruited with snowball sampling starting with Reba and Lindsey, one of the most active volunteers I met at the airport. Both were Anglo women over 50, and the people they referred me to were frequent volunteers, but also almost entirely Anglo women over 50. I was able to expand the pool to include younger volunteers after Olivia, the twenty-something Latina volunteer coordinator who had once been a volunteer herself, sent a message to the team group chat asking for volunteers to interview. I did not encounter any volunteers who were men during 3 shifts at SW, but I did interview one man who volunteered there. Looking at names on a volunteer message list, it appears that over 90% of the volunteers at SW were women, and most have Anglo surnames.

After my first visit to CV, Alejandro connected me to key volunteers in the organization, including several in the founding group. In addition to Alejandro and Elías, I interviewed 6 volunteers whose contact information I was given by Alejandro, and 4 volunteers I met during my two trips to CV.

5.2 Volunteer Demographics

Based on my interviews with 64 volunteers, meeting over 100, and seeing lists of names of volunteers at both WIA and CV, I feel confident saying that the demographics of the volunteers at SW, CV and WIA are strikingly similar across organizations despite different political, ethnic

and cultural contexts of the South and West regions where these non-profits operate. According to the Census, the Combined Statistical Area for WIA is about 60% non-Hispanic white, 15% Asian and less than 10% Black. By comparison, almost all Southern volunteers live in a CSA where about 45% of the population is non-Hispanic white and more than 30% is Black. The areas do have similar proportions of Latine population, with about 15% Hispanic of any race according to the census. Between 15 and 20% of the populations of both areas are foreign born. In terms of religious diversity, over 40% of the population in WIA's home base was religiously unaffiliated in 2024 compared to 25% in the South. (Pew Research Center 2025a).

The following statistical profile is based on interviews of volunteers. It includes 4 people who were volunteers before becoming employees, but excludes two interviewed employees and two people I interviewed who worked with the organizations but had never volunteered. The modal volunteer is a well educated American, white, non-Latine woman over 50. Table 5.1 provides an overview of volunteer demographics.

In both regions, more than two-thirds of the volunteers were women. In the United States, women are slightly more likely to volunteer than men, but substantially more likely to volunteer to do care work (Musick and Wilson 2008). A Danish study that separates care-oriented volunteering from other types of volunteering not only finds that women do more care-oriented volunteering, but also finds that unlike other forms of volunteering, rates of care-oriented volunteering do not rise with income and education (Overgaard, Petrovski, and Hermansen 2018). The fact that in this case volunteers are *both* more likely to be women, and have extremely high levels of education implies that education and/or correlates of education are

Table 5.1: Volunteer Demographics

Characteristic	Overall N = 64 ^I	South N = 22 ^I	West N = 42 ^I
Age (start of volunteering)			
20s	11 (17%)	6 (27%)	5 (12%)
30s-50s	28 (44%)	13 (59%)	15 (36%)
60+	25 (39%)	3 (14%)	22 (52%)
Gender			
F	50 (78%)	19 (86%)	31 (74%)
M	14 (22%)	3 (14%)	11 (26%)
Race/Ethnicity			
Asian	4 (6.3%)	0 (0%)	4 (9.5%)
Latine	12 (19%)	6 (27%)	6 (14%)
White	48 (75%)	16 (73%)	32 (76%)
Immigrant			
Immigrant	7 (11%)	1 (4.5%)	6 (14%)
2 non-U.S. Parents	6 (9.4%)	3 (14%)	3 (7.1%)
1 non-U.S. Parent	6 (9.4%)	1 (4.5%)	5 (12%)
U.S. Parents	45 (70%)	17 (77%)	28 (67%)

^I_n (%)

Table 5.2: Volunteer Education

Characteristic	Overall N = 64 ^I	South N = 22 ^I	West N = 42 ^I
Education			
Some college	2 (3.1%)	2 (9.1%)	0 (0%)
Bachelors (or in progress)	24 (38%)	9 (41%)	15 (36%)
Masters+	38 (59%)	11 (50%)	27 (64%)
^I n (%)			

independently associated with decisions to do this form of volunteering. The high levels of living abroad that I examine in Chapter 7 are one such correlate.

As shown in Table 5.2 volunteers are extraordinarily highly educated compared with the general population, with all but two interviewees having finished their education without a Bachelors degree. More than half of volunteers I interviewed have post-baccalaureate degrees. In general, higher levels of education are associated with higher rates of volunteering, but the extremely high levels of education in this group are still notable. One difference between the regions is the age of volunteers. Volunteers are more likely to have started volunteering around retirement age in the West. This may be due to the fact that WIA was started by people already in their 50s and 60s, while CV founders were mostly in their 30s at the time they started the organization. Both network effects and group culture may have affected the age of new volunteers. In 2024, WIA board leadership transitioned to a younger generation for the first time, and that might portend a change in the general volunteer pool as well.

Though I did not explicitly ask about racial self-categorization of volunteers, I met only two

volunteers who I believed would self-categorize as Black at WIA, a man who had immigrated from Congo, and an African-American college graduate who had spent a year in Spain and volunteered while applying to medical school. I did not have the opportunity to formally interview either one. Despite the higher proportion of Black people in the South, I met only one Black person at SW and CV, and she had come to visit but was not a regular volunteer.

Figure 5.1 shows the race and gender of volunteers along with their ages. This figure includes volunteer times with CV and SW in the South as well as both WIA and people who continued volunteering with a breakoff group afterwards. Notably, younger volunteers tended to volunteer for shorter times, with several people I interviewed volunteering for less than one year. Volunteers shown with an arrow were continuing to volunteer beyond January 2025. Southern Welcome was no longer offering services after that time.

5.2.1 Religious Affiliation

Classifying volunteers by religion is complicated by the fact that many volunteers had changed their religious beliefs and affiliations over their lifetime, as discussed in detail in Chapter 8. As shown in Table 5.3, over 40% of volunteers were religiously unaffiliated in the South and over 50% were unaffiliated in the West. Of volunteers who were religiously affiliated, in the West Catholics were twice the proportion as in the South (17% to 9%) and the reverse was true for Liberal Christian denominations (14% to 23%).

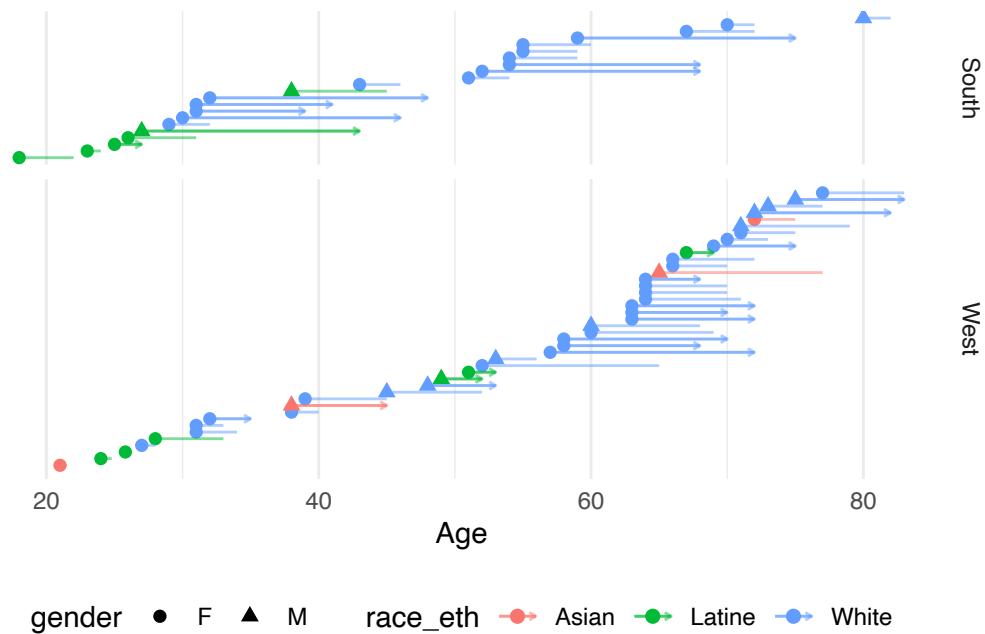


Figure 5.1: Years volunteering by region. WIA had the most interviewees and many had long experience. For CV I most interviewees were founders or long term volunteers. SW began during COVID and stopped operating in early 2025

Table 5.3: Religion of volunteers by region

Characteristic	South N = 22 ^I	West N = 42 ^I
rel		
Catholic	2 (9.1%)	7 (17%)
Liberal Christian	5 (23%)	6 (14%)
Unitarian	4 (18%)	1 (2.4%)
Jewish	0 (0%)	4 (9.5%)
SBNR/None	9 (41%)	23 (55%)
Other	2 (9.1%)	1 (2.4%)

^In (%)

5.2.2 Political Ideology

I hypothesized that some volunteers would follow a politicized pattern of engagement of the form “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.” In interviews I asked people about their engagement in politics, and then categorized people by their responses. Almost all volunteers fall into Progressive (aligned with Democratic Socialists and Bernie Sanders) and Liberal (Democratic Party) categories.¹ These roughly corresponded to the categories of *Worldly Immigrants* and *(Mostly Aging) Activists* introduced in the previous chapter, but even though progressives were more politically active than liberals, not all progressives were politically active.²

While a number of volunteers highlighted anger at Trump’s first term immigration policies as motivating their decision to volunteer, in line with theories of Moral Outrage (Jasper and Poulsen 1995), that feeling did not align clearly with political ideology, with Liberals as likely to be outraged by Trump as Progressives.

There are several possible reasons for this difference in politics between the West and South. The simplest explanation is that CV founders had progressive politics and attracted volunteers with similar views. CV was started by people who had an activist stance, and sought to close the immigration detention center. Elías, who was a force in starting both CV and SW, embraces a

¹I did not ask people to characterize themselves into categories shown here, but inferred the categories from discussions of their political activity.

²I classified people who were frequent political volunteers, who regularly wrote letters to congresspeople, lobbied in state government, or regularly participated in protests as highly engaged. People who regularly voted and may have participated in a political campaign or one-off protest as having medium engagement, and people who did not participate in politics beyond voting as having low engagement. One perhaps unexpected correlation was that there was a distinction in politics between the people I interviewed in the West and in the South. In the South I characterized 77% of the volunteers I interviewed as Progressive.

Table 5.4: Visitors are much more likely to be progressive and highly politically engaged

Visitor	FALSE N = 44 ^l	TRUE N = 20 ^l
politics		
Liberal	24 (55%)	1 (5.0%)
Libertarian	1 (2.3%)	0 (0%)
None	2 (4.5%)	0 (0%)
Progressive	17 (39%)	19 (95%)
political_engagement		
low	9 (20%)	1 (5.0%)
med	16 (36%)	3 (15%)
high	19 (43%)	16 (80%)
^l n (%)		

prophetic leftist politics inspired by what Martin Luther King called the “beloved community.” Another possibility is that in the more anti-immigrant political environment in the South (recall that the state supported law enforcement cooperation with immigration authorities), one needs to be more politically out of the mainstream to publicly support immigrants.

In the West, where Noreen, the leader of the visitation group, had an activist progressive bent, visitors in her group almost all had progressive politics and became more engaged in immigration politics specifically over time. The schism at WIA described in Chapter 9 occurred when Noreen left the organization.

5.3 Summary

The data discussed in this chapter give a high-level view of the kind of person who volunteers at these non-profits. The median volunteer is a highly educated, politically left-of-center, woman. Like most care-giving non-profits, these organizations attract women as volunteers at a higher rate than men. Volunteers are split between generally non-Religious and membership in left-leaning religious traditions. As detailed in Chapter 8, many interviewees who attend religious services changed religious affiliations to be in a context that encouraged the kinds of volunteering they ended up doing. Of the data shown in this chapter, here the high levels of education among the volunteers stand out most against the backdrop of the American populace.

As will be covered in the next chapter, the percentage of volunteers from immigrant families is higher than in the American population overall, but not substantially so. What will stand out is that the small number of young volunteers is largely composed of those immigrants.

6 Immigrant Identity and Relational Empathy

Relationships and the Shape of Concern

Shared identity can be a powerful motivator for action. Social Identity Theory focuses on how an internalized sense of group belonging can motivate compliance with group norms and prioritization of group needs in the context of inter-group competition. Studies of social movements use the concept of collective identity to describe how what is variously called “shared fate”, “linked-fate” and “we-ness” as a cause for, and a result of, collective action (Horowitz 2017; Owens, Robinson, and Smith-Lovin 2010; Polletta and Jasper 2001). A sense of “we-ness” sometimes called “self-other merging” has also been used to explain higher rates of helping for in-group members (Penner. et al. 2005), and has been linked to higher rates of empathy for in-group members (Stürmer et al. 2005).

While what we might call “identity-based empathy” seems to provide a straightforward explanation of how a sense of shared identity motivates volunteers from immigrant families,

reliance on identity as an explanation often takes for granted that which needs to be explained. Brubaker and Cooper (2000) argue that we should be careful about substituting a category, in this case *immigrant*, with the concept of an internalized and motivating sense of group belonging. Presupposing an underlying social identity avoids the underlying question of how relationships and social contexts contribute to becoming the sort of person whose shape of concern encompasses immigrants in detention.

Notably, volunteers that might be seen to share an immigrant identity with people in detention typically don't have the sense of shared fate thought to be at the root of social movement solidarity, because volunteers themselves aren't generally subject to detention.¹ In the vocabulary of social movements, the volunteers are all "conscience constituents" rather than "beneficiary constituents" (McCarthy and Zald 1977). Like their peers from families with multi-generational roots in the U.S., almost all the volunteers from immigrant families have never been, and will never be, in a position where they will be subject to detention.

Rather than beginning with an assumption of motivating identity founded in being an immigrant, or belonging to an ethnic group that is primarily composed of immigrants, a more fruitful approach is to identify patterns in the life course associated with what I described as the 4A's that lead to volunteering: *attention* to immigrants in detention, emotional *activation* that leads to volunteering as a form of problem solving, which depends on *awareness* of opportunities to volunteer, and biographical *availability* to do so. Two key tenets of the life

¹The vast majority of volunteers I met are American citizens, though a few have permanent resident status, which in spite of its name can be revoked. Indeed a significant subset of immigrants in detention are permanent residents who are in removal hearings subsequent to criminal convictions, or more recently simply criminal charges.

course approach are particularly important to highlight in this case. First, the *principle of time and place* draws attention to the fact that being an immigrant to the United States during the time of immigrant detention, and in particular during the age of nationalized enforcement in the post 9/11 era likely yields a different set of motivations than being an immigrant in an earlier era. Second, the *principle of linked lives* holds that lives are lived interdependently. Motivations are not only provided through direct experience, but through the indirect effects of external events on people with whom one has meaningful relationships, most notably between parents and children (Elder et al. 2003).

The interdependence highlighted in the principle of linked lives has been implicated specifically in motivation to provide care. Philosophers of care (Gopnik 2023; Schwitzgebel 2025) and some sociologists (Abbott and Burkitt 2023) have argued that motivation to care for specific subsets of unknown others need not depend on shared identity. They argue that care for unknown others is often modeled on existing caring *relationships*, and that people are likely to feel empathy for those who are similar to people they already care about, not simply people who are similar to themselves. I refer to this as *relational empathy*. Unfortunately, it is often difficult or impossible to disentangle the sources of empathy based on shared identity from the sources of relational empathy. Life experiences that yield an internalized sense of personal identity are often irreducibly intertwined with the life experiences that structure caring relationships. Still, Abbott and Burkitt (2023) argue that many caring relationships cross lines of identity, and contribute to moral boundaries.

In this chapter I address three questions. First, I ask if having immigrant family provides a

distinct motivation to volunteer. Second, given the provisional nature of “immigrant” identity as opposed to ethnic or communal identity, what role does social identity play in immigrant participation in volunteering? Third, if relationships are key to motivating emotions, to what extent are such relationships important to motivating people who do not share identities with people in detention?

I answer in the following ways. First, I find that the link between immigrant family and volunteering is particularly prominent for people from families and communities where immigrant detention was a fact of life. Older volunteers were mostly people who had grown up in the U.S. with little prior exposure to immigrant detention, but younger volunteers were much more likely to come from immigrant families. In particular a cluster of young Latinas grew up in families and communities where attention to immigrant detention was an unavoidable fact of life. The parallels between the experiences of loved ones and immigrants in detention (as opposed to feelings of shared fate implicated in social movements) appear to be particularly emotionally motivating. Yet emotional activation that led directly to volunteering was, as with other volunteers, multi-factorial and situational.

Second, in keeping with findings that many Latinas living in the United States support immigrant rights in response to feelings that anti-Immigrant policies reflect anti-Latine sentiment, I note that Latine identity becomes merged with immigrant identity for some Latinas who grew up in immigrant communities. More directly, existing ties to Latine cultural organizations provide awareness of opportunities to volunteer on behalf of immigrant communities, providing a connection between identity and the act of becoming a volunteer.

Third, I find evidence that these emotionally meaningful relationships with people who may be subject to detention can be motivating in the absence of shared social identity. Just as friends and families of people who have had cancer might be moved to participate in campaigns to fund cancer research as “conscience constituents” though they and their loved ones are unlikely to be beneficiaries of such research (Walker et al. 2023), people who have experienced the emotional impact of the immigration enforcement and detention system might be moved to mitigate its harms whether or not they identify themselves as being part of the same social group as those who are being detained. Following Abbott and Burkitt (2023) I argue for recognition of relational empathy as a source of care.

6.1 Background

Brubaker and Cooper (2000) have argued that social scientists often mistake other meanings of the word identity for the internalized emotionally motivating connection referred to by social identity, what Horowitz (2017:2) describes as a “person recognizing that they are in a group with other similar people, even if he or she has not met them previously, and that all members of the group have a shared fate”. Brubaker and Cooper say

If one wants to trace the process through which persons sharing some categorical attribute come to share definitions of their predicament, understandings of their interest, and a readiness to undertake collective action, it is best to do so in a manner that highlights the contingent and variable relationship between mere

categories and bounded, solidary groups (Brubaker and Cooper 2000:9)

Finding a way to trace that shared definition of predicament and interest for people from immigrant families and those detained by the U.S. government is a tall task. Even if a popular perception of immigrants as overwhelmingly from Latin America were true, it not a given that families labeled “Hispanic” by the United States census would feel a strong bond with Guatemalans who sought asylum at the border, much less the Somalis, Chinese or Sikhs that comprise a large percentage of the asylum seekers detained under President Biden, when this study was done. Indeed, surveys subsequent to the 2024 election outcome, with nearly half of Latine voters voting for a candidate whose top issue was detaining and deporting immigrants, and whose supporters waved signs calling for “Mass Deportation Now”, is concrete evidence that commonly used categories are of limited utility in understanding which people experience feelings of a “shared fate” with immigrants.

There are signs that broad immigrant collective identity can be motivating. Several researchers have documented the rise of an immigrant collective identity as a contributor to, and a possible outcome of a broad set of protests against the so-called “Sensenbrenner Bill”, a 2006 bill passed in the U.S. House of Representatives that would have made presence in the United States without documentation a crime and would have criminalized actions that support undocumented immigrants (Voss and Bloemraad 2011; Wallace and Zepeda-Millán 2020; Zepeda-Millán 2016). Bloemraad and Voss (2020) claim that, “Prior to 2006, ‘immigrant’ had relatively limited saliency as a collective identity”, and “Latino had somewhat greater saliency,

but it was highly contested, undercut by divisions based on country of origin, nativity and cultural traditions” (Bloemraad and Voss 2020:694).

However, in more recent research, the same authors worried that the collective identity that drove those protests has dissipated (Bloemraad and Voss 2020), or that the “terrorizing” of immigrant communities initiated in the first Trump administration has had a chilling effect on the immigrant rights movement.” (Zepeda-Millán and Wallace 2018:4).

The life course principle of linked lives is very evident in survey data of Latine and immigrant communities. Latine citizens cited both relational bonds with undocumented peers and material concerns about how their livelihoods in immigrant communities would be affected as motivations for supporting broadly pro-immigrant protests (Zepeda-Millán 2016). In one survey of Latines, respondents who knew undocumented people were more likely to support immigrant rights activism than those who did not know undocumented people (Wallace and Zepeda-Millán 2020). It is worth noting that immigrant rights activism has not always implied support for immigrants in detention. Advocacy has often advocated for “good” immigrants like DREAM-ers while at the same time reducing the relative deservingness of other undocumented immigrants (Bloemraad and Voss 2020; Shah 2024).

American citizen members of immigrant families often continue express attachment to immigrant identity despite legal citizenship status and external markers of assimilation such as education levels, language mastery and employment (Waters and Jiménez 2005). Bloemraad (2013) found that American citizen children with Mexican, Chinese and Vietnamese parents tied “Being American” to whiteness, rather than citizenship, which was valuable legally, but

did not define identity. Schmalzbauer (2014) found that American born children of Mexican immigrants in a largely white community preferred not to refer to themselves as American. Experience outside the home likely contributes to this internalized identity. Skin color has been found to mediate the economic value of citizenship for Mexican Americans (Catron 2023). In these cases, the relationships people have may define their sense of identity more than their legal status.

Surveys find that citizen children of undocumented parents were more likely to participate in protests than their peers with citizen parents (Street, Jones-Correa, and Zepeda-Millán 2017). Dreby (2014) found that young children in mixed status families internalize perceptions of threat even though parents avoided discussing it. For children who were growing up in a community with a high concentration of Mexican immigrants “the threat of illegality is quite salient in children’s everyday experiences” (Dreby 2014:199).

These emotional patterns tying immigration enforcement to threat to loved ones may be associated with additional concern for unknown people subject to detention. The idea that concern is extended to people who are similar to those we already care for – as opposed to those with whom we share identities – has a long history. The idea has been attributed to Confucian scholar Mengzi, who argued that concern for those near to us is “the sprout of benevolence” more broadly (quoted in Schwitzgebel 2025:135). Schwitzgebel (2025) calls this relational approach to care “Mengzian extension.” Following Abbott’s (2019) argument that relationships lie at the foundation of morality, Abbott and Burkitt (2023) argue that the emotions inherent in relationships are instrumental in shaping personal moral classification, and lead people to

have higher levels of concern for others who are similar to people they already care for. Thus we might expect that anyone who has experienced a caring relationship with someone subject to detention – not simply “immigrant families” or Latinos – would particularly be those who extend concern to people in detention.

6.2 Profile of Immigrant Volunteers

Of the volunteers I interviewed

- 7 (11%) were born in outside the U.S., similar to the 14% of U.S. residents who were born abroad. ($p = 0.59$)
- 12 (19%) of the volunteers I interviewed were U.S. born and had at least one immigrant parent. Six had two immigrant parents. This is higher than the 12.5% of U.S. born who have at least one immigrant parent, but well within an expected range for a sample this size. ($p = .013$)

As highlighted in the life course approach, historical contexts of immigration might be associated with different patterns of motivation and awareness of immigrants in detention for both immigrants and their children. For example, Thomas was an older Asian-American man still running a small engineering company at an age when many would have retired. His mother was a Chinese woman from Hawaii and his father fled China in the late 1940s as the Communists took power. Thomas started volunteering at WIA in his sixties at the suggestion

of the priest at his Episcopalian church. His path to volunteering is difficult to distinguish from other older volunteers who connected via their church.

Evelyn, one of the oldest volunteers, is an immigrant whose parents brought her to New York from British Mandate Palestine in the 1940s when she was a toddler. Though raised in the U.S., Evelyn technically is an immigrant. Conversely, Olivia, who was born in the United States, was raised in Central America until the age of 10 and was enrolled in classes for English Language Learners throughout school. The variation here is not surprising – I first found WIA intriguing because I had observed that volunteers came from a wide variety of backgrounds – but it is necessary to have more information than natality to identify who might have a greater sense of “we-ness” with immigrants who have been in detention.

Figure 6.1 highlights a subset of volunteers that might be most directly affected by the intersections of the historical times of detention-era integration, and their family experience. The figure shows a plot of volunteers by age at the time they started volunteering and family immigrant status. It includes volunteers whose families had experience with the post 1986 U.S. immigration system, after the legal changes that created the modern detention system, increased local policing, and allowed for the detention and deportation of even documented “permanent” residents who had committed a wide variety of crimes.

As shown in Figure 6.1 this category includes people who are immigrants themselves, but also people who have one or two immigrant parents. Nearly all of the members of this group are Latine or Asian, but not all Latine or Asian volunteers are in this group, because they or their ancestors may have migrated to the U.S. earlier. Despite these caveats, the immigrant

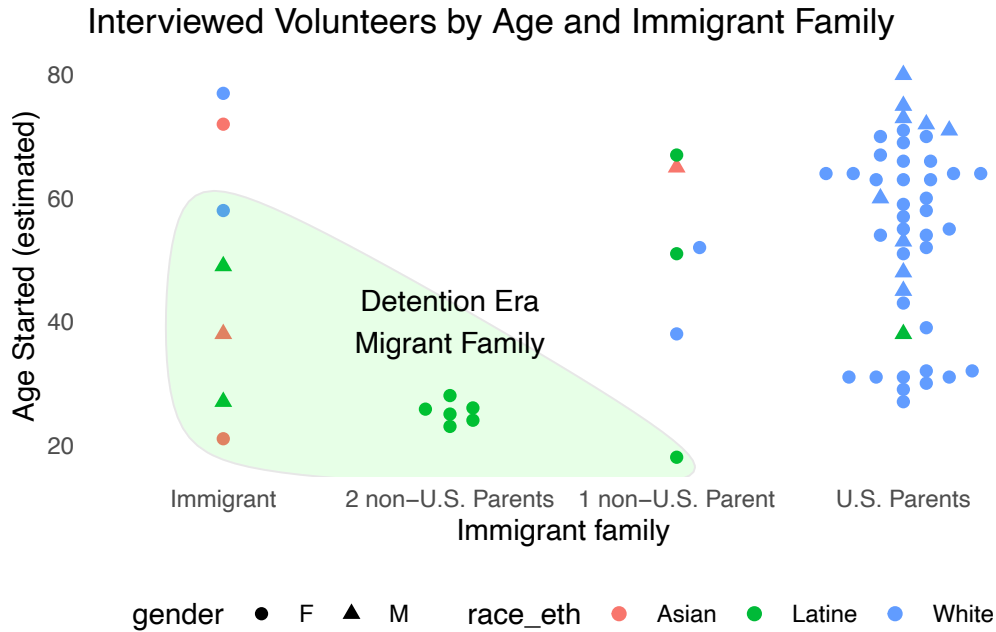


Figure 6.1: Interviewed volunteers by Age and Immigrant Family

experience group is overwhelmingly non-White and the other volunteers are overwhelmingly white.

Those who have detention era migrant families are distinct in other ways. As might be expected given their experience with the post 1986/1996 immigration system, this group is significantly younger than the volunteers on average. I interviewed 11 volunteers who were less than 30 years old when they started volunteering. Only two were immigrants, but 7 others were Latinas from mixed status working-class families with at least one parent who was not born in the U.S.²

I rarely learned the immigrant family status of volunteers I did *not* interview, but based on

²I did not ask volunteers their age, and inferred ages from dates in their biographies (e.g. year of graduation) if they did not state their age or when they were born.

Table 6.1: Immigrant Family by Age at Start of Volunteering (interviewed volunteers)

Characteristic	Overall N = 64 ^I	Immigrant Family N = 19 ^I	U.S. Parents N = 45 ^I
age_range			
20s	11 (17%)	9 (47%)	2 (4.4%)
30s-50s	28 (44%)	6 (32%)	22 (49%)
60+	25 (39%)	4 (21%)	21 (47%)
^I n (%)			

my subjective judgment of age and ethnicity of 103 volunteers, 24 appeared to be in their 20s, and 14 (74%) of those were Latine. Of older volunteers only 8 of 79 (10%) seemed Latine or non-white. In general it is safe to say that younger volunteers are more likely to come from immigrant families. In a random sample this categorical difference would be significant at $p < 0.001$. The association of age with natality is most obvious for volunteers in their 20s, but continues when considering volunteers in their 30s and 40s. Half of the 22 volunteers I interviewed who are under 50 years old had at least one immigrant parent, whereas only 17% of volunteers over 50 did.

The fact that young people who volunteer are likely to have immigrant families indicates that young people in immigrant families have some combination of higher levels of *attention* to immigrants in detention, stronger emotional *activation*, and higher levels of *awareness* of volunteering opportunities than their peers from non-immigrant families.

People who had detention era immigrant families were also distinct in terms of “opportunity awareness” – how they found out about the volunteer opportunities. Volunteers in this group

Table 6.2: Race and Ethnicity by Age Range (all volunteers, estimated)

Characteristic	Overall N = 103 ¹	Asian N = 4 ¹	Latine N = 19 ¹	White N = 80 ¹
age_range				
20s	24 (23%)	1 (25%)	14 (74%)	9 (11%)
30s-50s	40 (39%)	1 (25%)	4 (21%)	35 (44%)
60+	39 (38%)	2 (50%)	1 (5.3%)	36 (45%)
¹ n (%)				

were most likely to connect with the volunteer opportunity through work with immigrant organizations or via pro-actively searching online for volunteer opportunities that helped immigrants. A higher rate of searching online indicates that a key difference may be in attention and emotional motivation. In contrast, the other volunteers were most likely to connect via churches, friends and family, or political organizations and activities.

6.3 Relational Motivations of American Born Latinas

One sub-category of volunteers stands out in Figure 6.1: a cluster of young Latinas with non-U.S.-born parents and mixed status families. This category includes Gloria, who I introduced in Chapter 4. All but one of these volunteers has at least a bachelors degree, and that volunteer, Angelina, was attending college and applying for Fulbright scholarships at the time I interviewed her.³ While their high education levels are similar to those of other volunteers in this study,

³I met seven other young Latina volunteers who I didn't interview. I believe only two neither held bachelors degrees nor were enrolled in bachelor's programs. The approximately 20 year old sisters were working in a day-care and had attended some community college. Unfortunately, they did not respond to interview requests.

they are unusual for second generation Latinas, of whom about 20% graduate college, less than half the rate of white non-Hispanic women (Duncan et al. 2020).

These women in many ways have parallel life courses, but they came to volunteering without prior connections to one another, which highlights the independent relationship between life course and volunteering.

For these women, the U.S. immigration detention system was a highly salient aspect of their lives. Even though they would not be personally subject to detention, their experience in relationships and communities where people were subject to detention contributed to emotional activation in response to immigrant detention.

After receiving her MBA, Elise had recently moved to a new city when she searched the web for volunteer opportunities in response to the child separation policies in Trump's first term. She told me she was interested in volunteering on behalf of what she saw as her Latine community, and joining the board of WIA seemed a good fit because she knew the impact of the detention system from family experience:

My cousins have been in a detention center, and they've been tortured. And it's like really scary stuff that happens in there that I don't think the world knows. And like, they're all terrified to come back because of what they did to them in those centers, right. So when I saw the children, it just like broke my heart

Unlike many of the volunteers from U.S. families who expressed guilt or moral outrage over family separation, Elise highlights empathy (it broke my heart). Though she had previously

volunteered in the Latine community, relational empathy based on her cousins' experiences was central to Elise's initial motivation to volunteer specifically to help immigrants in detention.

Stella volunteered at the WIA welcome center for a couple of months at the same time she was completing her Masters in Social Work. She was introduced to WIA outside the detention center while doing a practicum at an immigrant legal aid organization and decided to start volunteering. A woman with a thick braid and a wide smile that revealed a mouth full of braces, Stella knew about ICE from her early childhood when her family was living in a mobile home and her parents would sometimes come home early from work in the fields to avoid raids. They instructed her firmly to never open the door for ICE.

they would say, hey, you know, we have to be super careful. ICE is around. And at the time I would I'm like, Mom, what's ICE? Like, what are you talking about? Like, what is that? And she would just say, you know, me and your dad, we're not we're not allowed to be here. So if they come knocking at the door and if you guys open the door, they will come in and they will take us away and then they'll take you guys away from us...It was just fear, just having that fear. And I guess I guess it was the biggest fear was just not not knowing why or just not understanding. You know, I'm like, OK, why why are they taking you? And if they do take you, what happens to us? Can we go with you?

While volunteering at the Welcome Center I spoke to another young Latina volunteer who I

didn't formally interview who had Stella's fears come true.⁴ Now a college student hoping to be a lawyer, Sofia said that when she was 8 her father had gone out to start the car and left the door open a crack. She heard him yelling, and then the ICE officers barged into the house and took her mother as well, though they had no warrant. At some point after being taken in, her mother convinced ICE that they had to release her so that she could take care of her small children. When a lawyer asked for paperwork ICE said they had no record of her mother being brought in. But her father was detained and her family had to raise \$25,000 bail. Sitting on a folding chair with her back to the cyclone fence surrounding the detention center where her father had once been held, Sofia looked over her shoulder, tilted her head in its direction, and said

“I hate those people”

Like a number of U.S. born volunteers from non-immigrant families, Angelina said she started volunteering to practice her Spanish, but she had other reasons to focus on the immigration detention system. Angelina told me that her father was detained and deported to El Salvador before she can remember. She has spoken to him only online. Angelina grew up with her American mother and grandmother and a grandfather who had immigrated from Indonesia. With the encouragement of her family, she went to Chinese language school as a child and also speaks Indonesian, Spanish, and Arabic, which she studied during a year abroad from her small Southern college. She enjoyed using her language skills working at the airport with the

⁴Because I didn't interview Sofia, she is not included in the figure or statistics presented above.

Southern Welcome group.

Angelina connected with immigrant detention groups after attending a detention-focused art exhibit by a college alumnus, saying that she had been interested in learning more about detention, a topic her family avoided discussing. Angelina said volunteering provided insight into her father's detention.

I started to gain a better understanding of, you know, how my dad could have developed mental illness inside an institution like this. Because, you know, with something like schizophrenia, like he has, you know, it's something that, you know, in the ICE detention center, you're not getting really the accurate treatment that you need. So I think it's, in a way, it's also for my own benefit.

Neither her father's experience, nor her desire to practice Spanish can fully capture the sources of motivation for Angelina to volunteer. Indeed Angelina refers to herself as a "Gringita," and like other U.S. born volunteers she was concerned with how Americans were perceived. She told me that when an immigrant said, "before I met you guys at [Southern Welcome], I thought that all Americans were very evil and hateful and mean." Angelina replied with a distinctly American response. "I was like, well, no, as we say Gringolandia, there are nice gringitas aqui."

6.4 Ethnic and Immigrant Identity

There is little doubt that direct personal experience with people who were subject to detention and relational empathy played a role in these volunteers' decisions to begin volunteering. Yet as seen in the example of Angelina, it is rarely possible to describe a simple causal pathway toward volunteering. The emotional activation that leads to the decision to volunteer may have diverse sources, while the feelings and opportunities associated with belonging to an immigrant ethnic community shapes the choices made in problem solving.

Like Gloria, Vanessa grew up in a small Southern town with a large Latin-American immigrant population. She still lives with her parents in a mixed status family. She told me her father had worked in the “chicken factory”, but now both of her parents were working in landscaping in a nearby community “where the rich old people live.” I spoke to Vanessa over Zoom for over 1.5 hours during her long commute to where she was working for an NGO registering Latine citizens to vote.

After receiving a BA in three years and doing some internships, Vanessa was preparing to apply to PhD programs in anthropology or Chicano Studies. Vanessa started volunteering when she met the volunteer coordinator for Southern Welcome, another young Latina, through her job. Vanessa had been looking for a volunteer opportunity and was excited to find one available at a doable time, working with immigrants, and alongside a person she connected to personally. Yet her immediate motivation was more mundane: she needed community service hours to work off a DUI. She told me

Getting a DUI out of like definitely like the biggest low ever, like I've ever faced you know, but I'm really glad that I got to work with like [the team] as a whole, and I will continue to still work with them like as long as I'm like in [my state] because you know I really love the organization.

If not for her previous connection to a Latine political organization, it is unlikely that Vanessa would have ended up volunteering for immigrants in detention.

While Elise highlighted her family relationships in explaining her choice to volunteer with WIA, she said that she had searched for opportunities to help her own community, which reflected a sense that Latine identity and immigrant identity were tightly linked. She told me

I grew up with all Mexicans. And for all you know, like, I was in a room where like, 90% of them were all immigrants, right? Like, you didn't really realize I didn't really notice that... I ended up going to boarding school with another kid from [city], I went to school with in middle school, he was an immigrant. Right. And he didn't go to college, right. But he had just like, invested all this time and was surrounded by all these people who all went to good schools, like he didn't have financial aid, so he couldn't go. Right. And I think that was the first time I really realized, like, we are different, you know, like, people who are immigrants, right?

Note that Elise says that “we are different...people who are immigrants”, even though she was born in the U.S. The richness of her relationships with immigrants led to her own sense of

immigrant identity. When she moved from the Mountain West to New York she found her identity expanding and began volunteering to support Latine kids:

I feel silly saying this, but I didn't really realize how diverse the Hispanic Latino community was till I got to New York, right, like, Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, they're also like, Latinos, you know, or like Hispanic, but it's some shape or form. Like we all have very common upbringing...I don't think I put too much emphasis and like just helping the Mexican community.

She was surprised to find the diversity of immigrants helped by WIA which she "didn't mind", and connected to herself via shared experience with her family, rather than through shared identity

Like we have people from all over the world. Not as many Mexicans as I thought. Not as many Hispanics like a lot of people from Africa, a lot of people from Asia, like just a lot of people from everywhere, which I don't mind. Like I think at the end of the day, they're all immigrants, no matter where their background is, and they're probably there's anything that they have in common is what they're going through. have, you know, the fear? So?

Of the immigrants I interviewed, José was the only one who had ever experienced a serious threat of immigration detention personally. José is a soft-spoken, fifty-something volunteer with a neatly-trimmed beard who makes a deliberate effort to see both sides of every issue.

Now a professor at a community college, José first came to the U.S. as an undocumented Mexican immigrant during high school. He cleaned office buildings at night with his mother and sister while going to an American high school near the border, because their family could not maintain even a subsistence living in Mexico. José re-entered the U.S. with a visa after receiving an athletic scholarship to college. José showed not only the emotional power of his own Latine identity, but also his expectations for others who shared it when he described encounters with Latino Border Patrol agents at the college near the Mexico border where he had his first job as a professor.

I was so upset one day that I figured I can't live here. Where you, I have this other Hispanic-looking person asking me to show if I'm a U.S. citizen and to show documents. It's like, I mean, if it came from somebody that is Caucasian or a different, but there was so much tension in my brain that, I mean, anybody who would have asked me for that is, you know, I don't, I wouldn't have liked it and I'm not okay with it and I disagree. But to add insult to injury, if it was another person that looked just like me that spoke broken English, like I did, I have a huge problem.

It was not simply the Border Patrol officer's Latino ethnicity that created an expectation of behavior, but the fact that this person "spoke broken English" that created an issue for José.

Though José had known about WIA for a decade, he didn't start volunteering until after the COVID-19 crisis receded, and recently joined the board. After more than 30 years in the U.S.

he still becomes teary when he connects the experiences of immigrants in detention to his own time as an undocumented immigrant. He makes it clear that it is his experiences, rather than his Latino identity, that made working outside the detention center so emotionally affecting, and made him different from many other volunteers. “I don’t want to discount their efforts or or the or the value of what they’re bringing to the table, but I have always been saying that in order to understand what those people are going through you need someone who has actually gone through it.”

[I]t may be best that [other volunteers] try to keep it to the facts because you also can’t, you can’t get involved without getting hurt. Mentally, emotionally, morally. And that’s kind of where I just, I hit the wall sometimes because I can’t. Sometimes I don’t go for a little while or for a long time because I need to recover mentally. It’s like when people, I would never compare myself to ever in a million years to go into war or anything like that. But we hear about how your brain works and how you retain the trauma, right? And so it’s like, oh, and how you suffer for other people?

Still, as someone who has lived in the US for a long time, José has some American identity now. He used “we” to describe the latest election: “half of the country that voted for the right for the president now, we’re overcorrecting to where now we are trying to undo all that progress that this other half said that we needed.” As to why many fellow Latines voted for Trump, José highlighted the difference between a generalized Latine identity and motivations that result

from lived experience.

[T]hey're third generation immigrants. And so there is something that has happened in the process where they're sort of not, they didn't experience what first generation experience and so they have adapted and assimilated.

6.5 Non-Latine immigrants

I only interviewed three volunteers who were in the “Detention-era Immigrant Experience” category and were not Latine. None of them knew people who had been detained before volunteering, but all were well aware of the difficulties of migration.

Rhonda is a white Canadian woman who had some difficulties in immigration that she preferred not to discuss on the record. A long-time and devoted volunteer, Rhonda had started volunteering as part of a group from her Catholic Church.

Sabita is a young woman from Nepal who migrated to the U.S. an adolescent, with her family successfully establishing residency on their second try. Sabita volunteered for only a few months and told me she signed up to “get a sash” for community service to wear at her college graduation. Sabita looked on line for volunteering opportunities that helped immigrants. Like Vanessa, the immediate impetus for volunteering was not related to identity or experience, but the choice of venue was a response to immigrant experience.

Kurniawan is an ethnically Chinese immigrant from Indonesia who had who migrated to the US with a family as a teenager in the wake of violence against Chinese Indonesians and is a

core volunteer at WIA. Responding to appeals from President Bush, Kurniawan served two tours in the U.S. military after 9/11, a choice he now describes as, “so fucking stupid.” Now a financial advisor who uses an American name in every day life, he asked me to give him an alias that reflected his Chinese Indonesian roots. When we first met at the Welcome Center, Kurniawan showed me the USCIS waiting times for family visas on his phone. Because his brothers were too old to emigrate on the family visa, he knew that Indonesian sibling visa requests from 16 years before were currently being processed. For Mexico the wait was about 25 years.

Yet like most volunteers, Kurniawan’s motivations reflected a full range of his interests. He told me that part of his motivation to volunteer was to work on his Spanish language skills. Kurniawan’s connection to WIA was unique in one way: he found out about it through a libertarian magazine that featured a comic about the detention center from an open borders advocate.

6.6 Relational Empathy Among Non-immigrants

Many of the examples above show how relationships with people who may be subject to detention are a component of motivation for people who come from immigrant families. But those relational motivations need not be confined to people who share an immigrant background.

Eliás, the activist who was instrumental in starting both SW and CV is not an immigrant. He’s “Nuyorican”, born to U.S. citizen Puerto Rican parents who moved to the South. His

concern for immigrants arose from shared Latine identity. He was teaching in a local college in a mid-size Southern town where he developed a close relationship with undocumented families from his church. Inspired by the idea of building a beloved community, he and his wife bought the house next door and arranged for friends to rent-to-own. That was the start of what he called an “intentional community.” On his cul-de-sac, Elías’s family’s life intertwined with those of undocumented immigrant families over a number of years. Elías became an advocate for undocumented families in local issues before engaging in campaigns against immigration detention and becoming an ordained minister. In his case, strong Latine and religious identities led to close ties with undocumented immigrants. Though not an immigrant himself, or technically even the child of immigrants, he came to feel “we-ness” with the immigrant community.

This type of connection to immigrants isn’t limited to people who share an ethnic identity. Faith, a white non-Latine fiction writer and one of the “originals” who co-founded CV, studied Latine churches in graduate school. In the course of her PhD work she developed close long-term relationships with the people in the communities she was studying. She remains a devout Catholic, a religion that she came to as an adult, partly based on her experiences in those churches. Faith bristled when I asked what motivated her commitment to immigrants, categorically rejecting the implication that in order to care about immigrants she had have a narrow social identity:

[I]t distresses me a little that there’s an assumption that in order to care I have

to have a, you know, family narrative or, you know, I'm sort of like something in my own biography, that makes me care...[T]his work compelled me because their relationships and friendships, and just the loving communities that I was able to, to be a part of initially as a researcher and then as a friend, and still as a friend...[W]hen I get the question like, why in the world would you care about this, like, you know, because I'm human and I love my fellow humans and I'm in, and I love the relationships I've built with the people that I've walked alongside.

While Faith argues against the idea that “there is something in my own biography, that makes me care”, she immediately attributes caring to the relationships that are certainly part of her biography, even if they don't align with her family background or ascribed identity. Faith demonstrates Abbott's (2019) view that the felt boundaries of morality are constructed in concrete relationships, rather than through abstract identities.

Shannon, a white woman with native-born American parents who volunteers with CV, told me that when she decided to volunteer during Trump's first term she was in a relationship with a man who was undocumented. She said, “There was that like that visceral experience of him sharing times when he was just treated horribly. And kind of like thinking about the reality of what these policies could mean for him. And so I think that that was part of what was underlying it.” In Chapter 4 I described how Candace had previously been in a long term relationship with a man who had overstayed his visa, which may have been a source of relational empathy as well.

Carole, another white American woman, told a harrowing story that cemented her commitment to volunteering at CV, which she had already connected to through her church. She had been a special ed teacher for a student whose father was in the immigrant detention center after being pulled over for allegedly having a broken taillight. At recess one day when his father was in detention, the child, who had a shunt in his head, grabbed his head and fell to the ground screaming. She said

Well, I was allowed to go to the hospital for the next two days because [the child's] mother and his grandmother did not speak English very well, and I could speak Spanish, which I was grateful for my principal to allow that. But [the boy] died. And that was, his mother would not believe that. [The doctor said] Yes, he's breathing, but that's because he's on a respirator... And all they did was sit around praying and say there was going to be a miracle. There was going to be a miracle. He wasn't going to die. And I knew he was dead. You know, there wasn't any miracle coming.

Though the detention center had told the family that they would release the boy's father for a day to attend the funeral, they reneged on that commitment

And then they brought him the day of the funeral. They brought him at six in the morning and allowed him to see his dead son. And then put him back in and took him right back to [detention]. They did not allow him to see his wife or his living children. And it's one of the first funerals I've ever been to. Mom was literally,

it was an open casket. Mom was literally inside the casket with [her son]. And when it was time to close it, they literally had to pull her off of him. And at the graveyard, she never got out of the car and she never stopped screaming.

I just had never seen anything more cruel. For a man who was not a criminal, was not a felon, didn't go to [detention] from a prison, you know, got stopped because he didn't, and when they found out he didn't have a license. He was in an ICE county and that was it. What did they think he was going to do? And, you know, his wife needed him and so did his two living children.

So, and after that, I went [to the detention center] a lot.

Still, Carole's motivation is not purely tied to this emotional experience, and other relationships are important. She volunteers as one of the "three Amigas" who belonged to the same Unitarian church. Though she has moved to a different state, she now drives 5 hours a few times a year to spend the weekend volunteering with her friends.

6.7 Discussion & Conclusion

Like almost all volunteers, the volunteers from immigrant communities highlighted in this chapter are highly educated and have resources and availability that enable volunteering. And, like other volunteers, their connections to volunteering cannot be reduced to a simple causal chain. They decided to volunteer to solve problems that might be particular to their

situations and life stages. However, their life courses and relationships are distinct from the older white Americans who make up the majority of volunteers, and the shape and depth of their concern reflects the relationships and experiences they have with immigrants who are subject to detention.

A small group of Latinas who grew up in immigrant families particularly stands out. Immigration detention was salient because of personal experience and relationships with people who might be subject to detention. Providing care involves person to person relationships. Providing care to unknown others has been linked to parallels between existing caring relationships, and these volunteers may have been exhibiting “relational empathy”, or what Schwitzgebel refers to *Mengzian extension*.

This process of providing care for people who are like those one already cares for is related to role identity theory as developed in Stryker’s (1980) social structural approach to symbolic interactionism. Stryker observes that, “[t]o the degree that one’s relationships to specified sets of other persons depend on being a particular kind of person, one is committed to being that kind of person” (Stryker 1980:61). One way that a shape of concern might be defined is in terms of the set of other persons for whom one feels a heightened responsibility to provide care. For volunteers from immigrant families, the “specified sets of other persons” with whom they have a previous caring relationship are immigrants, often immigrants who are themselves subject to detention. There is a rough structural equivalence (Boorman and White 1976) between emotionally potent relationships of volunteers, their loved ones, ICE and (possibly) community, to potential relationships that place immigrants in detention in the position of loved ones. It

makes sense that people who already have a commitment to being the kind of person who cares for loved ones who are subject to detention would respond to problems by replicating that commitment in volunteer organizations.

Caring and emotionally salient relationships extend beyond traditional family boundaries. A number of volunteers with U.S. born parents and no personal or family threat of detention had deep relationships with people who were potentially subject to detention. Like their peers from immigrant families, a number of factors likely contributed to their volunteering, but their background offers strong evidence that relational empathy is a component of their motivation. One can see a parallel for these volunteers in Courtney Bender's (2003) rich ethnography of volunteers in a food kitchen for people suffering from AIDS. Bender relates that the majority of the volunteers were from the LGBT community, but all volunteers who were not gay or bisexual had experienced the death of a loved one from AIDS. Similarly, many of the volunteers in this case had been affected by the threat of immigrant detention through their relationships that crossed lines of identity.

It is also important to note that the power of relationships to change the shape of concern continues *after* people have begun volunteering. Chapter 4 touched on the emotional impact of relationships established while visiting immigrants in the detention center. That theme returns in Chapter 9, which describes how the leader of the visitation group at WIA left the organization and most of the people who had been visiting left with her.

Like Schwitzgebel, the developmental psychologist and philosopher Allison Gopnik cites Mengzi as offering a model of care starting with family and presenting the philosophical

challenge of “how to expand these local feelings to the scale of a polity or an empire” (Gopnik 2023:63). However, as I outlined in at the beginning of this dissertation, feelings that expand to a polity or an empire can’t be put into action by individual acts of care. Individuals must prioritize, and that prioritization defines their shape of concern. In the next two chapters, the focus turns to people who have no strong prior links to immigrants in detention, but still make active choices to supply care.

7 Living Abroad and the Shape of Concern

Change in Concern in Response to a Changing Generalized Other

In Chapter 6 I focused on those volunteers whose families had experienced the modern American immigration system. In this chapter I turn to the 51 volunteers who had American born parents or were raised in the U.S.¹ A striking fact about these volunteers is that 38 had lived abroad (74.5%) and 9 of the remaining 13 had traveled extensively internationally. Two of the non-travelers were board members who did not work directly with immigrants. Eight of the 38 had lived abroad as children of expat parents, 23 had been students abroad, and 18 had lived abroad as adult expatriates. As is obvious from these numbers, some people lived abroad multiple times. Two volunteers had worked in the Peace Corps, one of them twice, both after college graduation, and again with her husband after her children were grown. Not counting short term tourism, the volunteers I interviewed had lived in Europe (France, Germany, Greece,

¹I included Evelyn, who migrated to the U.S. as a toddler in this list.

Poland, Russia, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Ukraine, and the UK), Africa (Egypt, Kenya, Libya, Burkina Faso), Asia (Azerbaijan, India, Indonesia, Israel, Japan, Kazakhstan, Lebanon, Malaysia, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, and Thailand), South America (Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay) and Central and North America (Canada, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Grenada, Guatemala, Mexico, Nicaragua). Overall, volunteers had lived in 49 countries or territories outside the United States, including the U.S. territory of Puerto Rico.



Figure 7.1: Places where volunteers lived outside the United States

While the number of Americans who live abroad is notoriously difficult to estimate (Dashefsky and Woodrow-Lafield 2020), 74.5% is a striking proportion of this group under any reasonable set of assumptions about how the volunteer pool is assembled. In 2011, the Ameri-

can Community Survey showed only 0.3% of Americans had resided abroad in the prior year (Dashefsky and Woodrow-Lafield 2020). Even in the context of highly educated Americans, the rate at which volunteers had lived abroad is remarkably high. Only 6% of American university and college students study abroad (half of those only for a summer term), yet 45.1% of this set of volunteers had studied abroad.

The correlation between living abroad and volunteering is so statistically unlikely that it must be recognized as a source of valuable information about the sort of person who helps immigrants in detention. For Americans, living abroad is a relatively rare behavior, but in this group of U.S. born volunteers, having lived abroad is the norm. Even if one could succeed in identifying a sub-population of Americans whose class and educational status was such that 50% had lived abroad (perhaps professors of sociology?), a sample of this size with where over 70% had lived abroad would be labelled $**p < .01$ ². Yet it is difficult if not impossible to untangle the role of living abroad in the decision to volunteer to help immigrants in detention in a causal model. Does the kind of person who is interested in difference also live abroad, or does living abroad awaken something within a person that shapes understanding, perception and emotion in a way that motivates care? The evidence I provide in this chapter indicates that the answer is almost certainly both.

I demonstrate that one of the factors yielding emotional activation is connected to the pragmatist model of self-judgment. What Mead refers to as the generalized other, and what

²More precisely, $p = 7.7753045 \times 10^{-4}$ for 38 out of 51 living abroad, when 50% of the population has done so.

Adam Smith before him called the “impartial spectator” shape action. People internalize the judgment of others, and *the particular set of others* that sit in judgment shapes moral evaluation of actions. In this sense, one’s shape of concern is a product of the set of people whose judgment has incorporated into self judgment.

Using a series of vignettes, I show that the volunteers’ stories reflect changed understandings of their American identity in the wake of living in a place where that identity placed them in a different relation to the people around them than they had experienced before. Many of these volunteers have internalized an American identity, and feel some collective guilt about America’s role in creating the conditions that underlie migration. One upshot seems to be that many volunteers care about *how they are perceived* as representatives of America. This sense of it being important to create a positive impression for immigrants released from detention is a product of two things: an internalized sense of American identity and shared responsibility, and that the moral judgment of immigrants carries weight.

Yet I also argue that the pursuit of personal interests via what Hitlin and Elder (2007) call “life course agency” is an important factor in becoming the sort of person who supports immigrants in detention. Early interests in experiencing a world outside of their social milieu often motivated people to live abroad as young adults, and people took agentic action to do so. The experience of living abroad may have caused them to incorporate the judgment of non-Americans into their motivation, but pre-existing social context, access to resources, and what appears to be an intrinsic interest in novelty were precursors to those feelings.

7.1 Beyond the Contact Hypothesis

The contact hypothesis is one of the best replicated theories in social science (Paolini et al. 2021). Allport's (1954) original formulation argues that intergroup contact can mitigate prejudice under certain conditions, particularly when people from different groups cooperate as equal status partners with institutional support. A large meta analysis showed that contact could work to decrease prejudice, though perhaps less effectively, even in the absence of all of Allport's stipulations (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006).

Yet there are many reasons one should not conclude that the contact hypothesis mechanism explains volunteering. First, there is no particular reason to think that living abroad involved institutionally supported, equal status cooperation between groups, conditions that have been shown to be optimal in successful replications of the contact hypothesis (Paolini et al. 2021). Second, under real world conditions, the generalizability and sustainability of positive contact to attitudes toward outgroup members seems limited (Mousa 2020; Paluck, Green, and Green 2019). Third, the contact hypothesis may not apply to immigrants in particular. Despite hundreds of studies on racial discrimination, a 2019 review found that the contact hypothesis had only been tested with respect to views of foreign nationals once in the previous forty-five years (Paluck et al. 2019). More importantly, the idea that these attitudes would transfer to perceptions of *detained* immigrants is well beyond the scope of claims made for the contact hypothesis. Finally, the outcomes of positive group contact, even in idealized situations that minimize of negative contact, are simply increased tolerance and reduced prejudice. But

reduced prejudice does not imply active liking or a desire to help (Pittinsky, Rosenthal, and Montoya 2011).

Noting these limitations, several research efforts have argued that understanding a desire to help across boundaries requires stronger motivation than that provided by simple cross group contact. Siem et al. (2016) argue cross-group helping depends on stronger commitments to the groups being helped than abstract universalism or tolerance of the sort predicted by the contact hypothesis. They argue that we need to move beyond generalized endorsements of universal equality to understand “the specific psychological and social processes that prompt people to deliberately and actively seek out cross-cultural contact” (Siem et al. 2016:261). In this view, people are more likely to help “culturally different” others if they already hold an interest in outsiders, known as *xenophilia*. Psychological surveys have linked a set of positive outgroup attitudes labeled *xenophilia* to major personality traits including Extraversion, Openness and Conscientiousness (Stürmer et al. 2013). Yet a purely psychological explanation leaves major gaps in the story. Just as with the case of Universalist values, these psychological traits are widespread.

7.2 American Identity in Volunteers

In Chapter 6 I noted that not all people from immigrant families necessarily feel a motivating immigrant identity and relied on the life course principles of linked lives, and time and place to highlight families that experienced immigration during the era of immigrant detention.

Conversely, we should not necessarily assume that people who have two U.S. born parents have internalized an American identity that might underlie a sense of collective guilt or responsibility for American actions.

For this chapter I performed a round of interview coding specifically trying to uncover themes of social identity. Because questions of identity are often studied from the point of view of “Who am I” (Owens et al. 2010; Stryker 2008) or in the case of collective identity a sense of “we-ness” (Owens et al. 2010), I electronically highlighted all uses of the words “we”, “us”, “our”, “I am” and “I’m” and personally reviewed interview transcripts. The interviews were not designed for this use, and included no questions specifically designed to evoke identity, so this analysis has the advantage of uncovering groups interviewees place themselves into in natural speech, but the disadvantage of being the product of semi-structured interviews that have varying lengths and content. It is not a definitive measure.

The vast majority of the collective pronouns used in interviews referred to family and the organizations that I was studying, including discussions of what “we” volunteers do, where families lived, and what they did together. However, many referred to larger collectives, most notably something I call the “American we”.³ The American we was very heavily used by American volunteers to describe the actions of the American government, often in the context of a felt guilt over U.S. actions. The American “we” can reveal one aspect of social identity even when people deny feeling particularly American. For example Spencer, a white U.S.

³My use of the term American in this chapter should really be thought of as “United States of American.” At least one of the people I interviewed explicitly made that distinction.

Table 7.1: Self identification of interviewed volunteers

imm_group	n	american	immigrant
Immigrant	7	4	7
2 non-U.S. Parents	6	2	3
1 non-U.S. Parent	6	6	0
U.S. Parents	45	44	0

born volunteer I discuss below, told me that he felt himself “a citizen of the world”, but when discussing the U.S. actions abroad he said “I think *we* are well-meaning. I think *we’re* like children, *we’re* well-meaning, but *we* don’t always do good things. *We* think we do, but *we* don’t always.”

While the “American we” was simple to identify, immigrant and ethnic identity also appeared in the transcripts. Table 7.1 shows how many people used language in their stories that indicated their membership in ethnic groups and immigrant identity, broken down by natality. Almost all volunteers used some form of inclusive language or group membership to place themselves into American or U.S. status.

Note that 44 of the 45 native-born U.S. citizens with two U.S.-born parents used language that implied they were American. The only exception was Elías who is the child of Puerto Rican parents who were U.S. citizens. Note also that of the 7 immigrants, 4 also used language that included them as Americans. For example in Chapter 6 I noted that José described the election of Donald Trump as something that “we” did.

7.3 Seeing and being seen

When volunteers spoke about their time abroad, three distinct themes emerged, which I refer to as “Seeing as an American”, “Feeling like an Immigrant”, and “Being seen as an American”. People seeing as Americans tended to highlight the way people lived differently in other countries, often with a focus on the levels of poverty and precarity that they had not come into contact with in the past. Some linked the precarity they observed with the forces that drove people to migrate, weaving a narrative of deservingness. A few who had lived in Europe went the other direction, noting how their time in Western Europe exposed them to a form of capitalism with greater safety nets. Other volunteers noted their sense of vulnerability and dependency as people who were living in another country. Yet the most striking correlate of having lived abroad was a new sense of how the volunteers, as Americans, were viewed in the world.

7.3.1 Seeing as an American

Abigail, a petite, mild mannered retired physician whose facility with Spanish had made her popular with her largely Latino patient panel, exemplified seeing as an American. She said that when living in Ecuador as an exchange student, “I saw how people lived in another country. I had never seen that kind of poverty before. And the envy, the distance between rich and poor. And that influenced me. Not so much directly like going into medicine, but just there was a whole other world out there... the world was not populated with people who live like us.”

Pamela, a white woman who spent much of her professional career organizing trips to Latin America, described a similar reaction when she lived with a family in Mexico for a year in college. She said, “I lived with a family who needed the money, and it was pretty, pretty modest house. And sometimes we didn’t have water, sometimes we didn’t have gas, so we didn’t take a bath. And that upset me at first. And then I realized I was privileged in the United States, you know, always having water and it was always hot.” Yet Pamela is also an example that even if someone encounters the world with an American gaze, living with, and depending on people from a different society leads to a different “looking glass” for the self: “I found out that when I griped to people about not having hot water, that I didn’t make any friends, you know, they didn’t like that. So I kind of taught myself to take another approach, and just say, Well, everybody’s in the same boat. And so what, and find something else to occupy my time in my mind.”

Thomas a former board chair and volunteer at DIA, whose father had come to the U.S. from China after the Communist takeover, had a related reaction to the time he lived in Brazil before Brazil’s economic rise. He noted how even the other managers he worked with at a manufacturing plant in Brazil lived with much less than he did, and when they traveled to the U.S. were amazed by the American standard of living compared to their own.

Perhaps not coincidentally, and in keeping with the helping-focused ethos of WIA, each of these older Americans adopted what might be considered a paternalistic approach to their volunteering. Abigail, who frequently drove people to the airport from the Welcome Center, would gather her passengers on folding chairs around her, check their boarding passes, and

use a binder to walk them through the airport process in great detail. Though I knew from my own experiences that the airport can be extremely challenging for immigrants who are unfamiliar with airline travel or unable to read Latin characters, Abigail's approach seemed potentially infantilizing to some of the migrants, most of whom had overcome much more daunting obstacles on their way to the U.S. I had learned that lesson from the folks I drove to the airport who disdainfully waved me off when I offered to help them get through security.

Thomas was a supporter of increased immigration and viewed immigrants as particularly deserving because of their initiative. He contrasted his work for immigrants, "folks that are working to improve their, and their family's situation", with the people at food banks where his family and others at his church volunteer. He said, "my wife accuses me, sometimes, of 'coming over on the Mayflower Puritan type ethics', but I believe that you can offer people help, but a lot of it for them to afford to develop. And also it's personal responsibility. [pause] Just this really sounds cold, but to certain extent, I admire these folks that have [pause] gone through that journey to cross the border to try to seek a better life."

Pamela also had limits to the shape of her concern. She grew up in a small Pacific Northwest town that to this day has less than 1% Black population. She chose not to go to her state university at a time when "the Black Panthers were roaring through the campus on their motorcycles. And I was not impressed with that. I didn't want to be around that kind of turmoil." Her many years of travel to the Central and South America led to friendships there and a particular affinity for Latinos that invites criticism as exoticism. She said, "Latin America is my thing. Latinos, if I'm not around Latinos, I don't feel right." A sense of paternalism

might explain Pamela's pride at having sponsored a girl at a Mexican orphanage. However, some of Pamela's attitudes changed in response to visiting immigrants in detention, as I'll describe in Chapter 9.

Of course there are different ways of seeing like an American, subject to both social experience and the personality traits that psychologists highlight. Ashley, an extroverted, entertaining⁴, lecturer at a Southern university who has lived in several Spanish-speaking countries and is deeply involved in justice issues at the U.S. border, noted the difference between her approach to travel and that of her parents in South Carolina, particularly her mother who had been "eaten by Fox News."

Honestly, I think as my world opened up with traveling, and knowing a lot of different people, and speaking another language, and being willing to accept other ways of life and not only accept other ways of life, but celebrate them and be respectful of them and not just, "oh, that's a neat way to do things", has made my perspective different than theirs... They've been to like Cancun. They've been to the Bahamas. My mom went on a cruise around like some European countries, and she wanted to be on a cruise because she didn't know if she would like the food at the places they were going

⁴She told me about getting a PhD: "I always tell people, if you like to cry in your car, a PhD is for you." and "So I don't have kids. I just have Charlie the Chihuahua and an ex-husband. But yeah, I would say I got a big upgrade with a PhD and a dog."

7.3.2 Feeling Like an Immigrant

Another aspect of living abroad was a sense of dependency and isolation as someone without cultural competency. For Erin, a white woman in her thirties whose father migrated to the United States as a child, graduate school in Poland revealed that her success in the American context was dependent on skills she took for granted at home: “not knowing the language and learning a new culture and all of that you can feel incredibly isolated and lost and terrified, and whatever else anxious.”

Alice also felt isolated when she, her husband and her children took a six month sabbatical to Uruguay, where she hoped to practice her Spanish. “I thought, my kids will make friends, I’ll make friends, I’ll get to practice my Spanish, all of that will happen. And it just was not, people there are, they have all the relationships they need within their family, they don’t need to make, they didn’t have any interest in making friends with us.”

Phillip, a retired Episcopal priest, served a term as WIA Board Chair after his retirement, but a number of years before I began my research. I met Phillip, a tall white man with a full head of hair whose quaver of speech and unsteadiness of gait show his age, at one of the community meetings he continues to attend. Early in his career, Phillip opted to lead a church in Colombia for seven years with his wife and young family. He told me “[W]e were foreigners in a country foreign to us and learned to live in that country. And I still love it deeply, go when it’s possible. So here are people coming into a country foreign to them... That was a cause of sympathy, I think, for me, and understanding”

Mitch started his career as an engineer in Germany and cited several reasons for volunteering, revealing the complex nature of motivation that has been a theme throughout this work. Mitch found out about WIA through classmates in adult Spanish classes, and told me in an interview that he wanted to volunteer to practice his Spanish. But the first time I met him he said, “I’m here because of Trump,” echoing the logic of “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.” In the interview he said, “[I]t was something I could do to counter that. That anti immigration national wave.” But he also felt that his volunteer work partially reflected reciprocity for the support he got when arrived in Germany without adequate language skills, “And so yeah, the Germans helped me. So I kind of felt like, oh, I should help these new immigrants coming back to the coming to the U.S.” Now retired, Mitch also said that he’s interested in moving back to Germany, where he felt that there was a more effective and responsive political system, telling me “But guess what, Western European, Western European countries are the pinnacle of democracies in this world. Now the U.S. has fallen.”

Shannon, a graduate student studying international conflict resolution, had a slightly different reaction to her time in Europe, describing herself as a “misfit” in the conservative Southern area where she grew up. This sense of being a misfit included things like not having children and not feeling very patriotic. She told me, “I started out with being a misfit, you know, because I think there were times when I felt so much more, you know, like I connected so much more in European countries than I did in the United States.” Given her ideological commitments and personal history, one should take with a grain of salt that being in Europe *caused* Shannon to feel like a misfit back home, but perhaps finding a place where she felt more comfortable

highlighted the fact that feeling like a “fit” was absent where she grew up.

7.3.3 Being seen as an American

Spencer is an active, vibrant and engaged older white man who grew up in Little Rock in the midst of historic desegregation at Little Rock high school, an event he regrets paying little attention to as it played out. He worked in Europe for four years and now says, “I see myself more as a citizen of the world than I do an American, although I have loyalty to the United States.” He had a busy life after retirement, including going back to work at an NGO and running a quixotic campaign for local office on an independent, good-governance platform. He told me that he began volunteering with the Southern Welcome organization for selfish reasons: he wanted an opportunity to practice his Spanish. Yet he also credited his experience in Europe for his interest in immigration. He said,

So it was the most profound change in my life to be outside the country and experience what it’s like day to day to be seen as an American living somewhere else, not only in Germany, but all the other places I went to.

But it was not simply *living* in Germany, that changed him, but understanding the way he and his country were viewed from afar. Note that below, despite his sense of being a “citizen of the world” his use of the “American we” reveals an American social identity.

I think that as Americans, that was a profound experience, living outside the United States and being able to hear day to day what people thought of the United States,

and becoming more aware that the things that we had done that were usually celebrated at home as being great things or great things for the world weren't always seen that way.

Some other volunteers also had this realization, even as children living as Americans abroad. Matt, a retired psychologist, had a vivid memory of going to school abroad as a child 60 years earlier, "I went to a British embassy school in Sweden, which was really interesting. Where I went, I learned that George Washington was a bad guy. And I always remember that because it really helped me to get some independence of thought." Matt went on to become a conscientious objector in the Vietnam war and a committed Democratic Socialist. It would be silly to credit this childhood incident with a profound influence on Matt's life path, which also involved a winding religious journey that I will cover in the next chapter, but the fact that Matt gave this incident a prominent spot in his life story indicates that rejecting a received assumption of America's inherent goodness is important to his personal identity.

Linda, a retired humanities professor who also works with the Palestinian Rights group Jewish Voice for Peace, spoke of living in Spain as a teenager as "pretty magical" compared to life in the small East Coast town where she grew up. But when the family moved to Greece

[T]here was very anti American sentiments around, I guess, our interference in a previous communist administration or something that we had, you know, made sure failed. So, so some sort of political things were, were being, you know, seeds were being planted for me to kind of think of my position in a problematic way, I

guess.

For Linda, an ongoing sense of having a problematic American identity was perhaps reflected in a deep sense of guilt over her privilege as an American. She wept as she told me

I'm just aware being incredibly lucky. Yeah, I mean, I just feel like it's it's pretty overwhelming how much suffering there is. And so I guess there's basically a lot of a lot of guilt associated with the fact that I'm not one of those people, you know, just like by the, you know, the luck of the draw kind of. You know, I'm legal. I'm financially, okay. I have enough food. I have a roof over my head. I'm not, you know, a displaced person.

Linda expresses her guilt not so much for what the United States has done, but for her unearned privilege. As people experience life in multiple national environments, they may adopt a cosmopolitan perspective where they view their position in reference to a broader set of others. Mitch, the engineer who had lived in Germany, used almost the same language as Linda to describe what has been called *existential guilt* over unearned privilege (Montada and Schneider 1989). He asked if I knew the term "birth lottery" and said,

I believe in that birth lottery. I had the fortune to be born to a white American family at the height of our civilization's prominence after World War Two. And how lucky was that? Right?...The luck, the luck of the lottery. And so all these people trying to escape not just war and domestic abuse, but also their corrupt

governments. They had the misfortune of being born over there. And so like, I I'm so lucky. What did I do to deserve being born into the height of the world's best civilizations in the 1950s? Why am I so lucky? Is this too weird?...I might start crying...[Crying] It's good. [Crying more] So there's deep feelings beyond my thoughts about why I do it.

Perhaps the most important evidence that U.S. born volunteers were concerned with the judgment of immigrants is the emphasis many volunteers gave to being viewed as a different kind of American by the immigrants themselves.

Erin said, "I don't support the way, you know, the Trump administration treated immigrants and refugees and migrants. And, you know, I want to show that I think about it differently." There are two notable facts about this statement. First Erin did not begin volunteering until May 2022, more than a year after Trump left office. Her motivation could not have been to offset Trump's actions, so this statement positions volunteering as expressive. She described a need to "show that I think about it differently", but it is worth asking to whom she is demonstrating her moral difference? The people who knew Erin know her history working in health clinics and needle exchange programs. She seemed to desire demonstrating her worthiness to immigrants she would encounter for short periods at the Welcome Center.

Courtney, who grew up on a farm in the Midwest in a conservative, fundamentalist Christian family, spent two semesters abroad while she was at a Christian college. When she volunteered at CV and visited immigrants in detention, it was important for her to present a different image

to detained immigrants than they had experienced so far in America.

When [CV] started most people were local, local arrests. It was local enforcement. So these are people who lived in the US for 10 years for seven years for two, you know for however, whatever period of time and for them to look at me and say, 'you're the first person that's ever like been nice to me.' Or like 'this is the first time I've ever interacted with someone like you in this kind of way' was like, you know, this is this is very meaningful in that on like a very individual level.

Later she told me

And I think that was a part of, like a big part of [CV] ... just to say like, I disagree, like this is happening in my country and I disagree and I want you to know that I disagree with this and I don't like it. And I see that it's really negative and I see that you're suffering and I'm sorry, you know, that kind of thing.

Judy spent most of her childhood in South America where she went to the local schools as the child of American missionaries. Though she spent little time in the United States as a child, Judy was concerned with "our country" and what "we've" done to "create the mess."

So these, this is the first impression that these people have of what the U S and what Americans are is when they step off that van. And so I feel bad that the way they've been treated. And I also feel like this whole immigration thing is such, such a mess that I feel like our country's complicit and having created this

situation, you know, that's all politics. That's, that's a whole another story, but by meddling in other people's governments, by being the number one consumers of illegal drugs, by, you know, by being the source of all the illegal guns that are all, you know, they have flooded Mexico and South America. So I feel like we've kind of helped create the mess that immigration is and the mess that's that Latin America is.

7.3.4 Discussion of Living Abroad

The three patterns of reactions to living abroad can be roughly analogized to different theoretical approaches in the sociology of giving. The pattern of *seeing like an American* aligns with analyses that emphasize that charity reproduces relationships of dependency or domination. Among those volunteers who focused on poverty among non-Americans, their travel has enhanced attention to immigrants and causes of migration. But it is precisely the linking of poverty to immigrants that can reinforce a sense of superiority in those in a position to give, and legitimize power relations through misrecognition of the objective relations involved in helping (Bourdieu 1990). While there is no expectation of material reciprocity in these exchanges, the pattern of emotional rewards is aligned with the Bourdieusian critique.

The pattern *feeling like an immigrant* might loosely be tied to the empathetic mode of helping studied by Batson (- Batson 2011), though the extension of empathy to immigrants in detention, who are in a very different position from American immigrants abroad would need further

explanation.

The pattern *being seen as American* is highly related to Goffman's account of stigma and spoiled identities (Goffman 1986), feelings of collective guilt (Branscombe, Doosje, and McGarty 2002; Thomas, McGarty, and Mavor 2009), and helping as a form of moral cleansing (Lodewijkx, Kersten, and van Zomeren 2008; O'Connor et al. 2020). In a Goffmanian account, being American is a tribal stigma that is acquired or understood through the process of living abroad, and the immigrants become representatives of "the normals" constituted by people who understand America's role in the world differently than most Americans. The link volunteers make between immigrant detention and what is perceived as the United States' immoral behavior overseas is understandable as a product of broad moral failing in American policy. Feelings of collective guilt have been found to be motivating, but only weakly so, and tend to spur actions when relatively low-effort forms of reparations are available (Thomas et al. 2009). In terms of the 4A model, if one's emotional activation is related to guilt, then successful problem solving may be oriented to resolving guilty feelings, rather than being aligned with the needs of people receiving care.

While these patterns of response resonate with theoretical traditions, it would be a mistake to link distinct motivations to the specific people who expressed sentiments of the form "seeing like an American", "feeling like an immigrant" and "being seen as an American." These are different ways motivations for people with an immigrant identity are shaped by living abroad, but it is likely that many volunteers felt a combination of these motivations to varying extents. The varying expression of these patterns during interviews could be as much due to context,

the flow of conversation, and comfort with me as an interviewer as they are differences in underlying patterns of emotion and motivation.

Instead, the primary takeaway from the discussion above is that the sort of person who provides care to immigrants in detention is also the sort of person who feels that living abroad changed their understanding of their place in the world. There are several plausible and theoretically founded pathways by which the experience living abroad affects the shape of concern in terms of both attention to immigrants and emotional activation in response to the detention of immigrants in the United States. If it is indeed true that living abroad has causal effects here, then the next step is to understand the contributors to living abroad.

7.4 Travel as Life Course Agency

If living abroad is part of the chain of experience by which many white American volunteers became the sort of person whose shape of concern encompasses immigrants in detention, it is not the beginning of that chain. The obvious next question is how one becomes “the sort of person” who lives abroad. For some volunteers, the answer to that question is “being a child of an expat parent,” but for others travel seems to reflect aspects of disposition that may be deeply rooted in personality.

While the traditional view of the self in identity theory posits that individuals have agency within the meaning systems, structure of roles, and resources available to them, it places very little emphasis on individual difference and idiosyncratic motivation. For example, Stryker

(2000a:26) says “The prototypical question addressed by identity theory, phrased illustratively, is: Why is it that one person, given a free weekend afternoon, chooses to take his or her children to the zoo while another person opts to spend that time on the golf course with friends?” Yet for all the talk of socially defined roles and the salience and commitment people have to them, Stryker doesn’t address the personality or physical traits that might make one *enjoy* playing golf over looking at animals with their children.

As discussed in Chapter 2, Martin and Lembo (2020) explicitly seek to reclaim the meaning of interests from its narrow and self-regarding interpretation. In this conception, interests refer to things, ideas, and people that capture attention and motivate action. This kind of interest can encompass the idea of “self-extension”, an interest in the well-being of others. Martin and Lembo focus on the “sort of person” one becomes on the basis of pursuing those interests.

If travel is important to the path to volunteering, understanding the social and personal sources of an interest in travel is equally important. In the last two years, attention to this redefined conception of interests has been picked up in two very distinct branches of sociological research: an argument that sociologists should attend to the neurobiology of motivation (Abrutyn and Lizardo 2024), and one that ties interests, and specifically “moral interests,” to commitment to social activism (Lichterman 2024).

Abrutyn and Lizardo (2024) build on Panksepp’s (2004) theory of affective neuroscience to argue that at a physiological level, low-level pre-conscious affective systems both drive action and underlie the sets of embodied feelings that are categorized as emotions in culturally determined ways. These fundamental “subcortical” systems constitute the physiological sources

of human motivation to act in the social world. Abrutyn and Lizardo argue that fundamental drives to “SEEK”, “CARE” and “PLAY” are at work even without the defined social situations and dysregulated emotions central to Identity Theory’s model of motivation. In contrast, Abrutyn and Lizardo say we should view these drives to “SEEK”, “CARE” and “PLAY” as *independent* variables. People may feel compelled to explore their environment and try novel activities without any situational or identity triggers at all. The paths individuals take may be defined to some extent by their intrinsic drives.

For Lichterman (2024), a special type of interest is a “moral interest” – some things are not simply more interesting than others, but “better” in a moral sense and therefore worth pursuing. This reinforcing process, from being interested, to developing a further capacity to be more deeply interested, and to treating that interest as morally motivating, might be at work in the tie between travel and volunteering.

7.4.1 Sources of Interest in Travel

Though I do not have information on parental education for all of my interviewees, those with American parents were not only highly educated themselves (all but two had at least an undergraduate degree, and both of those had some college), nearly all had at least one parent with a white collar job, and many had a parent or parents with postgraduate educations. From a Bourdieusian perspective, many of these American volunteers were people with the cultural and economic capital that might be associated with travel. Yet this was not true for all volunteers.

Doug stood out among the volunteers at DIA, not only for the fact that he worked nights in a warehouse while studying for an online Masters, but also for what I perhaps unfairly noted as a “Trumpist” habitus, as a broad-shouldered, middle-aged white man wearing a baseball cap and a T-shirt hanging over a slightly protruding belly. I met Doug at the Welcome Center when I was struggling with Google Translate while helping an immigrant from China connect to WeChat. He surprised me by speaking to her in Mandarin. I later learned that Doug had grown up near a military base. His father had been a prison guard, and when he was in high school his mother took an administrative job at a liberal arts college so that Doug could qualify for a tuition remission. There he earned what he called “kind of useless degrees” with a double major in Asian Studies and Politics and Government. Since “Japan was really blown up big, right, like, late 80s early 90s” he thought that would be a good place to make money, and got a job teaching English in a rural prefecture for two years. After returning, Doug wanted to travel to China, but he took the advice of the owner of a local Chinese restaurant and went to Taiwan instead. He taught in Taiwan for over 20 years before the COVID-19 pandemic turned a temporary stay in the U.S. permanent, and he decided to live with his aging mother.

Doug did not tie his support for immigrants to his time abroad, but instead to his disdain for Donald Trump. He told me, “I’m 86% libtard. That’s what my friends call me – a lot of them are Trumpers”. Doug told me he decided to volunteer after researching immigration policy while he was spending his time as a “Facebook warrior” opposing Donald Trump’s 2020 re-election bid online. Yet looking underneath this self-report one can see a tie between taking an interest in non-Americans, living abroad, and his focus on Trump’s immigration policies,

even though he had been outside the U.S. during the child separation era. Despite Doug's goal to make money, teaching in rural Japan was not a likely pathway to cashing in on the Japanese economic boom of the time. It seems more likely that Doug had simply had a xenophile's interest in learning about, and experiencing other cultures, even if he couldn't, or wouldn't, articulate the source of that interest to me. The difference between Doug and his "Trumper" friends was likely the product of a series of life course differences, the first of which may have been due to his mother's efforts to get him a college education.

Kathy, the editor of the WIA handbook who I introduced in Chapter 4, spent much of her adult life working abroad including working at the World Bank, for the UN, and working with Palestinian refugees in Lebanon while her husband taught there. It is perhaps unsurprising that someone with those experiences would be motivated to help immigrants detained in the U.S. Yet her path to becoming that person started with her own initiative in seeking out a new environment in the form of a Quaker high school. "I was actually skipping class from my big [public] high school and driving around in the country and saw it and went and checked it out...And I wrote away for catalog as you did in those days." When I asked Kathy, who had no Quaker background, how she decided to change high schools, she said simply, "It just seemed like the thing to do, you know, I don't know how to describe it." Kathy began her international travels after she met students from the international Friends World College at her new high school. She said, "when I heard about this [travelling college experience] from them, I knew that that's what I wanted to do." This desire to see the world and experience new things might be considered rooted in the affective drive to SEEK when coupled with a situation and ample

resources to make that sort of seeking salient and possible.

Just as Kathy didn't provide discursive reasons for her life-altering decisions, Connie, a retired librarian, provided little explanation for a decision to travel to Central and South America to learn Spanish. "I was just obsessed. That's how things happen. Right? You have to be obsessed. Who knows why? So I want to know – be fluent in – Spanish." She was "obsessed" enough to quit her job: "I said, I want to be able to speak Spanish to the Spanish speaking patrons in the library. But that wasn't enough for them. They didn't give me leave of absence. And so I just, yeah, I was young, I just quit."

Her first experience living abroad shaped Abigail, the retired physician, but it was her own agency and openness to experience that brought to Abigail Ecuador. She had never flown on a plane before but was determined to go on the trip because, "something in me wanted a little adventure." Abigail didn't have enough money to travel, so she took a job at the local library and saved for a year to pay for her trip. For Pamela, an interest and aptitude for speaking Spanish in college ("I took to it like a fish in water") led to her year in Mexico, which in turn led to a career traveling to Latin America and an affinity for Latine culture that led to her volunteering.

In these cases, interest built on itself, expanded and drove action in ways that might have been difficult to predict given the initial motivation to travel. This pattern echoes Martin and Lembo's analysis of the way that interest works to define the self. People did not simply exhibit agency *within* situations, attempting to shape interaction to their advantage, these volunteers exhibited agency in *choosing* situations, including situations about which they had limited

understanding before arrival.

7.4.2 The Social Cultivation of Interest

One factor that might drive early interest in living abroad is access to people who encourage and support attention to the broader world, though the direction that interest will take and the “sort of person” one becomes based on that travel may be unpredictable. The way that social experience can cultivate interests in other cultures and then subsequently change the meanings associated with that interest is demonstrated by the story of Natasha, one of the three amigas I introduced in Chapter 4.

Natasha, a retired woman who grew up as a member of a “very Republican” family in a “primarily blue collar” town, offered an instructive story of how her interest in the wider world arose, and was transformed through travel. She told me of her “uncle” Bob who, as an emigre from Czechoslovakia, stood out in their Midwestern town.

My uncle Bob traveled all over the world. ...he spoke seven different languages, incredible. You know, they were so worldly to me. And their house was just filled with these wonderful things from their whole entire lives. So they had a lot of interest, they had a lot of influence in me in terms of the decision to go to Georgetown. And in terms of me growing up, I wanted to be like that, you know, to be worldly, to travel and so forth.

With her fictive uncle’s encouragement, Natasha transferred from her state university to

Georgetown University with an eye to joining the foreign service. But, as an undergraduate she spent a summer in Ecuador, and the realities of poverty she saw transformed her interest from diplomacy to history.

And then at that point, I decided that I probably, I wasn't, I wasn't really as interested in in terms of sort of like the foreign, you know, going to the foreign service and so forth. I was more interested in in terms of more of the indigenous population and the history of these countries and the history of Latin America overall.

Instead of accepting a position in the Masters program at Georgetown, she earned a Masters in International Studies in a more progressive program, where instead of the "top bottom type of view of the world with the U.S. at the top",

it was more of people united will never be defeated. That was also the time of the Nicaraguan Revolution in 1979. Things were really heating up in El Salvador. Of course, there was Guatemala. And I just became really, really interested, particularly on Central America, specifically on Central America, as opposed to Latin America.

Natasha's interest in Central America and shock at American policy in the region led to her joining the 1980s sanctuary movement and moving to Nicaragua for a year in support of the revolution. A trip to Cuba led to a longstanding rift with her fictive uncle, a staunch

anti-communist. She has remained committed to the causes that drove her and considers her work with detained immigrants to be an example of that interest.

7.5 Conclusion

This chapter reflects a key theme in this dissertation: the near impossibility of separating out aspects of the self like role and social identities in explaining actions. An oversimplified version of identity theory describes salient identities being selected and put into play based on relevant situations. For example, Radke et al. (2020) categorize motivation for members of advantaged groups to work on behalf of disadvantaged groups according to four different identities: Personal Identity for people acting on their own interests (perhaps like Spencer and Mitch, who both wanted to practice their Spanish). In-group identity aimed at protecting the social hierarchy (perhaps like Abigail). Superordinate group identity, associated with disidentification from the group and attachment to a shared identity (perhaps like Spencer or Shannon who minimized their American-ness), and moral identity concerned with moral principles “focused on what is right and what is wrong” (Radke et al. 2020:293) (perhaps like the many volunteers who expressed moral outrage over detention). In an attempt to classify motivations for people who do humanitarian work at the U.S. Mexico border, Gomez et al. (2020) concede that in the real world delineations are “fuzzy”, but they go even farther in subdividing motivations using a 2x2x2 matrix according to whether the motivations are selfish or empathetic, religious or secular, and driven by adherence to deontological (rules-based) or

virtue-ethics philosophies, an eight-category framework supported by interviews with only 20 people.

I find little support for clear distinctions of this sort. Stryker (2000b) discusses the way that identity competition can explain who does, and who does not, participate in social movements, but competition may not be right metaphor to describe how the shape of concern develops. Instead, what is happening might be better described as *identity reshaping*. For this subset of Americans who had lived abroad, American social identity does not stand alone, but acquires a new moral valence as it is reflected in the looking glass provided by people who are not Americans. Reiterating Mead, Stryker says “self reflects society” (Stryker 2000a:27 and elsewhere), but living abroad, like being an immigrant or a child of immigrants, invites the question “which society?” The unexpected correlation of living abroad and working to help immigrants is likely a product of many different forces being required to create a rare behavior, among them, the acquisition of an “impartial spectator” who is less partial to the United States.

But if living abroad is partly responsible for a shape of concern that encompasses immigrants in detention, the factors that lead up to living abroad are hardly evenly distributed. They include access to resources, modeling of friends and family, and likely some psychological ingredients that underlie xenophilia. These include a desire to live abroad that many volunteers had a difficult time explaining. As Kathy said, “it just seemed like the thing to do.”

8 Spiritual Capital and the Secular Moral

Imaginary

Religious engagement has been a key factor underlying both volunteering and social movements on behalf of immigrants (Cunningham 1995; Glatzer and Carr-Lemke 2016; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2008; Nepstad 2019; Yukich 2013). In Chapter 2 I proposed the shorthand “my people help strangers,” for my hypothesis that religious identity would be an important factor contributing to a shape of concern that encompasses immigrants in detention. Indeed a religious context can contribute to the shape of concern by providing: *attention* to the facts of immigrants in detention, emotional *activation* tied to the confluence of moral commitments to universalism or parochial ties to coreligionists in detention and spiritual practices, in addition to *awareness* of opportunities to volunteer.

Religious experience can provide a moral community aligned with a universalist view of human deservingness, particularly within the liberal wing of American religio-political structure (Wuthnow 1988). These beliefs constitute what Wellman (2008) characterizes as *spiritual*

capital, moral worldviews that are “powerful instruments of thought and action” (Wellman 2008:274). These universalist moral worldviews may be linked to a shape of concern that provides special attention to immigrants via both discourse and volunteer opportunities that focus on immigrants. Moral and political concerns of clergy continue to shape those of their congregants (Kellstedt et al. 2010; Lee 2003), and the plight of immigrants has been a focus of some religious leaders at local (Nawyn 2006), national (Wells 2025; Yukich 2013) and international levels (Vatican News 2025). Several studies highlight that biblical injunctions to care for the stranger inspire action by church groups on behalf of immigrants (Menjívar 2006; Nawyn 2006; Yukich 2013). Christerson et al. (2023) tie spiritual capital directly to the 1980s Sanctuary Movement, quoting Huber’s (2009:721) definition of spiritual capital as “a set of resources and skills rooted in a spiritual connection to a reality greater than oneself.”

But if religion does supply “spiritual capital” in the form of moral world views, the decline of religious affiliation from 84% to 71% since 2007 (Pew Research Center 2025b:15) might be seen as an evaporation in spiritual capital, and a shift to a secular worldview with little explicit moral content. This shift is particularly salient on the left. Only 37% of American political liberals identified as Christians in 2024, down precipitously from 62% in 2007 (Pew Research Center 2025b:7).

The decline of religion in modern capitalist society is often ascribed to the rise of individualism and a lack of concern for community, but there is ample evidence that moral concerns play a substantial role in the rise of non-religion. Schnabel et al. (2025) leverage qualitative and quantitative longitudinal data to show that morality, rather than a process of rationalist

secularization, drives much of the fall in religious affiliation. They say, “it is not only or even primarily rationalistic doubts driving this exodus. Instead, it is authenticity and moral conviction: the perceived corruption, bureaucracy, and hypocrisy of religious institutions, especially on issues such as LGBTQ rights, gender equality, and social justice” (Schnabel et al. 2025:22). In their view, the fall in religious affiliation reflects a process of “individuation,” where people pursue personally meaningful moral and spiritual paths, as opposed to “individualism” that assumes that they are unconcerned with broader issues of morality and community. The moral convictions highlighted by Schnabel et al. align with what Edgell (2024) sees as a “secular moral imaginary that embraces autonomy, justice, dignity, and an explicitly scientific approach to decision-making in the public arena” (Edgell 2024:388).

Other scholars worry that there is not much to distinguish the liberal Protestant religious moral framework from areligious liberalism, and attribute the decline of that religious tradition to a lack of distinctiveness from secular culture (Wellman 2008). The idea that liberal religion is not a powerful source of liberal values is supported by findings that high levels of engagement with liberal congregations does not make people more liberal. In contrast with conservative churches, correlations of high attendance at liberal churches with liberal ideologies are simply selection effects (Schnabel 2024).

I find that the relationship of religion to the moral motivation of individual volunteers in my study was more complex than either the “spiritual capital” or “secular moral imaginaries” frameworks describe. Fully 66% of volunteers changed religion from their childhood, much higher than the 35% of U.S. adults who had such a religion change (Pew Research Center

2025b) ($p < .001$)¹. Volunteers had high rates of religious change in both the South (68%) and the West (57%). In fact the amount of religious change is even higher than shown in Figure 8.1 because a number of volunteers changed their religious affiliation more than once.² Despite the high rates of religious change and the religious diversity of the volunteers, they largely shared a common universalist moral framework that may have more to do with the educated, cosmopolitan world in which most came of age than in theological belief.

In this chapter I show that rather than church engagement being the *source* of moral priorities, many volunteers actively sought out religious contexts that provided resources to put their pre-existing moral identity into action. Though it found support in the church, this pre-existing moral identity was very much in-line with the “secular moral imaginary” described by Edgell (2024) and the liberal moral framework that Schnabel et al. (2025) characterized as underlying an *exodus* from religious affiliation. It also aligns with the generalized liberal moral framework associated with American Civil Religion (Gorski 2019). Just as social movement organizations may depend on church resources that can be appropriated to pursue morally infused political goals (Edwards and McCarthy 2007), so can individuals find resources in the church that allow them to put their pre-existing “moral interests” (Lichterman 2024) into action. In some cases, these interests demonstrated a prior shape of concern oriented towards immigrants in

¹Both numbers involve only ‘major’ change as opposed to changes of denomination within larger categories of religion, such as within Mainline or Conservative Evangelical traditions. Using a set classifications with more gradations and GSS data Sherkat (2014) finds 32.2% of U.S. adults changed their religious affiliation.

²Categorization of religion in America is complex and contested (Hackett et al. 2018; Sherkat 2014; Steensland 2000). Here I use “Liberal Christian” to include both Mainline Protestant as defined by RELTRAD (Steensland 2000), as well as Mennonite (a historical Peace Church classified conservative by RELTRAD). I place LDS and Swedenborgian in the “Conservative Christian” category though theologically they are considered heretical by some Christians.

detention, and in other cases attention that might have been primed by travel was directed toward immigrants in detention specifically through opportunities provided through the church.

The volunteers who left organized religion demonstrated very similar moral interests to those who still attended church, but as in Schnabel et al. (2025) they often cited those moral interests as reasons to abandon religious affiliations. Still, even those who left organized religion entirely and argued that the care they provided was motivated by secular humanism depended on resources that religious institutions and religiously engaged volunteers provided. This reliance on resources provided by a fading wing of America’s religious structure, highlights challenges that sociologists have been worried about for decades (Putnam 2001).

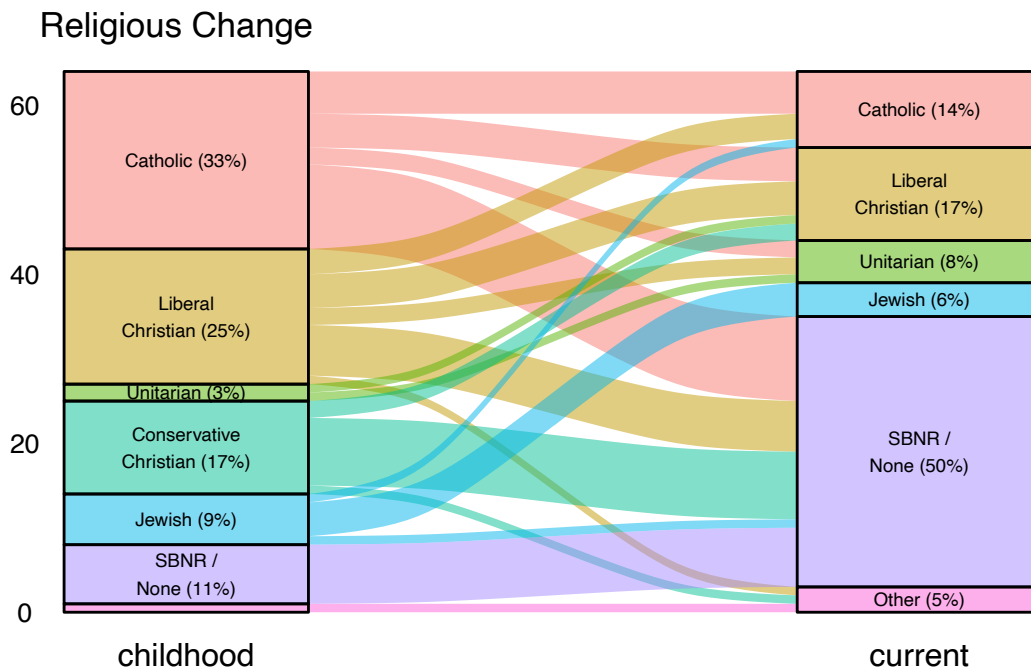


Figure 8.1: Religious change among volunteers

Religion is often described as consisting of “three B’s”: Belief, Behavior and Belonging

(Marshall 2002). In this formulation religion consists of belief in supernatural power, the behavior of attending services that re-affirm religious commitment and the feeling of belonging among people who share beliefs, styles of interaction and mutual support. While the volunteers in this study did not share religious affiliation, and half were religiously unaffiliated, their situated religious choices reveal a shared belief in a universalist conception of human rights, shared behaviors working with immigrants, and often a sense of belonging among the educated liberals and progressives that made up the bulk of the volunteer pool.

8.1 Religion and Organizational Formation

Given the prominent role of religious organizations in supporting immigrant rights, it is not surprising that the volunteer organizations I studied have relied heavily on both religious people and pre-existing religious institutions in their creation and ongoing operation. Kari, the driving force behind the creation of WIA as a non-profit, told me that one of the first things the organization did was to email 264 nearby churches with an offer to speak. Kari told me the organization chose to recruit from churches “Because they’re the most likely to have at least an understanding of what it might mean, to reach out to the strangers among us, and to be understanding that message.” As the “spiritual but not religious” child of a fire and brimstone Pentecostal preacher, Kari said she felt comfortable in religious settings and did much of this outreach personally. When Kari stepped down from the WIA board, Phillip, a retired Episcopal priest who had worked for years in South America, took over as board chair. WIA continues to

use a progressive³ Lutheran church for group meetings and cooperates with the Evangelical agency WERS, which organizes its own welcome group once a week.

In the South, Casa de Visitantes del Sud (CV) began as multi-denominational ministry founded by progressive Mennonites and Catholics who met at a gathering for immigration researchers and activists. Alice, one of the founding group, told me “it was very much started as an expression of our Christian faith.” The group was publicly known as a ministry, but Alice told me their explicitly Christian mission statement didn’t seem as welcoming when non-Christians sought to contribute to the work over the years, and the organization became more secular in its branding and operation.

8.2 Patterns of Religious Engagement

I identified four different patterns of religious engagement in volunteers that I labeled *true believers*, *searchers*, *non-believers in the pews*, and *leavers*. The *true believers* have a strong sense of the centrality of spirituality to both their personal religious experience and to the cause of welcoming the stranger and providing what they see as radical hospitality.

The *searchers* seem to put their liberal universalist values first, and attempt to find a religious environment that gives them the opportunities to practice those values while also stirring “the spiritual juices”, as one volunteer put it. Less bound by ritual and theology of a particular religion, searchers fit the mold of what Nancy Ammerman (1997) called “Golden Rule Christians,”

³The web site of the multi-racial church emphasizes that it welcomes all ethnic and cultural heritages, gender identities and sexual orientations.

where the practice of helping is central to their understanding of God’s will.

The *non-believers in the pews* eschew the theological side of religion and belief in god, but still engage with religious communities for both a sense of belonging and to access the resources and people that help them turn their values into action. Turning the pattern of “believing without belonging” (Davie 1994, 1997; Tromp, Pless, and Houtman 2020) on its head, these volunteers belong without believing.

Finally, the *leavers* have abandoned organized religion, often describing their choice in moral terms, whether or not they continue to believe in god or spirituality. Consistent with the findings of Schnabel et al. (2025), leaving organized religion was not a case of Weberian religious rationalization at work, but rather a value-laden response to perceived failings of organized religion.

Table 8.1: Patterns of belonging, believing and behavior.

	Belief	Behavior	Belonging
True Believers	Religion is true	Regular church attendance	Long term commitment to religious community
Searchers	Golden Rule as core religious tenet	Changing affiliation	Feel belonging in communities with similar beliefs & commitment to helping
Non-believers in the Pews	Non-theists or atheists	Sometime religious attendance	Common sense of purpose with congregants typically in white liberal churches
Leavers	May believe in God or may be non-theists	Do not attend religious services	May find belonging in volunteer or political communities.

8.2.1 The True Believers

John, who I introduced in Chapter 4, is a devotee of Catholic Social Teaching, with a graduate degree in divinity from a Jesuit institution who at the time of the interview was running a food bank. An outgoing, engaging white man of about 50 wearing khaki pants and a plaid button up shirt both times I met him, he laughs often. John joined Jesuit Volunteer Corps after college, “striving to live out what, at least in our tradition, we believed was the solution of poverty, which is community, and everybody living more simply.” Like other true believers, John explicitly ties together charity and politics for structural change. Using a metaphor variously attributed to Desmond Tutu and Saul Alinsky he said, “without advocating for a more just world, you’re really just pulling...the wounded out of the river”, instead of fixing the bridge upstream. On the other hand, “if it’s just advocating for a better world without the compassion for the poorest of the poor, well, then...it’s just, it’s more systemic than it is human.”

In line with the impact of travel outlined in Chapter 7, John began paying attention to international issues when he went to the Dominican Republic and his eyes were opened the devastating poverty and the role the US played in their economy and politics. He later worked in the Middle East with the Catholic Relief Service, where he said most employees are Muslim, and spent two years in El Salvador working for a lay Catholic organization. While John was not present at the founding of WIA, he reinvigorated the engagement of St. P, the parish where he was working, in the wake of Trump’s election in 2017. John is skeptical that the “spiritual but not religious” can support social movements: “I really think people say, ‘I’m Christian

solo, you know, I don't need anyone else.' I really think something's missing. That wasn't, that wasn't the dynamic of the movement around Jesus. It wasn't the dynamic that the early followers chose to remember and record. So that leads me to believe that gathering together with other Christians, is an essential piece." Like Rhonda and Joanie, who I discuss below, John moved on from his parish not long after the leadership of his progressive parish was replaced with priests who were less focused on social justice.

Elías is something of a serial entrepreneur of religious support for immigrants. The son of Puerto Ricans who moved to the South, with a bushy beard and a warm welcoming demeanor, he founded an intentional Christian community, helping other Latinos in a small town buy adjacent houses to enact a vision of an extended, religiously engaged family. Elías led protests at the detention center before co-founding CV along with Faith, Alejandro, Alice and others. Elías also started then spun-off the Southern Welcome group from his current organization that offers support and temporary housing for asylum seekers. A social work professor turned ordained minister, Elías calls himself "an idealist, not a pragmatist." He hopes for what Martin Luther King called a "radical revolution of values" leading to a "beloved community." While Southern Welcome was essentially a secular organization from the start, and CV became one after Elías moved on, religion and the idea of ministry remains central to Elías's work. He said "[W]e're trying to use more inclusive language because not all our staff are, you know, would identify as Christian or religious or anything of that nature. But it's undeniable, like, as long as I'm the director, that's the DNA."

Faith is a fiction writer and one of the "originals" at CV who became a Catholic after

developing close long-term relationships with people in the Catholic communities she was studying for her PhD. She remains a devout Catholic, telling me “my religious practice and spirituality or continue to be really important part of my daily life.” Like John she was inspired by Catholic Social Teaching because, “they articulated ways of kind of making sense of, you know, how we live in the world...in so much more profound a way than I had ever encountered.” She said, “it was important that we identify that we were all coming to the work, grounded in our kind of religious faith and our religious convictions.” With the growth of the organization, “[S]ome of that, that really profound sense of shared identity and mission has been lost and a part of that, I suppose, is the Christian foundation. But lost might not be the right word just sort of expanded as we’ve grown.”

Religion was not central to the childhood families of Faith and Elías growing up, and both found deep connection in progressive faith communities as adults. Alice, a woman in her sixties with long straight hair and unfancy dress that reflects her rejection of American materialism, had been active in churches throughout her life. Though her parents were “very, very strong Methodists,”⁴ Alice started going to a Southern Baptist church in junior high. During college, Alice began to worry about why Christians were not responding more strongly to world hunger and inequality. While browsing in a Christian book store, she came across the book *Rich Christians in the Age of Hunger* (Sider [1977] 2015), which places responsibility for global poverty on American policies and Americans’ collective behavior and in opposition to biblical

⁴“Methodist” can encompass both liberal mainline (United Methodist Church) and conservative (Evangelical Methodist, Free Methodist) churches. I believe this was a conservative church.

teachings that God favors the poor, and that participating in structural sin is itself sinful.

Alice told me, “I realized there was a whole chunk of the church or a whole subgroup of Christians who struggled with the same questions.” She married a fellow Southern Baptist and they were both active in the church, but when her husband was on a multi-denominational council they realized they “felt more camaraderie with the representatives from the Mennonite Church of the Brethren and Quaker churches,” which are known as peace churches for their historical embrace of pacifism. With this move, Alice might be seen to have something in common with the searchers. Despite her lifelong association with conservative churches, Alice had acquired motivating moral values that she felt were not being adequately prioritized in her religious upbringing or congregation.

Alice and her husband have been active in the Mennonite church for decades, and she still attends weekly. She told me that a religious commitment to the stranger was central to all of the founders of CV. Yet she has become reticent to categorize her current work as an act of faith, saying “that’s more of a change in my faith rather than a change in the work.” Revealing the ongoing nature of religious change and the time-bound nature of labels like “true believer,” she told me, “you know, when you have a survey and it asks what religion you are and one of the options is *none*? It’s not so much *none*, it’s *done*.”

8.2.2 The Searchers

Joanie, who I introduced with John in Chapter 4, is a high-energy woman in her sixties with short gray hair who frequently volunteered at the Welcome Center. Raised in mainline Protestant churches, Joanie converted Catholicism after enrolling her son in kindergarten at St. C, a Catholic school that was convenient for their family.

After her children graduated from school, Joanie left St. C for St. P, at the time a progressive, activist, parish. With its commitment to LGBTQ rights and service to the poor and immigrants – a priest there had been instrumental in starting WIA – St. P truly motivated Joanie: “My god that blew the roof, in a good way, blew the roof, roof off. Religion that walks its talk.” Joanie started volunteering at WIA through a friend at St. P, and it was there that she embraced teachings that aligned with the practice of supporting immigrants in detention: “Mary and Joseph were immigrants for God’s sake. I’d never thought about that before. But why else would they have to go up to Jerusalem to be enumerated? I mean, it’s just it’s a theme. It’s a, it’s about humanity, and it’s about people wanting something better for themselves or their families.” Yet those teachings likely resonated with Joanie because she already felt an affinity to them – after all, it was St. P’s commitment to Catholic Social Teaching that made that parish attractive to her.

Joanie’s subsequent religious path provides further evidence for proactive searching for an environment that supports her pre-existing universalist liberal moral identity. According to Joanie, changes in clergy at St. P aligned the parish with the American Catholic church’s shift

to the right, and she no longer attends mass there. “I would call myself a watching and waiting Catholic. My intention is not to leave the church. But some things need to change, or somehow *they need to give me answers that fit with how I think.*” Note that it is up to the church to provide answers that fit Joanie’s established thinking. In a follow up interview a year later, Joanie reiterated that she was a “watching and waiting” Catholic. However, she had started attending the same Quaker meeting as Kathy, her fellow volunteer.

Rhonda, one of the longest serving volunteers at WIA, had been a member of St. P as well. She grew up Lutheran in Canada and converted to Catholicism when she married a man who had previously studied to be Jesuit priest, saying “in my mind, it was the same as being a Lutheran.”⁵ She heard about WIA through friends on the social justice committee there. She said St. P had once been an “extremely liberal church”, where decisions had been made collectively. Using the same metaphor as Joanie, Rhonda said St. P had “amazing priests that just caused you to ponder, caused you never to accept anything, to really walk your faith rather than just talk.” But when a younger priest took over the parish, decisions that had been made collectively were reversed from the top, and she heard the women staff members were no longer respected.

Rhonda tried another Catholic parish and a Presbyterian congregation before making connections at her local United Methodist church where Rhonda appreciated a commitment to LGBTQ youth and is active in the social justice committee. To Rhonda, this church was “authentic to

⁵I’ve tried to imagine Martin Luther, namesake of the Lutheran church and fierce opponent of Catholicism, hearing this.

the preachings of Jesus”, which she summarized as “feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the prisoners, helping the poor, looking after the widows and orphans, that kind of scripture piece.” She said “[I]f you’re blessed, you have responsibility to help. So that is the summons to practice your beliefs, not to just be at a pew and think that that’s the reason for your spirituality is to adore God.”

Mike, a tall, robust retired white man in his 70s, was raised Catholic and attended a Catholic day school, but connected to WIA via his liberal United Church of Christ congregation, a denomination he described as “the one Obama belonged to.” After graduating from Notre Dame he returned to his home state to teach in a Catholic religious education program, but his understanding of religion did not resonate there, and he was fired within a year. He told me “I designed a program for those kids. And it was based primarily around the concept of love.” Parents didn’t like his approach and called a meeting where “they said ‘Oh, I can see where you’re teaching our kids about love. What does that have to do with religion?’ ”.

Mike joined his UCC church, which did some volunteering at the detention center, after having some trouble finding a place to worship after moving:

we tried out the Catholic church here and that was terrible. And then we found a Catholic church with a really cool Irish priest and so we went there for a while, then he retired on us. So we were kind of searching around for something to spear the spiritual juices.

Switching churches wasn’t new to Mike: “My oldest son was Baptized Lutheran. I’ve been

in Unitarian Unity churches. Just whatever. Studied a lot of Buddhism. Sort of the old ‘blow up your TV try to find Jesus on your own’.” He told me that, “a place that practiced that the actual idea of Christianity I think is hard to find.” When I asked him what that idea was, he answered in a way that Ammerman’s (1997) description of a Golden Rule Christian. Mike said “I think it’s summed up probably best in the golden rule and the beatitudes. Blessed are the meek, the poor in spirit.”

Matt, a retired psychologist and a devout Catholic, could be classified as a true believer, but his personal history reveals a process of seeking that continued well into his adult life. Matt and his (third) wife are lay associates of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace whose “charism of peace calls us to practice radical hospitality, nonviolence and care of creation” (Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace 2023). He began visiting immigrants in detention over a decade ago, but switched to regular correspondence during COVID. Despite his 30-year commitment to Catholicism, Matt changed religious affiliation multiple times. He was raised by his Jewish mother and had a Bar Mitzvah, but a few years later had a “strange mystical experience” attending church with a friend and joined a congregational church. After attending Howard University as one of few white students in the 1970s, he studied at Princeton Theological Seminary with the idea of joining the clergy. In his 40s, Matt converted to Catholicism, calling it “the full rich expression of the Christian faith,” and “the filet mignon... compared to the Big Mac of Protestantism.”

Yet despite change in religious affiliation and social connections, despite moves from urban centers on the East Coast to the desert Southwest, and then to the West Coast, one might argue that Matt’s moral identity remained constant as his religious identity changed. A conscientious

objector during the Vietnam war, Matt has remained committed to anti-war activities. He was a Democratic Socialists of America activist long before Bernie Sanders rose to prominence, and is somewhat resentful of what he considers newcomers to the cause. When asked how he became aware of WIA he mentioned two connections, a protest with a socialist group and a welcoming group with the order of nuns. While Matt remained committed to political change he said, “my really number one thing is anti war. And probably my number two thing is socialism. And I feel like what can I really accomplish for either of those things?... But, these are concrete things I can do try to help this detained migrant, feel a little bit less depressed or whatever. Yeah. So it’s like a substitution in a way”

For Joanie, Rhonda and Mike, their involvement in the specific task of helping immigrants in detention was clearly facilitated by their religious engagement. They joined their churches for a broader commitment to helping, and the organized activities in their churches spoke to them and oriented their attention and practice towards immigrants in detention. Matt was perhaps different. His religious searching seemed tied primarily to filling a spiritual hole, rather than searching for an outlet for his more explicitly political moral project. Yet for all these searchers, moral commitments were more durable than religious affiliations. These volunteers already had a universalist moral outlook and other life course experiences that might have made volunteering to serve immigrants in detention appealing. Finding the opportunity through the church may have turned a latent interest into action. The fact that all of these searchers volunteered for years, and Joanie and Rhonda continued volunteering after they changed their religious affiliation again is a sign that the practice of volunteering may have established a

shape of concern that continued to be motivating without the organizational supports provided by the church.

8.2.3 Non-believers in the Pews

Prior to the conflict described in Chapter 9, Noreen was one of the key volunteers in WIA – she coordinated the visitation program, ran an immigration book club, and answered calls to the WIA detainee hotline on her personal cell phone. Raised as a member of a small conservative Christian movement, Noreen earned a master’s degree in English literature, married a man from her sect, and home-schooled her children in Arizona. The strict gender expectations in the church grated on her. She told me, “I was told that it was good that I was smart, because I would produce smart men.” Noreen and her husband left the church together. “I don’t know how faith leaves,” she said, “it just does. And fortunately, fortunately, it left us both at the same time. We reasoned each other out of it.”

Yet a loss of faith did not end Noreen’s engagement with churches. She later joined Unitarian Universalist (UU) churches. While Joanie found her way to WIA via her church, Noreen joined a new church as part of her embrace of immigrant rights. Noreen felt deeply opposed what she called the “papers please” law pushed by Sheriff Joe Arpaio and then-governor of Arizona Jan Brewer, but says she didn’t act on those feelings until triggered by a specific event. As Noreen describes it, she was activated by some women who mistreated Latino students at the State Capitol, where Noreen had come to advocate for cancer care funding:

these women came by and said, “Anchor babies go back to Mexico,” and they were so awful. And I went over to them like “you can’t talk to children like that.” And they were they were just so horrendous. And so then the kids came over, and they’re like, “Oh, thank you for talking to them.” And I’m like, no, no, no, what’s going on here? And so I talked to them more. And then I met some other people who were involved in marching against [anti-immigration laws]. And so I did some of those marches with them. And that’s when I got connected to the UU church for those marches.

Though Noreen told me, “I’m not a believer,” and is no longer affiliated with a church, she engaged with the UU church for many years, even after she moved to a different state, participating in church-supported immigration programs there. Like Joanie, for Noreen, the church became a way to exercise values that she brought with her when she joined.

The UU church was the route to engagement for other non-believers as well including the three amigas I discussed in Chapter 4 and Chapter 7. I interviewed two of the three amigas. Natasha had never been a religious believer, but joined the Unitarian church because it was “A good place to raise the kids. So that was a big deal too because when we have the children, it’s like, okay, what about this faith thing? What am I going to do here? But I just don’t identify as a religious person.” Natasha embraced the work with CV and became the first non-religious board chair of the organization. But Natasha had long been committed to fighting immigration detention back to her involvement as a non-religious supporter of the 1980’s

sanctuary movement, which was founded by religious groups. Her support for immigrants had long been enabled by religion, but not founded in it.

Carole, whose searing experience with the dying child of a detained father was described in Chapter 6, was another of the Amigas. Carole was raised by a mother who “saw her job as raising Catholic children. That was her primary job.” But Carole felt that the church’s patriarchy and opposition to the birth control violated her values, and when she came home from college she negotiated with her mother to avoid attending. For most of her life, Carole said, “nature was my church.” She sometimes camped in her church Sunday night and then she would “take my backpack in and my change of clothes and change in my classroom.” But like Natasha, Carole explored the UU church as a place for her son to find social connection, and “we all decided after a little while that it suited all of us.” The UU church appealed to Carole because “the whole premise is deeds not creeds...I mean, we have people that are atheists and people, you know, but we can all get together and work towards a better world.”

Similarly, the UU church’s focus on social action appealed to Spencer, the retired executive I introduced in Chapter 7. After spending most of his life unchurched, he joined the UU church not because of religious belief but “because I realized that if I wanted to be a more effective contributing member to society, I could be more effective in the company of other like-minded people.”

While the UU church is theologically flexible and most Unitarians are “non-theists” who are unsure about the existence of god (Sherkat 2014:103), other non-believers chose to participate in religious environments that have more explicit theological commitments. Lori, a retired

veterinarian who was raised Lutheran and whose brother is a Lutheran minister, says she is an atheist. Despite never joining the church, Lori has attended Quaker meetings for over a decade. She joined the WIA board on the request of a fellow volunteer at a Friends meeting. Lori said, “I know I really admire the, the Quaker tenets, their testimonies, the things that, you know, they, they say that they believe in, even though I don’t believe in anything, but but things like, you know, oh, truth, community equality, simplicity, you know, those kinds of things that are very, very basic.”⁶

Connie, the librarian who once quit her job to travel and learn Spanish, proudly proclaimed her atheism and told me she didn’t like corresponding with a detainee who frequently invoked God in his letters. Yet she found out about the opportunity to volunteer at one of the religious groups she attended, “I can’t remember. I saw maybe a Quaker thing. A Quaker thing? Could have been a Quaker thing or Unitarian thing.” Though a non-believer, Connie joked that she may have inherited her motivating moral emotion from her Quaker, Jewish and Catholic forbears, “I was brought up Quaker, so I like to joke that I have guilt from Quakerism about not doing enough good in the world and I have guilt from Catholicism about sex and from Judaism, that’s just general overall guilt.”

Monica, a retired lawyer who protested the Vietnam war as an adolescent, told me “I’ve never believed in God, I’ve always been kind of a quasi-atheist. Well, definitely an atheist very

⁶In a follow up interview two years after the original one, Lori confirmed her atheism and continued engagement with the Quaker meeting to “fulfill that societal outreach”. But she also told me that “my spiritual path has kind of taken a little jog,” as she has become more involved as a shamanic practitioner. She had been going on journeys with spirit guides for the past 20 years, but hadn’t mentioned it previously because it’s “not something that is for everybody.”

into Jewish tradition.” Monica’s engagement in Jewish life is entwined with her commitment to social justice. In addition to her work with WIA, Monica is involved with a Jewish immigrant justice group, and the immigration and sanctuary committee at her synagogue. Though she never believed in God, she was more observant as a young woman, even studying Talmud in Israel for a semester. “I just thought, one does better in the world by acting as if you know, God exists. And if one doesn’t have a, you know, rooting in a tradition, and one can just drift off into, into meaningless materialism.”

While belonging without believing in god is not uncommon among Jews and Unitarians in the U.S. (Sherkat 2014), belief in *god* is not the only belief that matters. A sense of universalism, whether members of Unitarian Universalist congregations or not, is pervasive among the non-believers who attend services. Universalist values are not sufficient to explain care directed to particular subgroups of others, but resources provided in a universalist religious context contributed to awareness volunteering opportunities on behalf of immigrants in detention.

8.2.4 The Leavers

As shown in Table 8.2, 0% of volunteers I interviewed were religious “Nones”, substantially higher than the national rate of about 29% (Pew Research Center 2025b) ($p < .001$). That number may be less surprising given the context. Religiously unaffiliated people are much more likely to have positive views of a growing immigrant population (47% positive, 23% negative) compared to religiously affiliated people (30%-43%) (Pew Research Center 2025b:7),

Table 8.2: Volunteer religion by region

Characteristic	Overall N = 64 ^I	South N = 22 ^I	West N = 42 ^I
rel			
Catholic	9 (14%)	2 (9.1%)	7 (17%)
Liberal Christian	11 (17%)	5 (23%)	6 (14%)
Unitarian	5 (7.8%)	4 (18%)	1 (2.4%)
Conservative Christian	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Jewish	4 (6.3%)	0 (0%)	4 (9.5%)
SBNR / None	32 (50%)	9 (41%)	23 (55%)
Other	3 (4.7%)	2 (9.1%)	1 (2.4%)

^In (%)

so one would expect religious “Nones” to be overrepresented among volunteers.

Though some religious “nones”, like Connie and Lori, found moral community in the church, others removed themselves from church environments because they found the moral boundaries imposed by the church at odds with their personal values, in much the way Schnabel et al. (2025) describe. For many of the volunteers who lacked a church social context to provide opportunity awareness, strong identity or political motivations were part of their path to volunteering.

Elise is the daughter of Mexican immigrants who grew up as a member of the LDS (Mormon) church and was raised by her grandmother, aunt, and a mother who worked three jobs. After her mother “picked up and kind of jumped out of my life”, people from the church took her in and Elise attended boarding school in New York, a time she referred to as “the best four years of my life.” Elise told me that after the break with her mother “the church served almost like a

mother figure with all these rules.” But Elise said she began to have issues with the church and “when I was like, 24, 25, I really pulled the plug. And I was like, this is just not for me. I feel like I can still be very religious in my own self, like believe in God, without needing the church.” Elise said she left the church partly because she didn’t agree with the judgments it was making about the diverse group of people she came to know during boarding school and college.

I went to boarding school where there’s a lot of kids who are Jewish, all my best friends, you know, they’re, they’re different religions. And for me to come home and be like, ‘Well, I’m the only one who’s gonna go to heaven, and all these good people are gonna go to hell, or not go to like, the same place.’ Like that just seems so wrong to me, right? ... I think at the end of the day, I really realized that, you know, for me, God is just, God is about love and service.

As described in Chapter 6, Elise described her motivation to volunteer with detained immigrants as not rooted in religion, but rather her Latine heritage and the specific experiences her family had with immigration detention. Still she felt that, “service was always something that was engraved in me” by the church.

Tammy, a rare 20-something volunteer who did not come from an immigrant family, grew up in a white working-class Catholic household and took religious classes up through her confirmation, but abandoned the church when she turned 18. She linked her leaving to the church’s moral boundaries excluding her cousin, who was close to her family

our priest had told her that because she was living with her boyfriend before marriage that she was not allowed to take the you know, the bread. Yeah, anymore. And I remember feeling like that was so ridiculous. And I think because of my experience, and like really diving into religion in a way that a lot of kids don't just having those like classes I had to go to. I don't know, I got angry about it at some point.

Tammy found her way to DIA through an independent web search. As someone with a love of travel, she specifically sought a volunteer opportunity that would provide a counter to her father's anti-immigrant views. She said her father was a Trump supporter who started watching TV news after he retired and "repeats things that he sees on the news that he actually doesn't know anything about."

Both Tammy and Elise proactively searched the web for volunteer opportunities. This highlights one important difference between people who said that they were "Spiritual but not religious" or religious "Nones" and other volunteers. A plurality of volunteers who attended religious services began volunteering through their church, while the SBNR/None group was most likely to connect by searching for opportunities or seeing them on social or broadcast media. This indicates that the non-religious group had a shape of concern oriented toward immigrants independent of organizational affordances provided by the church, whereas volunteers like Joanie may never have translated their universalist ideals to action on behalf of the immigrants without religious engagement. Still, fewer than half of the religious people began volunteering

Table 8.3: Connection to volunteering by religious belief.

Characteristic	SBNR/None N = 32 ^I	Organized religion N = 32 ^I
link_type		
Church	5 (16%)	12 (38%)
Friend/Family	10 (31%)	8 (25%)
Media/Search	11 (34%)	5 (16%)
Political	3 (9.4%)	3 (9.4%)
Other	3 (9.4%)	4 (13%)
^I _n (%)		

through religious organizations, and nearly 20% of the SBNR/None's still connected via religious organizations as shown in Table 8.3.

Ashley, the 40-ish foreign language professor with a strong accent from her native North Carolina, said her volunteering is “not out of any sense of, you know, brownie points with Jesus.” Ashley told me that she’s a “Full blown atheist. And that does freak people out a lot of times because they’re like, ‘but you’re nice.’” She told me that because people in the South do not respond well to atheists she would often answer questions about her religion with “I was raised Lutheran.” But Ashley became disillusioned with religion after years in youth group in her small town, “because I started to see a disconnect between what Christianity is meant to do and what the people who are Christians do.” She said “I think that if you want to say that you love Jesus, then you should do that with your feet and your hands and not just silently in your brain.” Still, she first came to the hospitality house because fellow PhD students who were religious Christians invited her, knowing of her Spanish fluency and cosmopolitan interests.

She did not come to church, but the church came to her.

Religiously unaffiliated volunteers exhibited a wide variety of non-religion, from Christian believers who don't belong, to people who considered themselves spiritual but not religious, to committed atheists. Yet the core set of beliefs they said drove them to non-affiliation are consistent with the religious values the searchers said drove them to seek compatible Christian congregations and those that the true believers said tied them to their faith.

8.3 Discussion

For many volunteers in this group, the causal arrow between religion and morality pointed the opposite direction from what religious researchers sometimes assume (Bennett and Einolf 2017; Wellman 2008). Rather than religion imbuing moral identity in its adherents, people joined churches that affirmed their moral identity and provided opportunity to act on it.

The fact that moral values preceded religious change in this group is consistent with findings correlations of church attendance with liberalism are simply selection effects (Schnabel 2024). But Schnabel (2024:329) emphasizes that “Just because liberal religion is not liberalizing does not mean it cannot be a mobilizing resource.” Volunteers joined churches both to be among people who shared their value commitments and for resources like information, organization and compatriots that allowed them to act on those commitments.

In his work explaining the rise of evangelical Christianity in the US, Christopher Smith (1998:118) says that religious change can often be explained by people seeking “satisfying

morally orienting collective identities,” but in this group people’s moral identity seemed to be formed outside of the church. Rather than searching for moral orientation, they sought *satisfying collective engagement* with others who shared universalist values that they were already oriented toward. Importantly, this engagement also provided resources that allowed them to transform their possibly broad moral motivation into action on behalf of immigrants in detention.

The role of UU church membership among the people I interviewed both in the West and the South is particularly revealing of this pattern. According to the General Social Survey, Unitarian Universalists comprise only 0.3% of the U.S. population (Sherkat 2014:37), but 5 volunteers I interviewed (including the two Amigas I interviewed) were current members of Unitarian churches and 4 other interviewees, including Noreen and Mike, indicated they had attended in the past. The Unitarian church may be the apotheosis of Weber’s concept of religious rationalization, the move from mystical, other-worldly focused religion to a bureaucratized religion oriented toward behavior in this world. Yet it is explicitly value rational, with abstract universalism at its heart.

One of the ways this universalism is expressed is through support for immigrants. At a national level, The Unitarian Universalist Association has long been active in immigration issues (Unitarian Universalist Association 2025), including support for sanctuary movements and political campaigns. In the “4A” model I presented in Chapter 2, support for immigrants in detention depends on attention to immigrants, as well as awareness of volunteer opportunities to help them. In Chapter 7 I argued that attention to immigrants was highly associated with

time spent living abroad, but the focus of the church on immigration topics yields both attention and awareness of volunteer opportunities.

Universalist values cited by many volunteers as underlying reasons for religious change do not have an easily identifiable origin; they are more of a product of a causal cloud than discrete causal chain of events, with contributions from three overlapping areas: experience in a diverse exchange-based society (Durkheim [1893] 2019), access to cultural and economic capital (Bourdieu 1984), and hegemonic cultural contexts (Gramsci 2012).

Durkheim ([1893] 2019) argued that in a modern interdependent society, widespread exchange would lead to “organic” solidarity and a habit of treating strangers fairly. This has been confirmed in experimental settings where people raised in societies with widespread trade are more likely to share equally with unknown alters (Baldassarri 2020; Henrich et al. 2005). Yet the widespread opposition to immigrants in Western capitalist countries shows clear limits to the effect of generalized exchange on the shape of concern.

In keeping with a broadly Bourdieusian approach, the embrace of values of universalism, at least in survey results, is associated with a class positions that are similar to the volunteers in these organizations. Support for universalism is associated with high levels of education and relatively high incomes found in this group of volunteers (Enke et al. 2023; Vaisey and Miles 2014).

For volunteers who came of age in the 1970s and 1980s, a globalized human rights discourse with roots in interest convergence of government fighting the Cold War, multi-national corporations and Civil Rights advocates led to a version of universalism that could be aligned with both

liberal capitalism and progressive ideals. Coca-Cola's 1971 'I'd like to buy the world a Coke' ad featuring a multi-racial, multi-national group singing in unity on behalf of a multi-national corporation may be one of the best representations of this era's interest convergence.

Yet a strictly Bourdieusian or cultural approach cannot adequately explain the switching of religious affiliation in order to better enact an internalized set of moral commitments. Here a pragmatist view of agency is helpful. Volunteers changed religion because their current religious engagement presented them with a felt problem. Their internalized moral identity, however diffuse its sources, was out of alignment with their ability to enact it, so they engaged in situated problem solving to find other contexts, often not knowing the specific tasks that would bring their actions into alignment with their moral identity.

With the exception of Noreen, none of the volunteers seemed to have the specific case of care for immigrants in detention in mind when joining a new congregation. For some volunteers, the convergence of universalist values with information and opportunities provided through the church may have contributed to a shape of concern oriented toward immigrants in detention where no strong previous affinity had existed. For example Joanie joined St. P because of its commitment to social justice, but if the parish did not have a connection to WIA, she would probably not have spent years volunteering there. Rhonda also began volunteering through St P. and developed a commitment to serving immigrants in detention that she carried into new religious contexts and fought to maintain through the conflicts covered in Chapter 9. The pattern would be in keeping with findings that increases in religious attendance yield later increases in *non-religious* volunteering (Johnston 2013). For others, like Natasha, resources in

the church may have resonated with an existing commitment to immigrant rights.

Theories of the self are often focused on the ways inhabiting a social position shapes behavior in the moment. However, given availability and resources, people often seek out new organizational contexts that will increase their sense of efficacy and authenticity (Thoits 2003). In some cases, religious choice might be seen as part of what Lichterman (2024:18) calls a “moral project” to “establish good personhood”. For example, the Catholic food-kitchen volunteers described by Allahyari (2000) sought to achieve a vision of their best moral selves via service. The volunteers in this study seemed motivated not by a vision of a future self, but by pragmatic decisions to find situations that were comfortable and validating for the people they already felt themselves to be. This type of life course agency (Hitlin and Elder 2007) may not have predictable consequences.

8.4 Conclusion

In this chapter I showed the complex interplay between religious engagement and volunteering on behalf of immigrants. At the level of abstract values, there seemed to be consistency among the volunteers regardless of their religious association. Religious affiliation for most volunteers seemed to be *downstream* from those moral values. The seekers often still associated the source of those values in religion, but looked for comfortable religious contexts where they could be true to them. The non-believers in the pews sought to leverage the resources provided in religious contexts while remaining loosely connected. And leavers cited moral reasons for

leaving religion, but still engaged with organizations that depend ed on religious solidarity for both their creation and continued existence.

The fall of religious affiliation combined with the continued dependence of care on religious organizations has worried social analysts for the last quarter century (Wuthnow 1998). One consequence of this fall that seems ripe for further research is the secularization of formerly religious institutions of care, as was the case for CV. In a parallel move, Lutheran Community Services, which focused on resettlement of refugees who are often not Christian, rebranded itself as Inspiritus in the South, and its Lutheran roots are no longer accessible on its website without concerted searching (Inspiritus 2018). But it remains to be seen whether this type of transition will be eroded by a type of “drop-in” volunteering that satisfies volunteers needs to affirm their moral identity without generating solidarity that sustains institutions over the long term (Wuthnow 1998).

9 Service or Solidarity

I want to voice again that I believe volunteers in this organization have some internal work to do around the root causes of these feelings of anger and frustration...and how they may be tied to bias and some of the systems of oppression we're all living within. – Email from a WIA volunteer

Volunteer organizations like WIA are often criticized for “putting band-aids on problems that require surgery” (Eliasoph 2013:8) and focusing on providing opportunities for volunteers to feel good about themselves rather than solving the broader conditions that underlie the need. Volunteers often seek to perform services that are “immediate, charitable and therapeutic” (Piliavin, Grube, and Callero 2002:469), and non-profit organizations seek to provide those opportunities while appealing to donors that fund their continuing operations. In many cases, the culture of care-giving organizations suppresses talk of political solutions in the name of a lowest-common-denominator culture of polite helping (Bender 2003; Eliasoph 2003). Worse still, critics argue that the provision of care perpetuates domination, as the warm glow volunteers

receive from helping mitigates the discomfort of privileged volunteers that might otherwise translate into political activism. This criticism has particularly been leveled at organizations that rely on “nice white ladies” who view themselves as “white saviors” volunteering to help people of color (Daniels 2021).

Certainly, many of these criticisms can apply to WIA, which is an organization devoted to helping while avoiding political activism. However, a theme of this dissertation has been that relationships and experiences in new social contexts often transform the shape of concern of potential volunteers. That transformation does not end with the decision to volunteer. Indeed, an assumption that volunteering serves only to reinforce existing understandings and positions runs contrary to the central idea that the shape of concern evolves throughout the life course. Providing care can lead to changed understandings and political commitments among volunteers, both through their interactions with the people for whom they care, and through their interactions with other volunteers and the organization. Progressive era activist and sociologist Jane Addams encouraged people to embrace the “perplexity” that could result from putting themselves in positions to help others. That experience could “challenge and transform your most dearly held assumptions about how to be a good person” (Eliasoph 2013:42), and lead to an understanding that political action can eliminate the need for care.

Unfortunately, we know little about how different practices of care and organizational structures might align with these different possible trajectories of concern for volunteers. Do organizations like WIA attract people who prioritize their own satisfaction and are satisfied with helping those who are harmed by a system they implicitly support? Alternately, do practices

of care, interactions among volunteers, and relationships between volunteers and those being served promote deeper empathy and a willingness to change the system even in the absence of short term rewards?

As I have argued elsewhere in this dissertation, such transformation might not be visible in most circumstances. Most behavior is habitual, and the shape of concern is only revealed when people feel that they have a problem and make life choices to solve it. If volunteering in an organization like WIA becomes a habit, there may be little to reveal the different ways the experience might be changing people. In fact, organizational scholars have argued that as people perform different roles they develop different perspectives that only become visible “faultlines” at times of organizational crisis (Dyck and Starke 1999; Lau and Murnighan 1998). Lau and Murnighan (1998) argued that two different types of events might precipitate these crises. Similar to Fligstein and McAdam (2012), they highlight the tendency of external forces that impinge on the organization to lead to organizational fracture. In addition, Lau and Murnighan (1998) highlight the way changes within an organization can lead to fracture. In particular, hidden faultlines tend to become visible when organizational newcomers ascend to leadership roles without a full understanding of the organization’s culture.

In 2024, towards the end of my time volunteering, WIA encountered an organizational crisis that revealed hidden faultlines and distinct motivations among groups of volunteers. Conflict over limited resources led to Noreen, the leader of visitation volunteers, leaving the organization. Board and staff transitions led to disputes about organizational priorities, and WIA encountered competition from La Lucha, an activist organization that disdained WIA’s

non-confrontational approach to helping. Like a geologist who happens to be near a fault at the time of an earthquake, I was able to observe innocuous-seeming divisions expand into deep rifts under stress. Under those conditions, distinct positions, subcultures, and motivations underlying different practices of care became more clear, and provided an ideal case to examine how experiences providing care within the organization changed the perspectives and priorities of volunteers.

In this chapter I highlight distinct trajectories for two groups of volunteers that were revealed during this crisis. The WIA volunteers who established long-term relationships with immigrants in detention followed a different path from those whose interactions with visitors tended to be short term. The long-term visitors embraced a politicized mode of care that relied on three things. First, long-term connection with people in detention provided an emotionally motivating understanding of system harms. Second, a book group provided a culturally appropriate venue for this largely homogenous group of educated white women to tie the harms they were seeing to larger systems. Third, the homogeneity of the group eased communication and enabled support through the difficult emotions engendered via the volunteer process. In contrast, the somewhat more diverse welcoming group proved committed to performing their tasks in a non-politicized context, despite challenges from within and outside the organization. When their challengers – who prioritized structural change over one-on-one care – left the field, WIA volunteers continued supplying “bandaids,” that nonetheless were helpful to immigrants in the moment.

9.1 Sociological Background

Sociologists have long held that apparent acts of charity can often be a manifestation of power relations and a tool for maintaining them. As Mauss ([1925] 2002) pointed out, gift giving is often a way of establishing a status hierarchy and prolonged dependency. Yet when people perform acts of charity, they feel a genuine sense of satisfaction tied to helping improve conditions for those less fortunate. For Bourdieu (1990), the sincere warm glow people feel when giving to others is a “subjective truth” that hides the “objective truth” of how charity perpetuates domination.

Yet one cannot simply assume that volunteer care work serves only entrench pre-existing attitudes and structures of oppression. Jane Addams rather harshly criticized the “charitable visitor” of her day for sitting in judgment of poor families, but she also described the “perplexity” that results from engaging in a new situations, and how a new understanding of the systems of oppression can arise from engagement in the realities of the lives of the poor (Addams 1899). For example, Addams describes a well-heeled young woman who aims to provide charity, encountering the justice system for the first time.

To her mind, the courts can do no wrong. To be sure she has never come in contact with them, and she is shocked as she gradually discovers that the courts are used for justice or revenge exactly according to the ethical development of the plaintiff.
(Addams 1899:174)

While Addams’ observations about how new understandings arise from experience in novel

social environments is important, volunteering is not simply the act of an individual inserting themselves into a new situation; it happens in the context of organizations. Those organizations take on different forms (Clemens 1993; DiMaggio and Powell 1983), and offer different cultural styles and resources that constrain, shape, and enable actors within the organization as well as capacities for action of the organization itself (Carlsen et al. 2021; Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; Lichterman 2006). Clemens (1997) explains that experience in organizations provides people with an “organizational repertoire” that they can apply in new situations, reusing the modes of action from one sphere to create novel organizational forms and capacities.

Importantly, when volunteers provide care to people across lines of difference in class and culture, they simultaneously interact with other people in the organization who may or may not share their culture and ideology, and may contribute to volunteers’ understanding of the work they do. Clemens notes that beyond serving as a way to achieve immediate goals and solve problems, organizations are “arenas in which preferences and values are discovered” (1997:11). A similar theme appears in the broader collective action literature which highlights that collective identities are both a cause of social movements and a product of participation in social movements (Polletta and Jasper 2001). In this sense simply acting in the way prescribed by an organization becomes an “immanent good” that satisfies people’s desires. A collective identity can be as simple as “we are people who do these sorts of things in this particular way” (Clemens 1997).

“Cultural repertoires” (Lichterman 1995:6) are an important component of organizational repertoires. Eliasoph and Lichterman have been particularly attentive to the role of group

culture in shaping civic action and volunteering (Eliasoph 2003, 2011, 2013; Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; Lichterman 2006, 2012, 2020, 2024; Lichterman and Eliasoph 2014). They argue that it is important to attend to locally shared group cultures to understand how groups make meaning and enable or discourage patterns of action. Differences in culture within the organization can yield acrimony and division. In other cases organizations with highly aligned political goals may have difficulty working together because the styles of cultural interaction clash (Lichterman 2006, 2024).

Lichterman (2024:18) argues that there is a moral component to group style, and individuals “may gravitate toward or away from a perceived style of action depending partly on how they understand themselves in moral terms.” He cites the example of a minister in a liberal congregation with a cultural style that emphasized the moral importance of inclusivity and the ability of each individual to express a personal point of view. The minister found her interactions with an exclusive Christian congregation that preferred a unified voice from authority discomfiting, despite shared goals and Christian beliefs. To her, the idea of exclusivity was “morally puzzling and hurtful” (Lichterman 2024:22).

Allahyari (2000) found that for some of the white, educated, food kitchen volunteers she studied, volunteering was part of a deliberate effort towards personal moral improvement. Yet the interactions of those women were largely with one-another, not with the people they served. Their aim of unquestioning Christian charity did not lead to what Addams would call “perplexity.”

Eliasoph and Lichterman cite Bender’s (2003) work on volunteers who cooperated to provide

food for people with AIDS as an example of how some organizational cultures might suppress difference in order to enable a subset of actions on which all parties can agree. In that case, a shared “courteous, nonpushy” style of interaction bred solidarity, even though ideology and culture that volunteers brought to the work from their outside lives differed.

In a case very relevant to this work, Yukich et al. (2020) studied ally immigrant rights organizations. Using ideas from Lichterman (1995), they note that “personalized politics”, “an organizational culture common among U.S.-born, middle-class, white people that emphasizes intensively participating individuals who are articulate and confident in self-presentation” (Yukich et al. 2020:492), often leads to high levels of engagement among highly educated people like volunteers from WIA, but can inhibit connections with groups that they attempt to serve. They note that “even ally organizations that strongly aspire to involve immigrants often lack substantial immigrant involvement” (Yukich et al. 2020:492), because of the cultural styles they employ. This mode of personalized politics can be seen as a way that “racialized organizations enhance or diminish the agency of racial groups” (Ray 2019:26) through practice, while simultaneously working for broader inclusion.

In other cases, organizations can contribute to the construction of an oppositional consciousness. Nepstad and Smith (2001) describe the rise of support for the Central American Peace movement as the product of three things. First, church members learned information from missionaries who were trusted members of the community, a process that contributed to “cognitive accessibility,” an openness to information that might not have been accessible via other means. Second, network connections tied members to Central Americans and to a community

of like-minded others. Third those network ties reflected — and were a causal contributor to — a shared, emotionally motivating, moral framework that contributed to the moral outrage that drove church members to action.

Lichterman also finds cases where group culture can change via engagement. In a study of white churches that largely failed in their goal to “weave a new safety net” for Black communities in the wake of welfare reform, one group moved from a “volunteer style” involving a giver and a receiver to a more effective partnership. Members of that group made clear “that they did not want to be like the volunteers that ethnographers love to hate” (Lichterman 2005:203).

In the current case it is important to attend to the sources of change in both individuals and organizations. What is the role of “perplexity”, prompted by interactions in a new social context in shaping individual perceptions? How do individuals leverage the repertoires of action that they accumulated in other organizational contexts to power organizational change? Where do cultures of interaction lead to conflict, and where does the suppression of conflict enable action that would otherwise not occur?

9.1.1 WIA’s non-political approach

From the beginning, WIA positioned itself as a non-political organization. I spoke to four board chairs, and all echoed the same line. Kari was the driving force in starting WIA who had left the organization years before I started my research. She told me she considered immigration policy horrible, but opposed closing down the detention center, saying, “If there is a detention

center, and there is, let it be [here] where people care. Look what happened. This amazing organization came up and came together and did an amazing thing.” When I asked if she felt that the organization should do political advocacy, she said, “if your organization is there to serve immigrants in detention ...and you can just read the mission statement straight up, that’s what it is... Stay on point. We are here to serve the immigrants in detention.” Her successor, Phillip, the retired Episcopal priest told me the same thing, as did Thomas, the older Asian man who led the board through the COVID crisis and was in charge when I started doing my research.

This reticence at challenging ICE was widespread among volunteers, but not universal. I had learned from Noreen, the volunteer who coordinated visitation and answered calls from people in detention, that a policy of non-confrontation had been a source of intra-organization contention for years. It came out during a fight over a state law to prohibit private detention centers. Noreen, told me, “I have issues with WIA because they they’re claiming neutrality. And I, I, my position is that it’s not an ethical position to be neutral on this topic.” Noreen once told me, “I don’t think I’m an activist. But I do think I’m an advocate. And that is one of my issues with WIA, if you’re going to call yourself an advocate for immigrants in detention, that we need to start advocating. And so that means getting political.”

The facade of neutrality was broken when Phillip, who was board chair at the time, sent a letter to the editor of a local news outlet saying that he didn’t think the center should be closed down, because services like WIA’s would not be available elsewhere. Noreen challenged the board to change positions. Under pressure, the board eventually endorsed a petition against

private detention, and the law was passed, only to be rendered moot by the federal courts, which ruled that state law could not override federal immigration operations.

Still, years later at a WIA community meeting at a progressive church in town, Phillip, now frail, but still passionate, repeated the idea that seemed to be an article of faith among a large subset of the volunteers. He did not want the detention center shut down because the detainees would just be moved to places that didn't have the support system provided by WIA. Of course this idea also aligned with organizational imperatives to continue operation and volunteers' investment in the warm-glow they received from volunteering.

After that meeting, a middle aged woman representing a Latine organization told me that Phillip's statement was so triggering she had to leave the room to collect herself. She said she had been held in detention where she was hosed down "like an animal" more than 15 years before. Though she had appreciated the help she received from organizations like WIA, she could not understand how anyone that supported immigrants could also support the existence of such a place. Yet she said nothing publicly.

Edie, the first employee of the WIA who went on to become executive director, was focused on helping, and not on structural or political change. She once told me that her idol growing up was Mother Theresa. When she left her job in banking to take what was then a part-time job as WIA program manager, she felt she was moving in that direction. Like Mother Theresa, Edie concerned herself with people's immediate needs, not the factors that led to them to be in need. Edie didn't want to do anything to upset her contacts at ICE or the detention center, because she thought they improved her ability to help. She was able to arrange for them to call

and let WIA know how many people would be released each day, and had once served as an intermediary between ICE and the health department during COVID.

During the period I worked with WIA, the non-confrontational approach extended to interactions among volunteers, who went out of their way to praise one-another.

9.1.2 WIA's Dominant White Culture

It may seem a step too far to say that the culture of the organization represented a white default when Edie, the executive director, was a Latina, and Thomas, the board chairman at the time I began volunteering, was the child of a Chinese immigrant, but the auction the organization hosted as a fundraiser in early 2024 made it clear that the organization's funders were largely white.

Almost all of the people in the Catholic Church social hall were non-Hispanic white Americans. There were a few people of color there, but most of them seemed to be performing. In a bit of synergy encouraged by a funder of both organizations, a local non-profit "refugee choir" sang as entertainment. The choir, with immigrants from a variety of countries, was led by the Anglo woman who founded it¹, and sang songs that in my notes I called "cloyingly unobjectionable" including the song "Peace, Salaam, Shalom," and one written by a local immigrant containing the lines "This is my home, don't treat me this way, I'm just like you."

The short speech by the board chair of WIA was given by Madison, a young white woman. I knew that Thomas had left the board, but a few months later his expected successor was

¹At this writing she is no longer the director of the organization, and it is led by an Asian American man.

no longer serving. I learned later that Madison, who grew up in an Irish Catholic enclave in Chicago and spoke only English, had been an ESL learning specialist in schools, and worked as principal of a school with a large immigrant population during COVID before taking maternity leave and joining private industry. With a less demanding job, she searched online for volunteer opportunities that would allow her to work with immigrants and joined the WIA board.

Three months later, though she had little knowledge of immigration policy or the organization's volunteer operations, Madison volunteered to become board chair. Madison's ascent to board chair fits the description of a newcomer in a position of power that organizational scholars warn about being a common precedent to organizational fracture. Madison shared with me that she took on the role partly because she felt that board meetings were not professionally managed. She said "I can't prepare myself to come to a meeting each month where we don't get anything done and where there's no law and order. And so I was like, I'll be the chair because I also was like I can run a meeting" Madison told me that the management and financial acumen she gained from her time as a principal, along with a doctorate in "Organizational Change and Leadership" she had earned remotely would serve her well as a board member. In the first online meeting she held with volunteers, I noted that she had absorbed a corporate communication style. In sentences where she pushed back on a premise, she always used the conjunction "AND" (instead of "but"), and went out of her way to validate everyone and praise as many people as possible.

In the months after Madison took over, several board members resigned the board. She told me, "I will say I didn't push anybody out and I didn't ask anybody to leave. I think change can

be really good.” Since Thomas and a young Latina who had family experience with detention had ended their terms on the board, the board included no members who had any personal or immediate family experience with immigration, though Madison told me she was hoping to recruit some. With Edie now a full-time executive director, and the loss of Thomas, who had treated the position as a second job, the board had transitioned from being a working board to a governing board focused on funding and managing the executive director, rather than one focused on the way the organization provided services. That transition is a common point of turmoil in non-profits (Murray 1996).

9.2 A community of visitors

Noreen was one of WIA’s most dedicated volunteers at the time I arrived, spending her time organizing volunteers to visit immigrants in detention, answering calls from people in detention on WIA’s “hotline,” which was forwarded to her personal cell phone, and frequently visiting in the detention center. A warm and engaging woman with wavy white hair, Noreen’s penchant for wearing turquoise jewelry reflected her roots in Arizona. She had grown up there in a conservative Christian sect, where she said, “I was told that it was good that I was smart, because I would produce smart men.” Noreen married a man from the same church, but she and her husband left the church together.

Noreen got engaged in immigration politics more than a decade earlier. Noreen had come to the Arizona state capital to advocate for cancer care funding when some women mistreated a

group of Latino students who were lobbying against Arizona's restrictive immigration laws.

these women came by and said, "Anchor babies go back to Mexico," and they were so awful. And I went over to them like "you can't talk to children like that." And they were they were just so horrendous. And so then the kids came over, and they're like, "Oh, thank you for talking to them." And I'm like, no, no, no, what's going on here? And so I talked to them more. And then I met some other people who were involved in marching against [anti-immigration laws]. And so I did some of those marches with them. And that's when I got connected to the [Unitarian Universalist] church for those marches.

Through the church she connected with Freedom For Immigrants, an organization founded by white academics², and was introduced to the practice of visiting immigrants in detention to offer support, but also to better understand and communicate the conditions in detention.

[I]t seemed to me at some point like that I needed to get my hands dirty, and my feet wet and really talk to people and see what was going on. Right? And so that's when the visitation thing felt like the right thing. Because then it's getting down in there. You're talking to people, you're seeing what's really going and I thought that I would still do that the highest form of advocacy really, is being the eyes and ears of the community and talking to people about what I see and when really

²FFI leadership changed during the period of my study, as leaders with immigrant roots took over. The organization spent 8 months in a "chrysalis phase" and emerged with a broader abolitionist agenda, while terminating its bond fund.

what's going on

When Noreen moved from Arizona, WIA was a relatively new organization but had already established a network of volunteers. Noreen introduced the idea of visitation to Kari, who took it on. Following Clemens (1997), this was an example of Noreen introducing a mode of action from her own organizational repertoire into a new organizational context. When Kari left WIA, Noreen put her own stamp on the group. "I wanted a community," she said, "I wanted a community of people who were visiting a community of people."

For Noreen it was important for her community of visitation volunteers to focus on the wellbeing of the immigrants in detention and to lose the "white savior attitude" she felt she herself had demonstrated in the early days of her immigration activism. She told me, "I'm really ashamed that I felt that way. Now, looking back, because I didn't quite understand that I was trying to be a white savior."

To her, the warm-glow that many volunteers felt was something to be resisted as a motivation.

[O]ften, when people do get involved, firstly, it's about how it makes them feel, right? This, this makes me feel good, right? Or, this makes me feel powerful, or this makes me feel all these things. But what's really important is getting over that because that's just being self obsessed. What's important is understanding the whole. the... as an individual we can, we can do stuff to change things. But we can only do it best if we're not focusing on ourself.

Noreen sought to inculcate that idea in other volunteers and started a book club aimed at

“understanding immigration at its base, really, really understanding it.” The first book they read, before the series of books on immigration, was *White Fragility* (DiAngelo 2018). She said, “we needed to kind of make sure that we weren’t being white saviors and understand our whiteness, and understand that we weren’t going into save people, we were actually acknowledging what was going on.” Implicit in the focus on that book was the fact that all of the people in the book club were in fact white.

Subsequent books focused on immigration and the border, including first person narratives, reportorial works on the border and migration, and works advocating for open borders. Noreen showed real skill in coordinating the book club in a way that attracted the educated volunteers she worked with, and shaped their views.

Amanda, who also volunteered at the Welcome Center, was one of the regulars in the book group. In contrast to the gregarious Noreen, Amanda was a shy, outdoorsy woman who was reticent when I first asked her why she volunteered. She told me, “I don't know. I don't. I do it to practice my Spanish.” But when I interviewed her, I found out that not only had Amanda served in the Peace Corps in Central America, Amanda’s husband was an immigrant from Asia, they adopted two children who had been refugees, and they had lived abroad as a family. One reason Amanda gave for volunteering was a sense of duty. She told me, “I don’t know that I could be a happy person,” without volunteering. “It wouldn’t feel good to know that that’s who I am.”

Amanda spent years visiting people detained inside the detention center, despite the fact that it made her profoundly sad at times. Amanda visited one woman in detention for 9 months, and

grew close to her, saying, “I think that’s why it was so special because yeah, I think she could see that I cared for her truly. I mean, it wasn’t pretend.” But in Amanda’s view the relationship ended tragically.

[W]hat was so difficult was knowing that we are both human beings. We’re both close to the same age. And yet I am here, free, plenty of money, happy life, whatever. And she is there, had struggled all her life to get there and had nothing to show for it and was going to get deported. Oh, we didn’t know that then, but she did get deported.”

It wasn’t her visitation experiences alone that converted her sense of duty and emotional experience into a deeper understanding of immigration. The book club contributed as well. There she read books that she said she would never have read on her own, including ones that were “a slog.” Amanda commented on how before reading a book on open borders, “I thought, there’s no way that could work. I can’t even wrap my head around the concept of it.” Yet she found herself agreeing with the premise of the book: “what they were saying was the way that we can go anywhere, pretty much, with our passport, it would be like that. People can just go wherever they want to go, like we can.”

Pamela was another volunteer whose horizons had expanded through travel. She grew up in a rural white town, but studied in Mexico during college. Soon after graduating, Pamela got involved in the travel industry, eventually starting a company that organized trips to Latin America, where she made lasting friendships. Some of Pamela’s charitable instincts can easily

described as “white saviorism.” She told me about the excitement of a girl whose care Pamela sponsored through a Mexican orphanage. Pamela showed an affinity for Latinos that invites criticism as exoticism, but also motivated her to begin helping detained immigrants. She told me, “[WIA] came into the picture when we moved down here and I really needed to be involved in Latin America. Latin America is my thing. Latinos, if I’m not around Latinos, I don’t feel right.”

Yet “being around Latinos” in this context had a different effect than spending time with friends, or giving money to provide care for (presumably) innocent children. Pamela told me her experience visiting had a major impact on her.

I have to say, when I went through that big, thick door, and it slammed behind me, and you have to knock to get out. You can’t just walk out. So you are behind glass, there is a telephone...every time that door slammed, I felt the the claustrophobia or the the feeling that I can’t get out of here because guards don’t like me, you know.

Pamela visited a number of people, and was most affected by the 8 months she visited a convicted felon who had served his time and was fighting deportation. “I mean, I would actually cry in the car on the way home just to get it out. And I mean, these are awful things you hear sometimes you just can’t believe how some of the guards treated them. But worse yet, how they were treated in their country.”

Pamela participated in the book club and told me that Noreen is “really good on educating us

on immigration.” Though Pamela had a more centrist political outlook than Noreen she said, “But we feel the same way. About the crazy. We need immigration reform terribly. She’s for abolition, complete abolition and free open borders. I’m not there yet.” The inclusion of “yet”, in Pamela’s response implied that she was still on a journey.

9.2.1 An independent group forms

Noreen had issues with Edie, the WIA executive director, who in Noreen’s view focused too much on the Welcome Center and did not appreciate the importance of supporting people while they were in detention. Most of the people detained in the detention center would never encounter the Welcome Center, because they would be deported directly from ICE custody. Yet Noreen claimed Edie had never personally visited immigrants while they were in detention.

There had been prior conflict between the two about the organization’s cooperation with ICE. Noreen told me that Edie, “has written on some of these, these things that our partners are at ICE and [the company that ran the detention center]. I’m like, ‘take that off. You can’t say that.’ You can’t say that. Even though we do have a working relationship, we, they’re not our partner.” Noreen said, “We’re obviously on the other side of ICE on political matters...nobody should be in detention. They really shouldn’t. I do believe that.”

The immediate cause of the rift was not over advocacy, but a fight over the allocation of resources, specifically the limited phone funds WIA distributed to people in detention each month. Noreen wanted to make sure people her group visited always received phone funds so

they could stay in contact, but Edie implemented a first-come-first-serve system. The recent college graduate who served as WIA's volunteer coordinator told me she felt trapped in the middle of the two older women, as Edie directed her to write confrontational emails. She was brought to tears after one such exchange, and in response Edie cut off Noreen's access to the phone hotline and the mailing list she had been using to communicate with other visitation volunteers.

Without phone or email access Noreen said "there's no reason for me to be involved with them." Several dedicated visitation volunteers who had also been regular donors withdrew their support from WIA. After leaving WIA, Noreen initiated her own visitation group, building around the book group she had established previously.

Eliasoph and Lichterman (2003) highlight the importance of styles of interaction in the maintenance of group culture. The group of educated white women in the new independent visitation group developed a culture distinct from WIA in a space largely defined in monthly zoom meetings and an email list. In one of these meetings I was the only man among 11 white women, 10 of whom were over 50 years old.

Book group meetings were actually mostly focused on news about visitation. Noreen began with a round robin review of the results of visitation – who was writing or visiting whom, and what they were hearing from inside. Reports included not only what the people they were visiting experienced, but also what they learned about conditions of others in the facility. Volunteers supported one another through their sadness following deportation of people they visited, and passed on advice, including things like contact information for organizations

serving people who have been recently deported to Mexico. The discussions of books were in-depth, and Noreen solicited opinions from everyone who read them.

Free from restrictions on politics, the independent group was also able to attract members who had previously chafed at WIA's non-political stance. One of those people was Janet, a retired professor in a biological science. Janet's father was from a Mexican-American family, and Janet had volunteered in support of immigrants in detention for years in another state before she retired. Janet told me she had started that work because she was, "furious at President Obama's immigration policies," toward Latinos and that she felt people from outside that community didn't understand how bad he was. Janet was already engaged in immigrant policy and legal support organizations and had contacts with both La Lucha and WIA, but hadn't joined either. She soured on some of LL's tactics, but also wasn't a fan of WIA's non-political approach. Janet was careful to distinguish her volunteering from charity. With charity she said, "I'm not really solving the problem. In fact, it's really good that you're poor and helpless, because that makes me feel better about myself."

Between meetings, in addition to visitation, members sent near daily group emails containing links to news reports about recent ICE actions, and opportunities for political action that would have been heavily discouraged on the WIA mailing list. Amanda figured out how to use an existing non-profit to transfer money to immigrants in detention via postal money orders, giving the recipients options about how to spend their money – for example for phone services or commissary. It turned out, that at least for visiting, there was no inherent conflict between being politically active and providing care.

9.3 Emergence of solidarity among welcomers

While Noreen's independent group of visitors had its roots in the book club that Noreen had initiated among a largely homogenous subset of volunteers, the somewhat more diverse volunteers who worked at the Welcome Center developed a sense of solidarity only after having their resources threatened.

In this case the threats to their resources came from both WIA board and staff who targeted the material resources upon which the volunteers relied, as well as limitations on the resource that was most central to their commitment, a supply of released immigrants for the volunteers to help. That supply was limited by more restrictive asylum policies implemented by the Biden administration as well as new competition from a competing organization with a very different group style and goals from WIA.

9.3.1 La Lucha

The organization I call La Lucha (LL) had been organizing protests and political action to fight immigrant detention for almost as long as WIA had been working outside the detention center. La Lucha maintained communication with immigrants in detention, working with them to organize hunger strikes within the detention center and publicize them on the outside. They also regularly organized protests outside the detention center. Yet even WIA volunteers who agreed with the goal of shutting the detention center had issues with La Lucha, which sometimes reflected issues with La Lucha's confrontational group style.

Though Noreen and La Lucha agreed on the goal of abolishing immigration detention, they did not behave as allies. Noreen and Janet independently told me that they had heard La Lucha would only support detained immigrants who participated in resistance, which they felt amounted to “buying” cooperation. But Noreen had respect for La Lucha, despite their very different cultural repertoire. She told me, “I don’t really like the way they go about things. However, I do appreciate that they’re trying to close down the center, and that they’re very, very political. Sometimes I think they lie. Sometimes I think they over exaggerate. But the fact is, they’re, they’re on it. They’re on it.”

In fact, after breaking with WIA, Noreen said she hoped to cooperate with La Lucha. “I’d like to somehow find a bridge to meet on with [La Lucha](#). And maybe Janet can help me do that with a little group of white people.” But Noreen feared that La Lucha wasn’t interested

they don’t like us, because we’re not... We’re white saviors, right. Like, we’re just trying to come in and be safe. And, you know, that’s, yes, I’m white. But I’m really, I see something, an injustice going on. It’s my responsibility as a citizen to do something about it.

Despite the differences in group style, and the direct conflict of goals between La Lucha and WIA, they had operated independently in the same broad field without open conflict for years. But in Spring 2024, La Lucha organized a vigil outside the detention center after an immigrant died in detention. On the first day of the vigil, I happened to be visiting someone in detention with Noreen. We left the detention center to see LL had set up temporary shelters between the

gate where immigrants were released and the WIA Welcome Center. One shelter was a shrine to the immigrant who had died, with flowers and candles.

La Lucha was officially a leaderless organization, but the founder of La Lucha, a formerly undocumented woman who was unrelenting in her goal that the detention center be closed down, was the center of attention. I spoke to her as other people were setting up loudspeakers for the coming protest. As we spoke, a large bearded young white man with their group stood close to me unsmiling with crossed arms. I couldn't help wondering if this was their "muscle." I asked her what next steps they planned now that federal courts had overturned the state law passed specifically to close private detention centers. She said, "We don't rely on the court and we don't rely on the law. We're gonna shut the motherfucker down." I didn't understand how that was going to happen, but she declined to be interviewed further, and rejected subsequent requests to interview La Lucha members.

With their tents set up closer to the exit of the detention center than WIA's Welcome Center, La Lucha maintained a daily presence there for the coming months, often greeting released immigrants before they encountered WIA's volunteers. La Lucha's primary intent was to interview people released from detention to find out information they could use in their campaign to shut down the center. They asked WIA volunteers not to interfere with their work, and offered some of the services arranging travel that WIA did.

The different group styles and emotion cultures of the organizations were quite apparent. In the LL tents were hand-written poster board signs. One was headed "Community Agreements" including admonitions against "loud talking and laughter" during leaders' media sessions and a

prohibition on “physical fighting.” It would have been hard to imagine the WIA manual, with its detailed instructions on how to order airline tickets, fill out forms, and account for petty cash, needing any such admonitions.

In an effort to make friends, WIA volunteers offered rides, clothing and food to released immigrants in the LL tents, but LL did not want their help most of the time. Mike, the older man who maintained the WIA RV said in a group email “If they eventually see we share many of the same goals, the guests will have all the more assistance. Loving, gentle cooperation is the key!”

It soon became clear that one of the things that was upsetting Welcome Center volunteers was the fact that with LL dealing with many released immigrants, they didn’t get the warm glow from helping the few people who tended to be released each day. As Biden cracked down on asylum seekers, the number of releases tended to be small even before LL showed up. On one slow day Connie, a retired librarian, had objected when a different WIA volunteer who had signed up only to be a driver worked with a guest when Connie didn’t have anything to do. She told me, “it pissed me off. And I said something to him, and he apologized quite a few times. But that we have some kind of organization to it so we’re not like fighting over them.” For Connie, at least, released immigrants were a resource to “fight over,” in search of warm glow, in addition to being people who needed care in a difficult situation.

Less than a month after LL arrived, grumbling had started among some Welcome Center volunteers. Ironically, a couple of those WIA volunteers had actually participated in protests that La Lucha led at the detention center. Lois was no stranger to protest. An artistic retired

teacher who sometimes wore her shoulder-length gray hair in pigtails, Lois told me her first date with her husband was at an anti-nuclear demonstration. She had been one of a group of women who regularly dressed in black to protest the Iraq war. Lois told me,

We would stand on the corner [in a small nearby town] every Friday, protesting the war. And we aged together there, I was one of the younger ones. So we've lost a lot of the members, but there's people still connecting."

Lois had done both visitation and welcoming and had written her senators about immigration, but she found the issue of immigration more complex than her anti-war activism. She said, "To me, it's really convoluted, and inequitable. And so I can't put my emotional energies into that, because it's this huge system that I can't figure out, and I don't understand. So I gotta take it down to a more micro level." Micro level helping might also describe some of the work Lois had done in the past when she traveled to Asia and Central America and helped in programs that are often criticized as "voluntourism".

Despite her history of protest, Lois felt less comfortable when she attended protests led by La Lucha, perhaps demonstrating Lichterman's idea that people attach a moral value to the ways ideas are communicated. She said, "they were yelling at the ICE people to leave their jobs, etcetera. And it didn't build and foster any kind of communication and empathy and things like that." Lois told me that one of the appeals of welcoming was being able to "walk alongside" immigrants who had been released, but she was less interested in walking alongside (or perhaps behind) combative protest leaders.

After La Lucha began welcoming immigrants, Lois complained in a group email that, “They only want to communicate with us when we have a ride to offer, a porta potty or pop to share.” Lois added, “After all these years of running a caring and compassionate support system for the newly released guests, our services have been taken over almost completely by LL.” She hoped that the board leadership would meet with LL so that she could maintain “a positive welcoming vibe.”

Dorothy, a younger visitation volunteer who had grown frustrated with the American foreign aid system after serving in the Peace Corps and working for NGOs in Africa, pushed back, arguing that, “The most important thing is that they are cared for, not by who,” adding that immigrants might prefer to be greeted by “mostly by BIPOC folks and/or people with personal experience with immigration and detention.”

Tensions continued as the months went on. Walter, a Bernie Sanders supporter with a long gray ponytail, once signed off on an email that described his day volunteering, including the conflicts with LL, with a sardonic “La Lucha Sigue” (the fight continues) instead of his usual “Blessings.” By late summer, the number of WIA volunteers had dropped to the point that the Welcome Center couldn’t be fully staffed. One volunteer driver wrote “I know that my personal satisfaction is not the goal of WIA,” but added he didn’t want to play “lap dog” to LL. Dorothy pushed back again, saying

I want to voice again that I believe volunteers in this organization have some internal work to do around the root causes of these feelings of anger and frustration

with LL and how they may be tied to bias and some of the systems of oppression we're all living within.

Mike, who had previously pushed for "Loving gentle cooperation," said he resented the implication. He argued that all volunteers wanted was "to see the gratitude on the faces of the immigrants we serve." Though Mike did not realize it, this desire for gratitude was part of what Dorothy saw as a system of oppression. No longer interested in cooperation, Mike said "LL has consistently treated our volunteers with overt hostility," due to communication with ICE, and concluded that "Perhaps it is time for WIA to find some other way to serve."

Madison heard that the volunteers were frustrated with LL, and finally secured a meeting with LL leadership to try to patch things up. But Madison didn't understand that LL had no interest in cooperating with collaborators. After 6 months, Madison sent an email acknowledging an impasse.

We are two organizations that exist and are fueled by different missions that don't align in many ways and that is okay. We can coexist respectfully without direct collaboration. WIA supports an ongoing need that we see to help detainees both inside the detention center and upon their release, while LL's goal is "to shut down the [detention center], and to end all detentions and deportations in [our state]." **Both are valid perspectives and worthy struggles, but different work.**

(Emphasis in original)

9.3.2 Intra-WIA conflict

While the welcoming volunteers complained about LL and a number drifted away, it was actually a challenge from *within* WIA that triggered a united response from volunteers and revealed how committed they were to continue doing the work they had been doing at the Welcome Center. In the wake of Edie's conflict with Noreen and fundraising shortfalls, Edie resigned as executive director under pressure. The board hired Yvette, an African-American woman with extensive fundraising experience to take Edie's place. Despite Yvette's lack of a background in immigration, Madison said, "[We have a] fully white board. And this person was a person of color. That's a strength."

With the board and staff led by newcomers, and an external challenge from La Lucha, both of Lau and Murnighan's (1998) triggers for organizational division manifested themselves within WIA. A few months after hiring Yvette, with no warning to the volunteers, the board sent out a mail saying that the organization was going to run out of money within two months if changes were not made. The mail said that the board had decided to give up the lease on the hospitality house, and sell the RV that had provided power and secure storage for the phones, electronics, food and clothing used in the Welcome Center tents.

While Noreen's abolitionist "community of visitors" was composed almost entirely of older white women, the loose group of 10 to 20 volunteers who aligned to protect the Welcome Center was somewhat more diverse. Several immigrant volunteers were prominent members.

As I mentioned in Chapter 6, Kurniawan's family migrated from Indonesia when he was

an adolescent in the wake of attacks on ethnically Chinese Indonesians. He had served in the National Guard after 9/11, a decision he came to regard as “fucking stupid.” Now a financial advisor, Kurniawan’s Libertarian politics were not aligned with the left-of-center or progressive politics of other volunteers, and he preferred to keep political advocacy out of WIA.

José had been an undocumented immigrant from Mexico as a child. He reentered with a visa to attend college and was now a professor at a community college. A soft-spoken, conciliatory presence, he sometimes became emotionally overwhelmed by the hardships immigrants in detention endured. A third immigrant, Rhonda, fit the “nice white ladies” stereotype in some ways, but had negative experiences with the immigration system when her family, including a child with a cognitive disability, moved to the U.S. from Canada.

Bryce, the de facto leader of the volunteer group, was not an immigrant, but grew up in a large Catholic family of “Kennedy Democrats” committed to social change. Bryce owned and ran a seasonal business with his wife Karina, and they had become regular volunteers during the off-seasons. He initiated a series of meetings, both online and in person, to help organize Welcome Center volunteers’ response to the board. He said the meetings were to allow people to “vent and relent,” a phrase indicating that disgruntled volunteers would eventually have to accept the board’s choices.

At those meetings volunteers expressed a sense of betrayal. Rhonda had worked as a volunteer for over a decade. She collected and organized clothing and supplies as well as driving guests to the airport and bus station. She worried how volunteers would handle supplies without a locked space at the detention center. She said “Nobody asked me whether that would work out

at all. The lack of respect to the volunteers that they would ask us. They need to ask. I wish they would respect us and ask.” Lois complained about the amount of money going to salaries. “My heart goes out to our visitors and our guests. I feel like there’s such a disproportionate amount going out to salaries.”

Still, volunteers tried to make the changes work. Bryce worked with Madison and Yvette to help them compose communications that would be less likely to offend volunteers. Bryce and Karina offered their personal RV to replace the WIA RV. Bryce coordinated preparing the previous RV for sale and temporarily moved operations into his vehicle, which was smaller and had no electrical generator. He worked to find a buyer for the old RV, but the purchase fell through.

Criticism of the board grew over time. Bryce said he had started 10 non-profits and this board was “doing everything wrong.” He and Karina decided to take back their RV. “Basically this is going to be a message to the board that we are going to back off enabling their dysfunction, and besides, it makes little sense to have us worrying out our motorhome while WIA has a nice big RV there that they are taking no action to sell or replace.”

In an effort to change board priorities, Welcome Center volunteers decided that some of them should apply to be placed on the board. José and Rhonda both applied and interviewed with the board. José was appointed to the board while Rhonda was rejected, but was offered the role of “volunteer liaison” instead. After Rhonda was rejected, another member resigned from the board, citing a “culture of secrecy.”

9.4 WIA's Revival

The re-election of Donald Trump portended a revival at WIA. José joined the board, along with another Latina from an immigrant family. Yvette resigned as executive director. The money she had been hoping to raise did not come through, and she had difficult relations with the volunteers who thought the money from her salary should be spent on services. A part-time volunteer coordinator took on the lower-paid job Edie had held before becoming executive director, and WIA returned to its roots as a largely volunteer organization with minimal staffing. Madison moved away and left the board.

La Lucha members became a less regular presence through the fall, and they stopped welcoming immigrants completely before Trump took office, leaving a shrine and signs. The window of opportunity to “shut the motherfucker down” that they may have seen under Biden had been closed in the short term. However, as ICE abuse becomes more visible outside the formerly hidden world of immigration detention, and moral outrage grows, that window may open much more widely at the next change in government.

Moral outrage seems to have inspired a new wave of volunteers, as many new names appear on the duty rosters. There was a similar surge of new volunteers in the wake of the widely publicized child separation policies in Trump's first term.

9.5 Discussion and Conclusion

This chapter highlights the way that two distinct patterns of care align with distinct trajectories of political engagement. A politicized style of care became dominant in a largely homogenous group of white women who leveraged a culturally resonant set of practices to maintain solidarity. Yet these practices also limited the appeal to others who might be politically aligned. Conversely, WIA's non-political organizational culture facilitated solidarity among people who may not have shared broader cultural and political practices. A mode of helping frequently maligned as self-serving still turned out useful to people who needed care in the moment.

If these different groups of volunteers could be described as having a similar shape of concern that extended to immigrants in detention, the practices of care they chose both revealed and changed their personal commitments. Within WIA, resources accumulated within a non-political organization attracted people with varying underlying motivations. Though she regretted the “white savior” motivations she had in her earlier years, Noreen already had some sort of oppositional consciousness when she arrived at WIA many years before. The resources provided by WIA, including access to people, were useful enough that for years she continued to engage. By forming a book group, she was able to use a practice from a completely different organizational repertoire to achieve her goals of spreading a new understanding of immigrant detention. Yet this practice is quite culturally specific,³ and her “community of visitors”, was narrow even as they embraced further understanding across difference. Like the white women

³There is a dearth of peer reviewed research on the demographic composition, but one small study showed 93% of book group members were women (Sedo 2003).

attempting to develop an anti-racist consciousness described by Ball (2023), this effort could really only advance in a narrow group.

Unlike Ball's consciousness-raisers and Allahyari's food-kitchen volunteers, however, the moral growth the visitors sought was not enacted entirely within a narrow set of relationships. It was coupled with long-term, emotionally affecting (yet obviously deeply unequal), relationships with people in detention. The process of personal change was not simply intellectual, and the practice of visiting was not simply in search short term satisfaction, which rarely arrived. Like the case of Catholic Central American activists studied by Nepstad and Smith, communication about harms arrived via trusted emissaries, but in this case, the information came directly from people in detention. In both cases a shared moral framework and cultural background facilitated group bounds, but in the case of Noreen's group the moral framework had a distinctly non-religious, broadly humanist approach common to the educated white women in her group.

The paradox for this group of volunteers was the fact that their commitment to people who were very different from them was dependent on their own sameness to one another. Their shared culture was a barrier to trust and full cooperation with La Lucha. Further research is needed on the ways organizations that leverage sameness for internal solidarity can best cooperate in loosely coupled ways.

For the welcoming group, it was a suppression of difference and a focus on do-able tasks that allowed solidarity to form, based on their own shared interest, which was continuing to do the work they found rewarding. Like the blood donors studied by Piliavin and Callero (1991), helping immigrants in detention came to be a role that volunteers incorporated into their sense

of self. The critique that they were putting band-aids on a problem that needed surgery may be quite valid, but as long as the current political power structure holds, those band-aids will continue to be needed.

10 Conclusion

I began this dissertation with a vignette. Meredith found herself up in the middle of the night, trying to find a place to stay for a man she met that day, knowing that he would have difficulty finding for himself. In the moment, she was motivated by empathic concern for a specific person she had met and had, at least implicitly, taken responsibility for getting him safely to his family. But, why I asked, did she and the other volunteers show up outside the detention center in the first place, when they had no obvious ties to immigrants in detention, and very tenuous ties to one another. I asked how these volunteers came to prioritize care for immigrants in detention. Traditional explanations for care are rooted in interpersonal connections and shared identities, but those explanations don't explain why people go out of their way to help alters who are different from them. Conversely, explanations based in broad values like universalism cannot explain why volunteers chose to volunteer for this particular group of people.

The general problem is to understand the forces that affect the *shape of concern*, defined as *a pattern of attention and emotional response to others based on the attributes and situations of those others*. This particular case is a fruitful one for research because volunteering to provide

care is a decision that has consequences for future behavior, not simply a response within a situation. These volunteers made that choice on behalf of a group that is widely perceived as being undeserving of care in the United States. I asked, “*How does one become the sort of person* that classifies detained immigrants as deserving of care, and is motivated to help them?”

In focusing on the sort of person one is, this approach differs from those that attribute motivation to distinct identities, interests or values. The idea that people *have* interests and values, or for that matter social and role identities that can be separated from the integrated conscious and unconscious processes that shape behavior is a sometimes useful, but fundamentally inaccurate abstraction. What we really *have* is attention and emotion, the patterned, “loop of thought, feeling, intention and memory” (Hitlin 2011:522) that evolves through practice and constitutes the self. Choices reflect the motivations implicit in those emotions as constrained and enabled by the repertoires, resources, and opportunities available in the situations in which people find themselves.

Insights from the sociology of the life course were particularly helpful in understanding both how the volunteers in this study came to have detained immigrants in their shape of concern, and how they ended up in situations that provided opportunities to do so. The life course approach explicitly links personal relationships, historical contexts, life trajectories, and choices to resulting interests and obligations (Elder et al. 2003). The importance of what the life course model labels “linked lives”, is reflected in the importance of relationships to alters who might be subject to detention among many of the volunteers. I argued that when it comes to care, people are likely to care for unknown others who are like the people they already care

for, which is slightly different motivation than caring for those who are like themselves. This form of motivation is also seen as important by philosophers of care Schwitzgebel (2025) and Gopnik (2023), who point out that this idea originates with Confucian philosopher Mengzi, who argued that feeling compassion for others that we know is the sprout of care for those we do not know.

A second tenet of the life course model is that lives are “embedded and shaped by the historical times and places they experience over their lifetime” (Elder et al. 2003:30). One of the notable findings was that volunteers had experienced different places than the vast majority of Americans. Almost all of the volunteers had both lived abroad and the vast majority of them had grown up in the era of interest convergence when American public culture had projected an inclusive vision of the American ideal. Living in a context where the “generalized other” was not American changed the way these Americans viewed themselves. An internalized awareness of judgment from non-Americans led to a sense of spoiled identity for many volunteers. Providing care to immigrants in detention, was in many cases an effort to repair a spoiled American identity.

A third critical insight of the life course approach is that personal choices have lasting effects. Personal choices to *change* social contexts both affect people’s patterns of attention and emotion, and provide resources and opportunities to act. In many cases, the decision to live abroad was an explicit choice by volunteers, and it changed them in ways they didn’t expect. Another important choice that led to action on behalf of immigrants was religious choice. For these volunteers religion often served as an organizational context that enabled particular kinds

of social action, rather than a choice based on spiritual considerations. Volunteers used moral language to describe how they chose religious affiliation, only sometimes using religious *belief* as the reason for those moral commitments. Many volunteers had joined churches because they wanted to be able to act on their universalist ideals, and churches gave them the opportunity to do so. The causal arrow between church membership and moral values appeared to point a different direction than is often assumed.

Those personal choices and their contingent effects on the shape of concern included the choice to volunteer. Experiences within the volunteer group often deepened volunteers understanding of the structural causes of immigration detention, and led them to new understandings.

These findings have implications for future work in the sociology of morality, which I outline below.

10.1 Values and Contextual Choices

Not long before I began working on this dissertation my attention was captured by a public debate between prominent sociologists. John Levi Martin and Alessandra Lembo (2022) argued that the concept of *values* was a distraction for sociologists. They claimed that abstract values that people purported to hold and be motivating were essentially made-up categories that could be called upon for explanation. The seemingly reliable instruments that social psychologists use for measuring values are nothing more than the reliable ways that people know how to answer survey questions. For Martin and Lembo, only interests matter for action. They recognize that

people might have interests in the well being of others, and that those interests grow over time. It is from their paper that I drew the quote in chapter 2.

Given the sort of person one is, there is something that can awaken interest, and pull one in, increasing investment and thereby deepening interest [...] It is precisely by becoming one sort of person as opposed to another that we develop the capacity to be interested (Martin and Lembo 2020:87)

The same quote is highlighted by Paul Lichterman (2024) who argues that some interests are “moral interests”, and that people may devote themselves to moral projects aimed at becoming a better person. The example of Noreen attempting to shed her “white savior” attitude to align her actions with the larger goal of fighting immigrant detention is an example of someone working on a moral project. But the concept of moral interests appears to come full circle on Martin and Lembo’s article. We might ask, “What are ‘moral interests’ if not values?”

While it is famously difficult to see how values shape behavior, in this work volunteers seemed to make explicit choices to place themselves in situations where concrete actions that reflect their values are likely to be enabled. When Joanie first volunteered for WIA there were a number of forces pushing her in that direction: she wanted practice her Spanish, she had the opportunity to spend time the company of friends from church, she was activated by Trump’s child separation policy, and the opportunity was presented to her in the context of a church event that she attended for other reasons. If “values” were at work in the decision to volunteer at WIA, they were only one of several forces. But why was Joanie in Church in the first place?

In Chapter 8 I described Joanie's choice to join that parish because it was a place where religion "walked its talk." She left the parish when she felt it no longer did so, an indication that those values had a persistent influence on her choice of broad situations.

Twenty years before Martin and Lembo's dismissal of values, Steven Hitlin (2003) took the opposite position, placing values "at the core of the self," perhaps coincidentally using a study of volunteering as evidence. Hitlin (2003:124) claimed that values "are linked with situations in two important ways: (1) they operate within situations by affecting judgments and perceptions, and (2) they influence decisions about which situations we find most desirable." While it is critical to state the caveat that people usually don't have the resources or freedom to place themselves in situations as they please, Hitlin's second point seems to bear out in this study.

If sociologists are to look for evidence of the effect of values in behavior, I would argue that the choices that we should be looking for are choices to participate in social contexts, rather than the choices made *within* particular contexts. It is unclear if the Schwartz value model presented in Chapter 2 is an appropriate ground truth for such a conception of values, but if we are going to acknowledge the power of "moral interests," to shape such choices, there seems to be little reason to abandon the concept of values.

10.2 Sociology of the Life Course and Sociology of Morality

I have found the principles laid out in sociology of the life course particularly useful for understanding the evolution of the shape of concern. The subdiscipline is rooted in Glen Elder's study of the children of the great depression, and highlights the way stages in an individual's life course intersect with historical times and places that shape future outcomes. Much of the momentum of life course research was absorbed by demographers' wrestling with the difficult problems of unravelling age, period, and cohort effects using quantitative data. The original studies focus on what Elder called the "psychosocial change" in response to experiencing crisis at different life stages in the context of both family and the broader social environment. It seems that very little of this type of analysis has been done specifically into the way moral understandings and priorities are shaped by these intersections of life stages and broader societal change.

I have argued that the idealized vision of America that stemmed from the war was behind the emotional desire to redeem a spoiled American identity and as Erin said, "show that I disagree" with immigration detention that I saw in many volunteers. The corporate, media, and government support of the equality message made it a motivating force for the Gen X and Baby Boom volunteers decades later. While the shape of concern may vary according to individual life courses, broad ideologies are products of broad social forces. We can conceptualize motivating feelings being rooted in a Gramscian hegemonic discourse, in a Durkheimian experience of the rituals behind American Civil religion, or possibly a Bourdieusian subjective truth that drives

action despite the objective truth being otherwise. Regardless of the conceptualization, those feelings are motivating. Subjective truth continues to drive action in individuals long after the interest convergence is over.

Given that background, the time seems right to return to rich qualitative study of the life course as a serious adjunct to the quantitative age/period/cohort analysis, and particularly the impact of life trajectories on the shape of moral concern. Crises and corresponding re-mappings of interest convergence have, if anything, accelerated in the 21st century after a period of relative calm in the West during the preceding quarter century. The crises included responses to 9/11 that kicked off a wave of anti-immigrant policies, the financial crisis of 2008, and the COVID-19 pandemic.

I would argue that interest convergence between those who sought to restore the “wages of whiteness” and those who wanted lower tax rates and less business regulation drove the initial ascent and reelection of Donald Trump. This interest convergence has yielded a media and cultural environment that harks back to the pre-Civil Rights era, but with its own public rituals and communication styles that are likely to be lodged in the subconscious of a generation just as the idealized cross-cultural messages of an earlier generation were.

In this context it makes sense to begin tracking the psychosocial paths of different cohorts as they encountered the crises of the 21st century. In particular longitudinal studies into the impacts of public culture on moral understandings of cohorts of individuals who encountered these crises at different life stages seems like a potentially fruitful approach. It is possible that the National Longitudinal Study of Youth can supply a foundation for this work, though the

study of the effects of the Great Depression on the life course began with a study of children who were 10 or 11 years old when the Great Depression hit. The latest cohort of the NSLY turned 16 in the year 2000, perhaps making them too old for an equally impactful line of research.

10.3 Leveraging Intra-group Solidarity for Inter-group Aid

One of the striking occurrences during the course of this study was the emergence of Noreen's independent community of visitors. As I described in Chapter 9, the shared culture of the participants in that community both facilitated the operation of the group and made it difficult for them to align directly with possible allies in the field who may not have trusted that their interests really aligned. A similar issue arose in the context of the original 1980s sanctuary movement, where some histories describe the movement as “an immigrant movement without immigrant leaders” (Christerson et al. 2023:2), a characterization that has been challenged by immigrant scholars active in the movement (Barba and Castillo-Ramos 2021; Christerson et al. 2023). More recently Yukich (Yukich et al. 2020) noted similar issues with ally groups in the New Sanctuary movement having difficulty engaging immigrants.

Groups that leverage a uniform group style and culture may have advantages in generating intra-group agreement and facilitating action on behalf of others. However, such groups also may have difficulty coordinating with and winning the trust of ally groups with different norms as Noreen did with La Lucha.

At the time I was studying WIA I attended a Hanukkah party hosted by a local Jewish immigration group. The politics of the people who showed up were varied, but the leaders were able to leverage the collective culture and singing to build a sense of community among members who advocated for immigrants in a variety of ways, including lobbying legislators, supplying accompaniment to court hearings, and mutual aid.¹ As with Noreen's book group, in-group practices were being repurposed to generate solidarity on behalf of outsiders. The leader of the group told me that her organization aligned their actions with other immigrant support groups via a central membership organization that coordinated a statewide federation of immigrant activist groups.

The role of such federations that deliberately attempt to coordinate coalitions of groups that share overlapping goals, but disparate cultures seems worthy of more academic study. Does a “star-shaped” structure like that allow groups with distinct group styles to cooperate more effectively than they do by directly with one another? What kinds of services or movement activities should be centralized, and how centralized organizers should empower groups with distinct cultures while coordinating them seems a fruitful area for future research.

¹The group characterized their material support of immigrants as mutual aid, though clearly the aid was flowing one direction. The jury is out on whether a conscious effort to name such flows mutual aid yields a different “objective truth” than labeling the same flows as charity. Allison Goldberg's (2024) work here is thought provoking.

10.3.1 Lessons from Minnesota

I have left to the end trying to make sense of the ongoing actions in solidarity with immigrants in Minnesota during which immigration agents shot and killed both Renee Good and Alex Pretti. I had argued early in this dissertation that strong solidarity with immigrants, particularly immigrants in detention, was at an ebb in American life. In 2024, “Mass Deportation Now” was a winning political message for Trump, and late in his administration Biden implemented broad restrictions on asylum seekers with little pushback. Now, a whole city had mobilized in support of immigrants, and national approval of Trump’s handling of immigration has plummeted. Has the “shape of concern” of large numbers of Americans suddenly changed? Or does this mean that the concept of a “shape of concern” is fundamentally flawed?

Before addressing those questions it is worth stating the magnitude of the response to immigration enforcement that happened (and is continuing to happen) in Minnesota in the first months of 2026. As more than 3000 heavily armed CBP and ICE agents moved into Minneapolis and the surrounding areas to publicly stop, arrest and intimidate immigrants, thousands of residents stepped up to defend those immigrants. The actions in Minnesota weren’t civil disobedience as we usually understand it, since protestors tended to follow the law even as immigration officers repeatedly violated it.

The response was part social movement, part protest, and part large-scale mutual aid. Charles Mudede (2026) called the response *care activism*; others used the term *neighborism* (Serwer 2026). Churches organized food deliveries to families who were afraid to venture out, and

were overwhelmed by offers to deliver food. Delivery drivers were instructed to eat the paper with an address, should they be pulled over by ICE. Residents came out to blow whistles and film when immigration agents were on patrol. “Commuters” tracked ICE vehicles and were pulled over, threatened, and sometimes arrested. A new organization, Haven Watch, formed to provide the kinds of services that WIA provided at the Welcome Center, but in the sub-freezing temperatures outside the Minneapolis ICE facility. Nationwide, funds were being raised for immigrants who were unable to work (Moini and Finn 2026; Mudede 2026; Serwer 2026; Stand With Minnesota n.d.).

To put this activity into context with the shape of concern, it is worth reviewing the ongoing process that I have been describing as central to the concept throughout this dissertation. Attention leads to emotion that becomes action in the presence of opportunity. In the compact city of Minneapolis, attention to ICE was largely unavoidable, with or without previous commitment to immigrants. ICE set up outside schools, at bus stops and performed operations at churches. The dominant emotion in response to ICE seemed to be Moral Outrage, which arises from “interactions between long-standing affective commitments or moral emotions and short-run reflex emotions that tap into those as background” (Jasper 2011:297). Those long-standing affective commitments included commitments to local community, that came to be known as neighborism. The activation of this commitment to neighbors in the face of a common foe can be seen as a process that lowers levels of inter-group bias through activation of a superordinate shared identity (Dovidio et al. 1997). In Minneapolis opportunities to act were provided by existing civic groups, churches, and new coalitions that formed from school

and neighborhood ties that had formerly been loose.

The ingredients underlying an oppositional consciousness outlined by Nepstad and Smith (2001) were thrust on city residents. Cognitive availability came via direct experience. To an even greater extent than the child separation policies which initially prompted the volunteering of several people in my study, the behavior of ICE offended long-standing affective commitments to community as well as understandings of the rule of law. Suspicion of law enforcement had been broadly primed in the wake of the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis. Any subjective truth of the idea of law enforcement being a protective presence was already fragile.

Social psychologists have raised questions about whether Moral Outrage at the treatment of other groups stands up as motivation over time relative to relational empathy (O'Mara et al. 2011). The worry is that Moral Outrage is focused on a perpetrator rather than on the people who are being targeted, and the anger simply reflects concern with how the actions of the perpetrator reflect on the person who feels outrage. I would not say that the existence of short term Moral Outrage by itself constitutes strong evidence of a shape of concern that provides special attention to immigrants, or immigrants in detention. However the ongoing processes that transform the shape of concern seem to be in place in Minneapolis. New interpersonal relationships are forming through ad-hoc helping networks and have the potential to be durable, especially given shared experience under emotionally difficult conditions. The moral violation people were responding to was not simply aimed at immigrants. The very public presence of armed, masked immigration agents across the city was viewed as a direct affront to all city residents. In my research, living abroad was associated with changed judgment of American

role in the world. Encountering armed American troops directly should be expected to have a stronger and more lasting effect.

It will take time to find out how durable the present solidarity on behalf of immigrants proves to be, but it would be a mistake to conclude that the shape of concern among Minnesota allies of immigrants remains unchanged. If there is one lesson to take away from this research, it is that the shape of concern is not static. The shape of concern evolves over time in response to interpersonal relationships, social contexts, and personal choices to engage with organizations.

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A Qualitative Data and Methods

This appendix includes a summary of my qualitative data collection and analysis methods. Information about interview recruitment and length can be found in Chapter 5 . The interview guide is reproduced below.

A.1 Participant Observation

At WIA I was primarily involved in volunteering at the Welcome Center and as a driver to bring volunteers to the airport, the bus station or other places where they could meet family or receive support.

I volunteered for 52 shifts at the Welcome Center. These were generally scheduled to last four or five hours, though if I ended the day helping people get through the airport the shift could be 8 hours or more. During shifts I would take short notes on a pocket-size paper notebook or on my phone notes app (people were often on their phones, so I believe this this did not stand out). After volunteering I would record voice notes in my car, then transcribe them and

write up more formal field notes when I got home. I ended up spending many hours chatting with volunteers during this shifts while waiting for people to be released. However, when the Welcome Center was busy, my duties as a volunteer sometimes meant that I could not observe other volunteers' interactions as fully as I would have liked.

About 6 months into my time at the Welcome Center, the organization asked if I would become a lead volunteer. This meant showing up early, unlocking the RV and setting up. There was usually a second volunteer to help. As lead I would more closely track the progress of guests and occasionally ask other volunteers to help out. However, at least one other volunteer of the typical 3 on duty was also a sometime lead, so there was little direction to do, and little conflict to resolve.

In addition to volunteering at the Welcome Center I did other activities typical for volunteers. I attended bimonthly "community meetings", both online and in person. Most community meetings were centered on a guest speaker or speaker from immigrant supporting organizations in the area. After the rift described in Chapter 9, I attended an additional set of "listening sessions" to discuss the operations of the organization and volunteer concerns. I also virtually attended meetings of the break-off independent visitation group, which were extended forms of the book club meetings.

I also wrote field notes for all of these meetings.

Additionally, I visited and corresponded with a detained person at the detention center who was fighting his deportation order for about a year before he was deported. The man I visited had been transferred from a prison in another state after receiving a felony conviction for

property crime. I also attended his hearing in front of an immigration judge and supported him with some funds for phone and commissary accounts. I was not permitted to bring any kinds of writing materials into the detention center when visiting, so I would dictate notes in my car after each of these visits.

I spent three long evenings (6-8 hours each) working with the Southern Welcome group at the airport. In addition I spent 2 full days (about 12 hours each) at the CV house with volunteers and families visiting the detention center. While I visited that detention center twice, I only spent time in the waiting room and did not visit any immigrants detained there. My note taking process was similar to when I was volunteering at CV.

A.1.1 External Data

I was on the WIA group mailing list, which included daily reports from Welcome Center volunteers. I generally included these reports with my Field Notes when I was a volunteer (always when I was the lead volunteer and was responsible for writing them.) I also included emails pertinent to my work, in the data sources for my analysis, but I did not include all emails in my research data.

A.2 Data Management, Transcription and Analysis

I used automated tools to transcribe interviews and voice notes. Because these tools were not entirely accurate, my first step after transcription was to review each interview and note

carefully, correcting mis-transcriptions and merging sentences and paragraphs as made sense. For field notes I began with the recorded text and combined it with my observations that I jotted on phone or notebook.

After interviews and transcription review but before coding I created a case file for the interviewee and included highlights and impressions from interviews in those files. I maintained a spreadsheet with an alias and information on each person I met (105 in all), as extracted from field notes and interviews. Real names and contact information were stored in a separate encrypted file.

I used simple software tools to substitute aliases for real names in field notes and interview transcripts and produce a summary of all people mentioned in each file. I did my qualitative coding against these modified files. The aliasing was not foolproof (nicknames and ambiguous names were a problem) and I continued to manually fix names in transcripts and field notes over time.

I used the People spreadsheet to organize tabular data and provide reminders about who the people were. It was a very useful organizational tool, though not used for thematic analysis. Key columns in the spreadsheet included the alias, organization, roles in the organization, year interviewed, approximate age, a short description of the person, how they found out about the organization, how long they were working there, religious status, race and ethnicity and immigrant status for self, parents and family.

A separate spreadsheet stored metadata about each interview.

A.2.1 Spreadsheet Data

This is a subset of the columns tracked in the spreadsheet

column	description	example
Organization		WIA
roles	Roles performed in the organization	Driver
volunteer	Did they ever volunteer	TRUE
contact_source	How I made contact with the volunteer	Coworker
imm_parents	Number of immigrant parents	0
immigrant	Is volunteer an immigrant	FALSE
undoc_fam	Does volunteer have undocumented family	FALSE
Category		Worldly Liberal
age_est		69
start_year	Year started volunteering	2017
end_year		2024
int_year	Year interviewed	2022
decade		60s
gender		F
race_eth	Race and Ethnicity	White
link	How connected to volunteering (e.g. Church, Friend)	Church
link_detail		Catholic Tutoring Program
religious_path		Catholic→None
occupations		Retired primary care physician

column	description	example
education		MD
politics		Liberal
politics_detail		Liberal. When Trump was first elected, and all the women got out, marched that January in Seattle... We're more nonprofit than we are political.
political_engagement	Level of engagement in politics	med
summary		A retired physician who attracted a largely Hispanic patient panel due to her fluency in Spanish, which she began learning during a high-school program in Ecuador. Abigail dresses simply, usually in jeans and keeps her gray hair swept behind her ears. A self-effacing woman, Abigail double checks to make sure everyone she takes to the airport knows the drill and keeps a detailed record of who she drives.
quotes		So even though I would like to do the most good possible for the most people. I'm not really - that's not my personality. I have to be content with working on a more or micro basis, person, person to person. But every little bit helps

column	description	example
international connections	Travel details	Lived in Ecuador in on a High School program
born_abroad		FALSE
abroad_child		FALSE
abroad_student		TRUE
abroad_expatriate		FALSE
lived_abroad	Any of the above	TRUE
abroad_travel		FALSE
coworker	Did I volunteer with this person?	TRUE
immigrant_family	Any immigrant family members	FALSE
childhood_religion		Catholic
religion	Current religious affiliation	None
Regular Attendee	Attends religious services regularly	FALSE
languages	Languages Spoken	Spanish

A.2.2 Coding Interviews and Field Notes

My coding process was oriented more toward careful reading and re-reading of interviews, coding for broad thematic areas, and collecting those extracts and writing memos and analyses of those themes. I did not begin with fully open coding, but included attention on three identities (religious, political, immigrant) and emotional drivers in volunteering that I had theorized early on. I added more broad codes as my analysis continued. Because I was coding text files I wrote

tools to extract all codes and view all coded segments for an individual or all segments with code (including subcodes) across cases. I also wrote tools to be able to perform crosstabs & statistical analyses on codes by person combined with information extracted in a spreadsheet.

A.2.3 Codes

A.2.3.1 American Responsibility

Code for mentions of American responsibility for conditions that created migration.

A.2.3.2 COVID:

Code for any mention of how COVID affected themselves or the operation of the organization.

A.2.3.3 Deservingness:

Code when people use deservingness language, such as when they indicate that immigrants are deserving because they endured hardships, because they are hard working. Also use when people mention lack of deservingness among groups.

A.2.3.4 Desire for Detachment

Expressed desire to *not* have to experience the emotional consequences of engaging with immigrants.

A.2.3.5 Education

All references to personal experiences in the educational system. Extracted into columns in the spreadsheet.

A.2.3.6 Emotion

Expressions of personal emotion as a precursor or as a product of volunteering

Subcodes Anger, Empathy, Frustration, Guilt, Obligation, Pride, Sadness, Stress or Anxiety, Warm Glow

A.2.3.7 Gender Expectations

Code whenever a person indicates that they or someone else were expected to behave in a particular way because of their gender.

A.2.3.8 Social Identity

Any use of “I am”, “I’m” followed by one of these identity markers or (more common) use of a collective pronoun (we, us, we’re) to refer to one of the collectives in the subcodes.

Subcodes American, Immigrant, Latino

A.2.3.9 Language

Discussions of speaking non-English language. Collected in spreadsheet

A.2.3.10 Negative Experience

Negative experiences while volunteering

A.2.3.11 Opportunity Awareness

Information about how the person got in contact with the organization. Collected in spreadsheet

A.2.3.12 Problem Awareness

Information about how the person became aware of issues of immigrants in detention.

A.2.3.13 Self

Use of self-descriptive language to identify “the sort of person” they are. Use subcodes below when appropriate.

Subcodes: Limitations, Efficacy, Interests

A.2.3.14 Policy

Policy recommendations for addressing immigration and immigration detention.

A.2.3.15 Politics

Whenever people talk about their personal involvement in politics or political views. Use subcodes below for specific items. Extracted into spreadsheet.

- **Ineffectiveness:** View that politics is not going to change anything.
- **Trump:** Specific mentions of Donald Trump

A.2.3.16 Privilege

Explicit statements of awareness of personal privilege.

A.2.3.17 Quote

Highlight something interesting someone said that might belong in the manuscript.

A.2.3.18 Reciprocity

Statements that volunteering is an expression of reciprocity for good deeds done for self.

A.2.3.19 Relationships

Statements about meaningful relationships with any of the subcode categories below

- **Detainee:** Relationships people have established with immigrants who have been detained or formerly detained people.
- **Immigrant:** Close personal relationships with anyone who is an immigrant to the United States.
- **Abroad:** Close personal relationships with anyone who lives abroad.

A.2.3.20 Religion

Anything about religion - will be subdivided into *change, childhood, meaning*

- **Change:** Whenever someone changed their religious beliefs, identity, or affiliation.
- **Childhood:** Highlight text that indicates childhood religion
- **Meaning:** Expressions of meaning of religion to interviewee personally, e.g. “golden rule Christian”

A.2.3.21 Reticence

Expressions of trepidation when it comes to beginning volunteering

A.2.3.22 Self Enhancement

When someone mentions that they volunteer in order to enhance their skills – such as learning to speak spanish.

A.2.3.23 Social Response

How do friends, family, acquaintances respond when people tell them about volunteering.

A.2.3.24 Racism

Discussion of racism or targeting of specific ethnic groups.

A.2.3.25 Spanish

Desire to speak or practice Spanish as a motivation to volunteer

A.2.3.26 Travel

All discussions of travel, places traveled. Extracted into spreadsheets

A.2.3.27 Volunteering:

Personal history of volunteering.

A.2.3.28 Xenophilia:

Particular mentions of love of travel, or attraction to people from abroad who might be different

A.2.3.29 Organization:

- **Conflict:** Conflict within an organization or between organizations, or between an individual and the organization.
- **History:** Information about the history of the organization.
- **Leadership:** Comments on leadership or changes of leadership in the organization.
- **Recruitment:** Information on how the organization recruits volunteers.
- **Policy:** Changes in organizational policy or outlook

A.2.3.30 Profit:

Added when people talk about profits being made by private corporations.

A.3 Interview Guide

NOTE: The interview guide is quite open ended. The guide evolved over the first set of interviews. I noticed that I became a much better interviewer over time and many of the interviews turned into extended conversations under each of these topics.

Preamble. As we've discussed I am doing research for my PhD in Sociology at the University of Washington. I am interested in why people go out of their way to help others including people they do not know and from whom they have no expectation of receiving rewards.

Before we start, I have a consent form that explains that the information in this interview is confidential and that I am going to use it in anonymized form when I present research.

[RECORD]

1. My first question – can you give me some personal background about yourself, where did you grow up.

If not covered, prompt for

- a. Where did you grow up, and did you move
 - b. Parents what did they do and what was your relationship to them
 - c. Siblings
2. How have you spent your time as an adult?

3. Was there someone in particular who had the most influence on you growing up?
 - a. Is there someone outside your family?
4. How would you describe what [organization] does?
5. How did you first hear about [organization]?
 - a. If a person, prompt for relationship to the person and the context if not given.
 - b. If an event, who sponsored the event? What led you to go? [Prompt for the emotions that drove them to attend, and the emotional response to the event]
6. When did you begin volunteering?
 - a. Was it a direct result of when you first heard about [ORGANIZATION]
7. What's your role at [organization] and what activities does that involve?
8. Thinking back to the time when you started volunteering, what would you say were your reasons for volunteering?
 - a. If they don't talk about feelings prompt: How did you feel when you heard about the opportunity.
 - b. Have your reasons for volunteering changed since you began?
9. Do you know other folks who volunteer for [organization]?
 - a. Did you know them before you volunteered?

- b. Have you recruited other people to volunteer?
- 10. There's obviously lots of ways you could spend your time, including pursuing personal interests and many other volunteer opportunities. Why do you work with detained immigrants in particular?
- 11. I'm going to ask you some questions about your experiences volunteering at [organization]
 - a. What is a particularly memorable experience in dealing with detained or released immigrants?
 - b. Have you heard other stories from volunteers
 - c. How does working as a volunteer at [organization] make you feel?
 - d. Were there any incidents that made you think about giving this up? If so, could you share what happened? [This would be particularly good as a segue if they mention negative emotions]
- 12. What's your understanding of why people are held at the immigration detention center?
 - a. What do you think of the U.S. laws and policies on immigration
 - b. How do you think they should change
- 13. Other than the people here, what experiences do you have with people who have been in detention or prison?

14. What experiences do you personally have with the U.S. immigration system?
 - a. How about other people you know? Friends or family?
15. Have you spent time outside the United States?
 - a. What are the longest periods you spent abroad?
16. What other places do you volunteer or do board membership (now or the past)?
17. Do you participate in political or other activist activities?
 - a. Which ones
18. Is there a theme that ties your volunteering [and politics if they mention political action] together?
19. Are you involved in any religious organizations as a parishioner or in another role (many times this will be covered above and can be prompted at the time)
 - a. How has your religious affiliation or practice changed over time?
 - b. How do you describe the ties between your religious background and practice to the work you are doing at [ORGANIZATION]
 - c. Are other people from your church/synagogue/mosque/temple volunteering with [ORGANIZATION]
 - d. Does your [religious institution] support volunteering at [ORGANIZATION] or elsewhere?

- e. [If yes] How so?
 - f. [If yes] Is there someone you think I should talk to from your [religious institution]
to understand what they do to aid in volunteering
20. What do people say when you tell them about this work?
- a. Are there people you avoid talking to about it
21. Is there anything else you think I should know about you or your volunteer work?