

Anthropological Knowledge in the Voluntary Actions for the Benefit of Immigrants from the Guarded Centres for Foreigners in Poland. *A post factum* Reflection on the Project

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Abstract

The postulate of openness to Others is practiced both by anthropologists and active volunteers. In the case of the former, it is a condition for the acquisition of knowledge on the diversity of ways of life in the world and undertaking actions in the activist paradigm, while with reference to the latter, it is not only tantamount to assistance, but also the basic premise behind their actions. This common ethical perspective turned out to inspire reflections on how the anthropological knowledge can be useful for volunteer activity, which by the way is often understood in practice as 'helping others out of one's own accord'. As a result, in 2021/22 the didactic project *An Anthropologist – an Expert in Voluntary Activity. Improving Communication Competencies in the Situation of Intercultural Contact* was developed in the Department of Anthropology and Ethnology, Adam Mickiewicz University.

Keywords: intercultural contact, anthropological knowledge, volunteer activity

The project *An Anthropologist – an Expert in Voluntary Activity*

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edge on the diversity of ways of life in the world and undertaking actions in the activist paradigm, while with reference to the latter, it is not only tantamount to assistance, but also the basic premise behind their actions. This common ethical perspective turned out to inspire reflections on how the anthropological knowledge can be useful for volunteer activity, which by the way is often understood in practice as 'helping others out of one's own accord'. As a result, the didactic project *An Anthropologist – an Expert in Voluntary Activity. Improving Communication Competencies in the Situation of Intercultural Contact* was developed by Agnieszka Chwieduk and Jacek Schmidt from the Department of Anthropology and Ethnology, Adam Mickiewicz University. It was conducted in 2021/22 as a part of a subsequent edition of the proqualitative competition financed by *THE UNIVERSITY OF TOMORROW II* – an integrated programme of the development of Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, co-financed by the European Union as a part of the Operational Programme Knowledge, Education, Development 2014–2020.

The project aimed at a professionalisation of voluntary activity understood as a combination of anthropological, psychological and interdisciplinary (migration studies) knowledge with practical competencies in the area of group management in the conditions of the detention of foreigners. The reaching of the goal required a practical integration of detailed knowledge from the area of: 1) communication in the situation of intercultural contact understood as a field of the volunteer's relations with the business environment, the public sector – in the context of the multiethnicity related to the global mobility; 2) learning key terminology of the sociocultural anthropology by experience in the situation of intercultural contact. In connection with the above, the execution of the project covered subsequently workshops in the field of: a) psychology – the interpersonal skills training focused on the presence of clichés, cultural stereotypes and the ability to react to conflicts; b) fundamentals of kinesics and proxemics in an intercultural approach; c) fundamentals of negotiations using observational techniques in the area of anthropological research methods; d) actions of NGOs for the benefit of immigrants as a part of meetings with experts-practitioners active internationally, domestically and regionally; e) preparation of activating scenarios for immigrants (children and parents); f) a catalogue of key vocabulary of migration studies. The authors of the project were also particularly interested in what type of anthropological knowledge would turn out to be most significant and whether (and in what way) it would influence the making of organisational decisions (action management). The social competencies of the group of volunteers, which were one of the criteria of recruitment for the project, also turned out to be of significance.

The place for the project's implementation was not accidental. Guarded Centres for Foreigners became an optimum laboratory for contact with manifestations of multiculturalism understood both as relations between representatives of various ethnic and national environments, but also types of institutional organisations. In this scope, the very GCF can be referred to as a total institution, in which organisational

culture consists above all of the appropriately conducted supervision of all the actions of all the social actors who stay there, and a strongly hierarchised environment of Border Guard officers and civilians employed at the GCF. These characteristics make the space of the GCF a convenient laboratory of interactions of strongly diversified groups, which the authors of the project also call, in view of the abovementioned features, as ‘hardly accessible’ both to researchers and volunteers.

Last but not least, the project was to encourage its participants to enter a critical debate on the usefulness of the idea of the ‘professionalization of volunteer activity’ as an option for the education of anthropology students, who would like to practice anthropology outside its academic dimension.

The use of anthropological knowledge in the space of the GCF

Eight persons were qualified for the project: they were five female students and three male students from the second and third year of ethnology in Poznań, who participated in six study workshops in the first stage of its delivery. The second, practical stage, concerned the activation of the immigrants’ (including the children’s) free time and was conducted in one of the GCFs. The stay in this detention place turned out to be of key importance for the verification of the assumptions and goal of the project. This is because it made it possible to trace the integration of the knowledge acquired during training with its practical application, including the separation of

Photo 1

Children and volunteers in a commemorative photo, GCF 2022



important areas of anthropological knowledge useful for the professionalisation of voluntary service.

The participants initially acquainted themselves with the space of the centre and the temporary camp for refugees. They referred to their contact with immigrants in these two situations as a 'traumatic experience'. A detailed discussion revealed that what turned out to be the most significant for the assessment of the situation from the anthropological perspective was the understanding of the **impact of non-verbal communication** on the position of the volunteer, not only in the management of their actions in the groups of children and their families, but also the volunteers themselves.

The participants conducted some pre-prepared activating activities for immigrants – especially children.

Here, it was the **performative dimension of the activating activities**, which turned out to be a significant field of reflection; according to the students, it corresponded with the **performativity inscribed in the delivery of anthropological fieldwork**, when doing long-term ethnography is connected inter alia with the necessity to ceaselessly verify the adopted assumptions and methods, including work on the maintenance of a cognitive-psychological distance (which, when taken together, leads to specific results truly influencing the anthropological image of the Other). In this dimension, it became possible to work through the knowledge acquired as a part of the anthropological education. Firstly this meant– the **postulate of the attitude of positive tolerance** and – secondly – the **awareness of one's own**

Photo 2

'A play with a Klanza sheet' – activating activities for children, GCF 2022



competences in intercultural contact. This applied in particular to situations requiring a spontaneous and effective reorganisation of the purpose of volunteer activities, where negotiations as a part of one's group, with BG officers and immigrants, were important. In the latter case, the possible absence of one's knowledge of a given original language was compensated by variously arranged attempts of non-verbal communication. Apart from this, the participants could verify their techniques of preventing trauma experienced as an effect of contact with the conditions of detention, acquired during the workshops as a part of the project.

All the behaviours of the students directed at the contact with the social actors at the GCF can be inscribed into the volunteer's field of work in the conditions of a total institution, in which the awareness of the impact of both the open and the hidden control of volunteer activities became activated. What turned out to be significant here was the complex experience of contact with the Others **in the situation of otherness, known to the anthropologists from their group work, in particular during the long-term participant observation, when various difficulties with adaptation resulting from the different (for the researcher and for the group) ontologies, differences in the area of axiology and epistemology emerge.**

For example, 'activation of the immigrants' free time' – the volunteers' most important task – also proved to be the most difficult challenge due to the different understanding of time by the social actors at the GCF, representing different cultural models. For the BG officers who work there, time – in particular the time free from work – is a value in itself as well as their employment right. Additionally, the GCF expected that voluntary service consists in 'activation' understood as 'attractive recreational activities'. The association of free time with physical activity and recreation in the form of games and plays reflects solely the Western optics concerning the routine division of the day into meals, activities and relaxation – the latter possibly active and good for one's health. This understanding of free time is reflected in the plan of the day as stipulated in the rules and regulations, which should be complied with by the detainees in the GCF. In practice, the 'requirement to spend free time' is a systemic non-adjustment to the realities that the immigrants detained in the GCF are accustomed to – they not only do not work, but often cope with boredom – which is the more painful the longer is their isolation, increasing their longing for the familiar customs from their original environment, living according to a different rhythm. In this sense, the activities of the voluntary service had a huge sense. They provided the immigrants with an opportunity to break an exhausting and traumatising monotony, which is also experienced by the personnel – in this sense, they also benefited from the situation.

The above-described beliefs of the institution on how volunteers should fill in their free time proved to be an additional problem. In reality, the immigrants only expected someone to talk to other than the personnel, to spend time together/to

accompany them, only rarely accepting the offer of games and plays, which was a great success with their children, though. In this context, volunteers undertook negotiations to adjust their proposals of activities to the actual conditions rather than the enforced requirements. At the same time, they also had to step beyond the immigrants' distance to their offer, encouraging 'physical and play activity'. An additional factor profiling interactions was the non-open, institutional systemic control of spontaneous behaviours of the volunteers. This sort of interaction resembled a game of appearances between the volunteers and the officers. On the one hand, the institution of the GCF was building trust towards itself, but on the other, it did not resign from a discreet, but perceivable supervision of the students' interactions with the immigrants, which after all were necessary to establish good relations.

The issue of differences in the meaning of time and ways of its use therefore clearly disclosed the need for the knowledge of deep cultural models having an impact on the behavioural sphere of the immigrants representing different groups and systems of values, as well as a general well-being of all the social actors of the GCF. The necessity to cope with the omnipresent supervision made the work of the volunteers emotionally difficult, forcing them to negotiate their own position and verify the adopted activation plans. In effect, participants of the project concluded that the knowledge of cultural codes in a given institution, the awareness of the meaning of the actual roles in the group, and the training of conducting tasks in new conditions are areas of knowledge, also an anthropological one, which should create the foundation of all professional voluntary services.

Results

During the sessions analysing the course of the activating scenarios using a method referring to the idea of non-violent communication (as understood by Rosenberg, M. B., Chopra, D. (2015). *Nonviolent communication: A language of life: Life-changing tools for healthy relationships*. PuddleDancer Press), volunteers indicated the significance of 'experience with the game of appearances'. This brought to mind an analogy with the already familiar situation of the alienation of the researcher during participant observation, when they activate adaptive strategies in the group in compliance with their own unique creativity. Additionally, the above released a deep reflection on the cognitive and emotional effects of the volunteers playing their specific roles in the GCF system which was controlling them. They considered this moment of the project as the key one for the integration of the knowledge acquired in the mode of studies with their experience of voluntary service in the centre. This is because the project participants noticed their own cognitive and social potential, which – appropriately directed – resulted in their focus on tasks and the solving of problems from three areas: communication, organization and integration, and self-

Children and volunteers – the final of activating activities, GCF 2022.



control, with the simultaneous ability to cope with the absence of emotional comfort.

In effect, participants identified the following areas of anthropological knowledge, which are very useful for the delivery of professional voluntary service: 1) the awareness of cultural scripts in the non-verbal sphere, which are the basic ones in relation to the ones controlling the verbal sphere and marking a given ethnic or national group; 2) the knowledge of a foreign language (assessed as secondary in relation to non-verbal cultural scripts); 3) the knowledge of principles of functioning of small groups, various types of institutions generating specific social roles; 4) the necessity to adopt the attitude of a negotiator familiar with the notions typical for the language of communication of a given 'cultural world' (institutions and their participants). It turned out that contact with the immigrants and the supervising personnel additionally resulted in the self-awareness of the potential of the group of volunteers, which translated into the countering of trauma stemming from the contact with the detention conditions, care for the social actors from the GCF (immigrants and personnel), mutual care for maintaining emotional distance and learning cognitive distance.

Finally, the project was very positively assessed by the university in terms of its substance and formalities, and as such was – as a part of distinction – presented during the *6th Days of Quality of Education at the AMU* (6–7 June 2022). *Post factum*, its authors assured themselves of the rightness of their three adopted premises underlying the proposal of the project and the need to strengthen the above areas of anthropological knowledge in the teaching of ethnologists, with a possible

introduction of the possibility of their education in the area of professional voluntary service, including, firstly – the targeted broadening of the scope of soft skills as a part of the science understood as *performans*, secondly – a curricular introduction of anthropologists to multicultural environments in order to increase their chances for future employment – also as volunteers in the area of detention, and thirdly – a permanent development of the attitude of tolerance. This is because the understanding and reproduction of this kind of attitude takes place most effectively through action (interaction). As a result, students who are well-prepared in this scope may be optimum exponents of the values desired in a civil society.