

# When Strangers Meet in a Volunteer Initiative

Understanding the Precariousness of Volunteering and the Organizational Infrastructure Supporting It  
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Denmark has a long tradition of volunteer work and engagement in civil society organizations. The number of people volunteering in Denmark has been stable at around 40 per cent in the last 10–15 years (Lindholm et al. 2021; Espersen et al. 2021). The welfare field, covering the social, humanitarian, and health areas, has the second largest number of volunteers, surpassed only by sport (Espersen et al. 2021; Hjære et al. 2018). The term volunteering, despite its ubiquitous presence in society, is difficult to define, as it refers to a diverse set of activities within many different fields and types of organizations (Musick & Wilson 2008; Hustinx, Musick & Handy 2010; Henriksen, Strømsnes & Svedberg 2019). At its core, volunteer work refers to all forms of activities that are freely chosen and unpaid. In an international context, volunteering is primarily connected to the altruistic idea of helping individuals or specific groups in society that are in need and where governmental welfare services are limited. In the Scandinavian countries, volunteering is, however, also connected to activities that are linked to leisure, hobby, and political activities and was formed in parallel with the growth and development of the welfare state (Henriksen, Strømsnes & Svedberg 2019:8). Eurostat, the European Union's statistical bureau, has documented that the rates of volunteering in Scandinavian countries are the highest in Europe (Eurostat 2016). This high prevalence of volunteering, it is argued, is linked to the development of the Scandinavian welfare model, which also formed what has been described as “the golden age of associations” from the late nineteenth century to the present (Habermann & Ibsen 2005; Balle-Petersen 1976; Henriksen,

Strømsnes & Svedberg 2019; Klausen & Selle 1996).

In her work on the early development of civil society organizations and associations in the Danish welfare society, the Danish ethnologist Margaretha Balle-Petersen describes how the new associations developed in the welfare society differed from earlier associations by being formalized, typically with a written set of rules, and, in principle, by being open to everybody, and by having a democratic decision-making structure (Balle-Petersen 1976). The combination of formal structure and an openness to a broad and diverse set of volunteer roles and identities have been formative for the Scandinavian association, which has been highly successful in attracting a larger number of active and engaged volunteers compared to other European countries (Henriksen, Strømsnes & Svedberg 2019; Henriksen & Selle 1996).

In recent years, and with the increasing pressure on welfare services in Denmark, a renewed focus on rethinking collaborations between civil society actors, such as associations and non-governmental organizations, and Danish authorities has emerged. This tight collaboration between public authorities and civil society has spurred new developments among civil society actors. On the one hand, classic association-based volunteering is expanding in new directions, but on the other hand, the association has become susceptible to and replaced by ad-hoc, network-based and “less demanding” ways of being a volunteer, enabling even more people to become engaged in volunteering activities, for example, through new forms of match-making programmes (Lindholm et al. 2021; Lindholm & Hjære 2019; Espersen et al.

2021; Qvist et al. 2018). Match-making programmes are services where volunteers are either matched with other volunteers, with activities or with persons who need some form of support. Another tendency of these new forms of collaborations is that civil society and volunteer work increasingly become key providers of soft welfare tasks (Andersen 2018; La Cour & Højlund 2008; La Cour 2012).

One example of the tendency to involve civil society in providing soft welfare tasks is the role that volunteer plays in tackling loneliness in Denmark. In 2016, the Danish Health Authority reported that loneliness cost Danish society over 8.3 billion DKK a year, including the costs of treatment and care, as well as lost productivity (Eriksen et al. 2016). In 2022, 12.4 per cent of the Danish population showed signs of severe loneliness (Rosendahl Jensen et al. 2022). Several studies have shown that volunteering can improve mental well-being and prevent loneliness and depression (Stukas et al. 2016; Santini et al. 2019), and these documented health benefits have added to expanding volunteer work and developing volunteering schemes to encompass populations with a higher risk of loneliness and who are less prone to participate in volunteer work, for example, people with poor physical and mental health (Principi et al. 2012). The amplified focus on volunteering work and the increased role it plays in supporting the Danish welfare system necessitate an understanding of how new voluntary services are developed and their role in facilitating social inclusion and well-being. Understanding the workings of new voluntary services can also demonstrate how present attempts to use civil society actors to accommodate a diverse citizen

group are addressing and potentially contributing to mitigating the challenges of the welfare society.

Based on these new societal tendencies, this article will focus on a Danish social volunteer initiative called Elderlearn, and we ask: How can a volunteer initiative accommodate the current trends and changes in social volunteer work? To be able to answer this question we will analyse the volunteering act that is the meetings between the volunteers, and the organizational infrastructure behind it performed by the Elderlearn employees.

With Elderlearn as our case, we will open the act of volunteering by describing how habits, tacit knowledge, and socio-material objects are entangled in how we socialize and meet other people. We will show how vital the detailed planning and handling of social meetings is in ensuring a successful volunteer experience. This experience, which can turn out to be crucial for whether the participants will continue being engaged in the volunteer activity, is an essential success criterion for all civil society organizations involved in match-making programmes. As we will argue, knowledge about the socio-material fabric and work invested in social meetings are often black-boxed as “something we know how to do,” and little attention has been paid to the study of the actual practices of “strangers meeting and doing stuff” within the volunteer activities.

This lack of knowledge is quite peculiar, considering that the success of so much volunteer work depends on the success of these meetings. Inspired by the Austrian-American sociologist Alfred Schutz’s classic text *The Stranger* from 1944, we understand the volunteers as strangers and

explore how the volunteers in Elderlearn are faced with workings, challenges, expectations, and insecurities in the process of getting to know the person with whom they are matched. This will further form the background for analysing the organizational role of Elderlearn and how it facilitates and supports the meeting between the two strangers. The article is inspired by ethnological discussions of cultural encounters (Olsson & Lappi 2018), material objects as palpable connections to notions of identity and belonging (Frykman & Humbracht 2013), and cultural and social activities as forms of daily care work for well-being (Gustafsson 2017). However, we draw on concepts from Schutz, the Swedish ethnologist Orvar Löfgren, and the British-Australian philosopher Sara Ahmed, as we wish to highlight the amount of work, as well as the emotional and practical engagement, that volunteers invest in the acts of social bonding. We describe how a good and robust “voluntary relationship” is quite ephemeral and hard to define and manage but, nevertheless, is the key product or service provided by the organizations and requires detailed and ongoing support. Hence, in our analysis, we discuss the requirements, expectations, and socio-material work contained in the voluntary social meeting.

Grounding the analysis in the everyday undertaking of volunteer work, this article is an ethnological contribution to the ongoing discussion about the development of the field of volunteering in civil society and the role of the volunteer in Danish and Scandinavian contexts. The article offers a detailed close-up description of a social volunteer activity in a time when welfare tasks are outsourced, organized, and en-

tangled with civil society in new ways (Henriksen et al. 2019; La Cour & Højlund 2008; La Cour 2012; Espersen et al. 2018; Ibsen 2020).

### **Elderlearn**

The Elderlearn initiative matches older Danes and foreigners by creating and supporting robust social relationships and bonds between the two. By facilitating social meetings, Elderlearn is a type of organization that has traditionally been called visiting services (Bülow 2023; Habermann & Ibsen 1998). Visiting services have been part of the Danish volunteering field since the beginning of the twentieth century, providing services and initiatives in which people, who for different reasons need support or help, are matched with other, often more resourceful, people (Bülow 2023). Whether supporting everyday life activities, helping with letters or information received from public institutions, or simply acting as a social relation, the visiting service can take many forms. However, what makes Elderlearn quite unique as a visiting service is that the older Dane and the foreign language student ideally forms a reciprocal relationship where both parties give and receive, and, hence, form a relationship where there is no clear distinction between the giver and the recipient.

Elderlearn is registered as a socio-economic<sup>1</sup> organization and has facilitated meetings between foreigners who want to improve their Danish language skills and senior citizens since 2017. From 2017 to 2018, Elderlearn’s work primarily targeted the Capital Region of Denmark, but from 2019 to 2022 Elderlearn expanded and is currently facilitating the matching of foreigners and senior citizens in more

than 70 municipalities across Denmark. Elderlearn's main objective is to "create meaningful volunteer communities between people across age, generations and culture" (Elderlearn website 2023), thereby promoting well-being for seniors and improving integration opportunities for foreigners. The work includes recruiting, registering, and matching the pairs, arranging their first few meetings, and supporting the – hopefully smooth – functioning of their relationships. Elderlearn is supported financially by grants and by selling its services to municipalities and governmental institutions, such as the Danish Health Authority. As a socio-economic organization, the staff providing the match-making service at Elderlearn are paid, which stands in contrast to many other more classical volunteer organizations, which primarily use volunteers in their match-making programmes.

### **Methods and Empirical Material**

The article is based on ethnographic research carried out over six months in 2020/2021 as part of a collaborative project between Copenhagen Centre for Health Research in the Humanities at the University of Copenhagen (CoRe), Elderlearn, and the Association of Danish Seniors, with funding from the independent Danish philanthropic foundation Nordea-fonden. The purpose of the project was to give even more senior citizens the opportunity to participate in Elderlearn's volunteer work. As researchers, we have been following and collaborating with Elderlearn almost from the beginning of their activities until today.<sup>2</sup> The ongoing collaboration with Elderlearn can be described as a form of accompanying research,<sup>3</sup> which covers a

type of applied project-specific research in which continuous feedback and advice are provided by the researchers to the partners/collaborators. Accompanying research ensures that, for example, a development project receives research-based and focused feedback that enables the adjustment of the project along the way. Our accompanying research concentrated on following the Elderlearn initiative as it broadened its activity range, including, and consequently, how it had to reorganize and adapt to a new form of working. In particular, we focused on how the upscaling affected the senior citizens and their engagement in Elderlearn and their ability to participate as volunteers.

Our empirical material comprises semi-structured interviews and participant observations among Elderlearn pairs, semi-structured interviews with employees at municipalities using the services from Elderlearn, and interviews and participant observations of employees at Elderlearn. In addition, we participated in meetings and workshops for developing tools, such as a language game. Our volunteer informants were recruited with the help of Elderlearn. When new participants signed up for Elderlearn, they were asked if they would like to participate in the research project. All informants signed a declaration of consent and were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time. We ended up having 21 Elderlearn pairs, that is, 42 individual informants, 21 volunteer senior citizens and 21 volunteer foreigners, representing 9 municipalities across Denmark.<sup>4</sup>

The fieldwork took place during the COVID-19 lockdown in Denmark, which affected how we could arrange our inter-

views, since our informant group included several vulnerable senior citizens. We carried out six double interviews, five of which were physical interviews (using face visor), and one was an online interview. We conducted 49 individual interviews: one in-person interview and 48 online or telephone interviews. We interviewed the informants twice, with the first round of interviews lasting 45–120 minutes and addressing questions concerning the registration process, experiences from the first meetings, the kind of activities they did, how the meetings were arranged, and whether they had any considerations or insecurities at the start. The second round of interviews lasted 20–45 minutes and addressed themes such as the development of the relationship, whether any problems had arisen, and, if so, how these were handled. We also carried out six participant observations during the meetings between Elderlearn pairs and conducted six expert interviews of 60–120 minutes with employees and managers from four different municipalities. The interviews were conducted in Danish or English by researchers from CoRe and were transcribed and encoded using NVivo. The interviews were analysed to locate themes and emerging patterns (Davies 2008:195–198). For this article, we focus especially on themes such as “why get involved in Elderlearn,” “values of volunteering,” “expectations,” “preparing the first meeting,” “materiality,” and “infrastructure and support.”

### Theory

Ethnographically, we explored the concrete practices of volunteering between two strangers, for example, by listening to their accounts of preparing emotionally as

well as practically for the meetings or sitting at their coffee tables. Overwhelmed by the effort they put into creating a friendly meeting ground, we realized how much work, emphasis, and expectations were comprised in the social meeting. To analytically grasp this convoluted microcosm of emotions, material stuff, cultural tropes, etc, we found inspiration in the work of Schutz, Löfgren, and Ahmed. All three scholars apply a perspective on society that emphasizes the importance of tacit knowledge of culture, routines, and everyday life. Schutz’s classic text *The Stranger* from 1944 examines the hard work, problems of knowledge, and disconcerting identity issues entailed in being a stranger who approaches a resident group. The Stranger in Schutz’s story essentially improvises when meeting the new group; she arrives in a new group alone, unprepared, and for the first time, and must make decisions based on limited knowledge and preliminary assumptions that may prove wrong. When the stranger approaches a new group, and before interacting with it, she therefore relies on her own thinking as usual; hence, the stage is set for possible misunderstandings. According to Schutz, the members of an in-group do not possess a complete knowledge of “the cultural pattern of group life” but rather a pragmatic system of knowledge, a set of trustworthy recipes, which for members of the in-group take on the “appearance of sufficient coherence, clarity, and consistency to give anybody a reasonable chance of understanding and of being understood” (Schutz 1944:501). The cultural patterns with which the stranger is trying to grasp and become familiar are often implicit, tacit, and non-verbalized. Further in the text, Schutz depicts the

events that unfold when the stranger begins to interact with the new group. Initially, there is a shock that her first observational knowledge of the new group is incorrect, and she realizes that she lacks trustworthy recipes. At some point in the interaction, the stranger might develop enough knowledge to translate certain matters from the new culture, but then she realizes that the ability to interpret is not the same as the ability to efficiently express knowledge (similar to passive and active language learning). In summary, the first phase of interaction launches the stranger into a rather blunt testing of assumptions and a demand to develop new knowledge and practices.

This socio-psychological and detailed description of the first meeting between a stranger and a resident group opens for an understanding of the challenges, hard work, anxieties, expectations, and curiosities involved in creating social relations. Social encounters are part and parcel of our everyday life, and we often take for granted and anticipate that we know how to go about it, but what Schultz's text reminds us of is that, first and foremost, this is not always the case, and second, that social meeting is an ongoing trial-and-error practice that requires emotional and practical investments.

Similar to Schultz's exploration of a seemingly well-known and somehow banal social practice, Löfgren is known for his zooming in on the banalities of everyday life. He emphasizes that as ethnologists "like to see ourselves as masters of the study of the everyday, but we still know surprisingly little about how this machinery works" (Löfgren 2014:81), arguing that it still too often remains a black box in our analysis. He addresses the black

box of everyday life by looking at its "material and affective dimensions" (ibid.:82). He argues that everyday life and social meetings are composite situations fraught with stuff, emotions, norms, and processes, and are tangible and visible, as well as implied, tacit, and ephemeral. Together with his Swedish colleague Billy Ehn, Löfgren recommends an experimental approach to understanding cultural phenomena and begins with "the mundane world of objects and routines that surround us" (Ehn & Löfgren 2010:7). Thus, we are also inspired to explore the diverse ways in which objects can be sensitive or responsive in social encounters (Povrzanović Frykman & Frykman 2016). Following Ehn and Löfgren's recommendation, in our analysis, we will pay attention to the socio-material and affective aspects involved, which will help us "unbox" the social meeting between volunteers.

Ahmed has also been concerned with the materiality of emotions from the perspective of her work in feminist cultural studies. Central to her theory is the idea that emotions exist in a material world (Ahmed 2004b). Ahmed views emotions as relational, and rather than situate them in either the subject or the object of a relationship or a situation, she locates emotions in the relational space between the actors and the material elements involved. Ahmed focuses on what emotions *do* instead of attempting to define what they *are* and concludes that they shape both individual and collective bodies "through the repetition of action over time". She explores how emotions move between bodies, both individual and collective, and suggests that emotions create "*the very effect of the surfaces or boundaries of bodies and worlds*"



(Ahmed 2004a:117). As she argues in her discussions of racism, emotions such as fear, anger, and disgust, often associated with racism, can circulate between bodies, and thereby shape the boundaries or borders that are drawn between different groups of people (Ahmed 2004b:121).

Beyond moving between bodies and shaping boundaries, emotions can also be “sticky”, that is, they align individuals with communities and bodily space with social space. Emotions, for Ahmed, thus work as a form of capital, as they can circulate and are distributed across social and psychic fields. This movement of emotion between objects and material signs allows them to accumulate “affective value” over time. By applying Ahmed’s theories on emotions and materiality, we explore how the meeting between strangers is made up of and supported by a range of sticky objects.

In the following analysis, we draw on these three scholars as we zoom in on the socio-material-affective investments and strategies employed to form the social meeting between two strangers in Elderlearn.

### **Matching Two Strangers**

As meeting people and socializing is so often viewed as a social practice we know by heart and have all the competencies to fulfil, it also risks being seen as uneventful and inconspicuous. In volunteer work, where the main purpose of the activity is to socialize and have a conversation, the act of socializing is precarious and must be handled carefully, as the success of the volunteer scheme depends on successful meetings. In what follows, we explore the meeting between strangers and view it as a pivotal point in the act of volunteering.

We start the analysis by focusing on the first meetings between an Elderlearn pair after they are matched. The pair is encouraged to find a date and time for their first meeting and to meet at the home of the volunteer senior. The reason behind encouraging the Elderlearn matches to meet in the home of the volunteer senior is to ensure that seniors with very diverse life circumstances can participate, including seniors with difficulties getting out of their homes due to physical or mental circumstances.

Although the home obviously makes it possible for more senior citizens to participate, choosing the home as the core space for the volunteer activity made us curious and prompted us to ask questions such as: How does the senior volunteer manage being the host? How does the volunteer foreigner handle their role as a guest? In what way do these prescribed roles help or hinder overcoming the already notable differences between the two of them, such as age, nationality, language, and culture? What activities and material objects were engaged and applied in the meeting between the two?

These questions and our theoretical choices synchronized and guided our analysis, and it became clear that one practice dominated our ethnographic material – the act of sitting around a table, drinking coffee, and having something to eat – a very unassuming and common act. Yet, this act, we argue, creates a sort of “safe situation” for the Elderlearn pairs by offering a known way of navigating the troubled waters of the first meeting.

In the first part of the analysis, we unfold this act in detail by looking at the setting and sitting at the table. For us, the table provides an entrance to open the act of

socializing as we zoom in on the everyday materialities, movements, and emotions involved and entangled in the activity (Ehn & Löfgren 2010). In the second part, we will focus on some of the backstage work that was undertaken at Elderlearn's office long before the Elderlearn pairs met for the first time and how Elderlearn actively supported social meetings through different organizational structures and tools.

### Setting and Sitting at the Coffee Table: The Performance of a Volunteer Activity

75-year-old Ellen placed coffee cups, a milk jug, scones, and a lot of accompaniments on the long table in her living room when we met her for an interview. "I served the same thing one of the first times I met Sorina. A cup of coffee and something sweet to munch on always helps," she said, as she sat down. (Field notes)

Picture 1 shows the table in Ellen's living room, as described in the quotation. The field notes and the picture underline some of the socio-material preparation that comes before the actual meeting between the two volunteers, who at this point are strangers to one another.

Ellen was one of the many who described the act of drinking coffee and having something to eat as the go-to when meeting their Elderlearn match for the first time. As Ole, a 75-year-old man, said: "Well I always say, 'Let's talk over a cup of coffee,' so I just did the same when I met him."

Like Ellen and Ole, many of our informants shared that these first meetings took place around the table, accompanied by a cup of coffee and cakes. This was not an act required or even recommended by Elderlearn but what the volunteers felt was the right thing to do. The act of offering

something to drink and eat to visitors is a widespread, cross-cultural custom and is viewed as an expression of hospitality and friendliness. We posit that the volunteer seniors used this very common cultural practice as a way of curating the scene and creating a shared common ground, as several of the senior citizens expressed their doubts and uncertainty about the first meetings and the volunteer foreigner's intentions. This doubt was clearly expressed by 72-year-old Tine, who did not understand why her Elderlearn match wanted to meet with her:

It was so unclear what she actually wanted from me, I think. In fact, she is a sweet young woman with two children and a Danish husband, so I thought, why on earth would she spend time with me?



1. Ellen's living room. Photo: CoRe, Line Steen.



Mads, a 67-year-old man, also expressed this doubt and reflected on how he dealt with it when meeting his Elderlearn match:

Why have we even been matched? I thought a lot about it first. Although we don't have much in common, I can offer her a cup of coffee and an open door (Mads makes quotation marks with his hands) to some knowledge about Denmark and the Danish language. Well, either she likes the company or the coffee, because she has been here a couple of times now (he laughs).

For Tine, Mads, and several others, the friend/volunteer relationship was difficult to categorize. Setting the table with something to drink and/or eat seemed to give them a sense of control over how the meeting would take place.

In Picture 2, we witness another neatly decorated table in 82-year-old Hanne's living room, awaiting Hanne and Chiela to sit and have instant coffee with milk substitute, sugar, and vanilla pastries. The plates have napkins folded in triangles on them and are placed on placemats on top of a tablecloth. On the table, we also see a landline phone, an address book, a notebook, and a pen. In the corner of the table,



2. Hanne's coffee table. Photo: CoRe.

three different paper holders keep track of folders, letters, and other important papers, among other things, a city map of Roskilde in English. In the background of the picture, teddy bears and colourful cushions take up the entire space of the sofa as they are participating, or at least observing the meeting between the Elderlearn pair.

The picture of Ellen's and Hanne's tables shows how the meeting between strangers is prepared, supported, and cared for by all kinds of socio-material objects, which created a meeting where the volunteer seniors drew on the schemes from a known everyday activity as a way of ensuring a good setting for the meeting. Coffee, cakes, and many other non-human objects are, in this setting, applied with an expectation of their ability to create a shared positive experience based on their affective value.

In his text about the black box of everyday life from 2014, Löfgren addresses the materiality of everyday life and how non-human objects are entangled with forces and energies that shape their interactions with them (Löfgren 2014:79). By doing so, he draws on affective theory and asks, "Why is it that some things attract certain feelings and become a focus of irritation, happiness or sadness?" (ibid.:87). Following this line of thought, Löfgren draws on the work of Ahmed and her concept of *sticky objects*, arguing that certain objects can have a certain stickiness to them. In the case of the coffee table, objects such as coffee, pastries, and candlelight have the stickiness of hospitality and "hygge",<sup>5</sup> objects that, in Ahmed's words, can be labelled *happy objects* (Ahmed 2010:29). Ahmed argues that happiness should be understood as a happening involving affect: "to be happy is to be affected by something" (ibid.). She ex-

plores how happiness functions as a promise that directs us towards certain objects, which then circulate as social goods. Such objects accumulate positive affective value as they are passed around. This is based on her broader theoretical framework around “orientation,” where she argues that objects have a social and cultural orientation – that is, they are imbued with values that shape how they are perceived, used, and understood in a particular context. Objects can be oriented towards certain emotions, identities, and ideologies, and this orientation influences how they are experienced and how they affect individuals and communities. Happy objects, as discussed by Ahmed, are objects that are oriented towards positive emotions and are culturally accepted as symbols of happiness. These objects can include items that are associated with normative ideals of happiness, such as wedding rings, baby clothes, or other objects that are considered markers of a happy life within a particular cultural or social context.

Picture 3 shows Hans and Junta. We are in Hans’s living room, and the table, as in Ellen’s and Hanne’s case, is neatly deco-



3. Hans and Junta around the coffee table in Hans’ living room. Photo: CoRe, Line Steen.

rated with tablecloth, napkins, cups, coffee, candy, biscuits, cake, sugar, sweet tablets, and much more. Hans has put quite an effort into creating and presenting a welcoming and homey atmosphere and situation. Yet, in this familiar and cosy atmosphere, two specific objects caught our attention: the electric candles and the bottle of port.

Candlelight has, for many years, been equivalent to “hygge” in Danish homes, and Denmark is famous for burning more candles than anywhere else in the world. The Danish anthropologist Mikkel Bille argues that light “plays a crucial role in orchestrating a sense of community, solitude and “secureness” at home and that the light atmosphere relies on cultural premises and notions of intimacy, informality, and relaxation, encompassed in the term ‘hygge’, or cosiness” (Bille 2015:56). In the last few years, however, there has been increased awareness of the health and safety issues linked to burning candles. Thus, especially in public institutions, such as nursing homes and homes for seniors, candles with open flames are no longer allowed. Consequently, electric candles have found their way into many Danish homes, including that of Hans, who is living in senior housing. The replacement of classic candles with electric candles underlines the affective attributes of candles and the role they play in creating cosy and welcoming Danish social situations. As Bille has shown in his study, candlelight comes with a culturally specific stickiness and is not necessarily a shared cultural repertoire that evokes the exact same feelings.

This underlines the affectiveness of the object, the role it plays in social situations, and how, with the electric candlelight, the affect “sticks, sustains or preserves the

connection between ideas, values and objects” (Ahmed 2010:29). Setting the table is hence a notable example of how certain socio-material arrangements can establish an inclusive space.

However, as Löfgren argues, things and affects come together in many ways (2014), and material objects can also have embedded exclusion mechanisms. This points to the potential risk of people attaching different values and feelings to the same object – such as alcohol – which is the other object that caught our attention: the port, including the three small wine glasses. Whereas this situation ended with a “cheers”, it could potentially have been an awkward and difficult situation with a clash between different cultural understandings of and approaches to alcohol. According to Ahmed, happiness is often aligned with particular social and cultural norms, expectations, and ideologies. Thus, happiness can be a powerful tool of social control, as it is often used to reinforce existing power structures, and individuals who deviate from normative notions of happiness may experience alienation or exclusion from affective communities. Affective community refers to social groups or communities that are bound together by shared emotions, values, or experiences, and Ahmed argues that the alignment of happiness can create or reinforce affective communities that are exclusionary or oppressive to those who do not conform to dominant norms (Ahmed 2004b). Hence, when strangers meet for the first time, they do not possess enough knowledge about each other’s cultural repertoire to know potential points of conflict and often draw on their own affective community, such as Danish alcohol culture. So, how do the volunteers navigate in this situation?

As argued above, the act of setting the coffee table and the objects it includes plays an important role and seems to have a certain stickiness to it. However, regarding the interaction between the two volunteers, who meet each other for the first time as strangers, these objects do not necessarily have the same stickiness or evoke the same emotions for the two parties. Recalling the figure of the Stranger, we examine in the next example how two volunteers interact and navigate with and around the coffee table in an attempt to establish a good social relationship:

I did not want to put rolled sausage<sup>6</sup> on the table if she could not stand it, so I asked:

“What religion do you have? Are you Muslim<sup>7</sup> or what?” But she was not. When we were about to eat and have coffee, she asked if she could do this (she folds her hands). Then I said, “We don’t say a prayer before a meal here in our home. We have never done that, but I don’t mind if you do.” But then I asked her what she was saying in the prayer and she had just said, “Thank you for great food.” (Rigmor)

In the quotation, Rigmor, an 85-year-old woman, talks about one of the first times she met her Elderlearn match, Jirapinya. This quotation underlines how a social meeting between strangers can be a potential minefield filled with the expectations and prescribed imaginations of the other. At first glance, the quotation illuminates a traditional, conservative, outdated, and not politically correct expression about Jirapinya and her possible religiously conditioned precautions about certain types of food. However, we argue that another interpretation is as likely. The quotation also shows how Rigmor was very eager to be a good host, by serving good food and coffee, and by welcoming other cultural traditions

such as prayers at the table. Both Rigmor and Jirapinya were trying to establish a social bond by attuning to one another when, for instance, Jirapinya, with her body language, indirectly asked whether it was acceptable to say a prayer (Despret 2004). This underlines how the social meetings that form the base of volunteer activities in organizations such as Elderlearn are made up of stuff, affects, and mutual attunements that “are hard to notice, difficult to verbalize and operate like slow accumulations of change” (Löfgren 2014: 81).

To use the figure of the Stranger to understand the meetings does not, however, imply that the parties are strangers on equal terms. Rather, we acknowledge that they have different cultural and socio-economic backgrounds and very different stories regarding, for example, migration. Thus, the volunteer foreigner has been given the role of the stranger in many other arenas of her life as well. In this regard, it might be a new role for the volunteer senior to be a stranger. Ahmed argues that:

Strangers are not simply those who are not already known in this dwelling, but those who are, in their very proximity, already recognized as not belonging, as being out of place. Hence, we recognize such strangers, the ones who are distant, only when they are close by; the strangers come to be seen as figures (with linguistic and bodily integrity) when they have entered the spaces we call “home”. (Ahmed 2000:49)

In the meetings between Elderlearn volunteers, the involved parties are equally engaged in getting to know each other and overcoming, through carefully planned socio-material arrangements, the strangeness that either posits. The meetings between the volunteers are ambivalent mixtures of

cultural recipes and sticky objects that require translation efforts and hard work to ensure a welcoming atmosphere that both parties would wish to repeat.

### **Staying at the Coffee Table – the Support Infrastructure of Elderlearn**

In the first part of our analysis, we focused on the actual meetings between the volunteers. In the following, we turn to the backstage work done by the employees at Elderlearn to facilitate the meetings. We focus on some of the changes that Elderlearn had to initiate due to the upscaling of its activities from 2019 onwards, as they illustrate the meticulous and ongoing work done by volunteer organizations to create a robust support infrastructure around the meetings. The backstage work done by the organizations, such as Elderlearn, mitigates some of the precariousness and uncertainties of the meetings, ensuring that the strangers/volunteers in the Elderlearn context are handed tools to help approach each other and are not left to improvise on their own (Schutz 1944).

In Elderlearn, before the organization began scaling up, an employee would participate in the first meeting between the volunteer senior citizen and the volunteer foreigner to create a protected environment. However, due to the upscaling, this was no longer possible. The potential fragility of leaving the sole responsibility for the first meeting to the strangers/volunteers became a key concern for Elderlearn and prompted it to design a new start-up phase that did not involve an Elderlearn employee. To keep in close contact with the volunteers in the initial phases of their relationship, Elderlearn has developed several points of contact. This starts in the registration process, in

which an Elderlearn employee asks what communication devices the volunteers feel comfortable using. Many senior volunteers do not use their e-mail that much, and some do not use text messages. In this case, both the Elderlearn employees and the volunteer foreigner will communicate with the volunteer senior through phone calls. Another point of contact comes after the volunteers confirm the date and time for the first meeting, and an Elderlearn employee calls both parties one day in advance. This call is to make sure that both are up for the meeting and that they feel ready and well-informed, for example, by preparing them with possible conversation topics. On the day of the meeting, they also receive a text message to ensure that they remember it. These choreographed points of contact are some of the many management practices installed to support the meetings and create a smooth match-making process, avoiding too many or unnecessary problems for the matched pairs.

Another tool designed to support the start-up phase was the language game “Ordet er dit,” which literally translates to “The word is yours,” and which is sent to the senior volunteer who will be hosting the first meeting.

In pictures 4 and 5, we see an example of the game and an Elderlearn pair playing it. In picture 4, the orange card presents a statement that the players are urged to complete. This orange card says: “Family makes me think of ...,” and the players then have a certain number of word-cards that they can choose from, such as *hygge* and *uldtæppe* (wool blanket), and they then have to explain which word completes the statement best for them. One of the volunteer seniors, 75-year-old Ellen, explained

why she liked the game and used it with her Elderlearn match:

Well, it can take some of the awkwardness out of the situation. It gives you some catchwords, so you have something you can say so that you don't sit there humming and hawing without knowing what to say.

Another volunteer senior, 79-year-old Jette, stated:

The game is such a good idea. Because a game immediately gives a different atmosphere – of having fun together! So, I can see why they introduced it. Just a shame that the words are so easy.

As our informants express in the quotations, the game is a helpful tool for the pairs to apply as a way to structure their first meetings together without too much awkwardness or silence, a concern that many of the volunteers expressed when signing up at Elderlearn. The way the lan-



4. The language game “Ordet er dit”.  
Photo: CoRe, Line Steen.



guage game is designed provides words and half-sentences with the abilities and expectations to create specific types of conversations, such as the participants' life stories, cultural preferences, and introduction to Denmark and Danish culture. The game thus helps the volunteers to perform a conversation that could otherwise be very difficult and fraught with questions of how to understand each other and navigate the intercultural encounter. Moreover, the game supports the conversation by offering words and sentences which are all closely connected to Danish cultural values and act as happy objects, oriented towards positive emotions and culturally accepted symbols of happiness (Ahmed 2010).

The analytical examples above illustrate parts of the careful infrastructure that Elderlearn has built as part of its organization. Our research showed that replacing Elderlearn participation at the first meeting with a choreographed line of commu-

nication through letters, mail, and phone calls resulted in greater independence and agency in the Elderlearn pairs. As Mikkel, a 69-year-old man stated, "We're adults and don't need a babysitter." The quotation derives from a reflection on his experience as a volunteer in Elderlearn. For him, it was important to feel a sense of autonomy and flexibility to do what he felt like when meeting up. Consequently, he also, somehow ironically, explained how he did not apply the language game because he found it too childish. The Elderlearn infrastructure is a balancing act, allowing for independent and self-sufficient interaction between volunteers while monitoring and ensuring that they are comfortable and well-prepared to meet one another.

The preparatory phone calls and the game are two examples of how Elderlearn coordinates and facilitates the volunteer activity, as well as how the upscaling of the organization partly forced it to devel-



5. Elderlearn pair playing the language game. Photo: Elderlearn.

op tools that care for the meetings at a distance, enabling it to develop and refine its support infrastructure. However, the key point in this discussion is not whether an organization has an infrastructure. Instead, we emphasize that, first, an organization such as Elderlearn is constantly forced to adjust its infrastructure to accommodate organizational changes and improve the quality of its services. Second, the infrastructure is not only a supportive instrument tuned in on the well-being of the volunteers but also a tool for monitoring and assessing Elderlearn's service. These two related points are described in the following quotation from one of Elderlearn's employees:

It takes time! Especially in the start-up phase. After all, we have long calls with both parties, which are almost a kind of interview. We write down notes along the way. There are many things in such a conversation that are unimportant, but you gradually become skilled at sensing what is important! But the work doesn't stop there – after being matched, they need quite a lot of support: in the form of reminder calls on the day they meet, subsequent calls to debrief, and then after three months, we have monthly status calls with them. We also have automated emails and text messages that are sent out where we ask how things are going. After three months, we do the first evaluation via a questionnaire. It is also at this point that an Elderlearn pair is registered as what you can call a successful match and gets included in the reporting to the municipality or client, which pays us to do the work.

The support infrastructure detailed in the quote makes visible the important role of the employees in the organization and the degree of professionalization needed to guarantee the success of the match-making programme. These support infrastructure

practices are needed to stabilize the organization as well as the relationships between volunteers, and, as we have shown, are key elements when upscaling a social volunteer activity (Ertner 2015; 2019). Although voluntary organizations are still widely recognized for their civic qualities and democratic education, the emerging tendency of a professionalization of the field opens for new hybrid actors to enter welfare services through new policies, infrastructure of support organizations, and legal frameworks (Grub & Henriksen 2019:70–71). Our case, Elderlearn, is an example of a hybrid actor and of how civil society has become more inclined to turn to the business world and borrow organizational models, mindsets, and dynamics from it. As a socio-economic organization involved in volunteering work, Elderlearn can be seen as one of these new actors coming out of new partnerships and collaborations across Danish society (La Cour & Højlund 2008).

## Conclusion

In this article we have described how a social volunteer activity, such as Elderlearn, in which two strangers are matched to form a social bond, demands profound preparation and continuous work from both the volunteers and the organization behind it. In the first part of our analysis, we employed the notions of the Stranger, the black box, and stickiness of objects, which allowed us to understand the meeting between two volunteers in Elderlearn as hard work requiring emotional and practical investments from both parties. Consequently, this meeting is not the seemingly mundane act of easy socializing but instead an intense practice fraught with cultural recipes, material objects, and inclusion and exclu-

sion mechanisms. In the second part of the analysis, we described how Elderlearn establishes a support infrastructure to make the social activity work, to support the volunteers at a distance, and thereby to clear out as many potential problems as possible. The ongoing attunement between the different work practices performed by the volunteers and the employees at Elderlearn also made visible the emerging professionalization in the context of social volunteer work in Denmark.

Our article has provided a close-up description of two key sites where the otherwise often hidden requirements in volunteer work are performed: the meeting between the volunteers and the organizational infrastructure. This knowledge about the socio-material-affective investments involved in the activities and the strategies developed by the organizations is crucial in times when civil societies in Scandinavia are increasingly urged to take responsibility for softer welfare tasks and facilitate successful social activities for very diverse groups of citizens. The current developments and changes in civil society, and the impact these have on the field of social volunteering, open questions on how the future landscape of volunteer activities will be formed, which types of organizations will emerge, and what the roles of the volunteer will be. Our study of Elderlearn alluded to part of the answer; that the future of social volunteer work depends on the ability of organizations to build professionalized practices that can attune to the practices of their volunteers, and consequently facilitating and creating the infrastructure needed for a diverse group of people to engage, meet and socialize in volunteer match-making activities.

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## Notes

- 1 A private enterprise that runs a business with the aim – through its operations and earnings – of promoting social and community-beneficial purposes: <https://erhvervsstyrelsen.dk/vejledning-registrering-som-registreret-socioloekonomisk-virksomhed>.
- 2 See the former research project on Elderlearn at the CoRe website: <https://core.ku.dk/forskning/elderlearn---naar-svaekkede-aeldre-mennesker-bliver-frivillige/>.
- 3 See more about our accompanying research: <https://core.ku.dk/forskning/frivillighed-til-alle-aeldre/>.
- 4 Among the senior citizens: seven men and fourteen women aged 65–88. Among the volunteer foreigners: nineteen women and two men aged 23–47.
- 5 *Hygge*: a particular Danish word for having a good, fun, pleasant, cosy time.
- 6 Traditional Danish cold cut.
- 7 She applied an old Danish derogatory word for Muslims that is no longer used.

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