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Reimagining Social Relations Through Care and Collective Joy: The Formation of Collectivity Among Volunteers Along the Lines of In/Formality

Michelle Brunßen[1,2] | Sarah Jay[1] | João Manuel de Oliveira[2]

[1]Global MINDS, Department of Psychology, University of Limerick, Limerick, Ireland | [2]Instituto Universitário de Lisboa, Lisboa, Portugal

Correspondence: Sarah Jay (sarah.jay@ul.ie)

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ABSTRACT

The neoliberal model of social organisation frames individualism as the dominant perspective to perceive the world and competition as its core practice. Interdependencies become marginalised, and ideas of social welfare and community are pushed aside. Mutual aid efforts not only aim to provide relief for resulting social inequalities but further seek to build new social relations. Adopting a feminist institutionalist approach, this paper aims to contribute to a move away from neoliberal structuring of social relations by analysing how collectivity among volunteers is formed. Based upon ethnographic fieldwork and eight interviews with volunteers in the context of Lesvos, Greece, this paper contextualises the role of collectivity among volunteers working in mutual aid organisations along the lines of in/formalities. It provides a deeper understanding of the role of affect by exploring practical tools through which affective collectivity is formed: care and collective joy. The paper argues that in/formalities are not distinct spheres but, much like the private-public domains, constantly flow into and influence each other. While extending previous psychological research, the present paper shows that practices of care and collective joy, intertangled with in/formalities, offer possibilities to form affective mutual relationships between volunteers and are an integral part of collectivity formation.

1 | Introduction

Contemporary Western social structures focus on individual freedom, self-sufficiency and individual responsibility. They prioritise profit over social welfare, which leads to unequal amounts of precarity (Coultas et al. 2023). This has been linked to a neoliberal ideology that fosters social inequalities by emphasising individual achievements and ignoring our shared interdependencies (Segal 2023). While neoliberalism is an ambiguous term, numerous conceptualizations refer to it as a form of social organisation that frames individualism as the dominant perspective to perceive the world and competition as its core practice (Coultas et al. 2023). Individuals are constructed as independent and self-sufficient bodies. At the same time, essential questions about responsibilities and care are shifted to the private sector and are marginalised as unproductive (Hall and Silver 2020; Malherbe 2020). Scholars warn that neoliberalism's focus on the individual works to present any form of collectivity or togetherness as pathological, leading to people perceiving each other as a burden (Arnett 2023).

In this context of social relations being formed through individualised competition, we witness what scholars call a 'crisis of care', characterised by a rise of authoritarianism, austerity and economic inequalities within and between countries (Fraser 2016; Malherbe 2020). These dynamics result in conflicts and displacement, which promote policies that reinforce borders and treat migrating people as threats (Esposito and Kellezi 2020).

Whilst the neoliberal focus on individualism shifts responsibilities on individuals, mutual aid efforts provide an alternative

framework for structuring social relations based on collective action and recognition of interdependencies. As a form of political participation, mutual aid shifts responsibilities to collective efforts and provides possibilities for seeing each other as a source of joy and care (Arani 2020; Łapniewska 2022; Littman et al. 2022; Spade 2020b). Growing from anarchist tradition, mutual aid traditionally relies on informal practices (IPs). In line with increasing criticism of other forms of aid, formal institutions, such as aid organisations working in migration, increasingly adopt mutual aid principles.

Literature within institutionalism shows that institutions and their structure play an essential role in structuring social relations (Mackay et al. 2009). However, aligning with neoliberalism's focus on rationality, these theories strongly focus on cognitive processes and pay little attention to affect and embodied experience. Therefore, this paper makes a significant contribution to the literature by drawing on a feminist institutionalist approach to understand collectivity in mutual aid through affective processes and practices of care. Additionally, the present study argues that mutual aid organisations offer a distinctive context for forming collectivity. Therefore, this study aims to contextualise the emergence of collectivity along the lines of in/formalities (Misztal 2005). Additionally, within social psychology, some efforts have been made to understand collectivity and group formation within mutual aid through studies on shared social identity among volunteers (Bowe et al. 2020; Perach et al. 2023). Also, feminist affect scholars have highlighted the role of macrolevel affective processes in forming collectivity (Ahmed 2012; von Scheve and Salmela 2014).

Building upon that, this paper contributes by analysing how collectivity is formed along the lines of in/formalities through a feminist institutionalist approach rooted in affect theory (Ahmed 2012; Butler 2015). To do so, this paper starts by providing a deeper theoretical understanding and builds upon a field study in Lesvos. Lesvos, as one of the so-called 'hotspots' for migration in Europe, attracts volunteers who are embedded in more or less formal institutions, movements and organisations.

1.1 | Individualism as a Lense—Competition as Practice

Growing precarity stemming from marginalisation along the axes of gender, race, sexuality, ability, age, religion, ethnicity and more is exacerbated by individualism (Coultas et al. 2023; Fine 2023). Social psychological research on decision-making under scarcity, insecurity-driven prejudice and the disregard of systemic issues like racism and sexism shows that the individualised structure of social relations reinforces a circle of precarity (Elcheroth and Drury 2020; Greenaway et al. 2014; Sheehy-Skeffington 2019). Standing (2011) argues, these conditions produce lives marked by chronic insecurity, with unstable work, weakened social protections and growing exposure to risk becoming normalised. Ultimately, individualism undermines social support, fosters vulnerability and hinders collective efforts.

Within psychology, emphasis is placed on individual-focused resilience to explain why some people 'function' better than others, which upholds ideas of individualism and competition (Schwarz 2018; Cohen 2017). Therefore, scholars have criticised the discipline's complicity in blaming individuals instead of addressing their context (Coultas et al. 2023; Fine 2023). Through this individualised approach, systemic precarity is internalised, legitimising self-management and individual responsibility (Bower 2015). Living a fulfilling life becomes an individual duty, and unmet needs are attributed to personal failure rather than power structures (Ahmed 2010). Accordingly, focusing on individualism shifts essential questions about care and responsibilities to the private sphere.

1.2 | Mutual Aid: Collectivity Along the Lines of In/Formalities

Mutual aid is a form of political participation that offers collective solutions and challenges neoliberal assumptions by centring the collective over the individual (Spade 2020b). It allows for acknowledgment of macrostructural influences, fosters mutual relationships (Arani 2020), encourages caring bonds, recognises individuals as sources of creativity and joy, and relies on voluntary participation. Through collaboration, shared responsibilities and mutual support, mutual aid fosters a sense of collectivity (Spade 2020b). Rooted in anarchist traditions, mutual aid historically drew on informal collective practices (Sircar 2022), emphasising interdependence and seeing others as sources of support rather than competition or burden.

Despite these benefits, scholars note several critiques and limitations of mutual aid, such as emotional and organisational pressures on volunteers due to reliance on informal networks, challenges in sustaining long-term engagement and resources and the risk of unintentionally reproducing neoliberal ideas of community responsibility (Mould et al. 2022; Spade 2020a). Volunteers may experience burnout, and informal networks may struggle to maintain their activities over time without systemic support (Everingham 2017; Arani 2020).

These limitations, however, underscore why mutual aid is increasingly necessary. In contexts where structural support is insufficient, mutual aid functions as a critical buffer, providing flexible, community-centred care and addressing inequalities that formal institutions fail to redress. In this way, mutual aid both responds to immediate needs and highlights systemic failures, making it a vital mechanism to supplement formalised aid while advocating for more equitable structures.

Mutual aid is practiced among volunteers in various settings and embedded within multiple institutions (Everingham 2017), ranging from international charities and national Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) to looser grassroots structures (Łapniewska 2022). As traditional aid methods like charity face criticism for upholding precarity and marginalisation, mutual aid principles increasingly resonate within formal institutional aid structures in migration work (Reese and Johnson 2022).

Charity is often structured through institutions and centres around one-directional relations that position one group as helpers and the other as needing help, reinforcing unequal power dynamics (Arani 2020; D'Alessandro 2022). Incorporating mutual

aid principles in institutions promotes aid work that seeks to change underlying power structures rather than preserving them. Mutual aid organisations aiming to form reciprocal relations also provide a specific setting for forming collectivity among people engaged within organisations (Spade 2020b).

Institutionalist literature shows that institutions and their structures shape social relations (Mackay et al. 2009). To better understand this influence, Lowndes and Roberts (2013) differentiate between formalities and informalities. Formalities are explicit and include recorded rules, structured practices and official narratives recognised and implemented by organisations. Informalities involve implicit rules, spontaneous practices and collaborative narratives, allowing more flexibility and less control. However, the two are not exclusive spheres.

Aligning, feminist institutionalism cautions to acknowledge the interplay between in/formalities, as, for example, IPs can be embedded in formal structures, and both can drive change (Erman and Zadhy-Çepoğlu 2024). Formal rules shape informal narratives, guide conduct, and influence both formal and IPs (Alsabbagh 2024). While informal mutual aid networks in the context of migration are cost-effective, adaptable communication channels, scholars caution that lacking formal regulation can pose safeguarding risks to volunteers and the public (Mao et al. 2024). Together, formalities and informalities shape volunteers' experiences and define how they engage with their work and one another (Gray and Stevenson 2020).

1.3 | Explaining Collectivity: From Social Identity Theory to Affect

Within psychology, Social Identity Theory (SIT) was developed as a critique of individual-level explanations of behaviour and provides one framework for thinking about collectivity formation between volunteers (Hogg 2010). SIT holds that individuals categorise themselves and others into social groups, shaping perceptions of roles and responsibilities (Van Stekelenburg 2015). Volunteers in mutual aid see themselves through their group memberships, positioning themselves as part of a collective, which helps to navigate roles and predicts well-being (Gray and Stevenson 2020). Bowe et al. (2020) showed that sense of belonging to a volunteer group enhances shared social identity and emotional support, aligning with SIT's view that group membership is central to self-concept and mental health (Van Stekelenburg 2015). Recent research conceptualises identification as emotional bonds and embodied connections across domains such as collective action (Drury and Reicher 2009), mutual aid (Perach et al. 2023) and community volunteering (Bowe et al. 2020). Building on SIT's critique of individualism (Hogg 2010) and following Butler (2015), this study approaches collectivity through affect theory, foregrounding the emotional and embodied dimensions of belonging.

1.4 | Affective Relationships: Collective Joy

Butler (2015) argues that for people to build a set of 'enabling and dynamic relations', these relationships do not have to be built in a 'unified or conformist way', and they do not have to 'presume or produce a collective identity' (p. 27). Instead, their shared character can be understood as shared embodied engagement or emotional bonds, like collective joy (CJ) (Ahmed 2012; Butler 2015).

CJ as a shared emotion emerges spontaneously in moments of participation and is overspilling (Segal 2017). It enables a shift from a self-focused 'I' state, marked by self-judgement and awareness of others' reactions, to a 'We' mode (Minozzo 2020; Segal 2017). This fosters a sense of collectivity and strengthens collective bonds (Regis and Walton 2023). Though it may arise spontaneously, CJ depends on an environment that allows it (Segal 2017; The World Transformed 2021).

CJ derives from a branch of philosophy and socio-cultural theory, particularly the Spinozian concept of affect. Drawing on Spinoza, affect refers to the capacity of bodies to affect and be affected, emphasising how emotions emerge from relational interactions rather than solely from individual cognition, and highlighting the interdependence of self and others in shaping experiences like CJ (D'Alessandro 2022). Through affect, we sense, feel and experience our relationship with the world and vice versa. Affect is 'the experience of affecting and being affected' (Letson 2024, 16). Joyous affect can be understood as one's capacity to act and engage in productive relations. Recognising joyous affect involves acknowledging that being in the world means being dependent on, and shaped by others, human and non-human. In its affective capacity, joy is understood as social and political rather than individual (Ahmed 2010).

Forms of joy that highlight the social aspect have been largely ignored in psychology's conceptions of joy or are dismissed as pathological (Reese and Johnson 2022). While collective emotions have gained attention in political psychology, earlier theories on crowds depicted them as irrational, uncontrollable and contagious—much like a disease (von Scheve and Salmela 2014). Emotions were feminised and naturalised, framed as instinctive and automatic rather than complex and socially constructed, which marginalised their role in public and political discourse (Ahmed 2010; Freeman 2020). Although recent research highlights emotions' positive role in solidarity and collective action (Drury and Reicher 2009; Jasper 2011), studies still focus mainly on 'negative' emotions. Consequently, joy remains ill-defined within psychology (Arnett 2023), making it necessary to draw on other disciplines to understand CJ's role in collectivity formation.

1.5 | The Practice of Interdependencies: Care and It's Counter Dimension

Affect scholars also mention the role of care in countering neoliberal values of individualism and competition (D'Alessandro 2022; Hobart and Kneese 2020). Care is a multifaceted concept referring to 'a relational set of discourses and practices between people, environments and objects' (Hobart and Kneese 2020, 2). It includes both hands-on activities and emotional and political commitments to others' well-being. Conceptualised as an affective bond between inner self and external world, care is embodied in a shared 'feeling with, rather than a feeling for, others' (Hobart and Kneese 2020, 2).

Within psychology, Held (2006) highlighted relational connections and the ethic of care in forming interpersonal bonds. Interest in care also appears in research on social support (Cramer 2004), showing how emotional care fosters satisfaction in relationships (Shensa et al. 2020). Stemming from feminist Marxist thinking, which criticises that care work as a form of social reproduction is marginalised as unproductive within neoliberal capitalist worlds, scholars define radical care as 'a set of vital but underappreciated strategies for enduring precarious worlds' (Hobart and Kneese 2020, 2). Although care work sustains societies and social relations, it remains marginalised and confined to the private sphere (Aulenbacher et al. 2018). It cannot be separated from systemic inequality and power structures and is often co-opted by neoliberalism, which markets self-care as an individual solution to structural neglect, positioning groups against each other by questioning which bodies are worthy of care (D'Alessandro 2022; Hobart and Kneese 2020).

Radical care, resisting individualism, offers an alternative way of structuring social relations. While individualist relations are shaped by personal goals and competition, radical care emphasises interdependencies and collective over individual interests (D'Alessandro 2022). It situates people in relation to others and their contexts, showing that one's well-being is tied to another's, fostering collective responsibility (Ahmed 2010; Segal 2023). Radical care sustains social efforts and frames care as a terrain of struggle where movements like mutual aid build collective structures (D'Alessandro 2022).

The framing of radical care as a critical survival strategy fundamental to social movements recognises the pervasive use of care, as it is essential for any form of social and personal concern. It allows for understanding care as collective efforts in response to precarious ways of structuring social relations under neoliberal ideals of individualism. Due to its focus on mutual relations, radical care interrupts individualist ways of social relations and creates a crack, which opens space for caring ways of relating towards each other (D'Alessandro 2022). Therefore, using care as a theoretical framework to explore the formation of collectivity among volunteers allows us to recognise shared responsibilities, relationality and interdependencies and enables us to see these efforts as an alternative to neoliberal individualistic ways of structuring social relations.

To sum up, this study explores how collectivity forms among volunteers on Lesvos through in/formalities. To do so, the roles of care and CJ are investigated, as they propose an alternative framework for establishing social relations based on interdependencies, shared emotions and the formation of interpersonal bonds.

2 | Method

2.1 | Research Context—Lesvos

As part of my master's program, I, the student researcher, interned in Lesvos, Greece. Lesvos, an island in the northeastern Aegean Sea, is one of Europe's 'hot spots' of migration. Since 2015 and the onset of the so-called 'refugee crisis', a dominant crisis narrative, combined with insufficient structural care from governments and supranational bodies, has drawn international NGOs, grassroots organisations, civic initiatives and volunteers to the island (Tsilimpounidi and Carastathis 2017). Lesvos can also be considered a 'hot spot' for volunteer tourism, in which travellers engage in voluntary work as part of their trips (Trihas and Tsilimpokos 2018). Due to chronic underfunding, much of the humanitarian work is carried out by unpaid volunteers (Trihas and Tsilimpokos 2018). Since 2016, national and international legal changes have reshaped living conditions for asylum seekers, affected NGO and grassroots activities and led to the criminalization of aid work (Rozakou 2017; Gordon and Larsen 2022). Most humanitarian organisations on the island are based in its capital, Mytilene. One of two municipalities, Mytilene is located about five kilometres from Mavrovouni, the current refugee camp, making it a central location for migration-focused humanitarian efforts.

2.2 | Fieldwork and Reflexivity

During my internship in line with my master's program, I worked in a grassroots mutual aid organisation in Mytilene that was founded, organised and run by people with refugee backgrounds. As part of the volunteer community in Lesvos, my role cannot and should not be understood solely as that of an observer. I participated in daily organisational activities, including supporting language classes, assisting with cultural and music sessions and contributing to the coordination of social support initiatives. This positioned me as an active participant-researcher rather than a detached outsider, meaning that I was embedded in everyday organisational life and relationships. Letherby (2003) argues that reflexivity requires researchers to consider how their presence and actions affect the research context and how the context, in turn, shapes their perspectives and interpretations. I therefore engaged in reflexive practices, recognising that the knowledge produced was co-constructed with participants and the context. These practices included ongoing reflection on motivations and impacts, acknowledging the limits of my understanding and the potential for unintentional harm. I aimed to conduct research that was respectful, inclusive and responsive to the needs and rights of the community involved.

2.3 | About 'Care Takers'—The Participants

Eight aid workers (females = 7, males = 1) were selected through a recruitment process that unfolded within the network built during the internship in Lesvos. Sampling continued until data saturation was reached, defined here as the point at which no new information or themes were observed in the material. Recruitment information about the study was spread via a digital flyer distributed through WhatsApp groups and within my network, amounting to convenience sampling, snowball sampling and voluntary response sampling. Convenience sampling refers to the recruitment of participants who are accessible and willing to participate (Golzar et al. 2022). Snowball sampling was also employed, whereby participants referred other potential participants within their networks, a common strategy in qualitative research for socially connected groups (Noy 2008). In addition, participation was voluntary, meaning individuals chose to respond to the study invitation, reflecting the

self-selective nature of voluntary response sampling. Inclusion criteria involved previous or ongoing engagement in mutual aid organisations in Lesvos. Participants were from Europe, North America and Australia, two of whom had previous experiences in mutual aid. Participants were engaged within three different mutual aid organisations. Following an expression of interest in the study, potential participants were provided with study material, including consent forms and research privacy notice, and interview dates were arranged.

2.4 | Material Collection

I conducted eight in-depth semi-structured interviews, lasting an average of 48 min (range = 24-72), online between February and April 2024 using my institutional account of Microsoft Teams. Interviews were video and audio recorded. The structure followed previously formulated questions about participants' work in Mytilene and experiences of collectivity among volunteers. For example, participants were asked: 'Can you recall a memorable moment during your work with [name organization] when you felt a strong sense of connection or camaraderie with others? What was happening at the time, and what made it special for you?' The semi-structured design allowed for flexibility around adapting the interview structure to participants' inputs. Based on the Jeffersonian approach, transcripts were generated (Hepburn and Bolden 2017). Field notes were taken from the end of September to the end of December 2023, providing additional context and insight into the participants' responses. Approval for the study was granted by our institution's ethics committee under the approval number 2024_01_04_EHS. Participants were assured of their ability to withdraw from the study at any point without consequences. Confidentiality was maintained throughout the research process by anonymizing transcripts, safe data storage, deleting interview recordings post-transcription and carefully choosing interview extracts.

2.5 | Approach to Analysis

The present study adopted a social constructivist perspective and was grounded in relational ontology (Hosking 2011). The study aimed to explore and describe collectivity formation along the lines of in/formality within volunteer communities involved with different mutual aid organisations. Practices of care and CJ, highlighted throughout the material, were further investigated as integral tools for forming collectivity.

Reflexive thematic analysis was used (Braun and Clarke 2019). Transcripts were reviewed multiple times for familiarisation. Then, significant aspects of the data were identified, and NVivo was used to perform qualitative software-aided coding. Following, codes were organised into potential themes and subthemes. Through an iterative process, I consciously revisited and refined the themes considering the material and constructed a comprehensive narrative to communicate the key findings of the analysis. A thematic map (see Figure 1) was created to visualise the relationships between themes and subthemes. To enhance the rigour of the analysis, I engaged in ongoing reflexive practice, including peer discussion and supervisory dialogue, which supported me in critically examining my assumptions and interpretive decisions. As this study is grounded in a reflexive thematic analysis approach, the findings represent one situated and interpretive reading of the data rather than a claim to produce objective or definitive knowledge. Other interpretations remain possible. Three main themes were constructed.

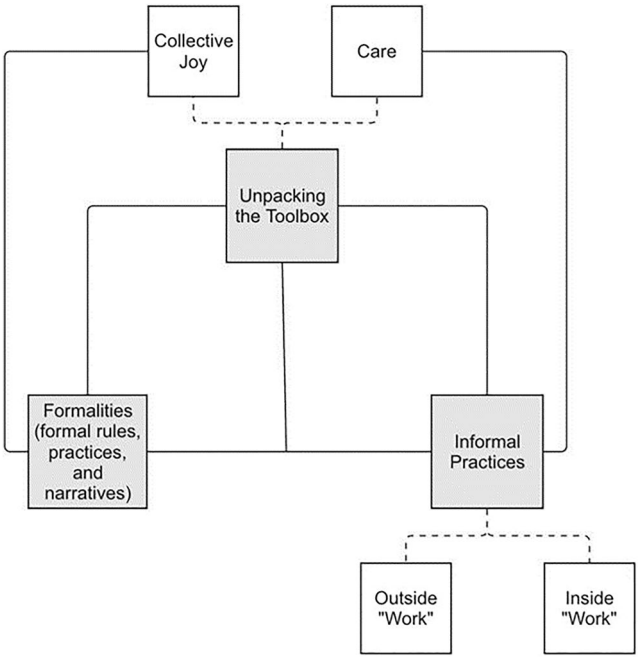

FIGURE 1 | Thematic map. *Note:* The three themes include 'Formalities', 'Informal Practices' and 'Unpacking the Toolbox'. Dotted lines indicate subthemes. 'Informal Practices' includes two subthemes: Outside 'Work' and Inside 'Work'. 'Unpacking the Toolbox' also includes two subthemes, namely 'Care' and 'Collective Joy'. Solid lines indicate the relationship between themes/subtheme.

The first theme, 'Formalities', refers to institutional support in forming collectivity, including formal rules, practices and narratives. The second theme, 'Informal Practices', concerns IPs in forming collectivity. It is divided into IPs 'inside' and 'outside' of what the interviewees constructed as 'work'. The third theme, 'Unpacking the Toolbox', can be understood as shifting away from the places of collectivity formation towards emphasising the tools used. It includes two subthemes: 'Care' and 'Collective Joy' (see Figure 1).

3 | Results

While walking through Mytilene, I repeatedly noticed groups of volunteers spending time together, eating, talking, or joining activities. Shortly after arriving, I was added to a WhatsApp group where volunteers arranged to meet in their free time. An excerpt from my field notes captures this: 'Sunday, walking home, too much work, the volunteers are out singing karaoke again' (22.10.23). Nearly every Sunday, the same small bar was filled with volunteers singing and dancing.

Interviews supported these observations, showing that collectivity was central to what participants called the 'volunteer community'. While they did not use the term 'collectivity',

they described 'getting closer' and being part of a 'community'. Reflecting on her time in Mytilene, Participant 3 noted:

> I was so happy that I was in Lesvos, because I think it's a very special community both in terms of the volunteers who are attracted to that space, and because the organizations I worked with are very unique.

In line with the reports of all interviewees, this extract highlights the presence of a community of volunteers in Lesvos. Additionally, it shows that collectivity formation takes place in different ways. On the one hand, people mentioned aspects that can be interpreted as formalities related to institutional support. On the other hand, aspects of informalities were brought up.

3.1 | Theme 1: Formalities as Institutional Support

This theme highlights participants' reports on how formal structures support collectivity and interpersonal bonds among volunteers through rules, practices and narratives. Formal rules recognised shared responsibilities and equal participation, explicitly stated in codes of conduct. They were implemented through hiring local and international employees to support volunteer well-being and organising safeguarding trainings, team meetings and events. Participants described how these formally organised activities, such as sports tournaments, cultural exchange parties, sharing circles, team meetings and morning briefings, created opportunities to form personal bonds.

Moreover, organisations adopted formal practices to ensure communication between volunteers. For example, participants shared that one of the organisations provided walkie-talkies to enhance communication. Although this specific formal practice was unique, participants across all organisations expressed organisational support for communication and team building through formal rules and practices.

While all participants reported 'team building' as a practice that can be categorised as formal in one way or another, a particularly memorable ritual was the 'Freaky Friday Box'. Throughout the week, volunteers wrote compliments on post-it notes, placed them in the box, and read them aloud on Fridays. Participant 5 recalled:

> We enjoyed our volleyball tournament and the 'Freaky Friday' box in general and many more activities. [...] we had the marathon together, which was such a nice experience. If you are a member of [organization], you train together for the marathon in Mytilene.

Beyond the Freaky Friday Box, the quote provides the first indications of the link between the sharing of organised or formalised practices and the presence of shared experiences. Formalised group activities, such as sports tournaments and cultural exchange events, contribute to collectivity through shared affective experiences and embodied interactions. Rather than merely shaping a collective identity, these moments generate emotional bonds and reinforce feelings of togetherness (Wetherell 2012). Furthermore, rituals like the 'Freaky Friday Box' enhance social cohesion and reinforce positive relationships among group members (Collins 2014).

In addition to formal practices, participants highlighted the formal organisational narrative around 'community' (Alsabbagh 2024; Lowndes and Roberts 2013). While they described a broader island-wide volunteer community, many linked their sense of belonging directly to their own organisation. They repeatedly mentioned a 'friendly', 'family-like' atmosphere, equal treatment, and organised events that made it easier to 'get to know each other' and 'bond'. This aligns with mutual aid principles that can be understood to provide specific settings for interaction (Spade 2020b). For instance, Participant 5 noted:

> Maybe [organization] made it easier because it also gave us international volunteers the opportunity to be together, like to work together. Everything was scheduled, everyone was treated equal with all the same tasks. We all have to clean and have to serve things and it was always teamwork.

Participant 5 noticed that volunteers engaged in equal tasks within the organisation felt treated equally. Sharing tasks under equal conditions fosters a sense of common goals and shared responsibilities, which helps to see others as a source of relief and possible help, vital for fostering positive relationships (Van Stekelenburg 2015).

Another central theme, often recalled with noticeable joy, was 'informal practices'. Participants referred to these as 'activities' or 'things' they organised themselves. They occurred both within spatial and temporal proximity to what was constructed as 'work' (inside 'work') and away from it (outside 'work'). Participant 5 explained:

> We would try and organize lots of things that took us out of the context that we're working in and just facilitate a time to be together and not too big about work but to get to know each other.

These IPs offered additional spaces for volunteers to connect, independent of organisational structure. IPs were seen as something that took volunteers out of the context of their 'work' and thus allows to understand IPs as complementary arenas of collectivity, creating opportunities for interpersonal bonding beyond formal work contexts. The following section focuses on these IPs in more depth.

3.2 | Theme 2: IPs—'Get Out' to 'Get Close'

IPs can be understood as interruptions of formalities. They were described as opportunities to 'get out of the context' of formal work and 'get to know each other'. Although participants did not use the term 'IPs', they frequently referred to them as 'activities'. These ranged from sports to social events such as visiting hot

springs, sharing meals, going to the beach, or going out together. Participant 2 gave an example of IPs outside work:

> We did many things, like day trips during the weekend. For example, hiking happened on Sundays when everybody was free and didn't have to work before or after. So [...] it was nice.

This illustrates that IPs often involved creative shared activities, such as hikes and day trips, and took place outside formal working hours. IPs were organized through shared communication channels, like WhatsApp groups, and described as 'organic' because they did 'not follow explicit rules' (Pp 3) regarding structure or participation. Still, participation was implicitly shaped by how these activities were organized. Multiple IPs took place each week, ensuring 'at least once a week there was something happening for everybody' (Pp 3).

Unlike formal activities limited to specific organisations, IPs brought together volunteers from several groups, extending collectivity beyond formal structures. Their inclusivity created spaces for connection and mutual support. Participant 5 highlighted their familiar, safe character:

> I think I can't compare it to anything, because I've never felt something like this before, and I have never felt so safe in a place as well. It was just like a family you choose yourself.

The quote shows that participants felt safe while engaging in IPs and compares the 'community' of volunteers to the ideal of a family, making clear that this 'family' was chosen by themselves. In line with feeling 'safe' while engaging in IPs, participants reported 'looking out for each other', for example, by talking about emotions. Participant 2 refers to this by noting that:

> Being able to talk to others was important. I think especially in this context of volunteering, it's good to have this sense of community to know that you have somebody to talk to about your day.

This highlights the role of shared communication in creating emotional support and strengthening the 'sense of community.' IPs offered spaces where volunteers could share experiences, find relief and foster care-based relationships outside of what was constructed as 'work', aligning with Held's (2006) emphasis on relational connections and the ethic of care.

Additionally, in line with participants' reports about formal practices, participants referred to the role of IPs in shaping collectivity by mentioning that they were 'feeling closer to others' during IPs and felt like they were part of a 'community'. Participant 2 puts this as follows:

> You know even from the most simple stuff like receiving the notification to go out or to go for a walk, like getting to know people, to spend time with them and then even organizing day trips [...] and this was the entry stage of this sense of belonging because afterwards I managed to head home with people from the volunteer community.

He points out that participation in IPs created emotional bonds through shared experiences and embodied interactions, reinforcing belonging (Ahmed 2004). While reporting about IPs, participants stressed that the people involved included international and community volunteers. The term international volunteer refers to people who come to Lesvos for a specific period, work in an organisation and leave afterwards. As a label, community volunteers refer to volunteers with a refugee or asylum seeker background, most of whom are still awaiting confirmation of their legal status. Although organisations aimed to foster a shared community, many formal practices targeted specific groups. For example, one organisation held regular meetings for international volunteers only, with additional monthly events where both groups came together over food and music.

Organisations also imposed formal rules governing volunteer interaction outside work. Some participants reported contract clauses prohibiting international and community volunteers from going out for drinks together to avoid role conflicts. However, many described deliberately breaking these rules, for example, by having pre-drinks at someone's house, going to bars, or dancing together. With a smile in her voice, Participant 1 noted:

> We would meet the others [community volunteers] every weekend or on Friday nights as well. We would go out together which is not really allowed by the code of conduct [laughing]. That's really how we became friends to be honest [...] We were meeting every Friday almost [...] with the team and I don't know dancing together all night in [name of the bar].

Aware that such outings broke formal rules, Participant 1 and others still engaged in IPs to build friendships. This tension between formal regulations and IPs echoes Lowndes and Roberts (2013), who argue that informal activities often unfold in relation to formal structures. Going out together was a deliberate break from organisational rules, highlighting the importance of IPs as spaces for 'things friends would do' (Pp 5) and as a site of contestation. Participants also communicated their disagreement with these rules to coordinators, which led to formal meetings addressing these tensions, illustrating the dynamic interplay of in/formalities.

3.2.1 | Dance and Joyous Play Inside of 'Work'

Next to IPs outside of 'work', participants also reported IPs emerging spontaneously inside 'work'. These practices were described as 'spontaneously' and 'suddenly' emerging during formal working hours, 'letting space for things to happen' or 'cut[ing] a bit of slack' (Pp 7) and were referred to in opposition to participants' formal role as volunteers. For example, participants referred to moments in which scheduled and formal workflows turned into unexpected and 'playful' interactions, including

spontaneous dancing during cleaning or 'joking around'. Below, participant 1 recalled a moment during an official security meeting where a formal lesson of checking the community centre before closing turned into a playful moment.

> Then suddenly everybody turned into [...] this spy movie [laughing] I don't know why and then just the whole group squat down, all running around that area and nobody kind of said we're gonna do this that way and then suddenly [...] everybody was screaming 'clear clear'. [Everybody was] running all around and it really felt like we were all playing together. This passion of everybody.

The formal and scheduled teaching of workflows quickly became a spontaneous, playful moment with everyone enthusiastically participating and enjoying. This was experienced as playful as the moments were described as 'playing with each other' and 'letting loose'. When referring to IPs inside of 'work', participants highlighted the 'fun' they had together and the 'enjoyment' they felt. Participant 6 mentions the 'fun' she felt while 'joking around' at her workplace, and she elaborates on it by explaining: 'I think that it's very helpful to build the team and it worked very well for us!'. She highlighted the role of playful interruptions of formal work and viewed the experience of 'fun' as crucial for forming collectivity, as it helped to 'build the team'.

Additionally, to their role in forming collectivity, these 'spontaneous', 'fun' and 'playful' IPs were constructed as interruptions of formal workflows and described moments that 'let the space'. Another example is a spontaneous 'dance party' during a clean-up session after an event, described as 'letting a moment happen'. When asked what she meant by this, Participant 6 further explained:

> [...] maybe I mean like to let these moments of bonding happen so [...] I think for example to consciously know that for example it took us longer to do the cleaning because everybody was not taking it very seriously and dancing but we had this passion and we danced together.

Informal and spontaneous practices interrupted formal and structured work, which allowed participants to form interpersonal bonds and foster a sense of collectivity.

Participants' accounts emphasised that IPs were not merely deviations from formalities but central opportunities for collective experiences, support and emotional bonds.

Drawing on Butler's (2015) and Ahmed's (2010) work, which highlights the role of CJ and emotional connection in fostering community, these spontaneous moments allowed volunteers to bond and form collectivity. These 'sweet little moments together' (Pp 1) strengthened social bonds and created a sense of collectivity. Participants supported this by reporting feeling 'closer to each other' during and after these moments. However, while it is clear that collectivity forms through formalities and informalities, the specific tools enabling this remain unclear.

3.3 | Theme 3: Unpacking the Toolbox

3.3.1 | Subtheme 1: Care Work

Throughout the material, it became evident that care was an integral part of the formation of collectivity. IPs were described as 'inclusive', providing opportunities to 'gather around common values' and including different activities, ensuring 'that there was something happening for everybody' (Pp 3). Most activities did not involve spending money, and when they did, participants with more financial means often covered costs for those with less. IPs were also described as 'organic,' with no 'strict rules for who is in and who is out' (Pp 3), allowing anyone to join. Participants recalled their first experiences of IPs outside 'work' as 'welcoming' and 'friendly'. Care was enacted through leadership in communication, such as creating WhatsApp groups to invite others, enabling participants to stay informed and connected for upcoming activities.

Secondly, alongside the caring design of these practices, care was evident in volunteers emotionally supporting each other. All participants reported that talking to others during IPs outside 'work' provided emotional support, in other words, care. Participant 2 highlighted the importance of 'being able to talk to others' and added that it 'helps at least to go on stronger and don't think about taking a break or giving up'. Participant 7 explained:

> [...] it was so nice to see how much people cared. When I shared then a lot of people took the time to give me advice. So again, the support, I felt like we were a team.

Participants emphasised that IPs offered opportunities to discuss emotions and challenges encountered in volunteer work. This sense of community and belonging provided understanding and support to continue their often-challenging work (Cramer 2004; Held 2006). Participant 3 described the hardships of humanitarian aid as 'a ton of human suffering that was happening on the island and enormous amount of ... unacceptable tragedy' and noted that IPs 'were really helpful' for volunteers to maintain a 'good headspace' and 'take care of their body ... care of their mind and also ... of their spirit.' Another participant stated that the reason for continuing in their field was 'actually the people [they] have met' (Pp 7). Participants reported relying on each other, knowing they could always ask for help. In line with the literature, IPs enabled volunteers to engage in emotional care and mutual support, which is essential for building interpersonal bonds and a sense of collectivity (D'Alessandro 2022; Malherbe 2020).

It is crucial to note that formal rules and narratives emphasising the importance of collectivity created opportunities for IPs. Participants frequently mentioned the structural care they experienced through institutional support. Participant 6 stated:

> Volunteer coordinators from my experience went above and beyond and made themselves available if people wanted a coffee or wanted to touch base and on top of that you had this great community.

She highlighted the availability of coordinators as formal support. Others noted that management genuinely cared about volunteers' well-being. In line with the literature, formal rules and practices designed to provide support and care played an important role in shaping the formation of collectivity (Arani 2020; D'Alessandro 2022).

3.3.2 | Subtheme 2: CJ

From the interviews, it became clear that joy was an important shared emotion among volunteers and emerged within both formalities and informalities. IPs inside 'work' occurred as unscripted, spontaneous moments during daily tasks, offering opportunities for CJ. They were commonly described as 'joyful moments.' Participants referred to feeling 'happy' and having 'fun together,' emphasising that these feelings arose spontaneously in practices that interrupted formal work through joyous play and 'joking around'.

Participants reported multiple instances where formal tasks were interrupted by informal, playful moments. One example is when Participant 1 described a security meeting unexpectedly turning into a playful 'spy movie' scenario. This spontaneous play created an atmosphere of fun and connection, transforming a routine task into a collective experience of joy. Participant 1 reflected on the moment's role in collectivity formation:

> I remember after this, the next day during the morning briefing, [...] I was looking around the room and I was like 'Oh, I really feel like I know everyone' and I like everyone [...]. I think it always brings people closer together and it's great memories and it connects you in other ways than work so I think it's always good.

She highlighted the role of spontaneous moments of joy in forming collectivity by making people feel more connected. Participants often noted that 'joyful' informal interruptions allowed them to step out of formal roles and connect 'in other ways than work.' By creating opportunities to 'give permission to laugh, to feel joy' (Pp 6), IPs fostered conditions for CJ to emerge (Spade 2020b). CJ relieved stress from challenging work and strengthened bonds, contributing to a more cohesive community (Ahmed 2010; Butler 2015; Ehrenreich 2007). When asked about moments in which she felt most connected to other volunteers, Participant 8 answered:

> I think when you have like a really silly game [...] you don't think about your work anymore or your position [...] and you let yourself go. Then it's a bit more real and it's more you and that's when it gets a bit more [...] raw if that makes sense

She emphasised that 'silly games' or 'fun' moments were crucial for building interpersonal bonds because they allowed her to stop thinking about formal roles. By 'letting herself go', she felt 'real' and most connected to others, highlighting the importance of emotions in forming collectivity (von Scheve and Salmela 2014). Participant 8 added that engaging in 'silly exercises where everybody is gonna look stupid but it's everybody' helped volunteers connect differently than through their formal work roles. CJ was thus essential for forming a sense of collectivity among volunteers.

Additionally, while describing moments of CJ during formal work, participants mentioned the importance of formalities and explicitly stated the coordinators' role in 'letting them happen'. For example, Participant 1 said:

> When we see the coordinators relaxing and kind of joking around a little bit it also invites us to do so. In the morning briefing, if the coordinator was super strict and serious then nobody would joke around. But as soon as they were kind of like 'huhhh' then everyone would joke around. We were still getting things done but it was fun.

She highlighted that a relaxed, joking coordinator encouraged CJ, whereas a strict attitude discouraged it. Spontaneous interruptions inside 'work' required support from coordinators to occur. This aligns with previous research showing CJ needs an environment that allows it (Segal 2017; The World Transformed 2021) and underscores the interplay of in/formalities: coordinators had power to enforce formal roles but their allowance for breaking them enabled CJ to occur inside 'work'.

In conclusion, IPs as interruptions of formal work provide fruitful ground for spontaneous moments of CJ and laughter. CJ provided relief from participants' formal work and roles within the organisation, fostered social bonds based on emotional connection, and contributed to forming collectivity among volunteers.

4 | Discussion

Adopting a feminist institutionalist approach, this analysis showed that collectivity among volunteers in mutual aid on Lesvos is formed along intersecting lines of in/formalities. In line with Misztal (2005), formalities and informalities are not separate but, like private and public domains, constantly influence each other. Formalities reflected mutual aid principles and were structured to help volunteers form mutual bonds, providing a specific context for collectivity (Spade 2020b). IPs, both inside and outside formal work, either aligned with or resisted formalities and served as additional sites for forming collectivity. This paper extends prior psychological research (Fernandes-Jesus et al. 2021; Mao et al. 2024; Wakefield et al. 2022) by showing, through affect theory, that practices of care and CJ, intertangled with in/formalities, establish social relations grounded in interdependencies, shared emotions and interpersonal bonds.

4.1 | Collectivity Along the Intersecting Lines of in/Formalities

While formalities and informalities offer opportunities to form collectivity, they also intersect in shaping it. The influence of formalities on informalities appears in two ways. First, formalities aligned with mutual aid principles can shape IPs by

demonstrating 'ways of doing things' (Mackay et al. 2009, 254). Formalities structured to foster collectivity can be understood to provide fertile ground for IPs aimed at the same goal. Second, formalities can also restrict the formation of collectivity, for instance, through rules controlling how volunteers interact outside formal work. Participants emphasised that IPs outside these rules helped form mutual bonds and friendships, yet formal rules sometimes prevented certain IPs. Thus, formal rules that do not adapt to group needs can restrict collectivity among volunteers. These findings align with scholars arguing that formalities can reinforce top-down decision-making, supporting unequal social relations and hindering mutual connections (Spade 2020b).

However, participants' accounts show that the influence of formalities on informalities is not one-directional. IPs also affected formalities. Formal rules governing volunteer interactions outside work sometimes led to disagreement, yet participants engaged in IPs that did not follow these rules. This resistance created opportunities for mutual bonds that formalities otherwise denied. Disagreements with formal rules resulted in attempts to challenge formalities, depicted in volunteers' questioning of formal rules within conversations with coordinators. These findings highlight IPs' potential to create spaces impossible within formalities and align with literature on their transformative power (Lowndes and Roberts 2013; Mackay et al. 2009). This transformative potential also appeared as mutual bonds formed in IPs influencing volunteers' formal work interactions, reflected in participants accounts of feeling closer to each other during formal tasks (Lowndes and Roberts 2013).

While scholars emphasise the intersecting nature of in/formalities, in other showing how organisational cultures, or in/formalities, shape IPs, Costas (2012) demonstrated that IPs can also reproduce formal hierarchies in informal spaces, limiting mutual relations. Since in this study, participants did not differ in hierarchy, as all were volunteers, future research should explore questions about how in/formal hierarchies between aid workers influence the formation of collectivity.

Although intersecting lines of in/formalities can be understood to provide the context for collectivity to be formed, this paper highlights the tools of care and CJ in forming collectivity, offering opportunities to establish social relations based on interdependencies, shared emotions and interpersonal bonds.

4.2 | Do We Care to Resist?

Both within formalities and informalities, care was present in multilayered ways. While care within the neoliberal worldview is left to individual responsibilities, resulting in a neoliberal model of moralised self-management (Hobart and Kneese 2020), which shifts blame for not meeting one's needs to individuals instead of existing power structures, care within the present paper was characterised by shared responsibilities for meeting the needs of volunteers.

One way care appeared in in/formal practices was emotional support, vital for forming affective bonds between volunteers (Cramer 2004). Structural care was also present. On one hand, structural care was part of IPs' design, characterized by inclusivity and allowing a broad range of volunteers to join. On the other hand, participants' accounts showed that mutual aid principles in organizational formalities provided a comprehensive framework for structural care. This framework included spaces for mutual relationships, support for communication among volunteers and coordinators, and narratives emphasizing interdependencies and reliance on each other. Thus, mutual aid principles in formalities ensured organizational care for volunteers' emotional well-being while providing fertile ground to form collectivity (Chatzidakis et al. 2020). Moreover, mutual aid can be understood as radical collective care, resisting neoliberal individualization and offering an alternative social structure that highlights care and shared responsibility, not only among volunteers but also between volunteers and organizations (Spade 2020b).

It is important to note that the radicality of care manifests in relation to the context in which it emerges. While the present paper follows feminist accounts to connect the emergence of care practices to the specific context, it can be argued that care is precarious within the specific context of Lesvos (Sander-Staudt, n.d.; Trihas and Tsilimpokos 2018). In fact, several authors claim that organisations working in migration on Lesvos lack governmental support, struggle for funding and face criminalization (Tsilimpounidi and Carastathis 2017). Additionally, a high turnover rate of volunteers means a constant need to recruit and train new volunteers, which might disrupt the formation of caring and mutual bonds (Trihas and Tsilimpokos 2018). Further, ever-changing laws regulate aid work and add instability and uncertainty, which affects how and when care can be provided, possibly leading to the criminalization of care (Trihas and Tsilimpokos 2018). Within these structurally careless conditions, both symptoms and causes of neoliberals' hyper-focus on individualism, responsibilities are individualised (Chatzidakis et al. 2020). On the contrary, radical care, as present in this paper, resists individualised responsibilities by recognising shared interdependencies and responsibilities (Hobart and Kneese 2020).

Additionally, scholars have noted that structural care is often only expressed when a specific form of suffering has become 'universal and deserving of a collective social response' (Arani 2020, 658). In line with this, governmental and structural care, formally included in policies regarding access to political, economic and social resources, is unequally distributed and intersects with forms of marginalisation (D'Alessandro 2022). This raises questions about which forms of suffering are understood as worthy of care, which bodies provide and which are denied care (Nadasen 2021; Reese and Johnson 2022). To answer these questions, future research should consider intersecting identities to explore care practices for forming collectivity.

Since the present research does not aim to generalize findings across contexts, readers of this paper are encouraged to understand this analysis as a depiction of a specific context and relationships at a particular point in time. While further research is needed, this paper provides a valuable contribution to the discipline of psychology by highlighting the role of radical collective care in forming ways of structuring social relations based on collectivity. The present study can be understood to encourage policymakers and humanitarian aid organizations to

develop formalities that facilitate collective care in humanitarian organizations.

4.3 | Relating Through CJ

Unlike the prevailing neoliberal emphasis on rationality and cognition, social relations explored in this paper were not rooted in cognitive and independent minds (Butler 2015; von Scheve and Salmela 2014). Instead, they were based on affective bodies that interrelate through embodied experiences of CJ. This was evident in participants' accounts of feeling connected to each other during shared experiences of CJ, transcending their formal roles as volunteers to form bonds based on shared emotions (Arnett 2023; Ehrenreich 2007; Minozzo 2020).

Within neoliberal ideals of individualism, reflected within psychological research, emotions are treated as private property, leading to them losing political power (Arnett 2023; Minozzo 2020; Segal 2017). The sharable potential of CJ, however, criticises and discards these ideas. While fabricated happiness within neoliberalism is emptied out of content, joy contributes to forming participatory, healthy and collective societies (Segal 2017). With its overspilling and excessive character, CJ allows us to break down distances between people, shown in its historical ties with practices that are larger and more exciting than we are individually (Ehrenreich 2007; Segal 2017). Thus, focusing on CJ allows us to imagine and participate in structuring social relations based on recognising shared interdependencies and seeing each other as a source of joy instead of drowning in competition. Therefore, CJ can be understood as an inversion of current ways of structuring social relations. The collective aspect of joy highlights that it is obtained from outside a single individual and from relationships between bodies, human and non-human (Segal 2017). Therefore, while acknowledging that collective efforts, such as mutual aid, already serve as opportunities for CJ, the present paper argues that more places for joy are needed within in/formalities of societies. The present paper marks a move away from the neoliberal emphasis on individualism and underscores the important role of CJ in forming collectivity, offering a unique perspective within psychology (Arnett 2023; Freeman 2020; Regis and Walton 2023).

This study acknowledges the challenges of centring joy in analyses. Whether the joy of a body is judged as immoral depends, among other things, on a body's access to status or whiteness. According to Stainova (2019), focusing on CJ can be understood as ignoring structural inequalities. However, the present paper aligns with scholars who advocate for joy as a 'radical praxis' (Kern et al. 2014, 835). It does not propose a magic-pill solution but recognises the need for a steady account of social transformation that builds upon large amounts of reflection and work. Instead, this paper argues that a focus on the political potential of CJ allows us to engage in affective resistance counterhegemonic to the neoliberal worldview through building sustainable mutual social relations (Ahmed 2010; Segal 2017).

I, the student researcher, acknowledge my own struggles to keep joy at the centre of this analysis, as, at times, it felt more important to contribute to a critique of structural, gendered, and racialized inequalities present in volunteering. However, the interviews with participants served as a reminder about the political and transformative potential of CJ. Although there might be no clearly articulated demand within bodies to come together in joy and no obvious political message, the act of affect-able bodies coming together in joy speaks for itself (D'Alessandro 2022). It says: We are still here, still standing, and resisting the exact logics that want to dispose of us (Butler 2015).

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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