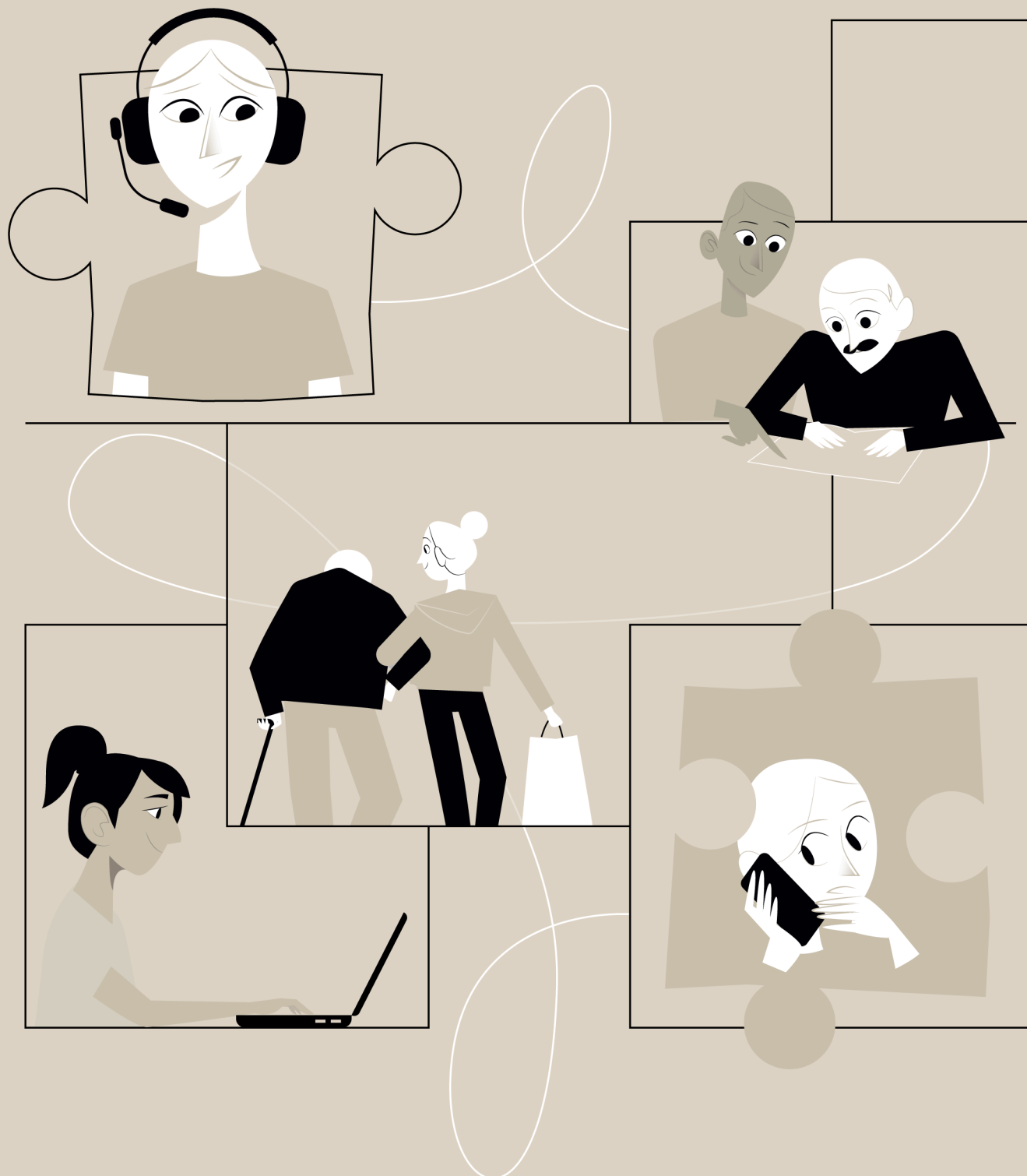# Infrastructures of volunteering

An ethnography of the transformations of civil society towards increased digitization.

By
Line Steen Bygballe

Title of PhD thesis

Infrastructures of volunteering: An ethnography of the transformations of civil society towards increased digitization

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Cover & illustrations used in the PhD thesis

Illustrations by Sanne Fredin. The cover illustrations shows a series of animated people interacting with others across physical meetings, telephone and computer. The illustrations are developed based on the production of an animated video with results from the EMOVE projects and can be seen on this web site: https://emove.ku.dk/

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Line Steen Bygballe, September 2025

Summary

This article-based PhD thesis explores the digital transformation of civil society through an ethnographic study of social volunteer matchmaking programs in Denmark. Specifically, the thesis examines how processes of digitalization are arranged through sociotechnical infrastructural practices within civil society organizations (CSOs). Grounded in ethnology, civil society studies, Science and Technology Studies (STS), and feminist theories, the thesis introduces the analytical figure *Careful Arrangements,* foregrounding the situated negotiations and agreements that make social volunteering both possible and precarious in the evolving landscape of Danish welfare society. Through this analytical figure, the thesis scrutinizes how social volunteering is actively produced and sustained through continuous interplay of assemblages of people, technologies, temporalities, and care. The thesis is situated in a welfare context, where voluntarism is celebrated as a cornerstone of democracy, critical for social cohesion and as a key element in addressing softer welfare tasks, which has received both nationally and internationally scholarly attention and is acknowledged for its scale and diversity (Henriksen et al.,2019; Ibsen & Habermann, 2005; Jeppsson & Svedberg, 2012). As civil society becomes more tightly integrated into welfare delivery, processes of professionalization and digitalization becomes central to how CSOs function (Hustinx & De Waele, 2015; Henriksen et al., 2015). However, these aspects of the everyday work practices of CSOs receive less attention. Thus, the thesis focuses on the infrastructures of volunteering, providing a deeply ethnographic account of CSOs, that carry out much of their daily work through digital platforms in their effort to support people in vulnerable life situations in Denmark. The thesis is grounded in multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2020 and 2025 among CSOs that are engaged in health- and social-related volunteering through social volunteer matchmaking programs, working closely with welfare institutions. Through one-on-one social activities, the CSOs aim to support people living in precarious and vulnerable conditions such as people with dementia, senior citizens who experience loneliness, and people with migrant background, who grapple with education, work and getting a social network in Denmark. The thesis is built on multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork from three different areas of the infrastructures of volunteering: the first site zooms into the social meeting between matched people in a particular social volunteer activity. The second site is the interdisciplinary socio-technical research and development project EMOVE (Enabling the Matching of Volunteers, see https://emove.ku.dk/), where I followed the design and implementation of an IT system tailored for CSOs working with one-on-one social volunteer activities, while simultaneously creating knowledge about how to safeguard the social and relational aspects of these activities. The third site is within the national network for visiting services, entailing a broad spectrum of CSOs working with these kinds of matchmaking programs, where knowledge, best-practices as well as frustrations were shared, providing a broader cross-organizational understanding of the infrastructures of volunteering. The multi-sited fieldwork provided entry points through which deeper transformations in civil society become visible. The thesis comprises three articles, each illuminating different *Careful Arrangements.* With this analytical figure, the thesis captures the affective, socio-material, technical and temporal work necessary to sustain volunteer engagement within an increasingly professionalized and digitized context.

In the first article, my co-author and I explore the complexity of creating and facilitating good social volunteer relationships through a case study of the Elderlearn initiative from the association Together Across. Utilizing ethnographic methods and theoretical frameworks from Alfred Schutz (1944), Orvar Löfgren (2014), and Sara Ahmed (2004), the article analyses how seemingly informal volunteer encounters, such as those between senior citizens and migrant language learners, are in fact deeply reliant on resources of the volunteers and the organizational scaffolding. We argue that the volunteer

initiates depend on carefully orchestrated arrangements made of socio-material and emotional preparations, underpinned by a professional organizational infrastructure that supports and sustains the volunteer social activities. Thus, the article renders visible the foundational arrangements that enable "strangers" to meet and connect under safe and meaningful conditions. Volunteering, as analysed in this study, is precarious, requiring persistent effort and organizational care to unfold sustainably.

In the second article, my co-authors and I explore the digital transformation of civil society through the implementation of the EMOVE project's IT system in three civil society organizations: Association Equal Access, the Alzheimer's Association, and Association Together Across. This ethnographic study identifies a range of conditions shaping digitalization in the CSOs, including their idealistic raison d'être, limited resources, and shifting roles within the welfare state. Drawing on Science and Technology Studies (STS), particularly John Law's concept of *modes of ordering* (1993), we analyze how each organization adopted the IT system in support of distinct *ordering projects*: In Equal Access, the system became part of an ordering project aimed at standardizing workflows and ensuring continuity in response to high staff turnover. In Alzheimer's Association, it enlisted as part of an ordering project to coordinate decentralized volunteers while preserving local flexibility. In Together Across, the system supported an ordering project of generating accountability through management tools to meet demands from external partners. Within these ordering projects, we found that the IT system both streamlined workflows, disrupted established routines and introduced new tensions. Challenging the notion of seamless, one-size-fits-all digital strategies, the article argues that civil society digitization must be grounded in each organization's specific context, goals, and ethical commitments. This underscores the need for flexible systems, inclusive implementation processes, and tailored support—particularly for smaller CSOs with limited resources. Moreover, the article shows how digital tools do not merely support existing routines but become entangled in the ongoing reordering of organizational life, thereby extending the concept of *Careful Arrangements* into the technological domain.

In the third article, I apply temporality as an analytical lens to unfold how processes of professionalization in civil society, shaped by logics of efficiency, acceleration, and digitalization, generate temporal tensions within CSOs engaged in social volunteer matchmaking activities. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and Judy Wajcman's theory on time and technology (2015), the article identifies two opposing temporal modes of working: "Always-on," characterized by fast-paced, automatized, and digital-driven practices, and "Slow-down," grounded in relational care, presence, and situational judgment. Rather than treating voluntarism and professionalism as dichotomies, these temporal modes coexist within CSOs, where they are continually calibrated and negotiated according to diverse logics of professionalism. To capture these negotiations, the article introduces the analytical figure of *careful arrangements*. This figure makes visible how calibrations between temporal tensions take shape through assemblages of people, care practices, digital platforms, and welfare actors in constant flux. The article argues that in times of accelerated and digitally mediated sectoral collaboration, foregrounding the qualities of slow-paced, emotionally attuned engagement is crucial for sustaining social volunteer matchmaking programs.

Collectively, the articles provide a nuanced ethnographic account of how digital transformations are negotiated in Danish civil society organizations. Ultimately, the thesis calls for more inclusive and reflective approaches to digital transformation in civil society—approaches that recognize and accommodate the relational, socio-technical and temporal labor necessary for sustaining meaningful social volunteer work.

Abstract

Denne artikelbaserede ph.d.-afhandling undersøger civilsamfundets digitale transformation gennem etnografiske studier af socialt frivillige matchningsprogrammer i Danmark. Afhandlingen analyserer, hvordan digitaliseringsprocesser organiseres gennem sociotekniske infrastrukturelle praksisser i civilsamfundsorganisationer (CSO'er). Med afsæt i etnologi, civilsamfundsstudier, Science and Technology Studies (STS) og feministiske teorier introducerer afhandlingen den analytiske figur »Careful Arrangements«, som fremhæver de situerede forhandlinger og foranstaltninger, der gør social frivillighed både muligt og prekært i et dansk velfærdssamfund under forandring. Gennem den analytiske figur gransker afhandlingen, hvordan socialt frivilligt arbejde aktivt skabes og opretholdes gennem et kontinuerligt samspil mellem grupper af mennesker, teknologier, temporaliteter og omsorg. Afhandlingen er placeret i en velfærdssammenhæng, hvor frivillighed hyldes som en hjørnesten i demokratiet, afgørende for social samhørighed og som et centralt element i håndteringen af blødere velfærdsopgaver, hvilket har fået både national og international akademisk opmærksomhed og er anerkendt for sit omfang (Henriksen et al., 2019; Ibsen & Habermann, 2005; Jeppsson & Svedberg, 2012). I takt med at civilsamfundet bliver mere integreret i leveringen af velfærdsydelser, bliver professionalisering og digitalisering centrale elementer i CSO'ernes funktion (Hustinx & De Waele, 2015; Henriksen et al., 2015). Disse aspekter af CSO'ernes daglige arbejdsgange får imidlertid mindre opmærksomhed. Afhandlingen fokuserer derfor på infrastrukturerne for frivilligt arbejde og laver en dybdegående etnografisk beskrivelse af CSO'er, der udfører en stor del af deres daglige arbejde via digitale platforme i deres bestræbelser på at støtte mennesker i sårbare livssituationer i Danmark. Afhandlingen er baseret på etnografisk feltarbejde, der er gennemført mellem 2020 og 2025 blandt CSO'er, der er engageret i sundheds- og socialrelateret frivilligt arbejde gennem socialt frivillige matchingprogrammer, hvor de arbejder tæt sammen med velfærdsinstitutioner. Gennem én-til-én sociale aktiviteter ønsker CSO'erne at støtte mennesker i sårbare livssituationer, såsom mennesker der lever med demens, ældre, der oplever ensomhed, og mennesker med migrationsbaggrund, der kæmper med uddannelse, arbejde og opbygning af et socialt netværk i Danmark. Afhandlingen bygger på flergrenet etnografisk feltarbejde fra tre forskellige områder af de infrastrukturer der udgør frivillighed: det første område zoomer ind på det sociale møde mellem matchede personer i en bestemt social frivillig aktivitet. Det andet område er det tværfaglige socio-tekniske forsknings- og udviklingsprojekt EMOVE (Enabling the Matching of Volunteers), hvor jeg fulgte designet og implementeringen af et it-system, der er skræddersyet til CSO'er, der arbejder med én-til-én sociale frivillige aktiviteter, hvor vi skabte viden om hvordan man kan sikre de sociale og relationelle aspekter af disse aktiviteter i en digitaliseringsproces. Det tredje område er inden for det nationale Netværk for Besøgstjenester, der omfatter et bredt spektrum af CSO'er, der arbejder med denne type socialt frivillige matchingprogrammer, hvor viden, arbejdsgange og frustrationer blev delt, hvilket gav en bred tværgående forståelse af infrastrukturerne for socialt frivilligt arbejde. Det etnografiske feltarbejde skabte forskellige indblik i dybere forandringer, der sker i civilsamfundet. Afhandlingen består af tre artikler, der hver især belyser forskellige former for »Careful Arrangements«. Med den analytiske figur indfanger afhandlingen det affektive, socio-materielle, tekniske og temporale arbejde, der er nødvendigt for at opretholde frivilligt engagement i en stadig mere professionaliseret og digitaliseret kontekst.

I den første artikel undersøger min medforfatter og jeg kompleksiteten ved at skabe og fremme gode sociale frivilligrelationer gennem en casestudie af Elderlearn-initiativet fra foreningen Sammen på Tværs. Ved hjælp af etnografiske metoder og teoretiske rammer fra Alfred Schutz (1944), Orvar Löfgren (2014) og Sara Ahmed (2004) analyserer artiklen, hvordan tilsyneladende uformelle frivillige møder, såsom mellem ældre borgere og mennesker med migrantbaggrund, i virkeligheden er dybt afhængige af de frivilliges ressourcer og den organisatoriske struktur. Vi argumenterer for, at frivilliginitiativerne afhænger af omhyggeligt tilrettelagte arrangementer bestående af socio-materielle

og affektive forberedelser, understøttet af en professionel organisatorisk infrastruktur, der støtter og opretholder de frivilliges sociale aktiviteter. Artiklen synliggør således de grundlæggende arrangementer, der gør det muligt for »fremmede« at mødes og skabe kontakt under sikre og meningsfulde forhold. Frivilligt arbejde, som det analyseres i denne undersøgelse, er usikkert og kræver vedvarende indsats og organisatorisk omsorg for at kunne udfolde sig på en bæredygtig måde.

I den anden artikel undersøger mine medforfattere og jeg den digitale transformation af civilsamfundet gennem implementeringen af EMOVE-projektets it-system i tre civilsamfundsorganisationer: Forening Sammen på Tværs. Alzheimerforeningen og Forening Lige Adgang. Denne etnografiske undersøgelse identificerer en række forhold, der præger digitaliseringen i civilsamfundsorganisationerne, herunder deres idealistiske raison d'être, begrænsede ressourcer og skiftende roller inden for velfærdssamfundet. Med udgangspunkt i Science and Technology Studies (STS), især John Laws begreb om ordningsformer (1993), analyserer vi, hvordan hver CSO har indført IT-systemet til støtte for forskellige ordningsprojekter: I Forening Lige Adgang blev systemet en del af et ordningsprojekt, der havde til formål at standardisere arbejdsgange og sikre kontinuitet som reaktion på en hyppig personaleudskiftning. I Alzheimerforeningen blev det inddraget som en del af et ordningsprojekt, der skulle koordinere decentraliserede frivillige og samtidig bevare den lokale fleksibilitet. I Forening Sammen på Tværs understøttede systemet et ordningsprojekt, der skulle skabe ansvarlighed gennem ledelses- og styringsværktøjer for at imødekomme krav fra eksterne partnere. Inden for disse ordningsprojekter fandt vi, at IT-systemet både strømlinede arbejdsgange, forstyrrede etablerede rutiner og skabte nye spændinger. Artiklen udfordrer forestillingen om ensartede, universelle digitale strategier og argumenterer for, at digitaliseringen af civilsamfundet skal baseres på hver enkelt organisations specifikke kontekst, mål og etiske forpligtelser. Dette understreger behovet for fleksible systemer, inkluderende implementeringsprocesser og skræddersyet support – især for mindre civilsamfundsorganisationer med begrænsede ressourcer. Desuden viser artiklen, hvordan digitale værktøjer ikke blot understøtter eksisterende rutiner, men også bliver viklet ind i den løbende omstrukturering af det organisatoriske liv. Dermed udfoldes begrebet »Careful Arrangements« til det teknologiske domæne.

I den tredje artikel anvender jeg temporalitet som et analytisk perspektiv for at belyse, hvordan professionaliseringsprocesser i civilsamfundet, der er præget af logikker om effektivitet, acceleration og digitalisering, skaber temporale spændinger inden for civilsamfundsorganisationer, der beskæftiger sig med socialt frivillige matchingprogrammer. Med udgangspunkt i etnografisk feltarbejde og Judy Wajcmans teori om tid og teknologi (2015) identificerer artiklen to modsatrettede temporale arbejdsformer: »Always-on«, der er kendetegnet ved hurtige, automatiserede og digitalt drevne praksisser, og »Slow-down«, der er baseret på relationel omsorg, tilstedeværelse og situationsbestemt vurdering. I stedet for at behandle frivillighed og professionalisme som dikotomier, eksisterer disse temporale arbejdsformer side om side inden for civilsamfundsorganisationer, hvor de løbende kalibreres og forhandles i henhold til forskellige logikker om professionalisme. For at indfange disse forhandlinger introducerer artiklen det analytiske begreb »Careful Arrangements«. Begrebet synliggør, hvordan kalibreringer mellem temporale spændinger tager form gennem sammenfletninger af mennesker, omsorgspraksis, digitale platforme og velfærdsaktører. Artiklen argumenterer for, at i tider med accelereret og digitalt medieret sektorsamarbejde er det afgørende at fremhæve kvaliteterne ved roligt, følelsesmæssigt afstemt engagement for at opretholde sociale frivillige matchingprogrammer for mennesker i sårbare livssituationer.

Samlet set giver artiklerne en nuanceret etnografisk beskrivelse af, hvordan digitale transformationer forhandles i danske civilsamfundsorganisationer. I sidste ende opfordrer afhandlingen til mere inkluderende og reflekterende tilgange til digital transformation i civilsamfundet – tilgange, der anerkender og imødekommer det relationelle, socio-tekniske og temporale arbejde, der er nødvendigt for at opretholde meningsfuldt socialt frivilligt arbejde.

Table of contents

1. Introduction

"The meeting room is modest: neutral walls, a long table lined with coffee cups, laptops, notebooks, and scattered printouts. Around it sit project coordinators and match leaders from a range of Danish civil society organizations (CSOs) working with social volunteer matchmaking programs, quietly waiting for the workshop to begin. We are here to discuss their current use of IT systems and their wish for a new one tailored to their needs. As the conversation begins, familiar themes from my earlier interviews with civil society actors emerge: reporting obligations, volunteer recruitment challenges, and the lack of funding to administrative tasks. A woman from a small association smile ironically as she describes their current system: "A student helped us build it five years ago. Since she left, no one has been able to update it, so it works horrible badly — but somehow, we still rely on it every day." Others nod, sharing similar experiences. Some of the organizations use a patchwork of platforms — spreadsheets, email lists, Facebook groups, and survey tools — stitched together in an effort to maintain oversight. One participant chuckle, describing how a local group of volunteers stored information on printed Excel sheets, packed in a plastic bags, handed from volunteer coordinator to volunteer coordinator depending on who was working that week. "Any system we get has to fit how we already work," someone notes. "It's hard enough to recruit new volunteers — and it's even harder to keep them if the systems don't support our workflows." Around the room, the concerns are practical, but highly relevant in times of digitalization of civil society: how to ensure continuity with limited technical support, how to live up to GDPR and compliance demands, how to balance tech innovation with the realities of everyday organization of social volunteering, how to train and educate volunteers and how to ensure that all of the above support their work with people in vulnerable life situations.

(Field notes from development workshop with CSOs, 2021)

Revisiting my notes in 2025, what stands out to me is how conversations that might initially appear mundane—regarding unmaintained information technology (IT) systems, General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) obligations, or limited digital support—opened a window into something more fundamental. These were not simply technical issues; they revealed the infrastructural patchworks that underpin many civil society organizations (CSOs) working with social volunteer activities in support of people in vulnerable life situations, such as older adults experiencing loneliness, people living with dementia, or with migrant background struggling to establish education, work, and social networks in Denmark. My ethnographic exploration revealed what, at first glance, could be dismissed as administrative detail, something that emerged as deeply entangled with the very conditions that make the volunteer activities and engagement possible. These backstage processes—including maintenance, coordination, and compliance—proved crucial to how care is organized, how relationships are facilitated, and

how volunteering is enacted, particularly within health- and social-related volunteer initiatives directed toward people in precarious life situations.

This recognition became a guiding thread in my research for this PhD thesis, as I began to explore volunteering infrastructures (Star, 1999, 2002)—the socio-technical arrangements, organizational routines, and material conditions that sustain and transform volunteer work over time. My concern lies with the mundane, subtle, and often invisible ways in which volunteering is made durable, how it is reshaped through processes of digitalization, and how it is enacted within the hybrid spaces of the Danish welfare society (Law, 2004; Mol, 2002; Winthereik et al., 2017). In adopting this perspective, I seek to highlight the margins and the machinery that makes volunteering possible.

What makes this perspective analytically productive is its contrast to dominant public representations, where volunteering is framed not merely as an activity but as part of a broader national self-image. It is framed as a cornerstone of democratic life and a moral resource that binds the country together. This strong cultural and political investment in volunteering as a defining feature of Danish identity forms the backdrop against which my investigation unfolds.

Denmark has long been recognized for its strong civic engagement and collective action, with volunteer initiatives forming a vital part of the nation's social fabric (Balle-Petersen, 1976; Henriksen et al., 2019; Ibsen & Habermann, 2005; Klausen & Selle, 1996). With many positive connotations, civil society is both considered and expected to be a carrier of democratic values, thereby fostering belonging, identity, and social trust, but also increasingly being the a provider for the welfare society (Kaspersen & Egholm 2023). Today, civil society continues to be praised as a vital component of Danish society. His Majesty King Frederik X, in his 2024 New Year's address, emphasized the significance of volunteering:

> *"Frivillighed er et eksempel på medmenneskelighed, og de fleste danskere engagerer sig på et tidspunkt i frivilligt arbejde. Det kan være alt fra at øve tabeller med børn i lektiecafeen til at få et nyt gymnastikhold op at stå til at holde et menneske i hånden, når livet rinder ud. Frivillighed kommer i mange former. Fællesnævneren er, at det giver mening for alle parter, både for hende, der giver sin tid, og for ham, der tager imod den. Frivillige kræfter holder utallige tilbud og aktiviteter i gang. Også Royal Run, hvor 2.500 frivillige stillede op i år, så vi andre kunne gå og løbe sammen i de fem værtsbyer. Til alle jer, der lægger en del af jeres overskud i den fælles pulje – tak.."* (Kongehuset, 2024)[1].

Similarly, the Danish government's 2022 policy document highlights civil society as a key force in maintaining social cohesion:

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[1] English translation: "Volunteering is an example of humanity, and most Danes engage in volunteer work at some point. It can be anything from practicing multiplication tables with children at a homework café, to starting up a new gymnastics class, to holding someone's hand when life is coming to an end. Volunteering takes many forms. The common denominator is that it is meaningful for everyone involved—both for the one who gives their time and for the one who receives it. Volunteer efforts keep countless services and activities running. Including Royal Run, where 2,500 volunteers turned up this year so that the rest of us could walk and run together in the five host cities. To all of you who contribute part of your surplus energy to the common pool – thank you."

> *"En af Danmarks styrker er, at vi hænger sammen som et folk – på tværs af geografiske, sociale, økonomiske og etniske forskelle og køn. Hver eneste dag skaber vi en fælles identitet og sammenhængskraft gennem vores møde med hinanden. Til spejder. I den lokale fodboldklub. På festivaler. "Regeringen vil arbejde for at styrke det frivillige idræts- og foreningsliv og gøre det nemmere at rekruttere og fastholde frivillige og ledere. Regeringen vil hjælpe foreningslivet ved at igangsætte initiativer, der styrker frivilligheden, hindrer og afvikler bureaukratiske byrder og sikrer fortsat stabile rammevilkår for det frivillige foreningsliv."* (Regeringsgrundlag, 2022, p. 50)[2].

In the quotes, volunteering is presented as a source of "humanity" and as "one of Denmark's strengths" that ensures collective identity and social cohesion. Here, volunteering is credited with nurturing moral commitment, community vitality, and a sense of homogenous national unity. Although the government's 2022 policy plan explicitly emphasized support for civil society, it has been difficult to identify how the plan has been realized in practice. In June 2025, a notable development emerged with the initiation of national negotiations on a new model for basic funding of civil society led by the Social Minister and engaging multiple parliamentary parties (Kræftens Bekæmpelse, 2025; Altinget, 2025). This suggests a growing political recognition of the structural challenges facing civil society in Denmark, although concrete measures have remained limited this far and slow to materialize.

The fostering of communities across social differences and cultivation of democratic competencies through volunteer work is evident in political rhetoric as well as within parts of the academic literature. Research in Denmark, Scandinavia, and in internationally highlights the importance of volunteer work and civil society for both social cohesion and democratic life. In the Danish context, *"Det frivillige Danmark - kort fortalt"*[3] shows how active participation in volunteer organizations and social networks generates social capital, which, in turn, sustains trust in fellow citizens as well as in political and economic institutions (Boje et al., 2008, p. 13). Similarly, Ibsen and Habermann (2005) emphasize the centrality of associations in Denmark for strengthening civic identity and collective action. Across Scandinavia, scholars such as Klausen and Selle (1996) and Henriksen et al. (2019) have emphasized how volunteer associations are key to fostering democratic culture, social trust, and legitimacy in the Nordic welfare states. These findings resonate with broader Global north scholarships. Putnam (2000) famously argues that volunteering and association-building nurture social capital and democratic participation in America; while others highlight civil society's role in consolidating democracy and highlight how civic participation cultivates democratically competent citizens (Almond & Verba, 1963; Diamond, 1999). Together, this research emphasizes that civil society is not a peripheral activity but a recognized cornerstone of democratic governance and social

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[2] English translation: "One of Denmark's strengths is that we are united as a people – across geographic, social, economic, and ethnic differences, as well as gender. Every single day, we create a common identity and social cohesion through our encounters with one another. At the scouts. In the local football club. At festivals. The government will work to strengthen volunteer sports and association life and make it easier to recruit and retain volunteers and leaders. The government will support association life by launching initiatives that strengthen volunteering, prevent and reduce bureaucratic burdens, and ensure continued stable framework conditions for volunteer associations"

[3] English translation: "Voluntary Denmark – in brief"

cohesion. Although it is crucial to account for the impact and quality of civil society, public appreciations and research contributions often risk producing a somewhat homogenous and glossy image—one that celebrates the human and emotional value of volunteering while concealing the infrastructures that actually make civil society function. What is rarely addressed, particularly in public and political portrayals, is how civil society is maintained in practice: how it is organized, coordinated, financed, and—increasingly—how it is digitalized.

Consequently, the structural and infrastructural dimensions of civil society are often overshadowed by idealized representations that present volunteering as inherently "a common good," while overlooking the everyday work required to sustain it. Moreover, these portrayals make civil society appear homogenous, which it is far from. In reality, it is highly diverse, encompassing a wide spectrum of activities—from widely praised initiatives supporting the sick, the lonely, or children, to local football clubs and neighborhood festivals, to niche hobby associations such as bird-watching groups or cheese appreciation societies. It also includes more contested or marginal actors, such as motorcycle clubs or groups operating at the edge of legality or, occasionally, beyond it.

"Getting on the Train": Professionalization and Digitalization in Health and Social Volunteering

Within this broad and varied field, my investigation centers on the part of civil society engaged in health- and social-related volunteering, with particular emphasis on organizations that closely collaborate with the welfare state in supporting people in vulnerable life situations, such as the Alzheimer's Association, Association for Equal Access, and Together Across. I use the phrase *"people in vulnerable life situations"* to underline that vulnerability is not a fixed personal trait but arises through contingent. I understand vulnerability as situational – acknowledging human interdependence: that our autonomy is always sustained by relations and infrastructures of support (Butler 2016: Tronto 1993)[4].

This intersection, where civil society and public welfare intertwine, is undergoing profound transformation. Research indicates how CSOs are increasingly shaped by processes of hybridization and professionalization, where public sector logics of accountability, such as documentation, regulatory compliance, and performance measurement, inform organizational practices, even as CSOs continue to emphasize their volunteer values (La Cour, 2014; Lundgren Andersen, 2019; Grubb & Henriksen, 2019). These tendencies do not necessarily arise from explicit legal requirements but emerge through policy discourses, funding practices, and governance frameworks that promote alignment between public and civil society actors. One of the central reinforcements of these dynamics comes from digitalization. Denmark is among the most digitalized societies globally, where e-government platforms, self-service systems, and welfare technologies have become embedded in everyday routines (Aagaard &

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[4] I return to this theoretical framing in Chapter 3, where I develop it further in dialogue with feminist and disability studies.

Pedersen, 2022; European Commission, 2020; Meyerhoff Nielsen & Ben Dhaou, 2023; Schou & Hjelholt, 2019; United Nations (UN), 2020). Importantly, digitalization does not exist in a vacuum but is increasingly extending into civil society. While my focus is on how CSOs themselves manage digitalization in their social volunteer activities, research has also documented how digitalization has given rise to new forms of volunteering through online platforms, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, which accelerated different kinds of "digital volunteers" through online groups and communities (Bang Carlsen & Tubøl 2025; Danmarks Digitale Frivillige & TrygFonden, 2023; Grubb, 2016).

CSOs increasingly face managerial demands to digitalize. Requirements for documentation, GDPR compliance, funding applications, and impact reporting are now expected to be handled through digital platforms, thus placing pressure on CSOs to adopt new skills and systems. Rather than being positioned merely as partners in digital transformation, many organizations experience digitalization as a management obligation — a condition imposed by funders, public authorities, and sometimes members or beneficiaries, in order to maintain legitimacy and secure continued support. In my ethnographic fieldwork, this was often described through the metaphor of *"getting on the train"* where digitalization was portrayed as a fast-moving process, and a ticking clock (Ronalds, 2021) where organizations unable to keep pace risked being left behind. Together, these developments illustrate how processes of digitization are not only transforming public administration but are also redefining the practices, expectations, and organizational forms of civil society. Such processes influence the practices of how organizations manage activities, recruit volunteers, coordinate, comply with legal frameworks such, and account for their societal impact. However, the train of digitalization does not move on even tracks. While digitalization can bring considerable benefits, such as easing bureaucratic processes, creating transparency, and enabling certain citizens to act with greater autonomy, it also introduces new demands and forms of inequality.

Since civil society does not operate in a vacuum, it is crucial to consider how these dynamics unfold within the broader welfare state, where digitalization has reshaped both the provision of services and the conditions under which citizens engage with them. The expansion of digital self-service systems has not benefited all citizens equally. A recent government report highlights that approximately 18% of Danish citizens experience difficulties with public digital solutions; of these, 7% do not use such solutions at all, while 11% utilize them but still encounter significant challenges (Digitaliseringsstyrelsen, 2025). Ethnographic research on digitalization in Denmark shows that digital support, through guidance, advice, and reassurance, plays a decisive role when citizens encounter new public self-service systems. Their study highlights a central paradox in the political ambition of universal digital self-reliance: while self-service solutions are designed to be accessible to all, many citizens still require substantial guidance to effectively utilize them (Andersen et al., 2024; Andersen et al., 2025).

In practice, support is not peripheral but essential for ensuring equal access to digital infrastructure. These insights are highly relevant for CSOs working with people in precarious life situations. Many of their target groups belong to those who find digital systems particularly

difficult to navigate, thus making it necessary for CSOs to adapt their practices with this in mind. Moreover, the digital transformation exposes the diversity and imbalances of civil society, as smaller CSOs with limited staff and financial resources may struggle to keep pace with digital technological requirements. Thus, the processes of digital transformations are generative in multiple directions: they enable new forms of autonomy and efficiency for some, while simultaneously producing friction, dependency, and inequality for others. Examining how CSOs navigate these tensions in their everyday practices enables us to see how digitalization is incorporated, enacted, and negotiated as part of the infrastructure of volunteering within a hybrid welfare society.

Research Focus

My research focus on the less visible, but equally important, question of how civil society is done: how it is structured, supported, and transformed through everyday organizational practices in the midst of digitalization. While larger organizations may have the administrative capacity and financial resources to adapt, small and medium-sized CSOs—particularly those working with vulnerable groups—often struggle. Digital systems can enhance coordination, documentation, and visibility, but they also impose new challenges and constraints. Many CSOs today operate within fragile, uneven, or fragmented digital landscapes. For them, digitalization is not a seamless upgrade but a process full of tensions, compromises, and unintended consequences. It is these processes that are the focus of my ethnographic investigation and guide the research questions of this dissertation.

While much research highlights the societal value of volunteering as well as accounts for new trends and forms of volunteering, there are still remarkably few ethnographic studies that examine how digitalization is reshaping the everyday work of CSOs that are engaged in social volunteer matchmaking activities for people in vulnerable life situations. It is precisely here that I seek to make a contribution: by providing an ethnographic account of how digitalization reshapes the everyday infrastructures of volunteer work. I approach digitalization not as a neutral or inevitable modernization process but as a lens through which deeper structural and relational transformations in civil society become visible. In particular, I examine how the adoption of digital tools is no longer optional; it is woven into how organizations recruit volunteers, track activities, report outcomes, and secure legitimacy. Focusing on these dynamics enables me to move beyond the polished narratives of community and care to explore the equally important negotiations and frictions that appear and underpin the infrastructures of volunteer social work.

An Ethnography of Volunteering Infrastructures

This dissertation is based on multisite ethnographic fieldwork carried out between 2020 and 2025, with the aim of exploring how volunteering is sustained and transformed through its infrastructures. To do so, I conducted multisite fieldwork on what I consider to be part of the infrastructures of volunteering, unfolding across three interconnected field sites.

My first entry point was the project called *Volunteering for All Senior Citizens* at the association Together Across (formerly Elderlearn), where I conducted accompanying research in 2020–2021. Here, I followed how volunteer matches between Danish seniors and newcomers were created, sustained, and scaled during a period of rapid organizational growth. This fieldwork made me attentive to the many organizational routines, adjustments, and negotiations that underpin what is often publicly portrayed as simple and natural encounters. It was through this work that I first began to conceptualize volunteering as dependent on infrastructures while also obtaining insight into the actual volunteer meetings that CSOs work to facilitate. In this sense, this aspect of my fieldwork zooms in on the infrastructural dimension of social volunteer matchmaking itself—the concrete practices through which encounters between volunteers and participants are made possible.

The second and most extensive site was the collaborative research and development project *EMOVE—Enabling the Matching of Volunteers*, carried out between 2021 and 2024. The project brought together researchers from the Copenhagen Center for Health Research in the Humanities (CoRe, University of Copenhagen) and Techno-Anthropology (Aalborg University), three CSOs—the Alzheimer's Association, the Association for Equal Access, and Together Across—and a private IT company, Kople. As part of this collaboration, I followed how these actors worked together to design and implement a digital system intended to support volunteer matchmaking. EMOVE became the central anchor of my thesis because it enabled me to study digitalization as it was negotiated in real time, from the first design workshops to the everyday use of the system. Therefore, this site zooms in on the digital volunteering infrastructures, thus revealing how technologies are imagined, built, and adapted to support— but also reshape—practices of care and coordination.

Finally, I participated in the *Network for Visiting Services* from 2020 to 2025, a national forum on which organizations working with volunteer-based visiting programs meet to exchange knowledge and address shared challenges regarding social volunteer matchmaking activities. This network provided a broader vantage point on the collective discussions around digitalization, recruitment, compliance, and care that shape this part of civil society. Here, my ethnography zooms in on a cross-organizational part of volunteering infrastructures, highlighting how organizations collectively maintain and adjust the conditions that make social volunteer matchmaking possible. Taken together, the abovementioned three sites form the basis for an ethnography of the infrastructures of volunteering. They enabled me to trace volunteering not only in its celebrated frontstage encounters between volunteers and participants but also in the backstage processes of coordination, documentation, and digital adaptation that make such encounters possible.

A shared key characteristic of all the CSOs that form the main part of my ethnographic material is their engagement in matchmaking programs. These programs focus on pairing volunteers with specific target groups based on compatibility, fostering social interactions, and providing care to individuals who are in precarious or vulnerable life situations. Compatibility with these social volunteer programs is typically determined by a combination of practical considerations, such as proximity or availability, and personal preferences, such as shared interests or hobbies.

For certain target groups, additional factors must be considered; for example, when matching individuals with dementia, it is important to understand the type of dementia they have and the stage of its progression. Similarly, in mentorship programs, factors such as professional experience within a specific field play a crucial role. While this dissertation only represents a small subset of the broader field of matchmaking, most such programs in civil society share a focus on providing care for people in vulnerable life situations through social interactions. The matchmaking process typically begins with an automated screening phase, where volunteers fill out forms or questionnaires to provide initial information. This is followed by personalized assessments, such as interviews, enabling a match leader[5] to gain a clear picture of the volunteer's personality and concrete needs—for example, whether a person with dementia requires a specific form of social interaction, whether someone with arthritis may need meetings at their own home due to mobility limitations, or whether a person with a migrant background should be matched with someone able to support their Danish language level and development. While the details of this process vary across organizations, certain principles remain the same: good matchmaking requires expertise and relies on the match leader's ability to obtain a deep understanding of the individual circumstances of both volunteers and the target group.

Thus, in this dissertation, I engage with the matchmaking process as a form of care work, albeit one very much mediated through the materiality of IT systems as well as phone calls and emails, often lacking the face-to-face contact synonymous with other types of traditional welfare care work. The IT system's role in this process is multifaceted. The system facilitates coordination and documentation, and match leaders rely on the system to document interactions, maintain participant profiles, and support the relationships through regular reminders. However, in this dissertation, the IT system—or digitalization in broader terms—is not my object of inquiry but a socio-technical condition through which deeper transformations in civil society become visible. My focus lies on locating and exploring *careful arrangements* within the infrastructure of volunteering: the negotiations and agreements that make volunteer activities both possible and precarious in the evolving landscape of Danish welfare society.

Research Questions and Main Argument

My analytical approach is grounded in ethnology, Science and Technology Studies (STS), and feminist theory, as I explore the socio-materiality of digital technologies and their entanglement with everyday organizational life. My research does not seek to evaluate digitalization in absolute terms, whether it is good or bad, but rather to investigate how it unfolds in practice. By analyzing the socio-technical fabric of social volunteer matchmaking programs, I aim to shed light on how the processes of digitalization are integrated into the infrastructures of volunteering.

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[5] I apply the term "math leader" which encompasses the role of an employed or volunteer coordinator, who's primary focus is to do matches between the CSO's volunteers and target groups.

Building on these reflections and analytical choices, this dissertation engages with the following research questions:

- How does an ethnography of infrastructures contribute new insights into the digital transformations in care-oriented social volunteer work in the hybrid Danish welfare society?

- In what ways does the analytical figure of *careful arrangements* make visible both the generative and constraining frictions in organizing care-oriented social volunteer work via digital platforms?

To answer these questions, I examine different aspects of the infrastructures of volunteering through three articles. The first article shows how volunteer relationships between people with migrant backgrounds and older citizens are sustained through organizational, material, and emotional scaffolding. The second article investigates how the introduction of a digital matching system reorders coordination across three CSOs, thus entangling digital tools with distinct organizational logics and generating both efficiencies and frictions. The third article applies a temporal lens to analyze how professionalization and digitalization recalibrate the rhythms of volunteer work, thereby highlighting tensions between accelerated, efficiency-driven practices and slower, care-oriented modes of engagement and how the CSOs navigate between these. Together, the articles demonstrate how the notion of *careful arrangements* opens up an understanding of the infrastructures of volunteering as produced and sustained through the negotiation of relational, socio-technical and temporal conditions in a digitalized welfare landscape. This forms the foundation for my main argument: that ongoing transformations in Danish civil society, shaped by professionalization and cross-sector collaboration highlighted through digitalization, are reconfiguring the practice and meaning of social volunteering. These changes introduce new demands of efficiency and accountability, but they also generate counter actions, often appearing as shadow practices with the aim to ensure relational care and presence, such as navigating around the standardized workflows built into IT systems, using private phones to ensure privacy or even good sound and connection, or deliberately postponing matches in order to ensure a better relational fit.

By tracing the generative concept of *careful arrangements* throughout this thesis, I illuminate how infrastructures of volunteering are not fixed or given but are continuously made and remade in practice. The figure depicts the complex interplay of socio-material, affective, and temporal elements that underpin contemporary volunteering, particularly under conditions of increasing digitalization and professionalization. The concept builds theoretically on STS and actor-network theory (ANT), which highlight the performativity and infrastructural dimensions of organizational life (Law, 1994; Mol, 2002) and feminist theory, which foregrounds relational and affective labor in sustaining socio-technical networks (Ahmed, 2004; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017).

Research Position: Engaging in Collaborative Projects and Producing Knowledge

My research practice is deeply shaped by my position at the CoRe, where collaboration across sectors and disciplines is central to knowledge-making. The framework for *Engaged Medical Humanities* that we developed in the article entitled *Engaged Medical Humanities: A Framework for Knowledge Production in Research Collaborations* (see appendix 1, Folker et al., 2025) has been formative for my work throughout my PhD journey. This framework emphasizes situated, reflexive, and accountable ways of working in collaborative projects, where knowledge is produced *with* and not merely *about* the actors involved.

My PhD project also reflects what we at CoRe regard as health research in the humanities, as it addresses the structures that surround civil society's support for people living in vulnerable life situations such as individuals with migrant backgrounds, people living with dementia, or those experiencing loneliness due to structural or personal circumstances. In this manner, my dissertation connects to CoRe's broad understanding of health as a social and cultural phenomenon embedded in the conditions of everyday life and the "good life" (Damsholt & Jespersen, 2014; Jespersen, 2021). The engaged medical humanities (EMH) framework builds on traditions from critical medical humanities (Fitzgerald & Callard, 2016; Viney et al., 2015) and engaged research (Campus Engage, 2022; Haapanen & Christens, 2021), while also responding to calls to overcome the rigid boundaries between basic and applied research (Santos et al., 2022). Developed collectively at CoRe, the EMH framework emphasizes *critical proximity* (Birkbak et al., 2015) as a methodological stance, foregrounding how research can be both collaborative and analytically reflexive. Rather than treating interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral projects as linear or harmonious, the framework emphasizes accountability and the importance of "staying with the trouble" in messy, asymmetrical collaborations (Haraway, 2016). Thus, highlighting that knowledge is produced not only in theory but also through the situated negotiations and compromises that shape collaborative practice.

In my dissertation, this orientation has informed the analytical figure of *careful arrangements*, which is constitutive for the main argument of my thesis. The concept was shaped through my situated engagement in cross-sector projects such as EMOVE, where researchers, CSOs, and an IT company together sought to design and implement a digital matching platform; but my involvement in *Volunteer for All Senior Citizens* and the *Network for Visiting Services* also played a role in shaping the concept. Across these sites, the messy negotiations, compromises, and relational work that sustained collaboration revealed that infrastructures of volunteering are continually produced and stabilized through what I call as *careful arrangements*. Thus, my contribution lies not only in applying an existing theoretical lens but also in developing one through the very practice of engaged research. By working within the CoRe tradition of EMH, my dissertation demonstrates how theory-building and practice-based collaboration are mutually constitutive: how the concept of *careful arrangements* emerges from, and illuminates, the everyday negotiations of volunteering in a digitalized welfare landscape.

Structure of the Dissertation and Articles

The thesis is structured in eight chapters. Following this introduction, *Chapter 2* outlines the state of the art, contextualizing civil society in Denmark and Scandinavia, and connecting it with the Global North, with particular focus on welfare collaboration, health- and socially oriented volunteering, and the growing role of digital infrastructures. *Chapter 3* presents the theoretical framework, drawing on pragmatist epistemology, ethnology, Science and Technology Studies (STS), feminist theory, and engaged medical humanities. *Chapter 4* details the methodological approach, including a description of the multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork, the research design, methods and empirical material, the analytical approach to the material, as well as the ethics and challenges of conducting ethnographic research. *Chapter 5* introduces and summarizes the three articles that form the empirical backbone of the dissertation, highlighting how each engages with different dimensions of what I conceptualize as *careful arrangements* in social volunteer matchmaking activities in civil society. *Chapter 6* synthesizes the main contributions and conclusions.

Chapter 7 holds the reference lists for each *chapter and chapter 8* includes the three articles in full length:

Article 1: When Strangers Meet in a Volunteer Initiative: Understanding the Precariousness of Volunteering and the Organizational Infrastructure Supporting It.

Article 2: How Civil Society Goes Digital. An Ethnographic Study of IT System Implementation in Three Danish Civil Society Organizations.

Article 3: Temporal tensions in civil society. An ethnological exploration of civil society organizations navigating between voluntarism and professionalism in the Danish welfare state.

Chapter 9 contains the appendix which includes the CoRe article *Engaged Medical Humanities: A Framework for Knowledge Production in Research Collaborations* (Folker et al., 2025), an overview of my empirical data, the report from the Volunteer for All Senior Citizens project and selected outputs from the EMOVE project

Illustrations of the infrastructures of volunteering [6]: An illustration of storing and securing data, showing files, folders, keys and locks.

2. State of the Art

This chapter provides an overview of the relevant existing research on volunteering and civil society and positions the dissertation within this field. The chapter begins by introducing volunteering as a contested and historically shifting phenomenon, before presenting central ways in which volunteering has been conceptually understood. It then narrows its focus to the Nordic and Scandinavian context, where volunteering assumes distinctive forms, and further to the Danish case, with its particular historical and political development.

Building on this contextual foundation, the chapter turns to three major transformations that characterize contemporary volunteering: hybridization, professionalization and digitalization. Each of these transformations is discussed in relation to current research and debates. The chapter concludes by highlighting the scarcity of ethnographic contributions to civil society studies and in line with ethnology's long-standing concern with how people organize everyday life (Löfgren, 2014; Damsholt & Jespersen 2014), this thesis offers a qualitative case analysis of how volunteer infrastructures are organized and digitalized through IT systems for social volunteer matchmaking. This allows for a nuanced and situated exploration of the emergent

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6 Each chapter opens with an illustration to visualize different aspects of the infrastructures of volunteering that make social volunteer matchmaking for and with people in vulnerable life situations possible. My ethnographic material contains numerous photographs of CSO staff, volunteer match leaders, volunteers, and people belonging to their target groups. However, due to ethical concerns regarding privacy and the difficulty of fully anonymizing these individuals, the photographs themselves are not shown. The illustrations thus serve as a visualization tool, capturing some of the infrastructures central to this study while protecting the identities of those involved.

paradoxes within volunteer management, particularly concerning the tensions between organizational mandates and the lived experiences of volunteers (Cour et al., 2023).

Research Approaches to Volunteering and Civil Society

Photo: Vincent van Gogh's The Good Samaritan *(1890)*

The picture that opens this chapter is Vincent van Gogh's *The Good Samaritan* (1890). It depicts a man lifting another injured man onto the back of an animal—an image often interpreted as a symbol of altruism, compassion, and moral duty. The painting draws on the biblical parable of the Good Samaritan, in which a man is attacked and left for dead on the roadside, ignored by passersby until a Samaritan—someone from a marginalized and distrusted group—stops to help. He tends to the man's wounds, lifts him onto his own animal, and brings him to an inn to ensure his continued care. Despite his outsider status, the Samaritan acts not out of obligation, but from compassion. This narrative has long shaped the moral foundation of volunteering—as an act driven by empathy, altruism, and the desire to do good, regardless of social or cultural boundaries. I include the image here to illustrate how volunteering to support people in vulnerable life situations has been and continues to be understood and portrayed in both public discourse and, often, in research—as an inherently good, selfless act of care for others. However, the romanticized portrayal of such moments, whether in scripture, art, or policy rhetoric, risks obscuring the broader historical, cultural, and institutional arrangements that produce and sustain them by focusing on the individual who acts as a volunteer or the one who receives the act of volunteering. To move beyond this individualized lens, the following section outlines how scholars have conceptualized volunteering and civil

society as historically contingent and contextually shifting phenomena. Kaspersen and Egholm have argued that both "civil society" and "volunteering" are fluid and dynamic concepts whose meanings shift in relation to their societal context and to the increasingly blurred boundaries among public, private and volunteer sectors (Egholm & Kaspersen, 2021a & b; Kaspersen & Egholm, 2023). In this thesis, I use the term *civil society organizations* (CSO's) as an umbrella concept that encompasses volunteer associations, NGOs, volunteer-based organizations, and other entities within civil society that operate under democratic membership structures.

Viewing volunteering and civil society as a historically shifting and socially constructed phenomenon necessitates an examination of how these concepts are organized, practiced, and understood within evolving political and institutional frameworks. Given that volunteering and civil society are dynamic concepts whose meanings change with context, research in these fields can be approached in several ways. Espersen (2024) have outlined how, within institutional tradition of civil society studies, CSOs are defined as voluntary associations, nonprofit entities, or NGOs that are self-governing (i.e., responsible for their own affairs and not controlled by other organizations). Moreover, their participation is noncompulsory, their activities are partially carried out by volunteers, and their potential economic surplus is reinvested to further the organization's stated purposes (Salamon & Sokolowski, 2016). This understanding is shaped by both "market failure" and "government failure" theories (Salamon, 1987). The market failure perspective posits that markets are unable to deliver certain public goods independent of buying and selling, while the government failure perspective holds that the state cannot provide all public goods or meet all societal needs. In such cases, civil society is expected to step in (Espersen, 2024). The "voluntary failure" theory argues that CSOs themselves may be partial or inadequate in their provisions, for instance by lacking the resources, scale, or equity to ensure broad and consistent access to services, requiring state involvement to fill the gaps (Salamon & Anheier, 1998; Salamon, 1987). However, these theoretical frameworks have faced criticism for failing to acknowledge the permeable and interconnected nature of sectoral boundaries, and the continuous mutual influence and renegotiation occurring between these domains (Espersen, 2024). In contrast, the normative, content-oriented tradition within civil society studies defines civil society in terms of ideals associated with modern democracy and "public goods," such as dialogue, activism, value creation, nonviolence, social capital, inclusion, and a commitment to diversity and compromise over conflict and uniformity (Kaspersen & Sevelsted, 2021; Kocka, 2004; Sivesind & Enjolras, 2022). From this viewpoint, civil society is esteemed for its capacity to cultivate environments where citizens and the state interact based on shared principles, thereby reinforcing social cohesion, democratic involvement, and inclusive societal norms. Nevertheless, critics of this perspective argue that civil society can also foster exclusion, erode democratic confidence, and perpetuate professionally managed, non-deliberative processes (Eikenberry & Kluver, 2004; Egholm & Kaspersen, 2021a & b; Kaspersen & Sevelsted, 2021).

Regarding volunteering and civic participation, prevailing societal narratives frequently emphasize their importance in comprehending active citizenship and engagement, assigning them considerable theoretical weight (Evers & Essen, 2019). Scholarly research frequently associates these discussions with both the institutional definition of civil society and theoretical

frameworks of volunteering that emphasize; voluntary participation, lack of financial compensation, interpersonal connection, and formal structures (Hustinx, 2010, Espersen 2024). However, this conceptualization often overlooks the multifaceted nature of civic action and the diverse motivations underpinning individuals' engagement in community initiatives (Grubb & Henriksen, 2018). From a more content-focused theoretical standpoint, volunteering is characterized as an avenue through which individuals engage actively and assert influence, either within representative democratic frameworks that align citizens' interests and values or within arenas where their participation carries varying degrees of impact (Boje, 2017, 2021; Putnam, 2000; Strömbäck, 2005). In addition to these forms, scholarship also identifies "individualized", "reflexive" or "fluid" volunteering, which is non-membership-based, often situated in informal settings, and reflects a shift from membership- and institution-based self-organization toward more flexible, personalized engagement (Hustinx & Lammertyn, 2003; Højgård, 2024; Grub, 2016). Thus, broader conceptualization of civic engagement includes not only traditional volunteering in non-profit organizations but also a wide array of other activities, both formal and informal, structured and everyday practices, characterized by their non-utilitarian nature and absence of immediate personal gain (Lynggaard & Boje, 2025). In the context of this thesis, volunteering is understood as a continuum, encompassing engagement from long-term, collective political action to more individualized, short-term, and reflexive contributions (Eliasoph, 2013; Hustinx & Lammertyn, 2003). This broad conception enables the inclusion of both traditional, membership-based associations and more informal, episodic, or digitally mediated forms of engagement. Adopting this perspective is crucial for understanding the socio-material and socio-technical infrastructures of volunteering within the field of social volunteer matchmaking programs for people in vulnerable life situations. The CSOs that I followed exemplify the diversity of this landscape: some of the CSOs that I engage with are member based patient associations, such as the Alzheimer Association and The Danish Rheumatism Association, where volunteer–recipient matchmaking is only one among several activities aimed at supporting people and their relatives in connection with a specific illness. Others, such as the Danish Red Cross and Danish Refugee Council, are large national organizations with broad mandates, within which matchmaking is a smaller subset of their overall work. Finally, there are smaller associations whose core mission revolves primarily around the matchmaking activity itself, which include Association Together Across, Association Equal Access, and the association "Meetings in the Mother Tongue". By situating these different organizational types within a shared analytical framework, this thesis explores how social volunteering infrastructures for matchmaking programs are organized and sustained in times of digitalization and how sectoral boundaries are navigated and negotiated in practice across diverse CSOs working to support people in vulnerable life situations.

Volunteering in the Nordic and Scandinavian Countries

Survey data indicate that participation in volunteering is comparatively high in the Nordic countries, with figures often falling within the 30–48% range, though specific numbers vary by country and survey year. In Denmark, a national survey commissioned by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Housing, carried out by VIVE - The Danish Center for Social Science Research and Statistics Denmark, shows a steady increase in volunteering over the past two

decades (VIVE, 2024). In 2024, 40% of the population reported being engaged in voluntary work, rising to 45% when time-limited volunteering is included. This represents an increase from 36% in 2020, with growth particularly evident in sports, culture, and social fields. The rise is largely driven by higher participation among older Danes, who today have both better health and higher activity levels. Online volunteering has also expanded, from 2% of the population in 2020 to 8% in 2024 (VIVE, 2024). This stands in contrast to the EU average, which tends to be closer to 20% (Henriksen et al., 2018; Nordic Council of Ministers, 2020 Qvist, 2019). What distinguishes the Nordic model is that universal welfare states have developed alongside, rather than at the expense of, strong associational cultures (Jeppsson Grassman & Svedberg, 2012; Trägårdh & Selle, 2013). These findings reflect a broader pattern visible in comparative research across many countries: strong welfare states often coexist with, and even foster, vibrant volunteer sectors (Salamon et al., 2017). In fact, in Scandinavia it has been recognized since the early 1990s that the emergence of universal welfare state models did not result in a shrinking volunteer sector or declining participation rates (Gaskin & Davis Smith, 1995; Jeppsson Grassman & Svedberg, 1996; Klausen & Selle, 1996; Kühnle & Selle, 1992).

The relationship between civil society and the welfare state has been a recurring theme in Nordic scholarship and public debate. Research highlights how discourses on the role of the volunteer sector contain multiple and occasionally conflicting understandings of what civil society is and what volunteering should contribute to (Enjolras et al. 2021; Loga, 2018a, 2018b). Since the late 1970s, questions of welfare state renewal and the engagement of CSOs in welfare production have been central to political discussions in the Nordic countries (Klausen & Selle, 1996; Kühnle & Selle, 1992; Kühnle & Selle, 1990; Loga, 2018a, 2018b; Trägårdh et al., 2013). In addition to these national debates, European institutions have also emphasized the role of the volunteer sector. For example, the European Commission launched initiatives in the late 1990s to highlight the sector's potential and strengthen cooperation among public, volunteer, and business actors (European Commission, 1997). Taken together, this body of research demonstrates that the Scandinavian countries form a distinctive context in which volunteering and universal welfare regimes reinforce one another. This recognition provides an essential backdrop for understanding the Danish case.

The Historical Context of Civil Society in Denmark

To understand the role of Danish CSOs working with people in vulnerable life situations today, it is necessary to situate such population groups in a longer historical context. How they have been cared for and how this care has been organized has always been closely tied to the development of associations, philanthropic initiatives, and their relationship with the state. The Danish case reveals that the boundaries between public responsibility and volunteer engagement have repeatedly shifted over time. By tracing these shifts, it is evident that what may appear as transformative changes in the present, such as collaboration with municipalities, professionalization, or digitalization, are part of a much longer trajectory of negotiation, adaptation, and reorganization. Looking at contemporary volunteering infrastructures from this

perspective makes it possible to see today's arrangements not as isolated innovations but as continuations of deep-seated developments.

Research on the historical development of Danish civil society consistently points to the adoption of the Constitution in 1849 as a formative moment. With the transition from absolute monarchy to representative democracy, new opportunities opened for collective organizing, and associations quickly became a central vehicle for political influence and practical problem-solving (Kaspersen & Egholm 2023 p.73). Associational life developed in tandem with constitutional democracy itself, and the act of founding an association came to symbolize the democratic principles enshrined in the Constitution (Ibid). This perspective is echoed in work by Dekker (2014), Espersen (2024), and Ibsen et. al. (2015), who each emphasize how associations embodied democratic ideals while also fostering participation in cultural, social, and educational life. Henriksen & Bundesen trace this described development in "*The moving frontier in Denmark: Voluntary–state relationships since 1850*" (2004) and show how during the second half of the nineteenth century, the associational sphere expanded rapidly. This included cultural and recreational activities, such as adult education, sports, and hobbies, religious revival movements, and social initiatives (e.g., cooperatives, charitable organizations, and tenant associations) (Ibid., 2004; Henriksen et al., 2018). This period also witnessed the emergence of numerous charitable organizations focused on aiding the poor and marginalized, predating formal state welfare provisions (Kelen, 1985). Ibsen et al. (2015) show how within the cultural and educational domain, the ideas underlying the Act on Non-Formal Adult Education (Folkeoplysningsloven) took shape, thus encouraging citizens to participate in societal life and political deliberation. In turn, they show how within the social- and health area, volunteer organizations also provided poor relief and support, particularly to the "deserving needy" (*værdigt trængende*), understood as those who would normally manage on their own but requiredsupport, while the state assumed responsibility for the "undeserving needy" (*uværdigt trængende*), who lost their civic rights and were placed under the strict administration of the poor laws (Ibid., 2015; Espersen, 2024; Henriksen & Bundesen, 2004).

This historical division in welfare provision, distinguishing between the "deserving" and "undeserving", significantly shaped the landscape of civil society and laid the groundwork for future welfare state development, fostering a complex interplay between voluntary action and state intervention (Lynch, 2010). By the 1890s, this strict divide began to dissolve as notions of human rights and state responsibility gained ground, and philanthropic organizations increasingly cooperated with public authorities—though often at the cost of legitimacy as primary providers (Henriksen & Bundesen, 2004). Sevelsted's studies further document how these collaborations became embedded in a political narrative that highlighted civil society's particular capability in addressing social issues (2017, 2018). He shows how this pattern was not unique to Denmark, and situates it within broader Scandinavian developments, pointing to shared Protestant roots and Christian organizations in Norway and Sweden. During this period, mutual aid societies such as the Danish Health Insurance Funds (De Danske Sygekasser) emerged, supported by state subsidies (Kaspersen & Egholm, 2023, p. 84). At the same time, interest-based patient associations were established to support different patients groups and by doing so providing early forms of collective advocacy (Henriksen & Bundesen, 2004). Scholars describe this proliferation of organizations at the turn of the twentieth century as "the era of associations" (Kaspersen & Egholm, 2023, p. 75), with virtually every cause institutionalized

in associational form; from unions and parties to sports clubs, hobby groups, and cooperatives (Klausen & Selle, 1996; Selle et al., 2019). These organizations were characterized by dense interpersonal networks, democratic practices, and moral frameworks (Espersen, 2024). The connection between associational life and democracy has been a recurring theme in both classical and contemporary scholarship. Academic scholarship, building upon Tocqueville's (1805–1859) concept of associations as "schools of democracy," (1835/quoted in Lichterman, 2006) has expanded this notion within the Scandinavian context, underscoring how Denmark's associative surge in the nineteenth century fostered a membership-driven sector and a democratic institutional framework (Ibsen et al., 2015). Recent studies underlined how these organizations forged lasting connections between civic values, participation, and political representation, where many operated simultaneously at local and national levels, thereby leading to local priorities influencing national agendas and vice versa (Enjolras & Strømsnes, 2018; Henriksen et al., 2018; Kühnle & Selle, 1990, 1992; Klausen & Selle, 1996).This relationship underscores how CSO's contributed to the cultivation of civic virtues and collective action, essential for the functioning of a democratic society (Duru et al., 2020). Indeed, these associations provided a vital arena for public discourse and political participation, thereby strengthening the democratic fabric by enabling diverse voices to be heard and represented.

From the mid-twentieth century, scholars describe Danish civil society as increasingly pluralistic, reflecting diverse political and ideological orientations. The pluralism required ongoing negotiation with the state at different levels, but generally framed by partnership rather than conflict (Bundesen, Henriksen & Jørgensen, 1998; Selle et al., 2019; Kühnle & Selle, 1990, 1992; Warren, 2001; Wijkström & Zimmer, 2011). This was also a time, where CSO's became tools for policymaking, providing expertise and member representation to inform public decisions (Henriksen et al., 2012, 2018; Kühnle & Selle, 1992). As Esping-Andersen (1990) and Henriksen & Bundesen (2004) note, this partnership intensified during the expansion of the welfare state after the Second World War, with CSOs adopting more professionalized practices to secure legitimacy. Yet, as Ibsen & Habermann (2005) and La Cour (2014) point out, the consolidation of the welfare state also sidelined voluntary organizations in legislation and service provision. At the same time, new forms of open-membership, democratic associations gained prominence, contrasting with earlier paternalistic voluntarism (Balle-Petersen, 1976). Henriksen & Bundesen (2004) and Wijkström (2011) show how hybridization accelerated as CSOs entered into service contracts with public authorities, balancing integration into the welfare apparatus with the risk of losing independence.

Since the 1980s, research has documented how political and economic pressures on the universal welfare model repositioned civil society as a partner in welfare provision.
Thus, this era witnessed a move towards specialized organizations addressing specific social, economic, and cultural concerns, often operating in closer collaboration with, or even as extensions of, the welfare state (Grubb & Henriksen, 2018). This integration led to complex partnership, where voluntary organizations often received public funding and took on quasi-governmental roles in service delivery, blurring the lines between state and civil society actors.

This trend aligns with a broader European movement towards harnessing voluntary agencies for welfare provision, a development particularly evident in the UK where the Voluntary and Community Sector is increasingly integrated into public service delivery (Hogg & Baines, 2011). In Denmark, associations were tasked with service delivery, conflict mediation, and facilitating citizen self-help, increasingly shaped by the logics of New Public Management (Klausen & Selle, 1996; La Cour, 2010, 2014). Scholars argue that hybridization deepened in this period as CSOs absorbed market-oriented practices (Wijkström, 2011). New state initiatives also institutionalized voluntarism further, such as the establishment of the National Knowledge and Development Centre of Volunteering (*Center for frivilligt socialt arbejde)* and the Council for Voluntary Social Work (*Frivilligrådet*). Today all municipalities cooperate with voluntary initiatives, have explicit volunteer policies as well volunteer consultants and municipality organized volunteer activities (Espersen, 2024; Henriksen & Bundesen, 2004; Hulgård, 2007; Ibsen & Espersen, 2016).This "welfare turn" in civil society policies reflects a deliberate strategy by Danish authorities to engage civic organizations in addressing complex welfare challenges, such as an aging population and increasing immigration, by positioning them as strategic partners and supplemental service providers (Grubb & Henriksen, 2018). Thus, across the political spectrum, voluntarism became a widely embraced idea, albeit for different reasons: for conservatives, as a nonbureaucratic alternative to state provision; for the left, as a grassroots expression of democratic participation (Ibsen & Habermann, 2005; La Cour, 2014; Musick & Wilson, 2008). This convergence made "civil society" into a political buzzword and linked to positive connotations, frequently invoked in both academic and policy debates (Edwards, 2004; Musick & Wilson, 2008; Kaspersen & Egholm, 2023; Trägårdh et al., 2013).Overall, the Scandinavian literature demonstrates that civil society has always been dynamic, adaptable, and deeply embedded in wider political, social, and cultural contexts, playing a crucial role in democratic development and welfare provision. Despite common historical foundations among the Scandinavian countries, significant national variations emerged in the structure and scope of philanthropic engagement, with Sweden's foundation sector is closely tied to its social contract, while Norway developed a larger segment of operating foundations closely affiliated with government, and Denmark saw the corporate-owning foundation become more prominent (Wijkström & Einarsson, 2018). This divergence highlights the distinct paths through which civil society organizations integrated with evolving welfare state models across the Nordic region, reflecting different societal priorities and historical institutional arrangements. Adding to this, scholars highlight how people in vulnerable life situations have been central to these transformations: from nineteenth-century philanthropy and poor relief, through the associational expansion of the twentieth century, to contemporary co-creation and professionalized collaborations (Egholm, 2021; Henriksen & Bundesen, 2004; Henriksen et al., 2018; Ibsen & Habermann, 2005; Sevelsted, 2017, 2018). Seen from this perspective, the infrastructures through which social volunteering is organized for and with people in vulnerable life situations today are part of a much longer trajectory of negotiation, adaptation, and reorganization. The aim here is not to decide whether current developments constitute fundamental change but to employ this historical lens to shed light on the Danish tradition of support from civil society for people in vulnerable life situations. By tracing how research has shown these arrangements to evolve over time, it becomes possible to better understand the infrastructures of volunteering and the practices through which care

and support are organized in contemporary Denmark. Building on this foundation, the following section turns to three processes that current scholarship identifies as particularly significant for the infrastructures of volunteering: the increasing collaboration between CSOs and other sectors (hybridization), the professionalization of CSO's, and the digitalization that has createa new forms of volunteer work and volunteer activities. Together, these processes frame the conditions under which civil society continues to support people in vulnerable life situations today.

Contemporary Transformations of Civil Society and Volunteering

In this section, I identify three major processes of transformations: hybridization, professionalization, and digitalization. These processes intersect, mutually reinforce one another, and manifest differently across organizational fields.

Hybridization

In academic literature, hybridization is understood as the blending of organizational logics, governance models, and accountability mechanisms across state, market, and civil society domains (Brandsen, et al., 2005; Brandsen, al., 2017; Evers, 2005; Hustinx, 2014). Rather than operating as autonomous membership-based associations, many CSOs today are embedded in contractual arrangements, policy frameworks, and co-production models that position them as partners in welfare provision (Brandsen & Pestoff, 2006; Henriksen et al., 2012) In the Danish context, this collaborative turn is particularly visible in volunteer social work. Since the 1980s, political enthusiasm has increasingly framed CSOs as co-creators of welfare, elevating volunteer social work on the policy agenda (Ibsen & Habermann, 2005; La Cour, 2014). The former Liberal–Conservative government's National Civil Society Strategy (Regeringen, 2010) institutionalized this vision by aiming to *"fremme aktivt medborgerskab og systematisk inddrage civilsamfundet og frivillige organisationer i arbejdet med socialt udsatte personer og familier.* (p. 10) [7]. Such initiatives reflect a broader "welfare turn" in Danish civil society policies, necessitating a "partnership-based" constellation involving public, civic, and commercial actors, frequently calling upon volunteers for specific program tasks (Grubb & Henriksen, 2018). This hybridization often results in a blurring of boundaries between sectors, where civil society organizations adopt quasi-governmental roles, and public entities increasingly rely on civic engagement for service delivery (Bochove & Oldenhof, 2018).

Scholars have documented how this move from informal cooperation to formalized partnerships has introduced both opportunities and constraints. On the one hand, CSOs gain access to resources, recognition, and influence by participating in governance networks (Henriksen et al., 2012, Hustinx, 2014). On the other hand, contractual arrangements and coproduction frameworks often require CSOs to adopt market-oriented governance principles, such as measurability, efficiency, and competitiveness (Hustinx, 2010; La Cour, 2014). These managerial demands can create dependencies, increase administrative burdens, and risk

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[7] Translated to English*: "promote active citizenship and systematically involve civil society and volunteer organizations in work with socially disadvantaged individuals and families"*

instrumentalizing CSOs, thereby narrowing their scope of action (Ibsen & Habermann, 2005). Moreover, this collaborative turn tends to privilege organizations engaged in service delivery to vulnerable groups, while marginalizing those adopting system-critical or advocacy roles (Edwards, 2004; Henriksen et al. 2015; Musick & Wilson, 2008). As a result, volunteer organizations find themselves recognized and supported when they contribute to welfare provision but simultaneously constrained in their ability to act as independent voices of critique. Therefore, hybridization is a double-edged transformation. It reflects new governance paradigms that view CSOs as essential partners in welfare innovation and service delivery. However, it also embeds them in relations of dependency and regulation that may erode the autonomy, plurality, and critical capacities traditionally associated with civil society (Henriksen et al., 2018; Hustinx & De Waele, 2015)

Professionalization

A second major transformation is professionalization, which refers to the process by which volunteer work becomes more specialized, regulated, and structured. As Freidson (2001) argues, professionalism constitutes a "third logic" that is distinct from both markets and bureaucracies; a system organized around specialized knowledge, ethical norms, and peer regulation. Evetts (2013) indicates professionalism also has divergent forms such as occupational professionalism, grounded in collegial authority and shared values, and organizational professionalism, driven by managerial control, standardization, and performance systems. These insights echo Max Weber's (1922/1978) classic analysis of bureaucratization as a core feature of modern rational–legal authority. Weber described bureaucracy as promising predictability, efficiency, and accountability, yet enclosing individuals within a rigid structure of rules and procedures.

In the context of CSO's, professionalization often entails the employment of paid staff, the adoption of formal management techniques, and the standardization of services, which can lead to a shift from member-driven to expert-led operations (Heylen et al., 2020). Abbott (1988) further reminds us that professions do not exist in isolation, they continuously redefine their roles and boundaries through interaction and competition with other professions and with broader institutional, cultural, and legal frameworks. Applied to civil society, professionalization is closely linked to hybridization: as contractual relations with state and private actors expand, CSOs face growing demands for accountability, transparency, and efficiency (Henriksen et al., 2015; Hustinx, 2010). La Cour (2014) and Espersen (2024) note that these demands generate tensions; professional practices can strengthen organizational capacity, enhance legitimacy, and facilitate collaboration with external stakeholders, but also risk undermining the flexibility, autonomy, and participatory ethos long associated with volunteering. Espersen et al. (2018) highlight that the Danish volunteer sector is highly heterogeneous in this regard: while certain grassroots associations remain volunteer-driven, others, particularly large national NGOs, operate with extensive professional staff, specialized management, and elaborate accountability systems. Professionalization also has implications for the role of volunteers. As Eliasoph (2011) and Hustinx (2010) observe, managerial and bureaucratic requirements often shift the responsibility for compliance and outcome measurement to professional staff, while volunteers are relegated to more peripheral, episodic,

and standardized roles. This reconfiguration risks reducing opportunities for long-term relational engagement. This shift also impacts volunteers' sense of ownership and their capacity for autonomous decision-making, potentially leading to disengagement from the organization's core mission (Grubb & Henriksen, 2018). At the same time, recent studies emphasize that a certain level of professionalization can be indispensable, particularly in work with people in vulnerable life situations (Brandsen 2020; Espersen et al. 2018) and in a national mapping of visiting services (besøgstjenester), Pedersen (2023) finds that successful volunteer–beneficiary matches depend on clear procedures, structured support, and continuous coordination. The study concludes that a certain level of professionalization is required to secure sustainable volunteer arrangements (Pedersen, 2023). Similarly, the increasing collaboration and formalization of volunteer work frequently create challenges for organizations, as volunteers' relational care can be perceived as unpredictable and incompatible with prescriptive rules by professional care workers, occasionally leading to conflict and concerns about volunteers overstepping their qualifications (La Cour, 2022). This tension highlights a critical dilemma: while some professionalization is necessary for quality assurance and organizational sustainability, excessive formalization can undermine the very relational aspects that volunteers often prioritize, potentially reducing their commitment and hindering their ability to provide personalized care (La Cour, 2022).

In line with this, a Rambøll report for the National Board of Social Services (2020) emphasizes that the inclusion of people in vulnerable life situations, both as volunteers and recipients, requires structured training, organizational support, and inclusive leadership. Without such measures, volunteer programs risk reproducing inequalities rather than fostering empowerment (Espersen et al., 2018; Rambøll, 2020). In this light, professionalization in civil society should not be understood solely as a bureaucratic burden or erosion of volunteering's participatory values. Rather, it is part of an ongoing negotiation among different logics and among the values of efficiency, accountability, and relational care. Thus, for organizations working with people in vulnerable life situations, professionalization can be seen as a necessary infrastructure for enabling safe and sustainable volunteer participation. As CSOs increasingly take on softer welfare tasks and collaborations that involve vulnerable groups, this transformation of professionalization unfolds at multiple levels. This includes changes to the nature of volunteering itself, with a growing emphasis on specialized roles and the professionalization of volunteer tasks, particularly in contexts involving sensitive social volunteer work.

Digitalization

A third transformation that shapes the infrastructures of volunteering for and with people in vulnerable life situations is digitalization. Over the last two decades, digital technologies have become embedded in almost every aspect of organizational life, including the coordination, recruitment, and everyday practices of CSOs. Digitalization enables new forms of participation—episodic, app-mediated, and hybrid—that promise flexibility and immediacy. Yet, as with hybridization and professionalization, digital transformations also produce tensions, opening opportunities for some while risking the exclusion of others.

In Denmark, digitalization cannot be separated from broader transformations of the welfare state. Carreras' (2024) ethnographic research has shown that since the implementation of mandatory public digital infrastructures in welfare provision, civil society has raised concerns about how digitalization increases bureaucratic demands and creates new barriers to accessibility, especially for low-income, elderly, disabled, and racialized citizens (Ældre Sagen & Epinion, 2023; Struve Nielsen, 2021; Faye Jacobsen, 2017). While public policy documents promote digitalization as a means to achieve "a more cohesive and efficient public sector that creates value for individuals and businesses" (The Danish Government, Danish Regions, & Local Government Denmark, 2016, p. 14), as well as ensuring that "vulnerable citizens (…) must be guaranteed more coherent case flows and services" (The Danish Government, Danish Regions, & Local Government Denmark, 2022, p. 21), these promises remain unattainable for many of those who rely most on welfare services. Scholarly work documents how public digital technologies often shift administrative responsibilities onto citizens themselves. Madsen et al. (2022) describe this as turning citizens into accidental caseworkers, where tasks once performed by trained caseworkers are delegated to individuals who may lack the necessary digital or administrative skills. This transfer of labor often exacerbates existing inequalities, disproportionately affecting people in vulnerable life situations who face significant barriers to digital literacy and access (ibid., 2021). Those able to manage these tasks are rewarded with efficiency and insight; those unable to do so risk sanctions or loss of benefits. This phenomenon is particularly acute in Denmark, where the rapid digital transformation of social security and healthcare services, while aiming for efficiency, has inadvertently created a "welfare turn" in civil society. This has led to increased reliance on civic organizations to bridge the digital divide for marginalized groups (Carreras et al., 2024; Grubb & Henriksen, 2018). Civil society actors are thus positioned not merely as advocates but as essential service providers, tasked with mitigating the exclusionary effects of digital-by-default welfare provisions (Grubb & Henriksen, 2018). Similar findings emerge in UK studies of digital-by-default welfare, where purported efficiency gains often come at the cost of increased friction for marginalized groups, deepening their exclusion from essential services (Zamani & Rousaki, 2024). CSOs such as food banks increasingly step in to help vulnerable groups navigate online applications for welfare support (Coles-Kemp et al., 2020; Morris et al., 2020). These dynamics place new demands on CSOs working with and for people in vulnerable life situations. They must both maintain the digital competence required to assist citizens effectively (Justesen & Plesner, 2024) and develop or acquire the digital systems and skills to navigate them internally. Many smaller CSOs struggle to meet these demands, as the prohibitive cost of IT systems and digital competencies presents a significant barrier. This challenge highlights a critical disparity between the idealized vision of digital inclusion and the practical realities faced by civil society organizations, which are increasingly burdened with compensating for the shortcomings of digital government services. At the same time, CSOs must follow the broader trend of digitalization within their own structures to remain relevant and effective. This creates a tension: while attempting to bridge the digital divide for others, CSOs themselves grapple with the digital transformation required to operate effectively in a digitized public sphere. Scholars from Science and Technology Studies (STS) and Human–Computer Interaction (HCI) have long warned that digitalization obscures the labor required to maintain infrastructures (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017; Star & Strauss, 1999). In the welfare context, this implies that the invisible

work of maintaining access is outsourced to families, volunteers, and CSOs—networks of care that are neither recognized nor compensated. Perceived efficiency gains for governmental bodies often translate into novel types of unstable labor for civil society organizations. Research across Europe shows how internet-based information and communication technologies (ICT) allow "many-to-many" communication, are loosening the centrality of traditional associations (Eimhjellen, 2014; Eimhjellen & Wollebæk, 2014; Lorentzen & Hustinx, 2007). The increased use of apps and digital systems across everyday life has also entered civil society in how organizations operate and communicate. There are a variety of platform opportunities, such as *Socialkompas*, which enables municipalities and volunteers to upload or find volunteer communities and activities, and *MinForening*, which allows associations to simplify administration by integrating activities, communication, tasks, member management, and payments in one system while also connecting with tools like MobilePay and accounting software. Large CSOs also develop their own platforms to organize volunteer engagement. For example, the Danish Red Cross' app *Røde Kors Parat* enables volunteers to register online and be mobilized for ad hoc, short-term tasks uploaded by community members in need of support. For digitally literate citizens, these tools offer unprecedented flexibility and immediacy. However, reliance on online registration risks excluding groups without digital access or skills. For CSOs working with people in vulnerable life situations, this exclusion is particularly significant: those most in need of support are often least able to participate in, or benefit from, digitally mediated models. This underscores the importance of organized social volunteer matchmaking programs, where employed or trained coordinators, what I term "match leaders", assume responsibility for registration, matching, and initiating volunteer activities. At the same time, studies reveal that digital platforms can help safeguard ethical boundaries. Grubb (2022) finds that structured, anonymized interactions in online tutoring programs prevent overly paternalistic dynamics, supporting more equitable relations between volunteers and clients. Similarly, Kneale et al. (2023) highlight how digital platforms facilitated rapid mobilization during the COVID-19 pandemic, ensuring continuity of support for vulnerable groups despite physical restrictions. Thus, digital platforms illustrate how digitalization reconfigures volunteering infrastructures: they provide scalability, efficiency, and visibility but also raise questions of sustainability, data ethics, and exclusion/inclusion (Godefroid et al., 2024). The research field on digitalization and civil society is rapidly expanding, encompassing work on online volunteering (Hine, 2024; Analyse & Tal, 2023), crisis mobilization (Carlsen & Toubøl, 2024; Bendixen & Sandberg, 2021), and digital welfare infrastructures (Andersen et al., 2025; Madsen et al., 2022).

In this thesis, I do not focus on digital volunteering as a field in itself. Instead, I investigate how digital infrastructures reorganize existing practices of social and health-related volunteering within primarily physical, place-based CSOs. Specifically, I analyze how digital tools for matching and coordination are introduced, negotiated, and embedded into everyday organizational life, as well as how these processes shape volunteering infrastructures with and for people in vulnerable life situations. By situating my analysis within this broader literature, I highlight both the promises and pitfalls of digitalization, its ability to create flexible and low-threshold entry points into volunteering, and its simultaneous potential to exclude those who are already marginalized. Understanding these dynamics is crucial to grasping how

contemporary infrastructures of volunteering are being reconfigured under the conditions of the digital welfare society.

Toward an Ethnography of Volunteering Infrastructures

From an ethnological perspective, the changing conditions of civil society and volunteering resonate with the discipline's long-standing concern for how people organize everyday life and strive for what is perceived as the good life (Damsholt & Jespersen, 2014; Jespersen, 2021; Löfgren, 2014). This has been explored across domains such as health and illness (Jespersen, 2021), work and life-modes (Højrup, 1983, Højrup & Nielsen, 2024), and home and temporality (Damsholt, 2020a, 2020b). A recurring ethnological interest across such studies has been to examine how material, institutional, or social practices and structures shape people's possibilities for participation, care, and belonging. And to show how everyday practices are organized in relation to broader structures of governance, welfare, and knowledge production. This ethnological lens offers a strong framework for analyzing how the digitalization of volunteering infrastructures reconfigures established modes of civic engagement and social support, particularly for populations in vulnerable life situations, by highlighting the intricate interplay between digital tools and human-centric care. Thus, even though ethnology has rarely taken volunteering or civil society as its central object of study, I find its perspectives on the mundane and the everyday practices of life as a productive entry point. Looking to migration and humanitarian studies, ethnology has more directly engaged with civil society. Research has illuminated how volunteers, civil society organizations, and public authorities intersect in the governance of migration; Sandberg and Bendixsen (2021) analyze the temporality of humanitarianism, showing how volunteer practices at Europe's borders are conditioned by humanitarian logics and border regimes. Similarly, Kohl et al. (2023) demonstrate how restrictive asylum and integration policies reshape volunteer engagement in Denmark, highlighting tensions between solidarity and state-imposed constraints. These studies underscore ethnology's potential to grasp the lived tensions of civil society through ethnographic fieldwork, especially at the intersection of humanitarianism, governance, and everyday organization. Despite such contributions, there is still little ethnologic research based on ethnographic fieldwork on how digital technologies are implemented, experienced, and negotiated within CSOs and in-depth accounts of how such systems are taken up in organizations working with vulnerable groups remain scarce in general. Questions persist about how digital tools reshape volunteer–recipient relationships, affect organizational workflows, and embed assumptions about care, competence, and inclusion. This dissertation contributes to this field by extending ethnology's analytical concern with the organization of everyday life into the study of civil society. Through an ethnographic case analysis of volunteering infrastructures in Denmark, it examines how digital technologies become embedded in practices of care, coordination, and participation. Instead of approaching digital volunteering as a separate phenomenon, the dissertation explores how processes of digitalization reorganize existing forms of volunteering and social engagement in civil society. In this way, it brings an new perspectives into civil society studies, while positioning social and health-related volunteering as a vital object of ethnological inquiry.
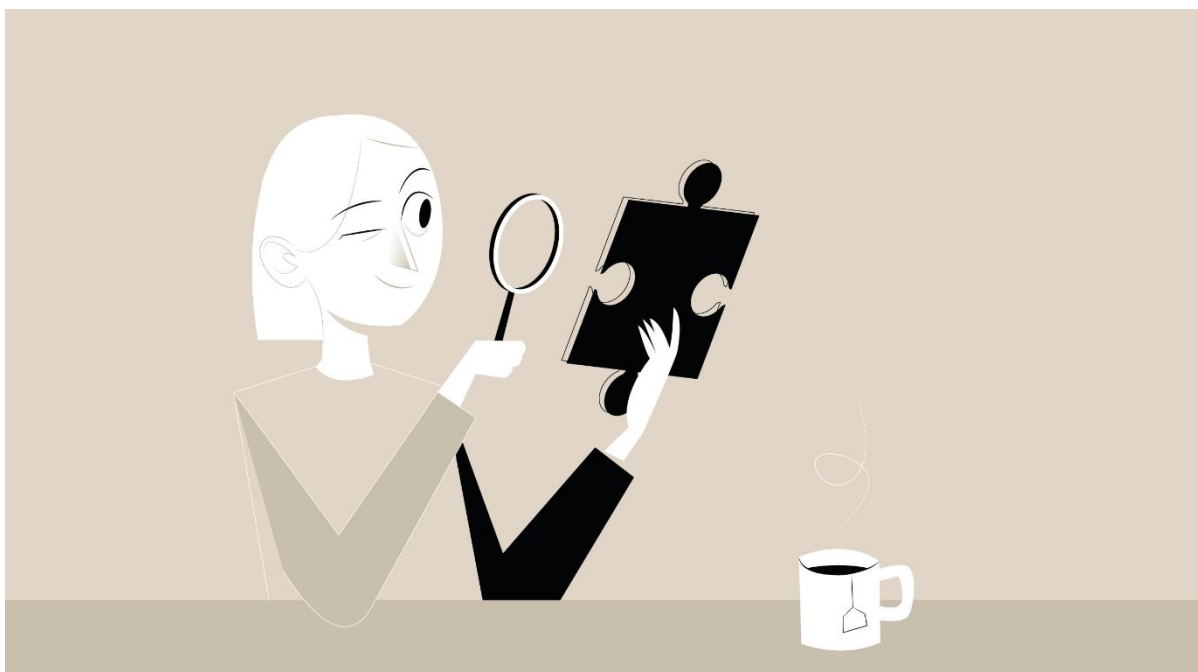
Illustrations of the infrastructures of volunteering: A match leader working. The illustration depicts a person holding a magnifying glass to examine a black puzzle piece.

3. Theory

The theoretical framework of this dissertation is deliberately eclectic. It does not draw from a single paradigm, but instead combines insights from pragmatism, ethnology, medical humanities, STS, and feminist and disability studies. These theoretical traditions serve as building blocks to analyze volunteering infrastructures through ethnographic methods and to conceptualize them with the analytical figure of careful arrangements. Together, these approaches enable me to analyze how volunteering infrastructures are enacted in mundane practices, shaped by technologies and suffused with affective, ethical, and political dimensions of care.

Pragmatism and Abductive Dialogue with Empirical Material

In this thesis, I adopt a pragmatist epistemological stance (Dewey, 1925; Peirce, 1931–1958), which emphasizes knowledge as provisional, relational, and oriented toward consequences in practice. Rather than pursuing universal truths, pragmatism situates inquiry in concrete problems and highlights dialogue between theory and empirical material (Carlsen & Mantere, 2007; Mol, 2002). Knowledge, from this perspective, is generated through experience and continuously reshaped in interaction with the world. The researcher and the researched are part of the same relational dynamic, where reality, less than being discovered as an objective fact, is constructed through situated practices and interpretations (Carlsen & Mantere, 2007; Creswell, 2013). Methodologically, pragmatism prioritizes the research problem over strict allegiance to any single method. It permits methodological pluralism, combining techniques that best fit the inquiry at hand. Rigor, from this perspective, is not secured by pursuing a

universal definition of truth but by reflexivity, dialogue, and the continual return of theoretical insights into practice (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). This abductive engagement (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012) is intertwined with fieldwork and unfolded in practice as an ongoing dialogue between conceptual frameworks and empirical encounters. In my research, theorizing and analyzing were thus inseparable from the ethnographic process: what fieldwork "gave" often became the very ground for conceptual elaboration. Thus, my use of theory is linked to my approach to ethnography as a practice where analysis is inseparable from fieldwork. As Ballestero and Winthereik (2021, p. 3) put it in their book "Experimenting with Ethnography":

> *"...analysis is a creative and organized process of generating insights. It is a process that can be full of space for imaginative thinking while resolutely grounded in a distinct understanding of empirics that is thoroughly ethnographic. In our rendering, analysis is a practice by which we can intensify the conceptual creativity and relational commitments that sit at the core of ethnography in its best forms."*

In this spirit, I treat ethnography as an experimental and relational practice of immersion, where empirical encounters and conceptual elaborations continually shape one another. This was particularly visible in the development of the analysis for the three articles. In the first (Bygballe & Jespersen, 2023), attention to the everyday practices of volunteering that sustained the relationship between two matched people drove me to think about infrastructures as forms of care. In the second (Bygballe, Elgaard Jensen, & Jespersen, forthcoming), the frictions provoked by IT implementation not only disrupted established practices but also opened up space for analyzing how socio-technical arrangements reorganize care work connecting to diverse ordering projects. In the third (Bygballe, forthcoming), tensions between competing temporalities in voluntary organizations drew my attention, pushing me to conceptualize how such tensions are negotiated in everyday practice and their effect on volunteering matchmaking programs. Across these studies, empirical moments of disruption, friction, and negotiation became starting points for theorizing careful arrangements as an analytical figure, capturing the way infrastructures of volunteering are continuously created, held together, and recalibrated through socio-technical practices in and across CSOs.

Science and Technology Studies (STS) and Actor–Network Theory (ANT)

Science and Technology Studies (STS) is a broad, interdisciplinary field that investigates how scientific knowledge and technological systems are shaped by—and simultaneously reshape—societal, political, and cultural contexts (Langstrup & Vikkelsø, 2014, pp. 383–384; Elgaard Jensen, 2020, pp. 89–116). STS scholars have shown how technologies are never neutral tools but sociotechnical arrangements that embody values, distribute responsibilities, and reconfigure everyday practices (Bijker et al., 1987; Winner, 1986).

Within this diverse field, Actor–Network Theory (ANT) represents a particularly influential approach. Developed in the late 1970s and 1980s by Bruno Latour, Michel Callon, and

colleagues at the Centre for the Sociology of Innovation in Paris, ANT insists on treating humans and nonhumans symmetrically, tracing how their relations give rise to agency (Akrich, 2023; Birkbak, 2025; Law, 1992). Rather than offering a fixed theoretical framework, ANT advances what John Law (2008) has called an empirical philosophy, urging researchers to follow associations in practice and to show how heterogeneous assemblages are stabilized, disrupted, and transformed (Latour, 2005; Mol, 2002; Vikkelsø, 2007). In this sense, ANT is both an analytic sensibility and a methodological intervention: it slows down analysis to resist neat separations between the social and the technical, highlighting instead how these are always co-constituted (Callon, 1986a; Stengers, 2005). It is within this broader STS tradition, and in dialogue with ANT's relational commitments, that I find the most sustained theoretical inspiration for my dissertation. In particular, I build on the work of Susan Leigh Star, who is not an ANT scholar as such, but whose studies of infrastructure have been foundational in STS and resonate strongly with ANT sensibilities. Star's insistence on examining infrastructures as relational, dynamic, and often invisible arrangements provides a crucial entry point for analyzing how digital systems in civil society organizations are lived, maintained, and sometimes contested in practice (Star, 1999; Star, 2002; Star & Ruhleder, 1996**).** I turn to the following quote of hers, which captures this perspective well:

> *"People commonly envision infrastructure as a system of substrates—railroad lines, pipes and plumbing, electrical power plants, and wires. It is by definition invisible, part of the background for other kinds of work. It is ready-to-hand. This image holds up well enough for many purposes—turn on the faucet for a drink of water and you use a vast infrastructure of plumbing and water regulation without usually thinking much about it. The image becomes more complicated when one begins to investigate large-scale technical systems in the making, or to examine the situations of those who are not served by a particular infrastructure. For a railroad engineer, the rails are not infrastructure but topic. For the person in a wheelchair, the stairs and door-jamb in front of a building are not seamless subtenders of use, but barriers (Star, 1991). One person's infrastructure is another's topic, or difficulty. As Star and Ruhleder (1996) put it, infrastructure is a fundamentally relational concept, becoming real infrastructure in relation to organized practices…"* (Star, 1999, p. 380).

This conceptualization of infrastructure has had a profound effect on my thesis. The invitation to examine infrastructure not as a static or technical backdrop but as a dynamic, relational, and often invisible system has deeply shaped how I approach the digital transformation of volunteer coordination (Star & Ruhleder, 1996). In the context of CSOs, infrastructures are not only digital platforms but also encompass routines, policies, emotions, and relational practices that make volunteer matchmaking possible. Star's insistence on studying infrastructure through its points of friction, when systems break down, when categories fail, or when users must improvise, resonates strongly with my ethnographic encounters. Whether in the form of system bugs, administrative bottlenecks, or shadow practices by match leaders, these moments of disruption revealed the hidden labor and values embedded in digital technologies. This framing has been essential to understanding digitization of volunteer work as an infrastructural practice, composed not only of computers, software, and standard guides but of people, judgment, and

relational labor. In the context of volunteering, the introduction of digital systems makes certain forms of labor hyper-visible (e.g., data entry) while concealing others (e.g., relational and affective work). As Star notes, *"invisible work is what makes visible work possible"* (Star, 1999, p. 385). Her work also sensitized me to the ethical and organizational stakes involved in standardizing volunteering practices through technology and to remain attuned to what remains invisible or taken for granted when working with digital systems. In this manner, Star's perspective focused my attention on marginality, maintenance, and the practical politics of the everyday infrastructures of volunteering. It enabled me to trace how CSOs navigate, shape, and use technological systems to provide care for their target group through situated, often improvised arrangements. Thus, especially led by Star, this dissertation is grounded in STS and its sub-field of ANT, which together enable me to conceptualize infrastructures as relational and performative.

Rather than treating IT systems as neutral tools, I follow Latour (1993), Law (1993), and de Laet & Mol (2000) in examining how technologies configure practices, redistribute responsibilities, and embody values. I connect my understanding of infrastructures to the metaphor of textures of practice, which highlights how work is woven together from heterogeneous human and non-human elements—human, technical, and organizational actors. This framing enables me to analyze volunteering not as a stable institution but as an ongoing process of organizing (Law, 1993). When the term *organizing* was introduced (Weick, 1979), it marked a shift from a sociology of nouns to a sociology of verbs (Law, 1994). Instead of treating organizations as fixed entities, it emphasized *organizing* as situated, pragmatic doing, where formal and informal practices are entangled and mutually constitutive. This resonates with de Laet's & Mol's (2000) concept of *fluid technologies*, which adapt across contexts. In my research, the development of the IT system for volunteer matchmaking programs was never static but continually reshaped by its users and institutional settings. It functioned as a boundary object; *"plastic enough to adapt to local needs… yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites"* (Star & Griesemer, 1989, p. 393). Connecting these theoretical understanding with STS-informed care theories extend it further: Mol et al. (2010, p. 13) describe care as *"persistent tinkering in a world full of complex ambivalence and shifting tensions",* while Pols (2019) also shows how technologies can mediate care or even become objects of care. In addition, with a focus on care robotics, Lipp (2023) argues that people increasingly need to care for the care technologies that we engage with through infrastructural maintenance as part of everyday work:

> *"..that robotics is not merely the modernist, rationalizing demon but rather itself in need of careful attention and support. Conversely, care is not solely about humanness but needs to be re-directed (partly) towards caring for the nonhuman and, more specifically, the robotic as well".* (p. 621).

These ideas emphasize the adaptability and labor required to integrate technology into relational, human-centered practices. This analytical stance also connects to Winner's (1986) argument that artifacts have politics, using the example of Robert Moses' low bridges in New York that illustrates how infrastructural design encodes values and exclusions. By deliberately

building highway overpasses too low for buses to pass from underneath, Moses effectively prevented people who relied on public transport, often poorer and racialized communities, from accessing the beaches and suburbs. In other words, the bridges themselves became political devices that shaped who could go where, privileging car owners while excluding those without. Star (1999, pp. 388–389) makes a similar point in describing how "bridges and barriers" built into infrastructures determine accessibility, depending on one's position and resources. I bring these insights into my analysis of how volunteer infrastructures are not neutral but also made up by priorities, exclusions/inclusion mechanisms, and values.

I also found inspiration for this way of thinking about infrastructures in other fields, notably in migration studies. Xiang and Lindquist (2014) conceptualize *migration infrastructures* as constellations of human and non-human actors that both enable and constrain mobility. They draw on Latour's reminder that it is inaccurate to attribute action to isolated individuals:

> *"It is inaccurate to say that an airplane or a pilot flies. Flying is a property of the whole association of entities that includes airports and planes, launch pads and ticket counters. B-52s do not fly, the U.S. Air Force flies."* (Latour, 1999, p. 182)

Similarly, migration is not enacted by people who migrate alone but by infrastructures that include recruitment agencies, transportation systems, bureaucratic paperwork, legislations, technologies, and informal social networks. Whyte et al. (2020) extend this perspective in their study of asylum, analyzing the paradoxical infrastructures of tent camps in Denmark as both enabling temporary shelter and reproducing forms of exclusion.

These perspectives resonate with my own analysis, where volunteering is not simply enacted by the volunteer or the person in need of support, but emerges from infrastructures such as constellations of IT systems, digital tools, project leads, match leaders registration forms, telephones, policies, cultural practices and values that all together enables volunteer matchmaking programs. In this sense, studying volunteering infrastructures implies paying attention to both the bridges and the barriers they create; how they enable participation for some while excluding or complicating it for others. Taken together, the STS and ANT perspectives complement my ethnological sensibility to the overlooked and mundane aspects of life and the disruptions to everyday life, while STS provides analytical tools for conceptualizing these practices as relational and infrastructural. Together, they enable me to study how the infrastructures of volunteering are continuously enacted, negotiated, and repaired in practice.

Feminist theory and Disability Studies: Care, Vulnerability, and Interdependence

> *"While not all people need others' assistance at all times, it is part of the human condition that our autonomy occurs only after a period of dependence, and that in many regards, we remain dependent upon others throughout our lives" (*Joan Tronto, 1993, p. 162).

Tronto's reminder highlights a fundamental condition of human life: that we are always interdependent. Interdependency is both a matter of personal relations as well as a matter of infrastructures that shape, sustain or undermine it Therefore, autonomy and vulnerability are not simply individual attributes but relational effects of the structures, technologies, and support systems that surround us. When infrastructures work, they sustain independence and participation; when they falter or exclude, they create and intensify vulnerability. This perspective is crucial for this thesis. It enables me to approach volunteering not as an encounter between two isolated individuals, but as something enacted in and through infrastructures of interdependence. In CSOs, the design, maintenance, and disruption of infrastructures—digital platforms, routines, policies, and relational practices—directly shape how people in vulnerable life situations are supported and included. Therefore, drawing upon feminist and disability scholarship (Hamraie & Fritsch, 2019; Mackenzie, 2019), I acknowledge how humans are inherently embedded in relations of care, both with each other and with the infrastructures that organize social life. This stance resonates with the pragmatist and ethnological traditions outlined earlier: rather than seeing care as a private virtue, it is understood as a collective, socio-material practice that runs through everyday routines and infrastructures. This perspective is also central in feminist and disability studies, which have long emphasized interdependence as a counterpoint to ideals of individual autonomy. These fields highlight how vulnerability and dependency are not personal deficits but conditions shaped by social, political, and material arrangements. Tronto's (1993) ethic of care, Haraway's (1988) situated knowledges, highlight the importance of context, relationality, and embodied knowledge. Drawing on these perspectives, this study examines how care and interdependence are negotiated in times of increased digitization. These perspectives provide tools for analyzing how technological systems distribute agency, visibility, and responsibility, which can effect and shape whose needs are recognized and whose are neglected.

In line with Mol et al. (2010) and Pols (2019), Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) extend the discussion of care and the work it entails into a feminist STS framework by treating care not as a private and apolitical matter but as a relational, ethical, and political practice that is always contextual situated. She argue how care and care work have been associated with reproduction and domestic life, often regarded as beyond the realm of politics. She unpacks these assumptions, showing how care work continues to be ethically and politically neglected. Care workers are frequently moralized for allegedly having lost a "natural" capacity for care, and the work itself remains chronically undervalued and underpaid (p. 206). Her approach is not to reclaim care as a universal moral ideal but to reframe it as a situated and relational necessity. As she writes, *"Care is a necessary activity, but its specific expression is always relationally conditioned"* (Ibid, 2017, p. 163). In *Matters of Care*, Puig de la Bellacasa investigates how care manifests in everyday life as unavoidable material and relational doings, aimed at *"maintaining, continuing, and repairing the world so that we can live in it as well as possible"* (p. 3, drawing on Tronto, 1993). This perspective opens infrastructures themselves as matters of care. Infrastructures, whether technical, bureaucratic, or organizational, are sustained not only by formal operations but also by an ongoing manifold of invisible practices that preserve and repair them.

In the context of CSOs, this implies that care cannot be confined to the face-to-face encounter between a volunteer and a person in need of support. Rather, care is woven into administrative routines, the use and maintenance of IT systems, and the daily coordination work of e.g. match leaders that hold volunteer practices together in social volunteer matchmaking programs. Thus, non-human actors, such as software platforms, telephones, note books, educational training materials and other technologies, also participate in shaping and distributing care. This has been a central concern throughout the thesis and is particularly salient in the collaborative EMOVE project: to explore whether and how an IT system could itself be caring or at least be designed in ways that support caring practices rather than obstruct them.

Following Puig de la Bellacasa, I approach volunteering infrastructures as practices of care: relational, distributed, and materially embedded activities that are indispensable for sustaining volunteer participation. However, infrastructures are never harmonious. They are sites where different practices of care collide, compete, or pull in divergent directions, reflecting distinct matters of concern (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2011; Latour, 2004). It is in this space of friction that I introduce the notion of careful arrangements. Drawing on pragmatist epistemology, this concept emphasizes how knowledge and practices are continuously recalibrated in response to situated problems. From ethnology, it inherits an attentiveness to the everyday routines and material supports that organize the conditions of care and "the good life." From STS and ANT, it takes the insight that infrastructures are relational and performative; configurations of human and nonhuman actors that must constantly be maintained. And from feminist and disability studies, it foregrounds interdependence and the invisible labor of care as political and ethical stakes. Careful arrangements thus name the provisional assemblages of people, technologies, policies, and values that hold volunteering together in practice. They highlight both the socio-material and affective dimensions of organizing social volunteer matchmaking activities: matching people, negotiating contracts and funding, maintaining digital platforms, and sustaining relationships through attentiveness and discretion. They are "careful" in at least two senses: because they require ongoing maintenance and repair, and because they foreground the ethical responsibility of how care, labor, and inclusion are distributed. This lens also brings together the analyses developed in the three articles. The first article shows how the quiet, often invisible work of creating and sustaining social relations for both volunteers and CSO exemplifies careful arrangements in practice. The second article demonstrates how IT systems, rather than simply replacing existing routines, generate new frictions that require reconfiguration and negotiations of ways of organizing. The third article highlights how temporal tensions between acceleration and the need for slow, relational care demand careful arrangements in order to succeed with social volunteer matchmaking for people in vulnerable life situations. Across these cases, careful arrangements capture how volunteering infrastructures are not stable systems but in flux. By conceptualizing infrastructures of volunteering as careful arrangements, I connect ethnographic detail to broader debates in STS, feminist theory, and civil society studies. More importantly, this notion offers an analytical lens for grasping how digitalization and professionalization simultaneously enable and constrain volunteering, surfacing invisible work and redistributing care responsibilities. Careful arrangements, in this sense, illuminate the negotiations, frictions, and recalibrations through which volunteering is made possible in contemporary civil society.

Illustrations of the infrastructures of volunteering: CSOs supporting and facilitating social volunteer matchmaking activities. This illustration depicts three individuals interacting.

4. Methodology

Locating Field Sites

The ethnographic material on which this thesis is based is multi-sited and layered, comprising participant observations, semi-structured interviews, workshops, focus groups, document analysis, and a broad range of collaborative activities carried out between 2020 and 2025 across two collaborative research projects: *Volunteering for All Seniors* and *Enabling the Matching of Volunteers* (EMOVE) as well as my engagement in the *Network for Visiting Services.* In the following I describe how these three ended up being my three sites for doing an ethnography of the infrastructures of social volunteering.

> *"Over a two-week period, I call Ingrid (a volunteer senior) several times to arrange a meeting. She coordinates with Milena (a volunteer with migrant background) to find a time that suits all of us all. I spend a good deal of time explaining what the visit is about and repeating who I am and where I'm coming from. Ingrid seems mentally sharp, but there are moments when she stops mid-sentence, either losing her train of thought or becoming uncertain. We agree that I will visit her at home, and that Milena will be present as well.*
>
> *On the day, a small detour and a wrong house number make me arrive a few minutes late. Ingrid is waiting outside, waving, and points me to a parking spot. Inside, she tells me I can keep my shoes on, but I take them off anyway. Milena stands between the sofa*

and dining table, hands neatly folded. She explains they waited for me to decide where we should sit — a small moment that hints at the attentiveness, and perhaps uncertainty, with which this double-interview is approached. We settle on the sofa. Ingrid, who has not yet set the table, moves slowly to gather cups, plates, and a small milk jug. Milena and I offer to help, but Ingrid prefers to do it herself. She serves coffee and cream puffs, explaining she is "a bit slow these days" after only recently "getting her arms back" following a fall that left both broken and in slings for months. She recalls the "highway of homecare workers" who came and went during that time, all wearing face shields — pointing to mine with a smile.

From the outside, Ingrid and Milena's match looks like a straightforward success: two people meeting weekly for over a year, both describing the relationship as mutually rewarding. But later, when I speak to the Together Across volunteer coordinator who facilitated their match, she describes the lengthy work that went into preparing them: multiple phone calls before the first meeting, explaining the program, answering questions, checking in after first visits, and offering guidance when either side felt unsure. Concluding by adding: "And they are some of the easy ones."

(Fieldnotes from double interview with matched pair, Together Across, 2020)

While the overall research design for the PhD was primarily anchored in my engagement with the EMOVE project, significant aspects of my approach emerged during a short-term, accompanying research project for *Volunteering for All Seniors* in 2020–2021, in which I followed a social volunteer match program for Danish senior citizens and foreigners by the association Together Across (formerly Elderlearn). At the outset, my focus was on the relationships between volunteers and participants (in this initiative both part are addressed as volunteers), how matches were formed, sustained, and experienced over time and how to ensure the quality of the volunteer service while the CSO was scaling. However, as I began my engagement with the field, my attention was repeatedly drawn to the work that happened before, after, and alongside these encounters. What began as a study of interpersonal dynamics gradually revealed itself as an entry point into a complex socio-technical infrastructure: the organizational routines, technical systems, and interpersonal negotiations and emotional preparation that underpin volunteer matches. The field note and conversation that open up this chapter crystallized something I had only begun to get a sense of at that point; that what appears to be a simple, self-sustaining volunteer relationship, often promoted as something "everyone can do," is in fact built on layers of organizational, technical, and relational work from the volunteers, the target group, and the organization behind it. Beginning at this early stage of the research, this perspective of the often invisible infrastructure emerged and ended up shaping the design for this thesis. I began to actively seek out multiple vantage points from which to study these infrastructures—not only the somewhat obvious *frontstage* of people participating in volunteer activities but also the backstage processes of preparing, sustaining, and, occasionally, dissolving matches; of collecting, storing, and interpreting information; and of balancing personal care of a target group with organizational protocols and the motivations of the volunteers.

This evolving approach ultimately brought me to the following three main field sites:
Together Across, where, as part of the Volunteering for All Seniors accompanying research, I followed matched pairs and explored how project coordinators and match leaders supported these relationships during their upscaling from Copenhagen-based to national wide. The EMOVE Project, a collaborative development and research project aiming at co-creating a tailored IT system for three NGOs, while generating knowledge regarding digitalizing social volunteer matchmaking programs. The Network for Visiting Services, a national peer-forum where organizations exchange knowledge, troubleshoot shared challenges, and discuss collective concerns regarding the future of volunteer-based care. This multi-sited fieldwork design reflects the aim of making an ethnography of volunteering infrastructures by not focusing only on one site. Across these sites, it was often during the seemingly ordinary encounters: scheduling calls, follow-up check-ins, IT system demonstrations, or agenda-setting discussions in network meetings, that the backstage infrastructures of care-oriented volunteering became visible.

Methodological Positioning

"One does not end up in Bolgatanga by pure accident. One does not begin the exploratory phase of research with a completely open mind. [...] But only by shuttling between larger theoretical questions and detailed observations can we institute the problem and explain it. It is the movement between them and their articulation that produces epiphanies and analytical knowledge." (Lund, 2014, p.231)

Lund's words resonate deeply with my own trajectory in this research. My "case" was not selected in a single decisive moment, but it emerged through an iterative process of following the field, refining questions, and reorienting my gaze as new empirical textures revealed themselves. The accompanying research began as an opportunity to observe a single volunteer program, but it opened my eyes to the infrastructural labor that makes relational volunteering possible. The EMOVE project and the Network for Visiting Services then became the arenas in which I could trace these infrastructures across multiple organizations, follow their translation into digital systems, and observe the everyday negotiations that sustain them. This methodological stance draws on situated ethnography (Haraway, 1988; Suchman, 2007), recognizing that all knowledge is produced from a particular location and is shaped by the researcher's position in relation to the people and processes studied. My position was one of embedded collaboration: present not only as an observer but often as a participant in workshops, IT development meetings, and network gatherings. These roles gave me access to both the frontstage—the visible, celebrated volunteer "success stories"—and the backstage (Goffman, 1959), where the work of coordination, negotiation, and infrastructural care unfolds. I also work in accordance with the concept of ethnographic composition (O'Dell & Willim, 2011), which treats ethnography as a layering and remixing of heterogeneous materials: participant observations, semi-structured interviews, internal documents, system walk-throughs, and moments such as the coffee-table negotiation in Ingrid's living room. Rather than

smoothing over the inevitable interruptions, contradictions, and gaps of long-term, multisite research, I follow feminist STS and care studies in embracing messiness, partiality, and co-production (Mol et al., 2010). Instead of seeing the field as a static object to be mapped, I see it as a dynamic, relational process. This orientation draws on methodological and analytical strategies I have unfolded in-depth with colleagues in the article Engaged Medical Humanities – A Framework for Knowledge Production in Research Collaborations (see appendix article, Folker et al. 2025), including an emphasis on empirical sensitivity, collaborative knowledge-making, and responsiveness to complexity. Like other scholars working at the intersection of ethnography, feminist STS, and care studies (Haraway, 1988; Mol et al., 2010; Suchman, 2007), I treat the small, often mundane details of practice as sites where the politics of care and coordination are revealed. This involves "staying with the trouble" (Haraway, 2016), resisting the temptation to reduce fieldwork to neatly defined inputs and outputs and, instead, tracing how relationships, infrastructures, and responsibilities unfold over time. A central principle in the Engaged Medical Humanities framework that I draw on here is the refusal of the false binary between "applied" and "theoretical" research. In my research, conceptual insights emerged through "doing"; sitting in living rooms, shadowing match leaders as they navigated phone calls and data entries, and joining discussions where IT functions were debated and redesigned. Infrastructures in this sense, were embodied and situated practices that I witnessed, participated in, and occasionally helped to adjust (O'Dell & Willim, 2011). Finally, following approaches to collaboration that foreground negotiated accountabilities (Davies et al., 2016; Folker et al., 2025), I understand engagement with societal partners as inherently nonlinear. Priorities shift, expertise is distributed unevenly, and organizational change generates new tensions. As part of my methodological positioning, I tried to attends to these dynamics, centering the often-overlooked backstage of volunteer coordination, and resisting the instrumentalization of ethnography as a mere "needs-identification" tool. This implies holding onto the frictions, ambivalences, and improvisations that shape and sometimes limit the scope of care-oriented volunteering. Thus, the multi-sited design enabled me to follow the infrastructures of volunteer matchmaking across organizational, technical, and network contexts.

Fieldwork Design – a focus on social volunteer matchmaking programs

A shared key characteristic of my field sites is their engagement in social volunteer matchmaking programs. These programs focus on pairing volunteers with specific target groups based on compatibility, fostering social interactions, and providing care to individuals in vulnerable life situations. Compatibility is typically determined by a combination of practical considerations, such as proximity or availability, and personal preferences, such as shared interests or hobbies. For certain target groups, additional factors must be considered, for example, when matching individuals with dementia, it is important to understand the type of dementia they have and the stage of its progression. Similarly, in mentorship programs, factors such as professional experience within a specific field or the language level of people with a migrant background when searching for a Danish senior to match with are important.

While this thesis only represents a small subset of the broader field of matchmaking in Denmark (Pedersen, 2023), most such programs in civil society share the focus of providing care for people in vulnerable life situations through social interactions. The success of these matched pairs hinges on the quality of the match, the ability of the match to establish a social relationship, and the organizational capacity to provide ongoing support to ensure that the relationships continue to function smoothly over time (See Article 1: Bygballe and Jespersen, 2023). Thus, the organizational involvement continues beyond initial pairing, as management and intervention are often necessary to ensure a successful match (ibid.). The matchmaking process typically begins with an automated screening phase, where people fill out forms or questionnaires to provide initial information. Volunteers are usually asked about their availability, interests, skills, prior experiences, and motivations for engaging in social work, and in some cases they are also required to provide a clean criminal record certificate. Target groups, by contrast, provide information about special needs, everyday challenges, and expectations for the kind of support they would like. The exact type of information collected depends on the focus and activities of the specific CSO. This is followed by personalized assessments, often in the form of interviews, thereby enabling match leaders to obtain a picture of the individuals and their specific needs. While the details of this process vary across organizations, certain principles remain the same: good matchmaking requires expertise and relies on the math leader's ability to get a deep understanding of the individual circumstances of both volunteers and target group. Thus, I argue that matchmaking is indeed a form of care work, albeit one very much mediated through the materiality of IT systems, phone calls and emails, and often lack the face-to-face contact synonymous with other types of traditional welfare care work. In this process, digitals platforms often play a big and multifaceted role. They facilitates coordination and documentation, and match leaders rely on the systems to document interactions, maintain participant profiles, and support the relationships through regular reminders send out through email and text messages.

Field Site 1: Together Across—Accompanying Research in the "Volunteering for All Senior Citizens" Project

By 2020–2021, Together Across (formerly Elderlearn) had expanded from a Copenhagen-based initiative to an organization with matches in over 70 municipalities. This rapid scaling opened up new opportunities but also posed a critical challenge: how to ensure that even senior citizens in vulnerable life situations such as frail health, limited mobility could participate meaningfully in the program when project coordinators were no longer physically present at the first meeting as they used to do.

The Project and fieldwork

My fieldwork at Together Across formed part of the *Volunteering for All Senior Citizens* project, a collaboration between the Copenhagen Centre for Health Research in the Humanities

(CoRe), Danish Seniors, and Together Across, funded by Nordea-fonden[8]. The project's aim was to examine and strengthen ways of making volunteering accessible to a broader range of senior citizens, particularly those in vulnerable situations, at a time when the program was undergoing national expansion. The accompanying research was conducted by me and a research assistant. The analysis of the empirical material was conducted in close collaboration between the two of us and the project's PI, Astrid Jespersen. Throughout the fieldwork, we provided ongoing feedback to Together Across, discussing emerging findings with project coordinators and leadership so that they could apply the insights during the upscaling process—for example, by refining preparatory communication, adapting matching procedures, and tailoring support materials for participants with specific needs. This included the development of a conversation game to help matches initiate dialogue, as well as guidance on how to bring a match to a close in a considerate way, so that both the senior citizen and the person with a migrant background felt confident in engaging in new volunteer activities with others at a later stage. The work culminated in a final report (See appendix 3, Bygballe et al., 2022), which outlined the implications of scaling for the program and identified key focus points for sustaining quality in the expansion process. These included the importance of maintaining personal contact during onboarding, safeguarding flexibility for participants with varying capacities, and ensuring that infrastructural tools supported rather than constrained relational work.

Methods and Empirical Material

The empirical material consisted of the following elements:
Sixty-one semi-structured interviews

Matched pairs: Six double interviews (five in-person, one online) and forty-nine individual interviews (one in-person, forty-eight online or by phone) with twenty-one matched pairs (twenty-one senior citizen volunteers and twenty-one newcomers). Interviews explored expectations, early experiences, and relationship development over time. Where possible, pairs were interviewed twice—shortly after the first meeting and again one or two months later.

Municipal stakeholders: Six expert interviews (60–120 minutes) were conducted with staff from four municipalities, including leaders in Elderly Care Services, project managers in Health and Care Services, preventive home visit coordinators, social and health care assistants, and a physiotherapist. These provided insights into how municipalities locally integrated and supported the program.

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[8] Volunteering for All Senior Citizens**: https://core.ku.dk/forskning/frivillighed-til-alle-aeldre/**

Six participant observations of matched pairs meeting in their homes or in public spaces. These encounters provided contextual detail regarding how participants structured their time together, navigated language learning, and negotiated cultural and generational differences.

The fieldwork took place during the final phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. Because many participants were elderly and a few were frail, a significant proportion of interviews were conducted online or by telephone rather than in person. This methodological adaptation not only minimized health risks but also revealed how different modes of communication shaped the quality of interaction and the match leader's ability to remotely support matches.

During one of the in-person double interviews with a Together Across match, I photographed the table between us: coffee cups, cake plates, and neatly folded napkins (see photo). This was not an isolated scene. Across several visits, I encountered similar "coffee tables"—

Photo from in-person double interview showing coffee cups, cake plates, cake, napkins and two people sitting next to each other. .

arrangements of cups, snacks, and table settings that, while seemingly mundane, formed part of the social choreography of volunteer meetings. In the analysis, this recurring scene became more than just a cultural marker of Danish hospitality; it emerged as an *infrastructural element* in its own right. The preparation and sharing of coffee and cake created a structured, familiar frame for what might otherwise be an uncertain or awkward encounter between strangers. It signaled care, reciprocity, and effort on the part of the host while also providing both parties something tangible to "do" together, easing the conversational flow and offering a rhythm to the meeting.

Methodologically, moments like these illustrate the importance of attending to the *material and embodied dimensions* of volunteer encounters—the gestures, settings, and objects that shape interaction alongside verbal exchanges. Analytically, they pushed me to understand what can be termed hospitality infrastructures which we describe in *Article 1* of this thesis (Bygballe & Jespersen, 2023). There, the "coffee table" became a key example of how relational volunteer work is scaffolded by small but repeated practices and arrangements, which enable trust-building and the development of sociality over time. This link between an everyday material practice and the sustaining of a match demonstrates how ethnographic fieldnotes, photographs, and interview contexts can work together to surface the often-overlooked infrastructures that underpin care-oriented volunteering. This field site provided my first sustained insight into volunteering infrastructures. The mutuality of the Together Across model—both parties as volunteers—was evident, but so was the complexity of sustaining such relationships at scale. I observed how successful matches depended on careful behind-the-scenes work: compatibility assessments, preparatory calls, targeted guidance, and follow-up interventions. By working in close collaboration with the organization during its national expansion, and analyzing the data with my research assistant and PI, I was able to see how research could actively shape practice in real time. The findings from this site directly informed my PhD's core argument that matchmaking is a form of care work—deeply embedded in sociotechnical systems—and that the quality of this work rests on infrastructures that are often invisible in celebratory accounts of volunteering.

Field Site 2: EMOVE Project—Participatory Research with Three CSOs and IT Developers

The EMOVE project (2021-2024) emerged from the ongoing discussions, frustrations, and transformations shaping the work of volunteer organizations in current civil society, which I addressed in the *Introduction* and develop further in the *State of the Art*. These shifts are particularly visible in CSOs that support people in vulnerable life situations, where they must navigate the combined pressures of regulatory expansion, shifting funding priorities, and demands for standardized reporting from municipalities and funders. Added to this are the challenges of digitalization: adopting GDPR-compliant tools, meeting increasingly formalized documentation requirements, and integrating technical systems that often sit uneasily alongside the relational and situational nature of care-oriented volunteering. Against this backdrop, the project called Enabling the Matchmaking of Volunteers (EMOVE) was established. Funded by Innovation Fund Denmark, EMOVE brought together researchers from the Copenhagen Centre for Health Research in the Humanities (CoRe) at the University of Copenhagen, the Techno-Anthropology Lab (TANTlab) at Aalborg University, and Kople ApS, a private developer of software for the volunteer sector, in collaboration with three national CSOs: the Alzheimer Association, Association Together Across (formerly Elderlearn), and Association Equal Access (formerly Foreningen Nydanskere). From its inception, EMOVE was designed as a research and development project with two intertwined aims: To utilize ethnographic methods to generate situated knowledge regarding the practical challenges of running relationship-based

volunteer programs through an IT system. And to co-design a GDPR-compliant, scalable IT system (developed by and named Kople) that could support and document these sensitive, complex matching processes. The research teams and I followed the development of the IT system from the very start and took part in the implementation process and the ongoing development process of designing an IT system suitable for the work of the CSOs. Before going through the EMOVE projects research and development process, I introduce the CSO involved in more detail, who all ran social volunteer matchmaking programs based on one-on-one meetings between people.

The Alzheimer Association (AA): "Activity Friends"

AA is a national organization dedicated to improving the quality of life for people living with dementia and their relatives. It operates through a central headquarters in Copenhagen and 13 local branches across Denmark. Within EMOVE, their core activity was the *Aktivitetsvenner* ("activity friends") program: pairing volunteers with people with dementia for shared leisure activities, such as walking, visiting a café, playing music, or attending cultural events. Unlike more task-oriented volunteering, "Activity Friends" require a high degree of flexibility and sensitivity. The progression and type of dementia significantly shape what activities are possible, how long they can last in doing the activity, and how communication unfolds. In my observations, match leaders often engaged in delicate conversations with relatives, balancing the desire for meaningful engagement with the need for safety, predictability, and respite for caregivers. Thus, the logistical challenges are substantial: volunteers are matched not only by proximity and interests but also by personality, communication style, and the participant's current cognitive abilities. Match leaders emphasized that a "good match" often depended on subtle knowledge—for example, whether a person still enjoyed large social spaces or now found them overwhelming or how their mood typically fluctuated across the day. To ensure that volunteers are well prepared for this work, AA requires all new volunteers to complete both an introductory course and a dedicated dementia information meeting before being matched. The same requirement applies to volunteer match leaders. These training sessions cover communication strategies, activity adaptation, and understanding the lived realities of dementia, thereby highlighting the organization's commitment to ensuring that volunteers are not only willing but also qualified and skilled to work with people living with dementia. From an infrastructural perspective, AA scale and decentralization created a strong need for a shared digital system in order to work together. Matchmaking was often handled locally by local volunteer match leaders, but the headquarters supervised this process and supported matchmaking work when needed, as well as gathered information from the local match leaders in order to provide aggregated reports for funders and internal evaluation. Before EMOVE, local branches relied on a patchwork of spreadsheets, email threads, and Word documents and SoMe platforms, thus making it difficult to maintain continuity when project leads and match leaders changed or to collect consistent data across branches.

Association Equal Access (AEA): Mentorships

AEA works to ensure equal access to education, employment, and civic participation for ethnic minorities in Denmark. At the time of EMOVE, their core work centered on mentorship programs that connected job-seeking individuals with migrant and refugee backgrounds with volunteer mentors. These included the following three programs: *Career mentoring* to pair university students with mentors from relevant professional fields. *Youth mentoring* to guide young adults through the transition from education into the job market. *Targeted mentoring* for Ukrainian refugees, focusing on orientation to Danish society and labor market integration. Volunteers served as "mentors," providing professional guidance, advice on navigating Danish workplace culture, and moral support. Mentees brought their own ambitions, skills, and life experiences, and the match process required match leaders to balance professional relevance, shared interests, and interpersonal compatibility. All match leaders at AEA are employed, but due to high staff turnover, partially due to reliance on internships and short-term contracts, implied that institutional knowledge was often at risk. One employed match leader described the effect:

> *"When someone leaves, they take their sense of the matches with them. You can write down dates and tasks, but not all the small things—like how a mentee opens up, or what the mentor is especially good at noticing."* (employed match leader, interview, 2022)

Before EMOVE, mentoring coordination and matchmaking was managed through a combination of the CRM system Sugar, Google Sheets, email chains, and shared documents. While Sugar was intended to serve as a central platform, project leads, and match leaders found it poorly aligned with the realities of their work. The system's rigid data fields and limited flexibility made it difficult to capture the relational and situational details that are essential for sustaining a good match. Staff often resorted to maintaining parallel records outside the system, which created duplication, confusion, and a constant risk of missing or inconsistent information. For AEA, "good matchmaking" were very much depended the match leaders ability and skills for careful relationship-building, cultural sensitivity, and the ability to navigate differing expectations of the mentoring relationship. They expressed that an IT system could help by tracking match progress, logging contact, and flagging potential issues early, but what they needed was for it to also accommodate the flexibility that was central to their approach.

Association Together Across (ATA): Multimatch Model

Among the three CSOs in EMOVE, ATA has undergone the most visible strategic and organizational transformation. Originally founded as *Elderlearn* and operating within a socioeconomic business model, the organization's early focus was on matching Danish seniors with individuals with migrant or refugee background for social, conversational Danish practice. In 2022, the organization restructured and relaunched as an association under the name *Sammen på Tværs*. This shift implied moving from a social enterprise framework to operating on the terms of a Danish volunteer association; applying for public and private funding, involving volunteer-based governance, and engaging more deeply with the civil society sector.

With this change in organizational form came a diversification of activities. At the time of this research, ATA works with the following three distinct types of matches:

SPT Match was the direct continuation of the original Elderlearn model. These matches pair whom them call "newcomers" (people with migrant or refugee backgriunds) to Denmark with Danish-speaking senior citizens from their local area to practice conversational Danish in an informal, relational setting. The aim is mutual and both parts are seen as volunteers: newcomers strengthen their language skills and understanding of Danish culture, while seniors gain social contact, and a sense of contributing.

Virksomhedsmatch (Company Match) is responding to Denmark's challenge in retaining international employees, where over half leave within five years of arrival. Through this match type, international employees are paired one-on-one with a senior from their local community. The focus is on practicing Danish in a safe, personalized setting, thereby offering the employee an opportunity to ask questions and explore cultural nuances without the pressures of the workplace. As one match leader explained, the aim is to "make language learning part of everyday life, not just a classroom task," while also enabling companies strengthen retention by fostering social belonging.

Sundhedsmatch (Health Care Match) is targeting the growing number of internationally trained health care professionals working in Denmark. These matches address gaps in cultural and linguistic competencies that can affect the quality of patient care and the professionals' own confidence. By pairing health care workers with Danish seniors from the same professional field, Sundhedsmatch offers a safe arena to practice spoken Danish, discuss culturally specific aspects of health care, and obtain insights into patient and relative expectations. As one hospital language consultant argued;

"Many of our international employees and their families feel lonely. Being matched with a senior from the same professional field gives them both a safe arena to ask professional questions and a stronger connection to the local community." (SPT webpage, 2025)

Despite these new match types, all ATA activities remain rooted in the principle of *mutual volunteering*, that both parties contribute and benefit, and the relationship is framed as a two-way exchange rather than a one-sided act of help. Before EMOVE, ATA used an internally developed IT system built by a former student worker. While it was designed to handle basic matchmaking, it lacked the more advanced functionalities needed to support their increasingly complex activities. The departure of the student who had built the system left the organization without in-house expertise to adapt or troubleshoot it. Match leaders and project leads often found themselves working around the system's limitations, maintaining separate notes and spreadsheets to capture relational details. These constraints became a central concern in the EMOVE co-design process; they directly informed the development of a more flexible, robust digital tool capable of supporting multiple match types while accommodating the nuanced and relational nature of ATA's work.

The Project: Research and Development Process

From the outset, EMOVE adopted a co-creation approach inspired by participatory design and techno-anthropology (e.g., Elgaard Jensen & Thorsen, 2023; Halse et al., 2010). By doing so, we treated ethnography not only as a retrospective evaluation tool, instead research and system development were interwoven from the first project phase. The process began with open "visions and wishes" workshops, where match leaders, managers, and developers jointly mapped existing challenges and articulated hopes for what a new system might support. These sessions revealed both common needs—for example, better overview of matches, easier follow-up documentation—and divergent practices linked to each organization's target group.Based on these inputs, Kople developed a basic, functioning version of the IT system that could be tested in practice. This enabled match leaders to begin using the system early while leaving space for iterative adjustments. My co-researchers and I conducted fieldwork in each CSO during this phase, documenting the following aspects: Step-by-step matchmaking workflows, from initial volunteer application to follow-up. Existing technologies in use (Excel sheets, CRM systems, paper notes, ad hoc digital tools). Pain points and workarounds—moments in which relational care and digital tools collided or required manual bridging. These ethnographic findings were fed directly into iterative development meetings with Kople and the CSOs. This ongoing loop from field observation to synthesis to design discussion to prototype revision, was a deliberate methodological choice to prevent the "design lock-in" that often occurs when research begins only after technology is fully developed.

The Fieldwork: Methods and material

Participant Observation: Over-the-Shoulder Ethnography

Along with the research team, I conducted 16 sessions of participant observation, both on-site in volunteer coordination offices (each 2–5 hours) as well as online (≤2 hours). These sessions often took the form of what I describe as "over-the-shoulder ethnography": sitting alongside match leaders as they navigated volunteer matchmaking, follow-up calls, and system documentation in the IT platform. Online participant observations were of volunteer match leaders who coordinated entirely from home. They shared their screen with me so I could follow their work tasks. This method provided a close view of how everyday decisions were made, how match leaders assessed situations, and how digital infrastructures mediated their professional judgment. One illustrative case concerned the termination of a match between Yusuf, a man with a migrant background, and Hans, an senior participant. Yusuf requested to end the match, citing Hans's frailty—an observation later shared by the match leader, although the municipality, which had recently visited Hans, maintained he was able to participate in such social volunteer activities. From my position at Ronja's desk, I could follow how she worked through this tension by navigating the IT system, while describing for me what she did:

> "(…) I can review their relationship history in the IT system right from the start. They both have profiles, and on the profile, I can see a 'timeline' with info about when they were matched. Under the section called 'notes,' I can see what we talked about after their first meeting, because we make a short debriefing call. In this case, Yusuf had

already pointed out that Hans was very weak and difficult to communicate with as it seemed that he went in and out of sleep. After a month, when the Yusuf received an automatic email, sent from the IT system, asking how their relationship was going, he responded that Hans had canceled twice due to illness. And at the 2-month status call, Yusuf said more or less the same thing. It was clear to me that he was uncomfortable visiting Hans and not enjoying it. With this kind of feedback about how things are going, I felt like I'm on solid ground and could defend to the municipality why I think a different intervention is needed for this person. And again, I manage SO many matches that it would be impossible for me to remember everything I've just gone through with you. In that way, I feel like my assessment is supported by the IT system." (Interview with match leader at TA, April 2024)

This case illustrates the value of participant observation as a method for gaining insight into practices as they unfold in situ. By being present alongside match leaders, I was able to observe not only the outcomes of their decisions, but also *how* these were reached through a combination of system navigation, professional judgment, and negotiation with external expectations. In this way, participant observation offered a perspective that interviews alone could not provide: it revealed the concrete ways in which match leaders engaged with the IT system in practice, and how its functions were used to support, legitimize, or at times complicate their work.
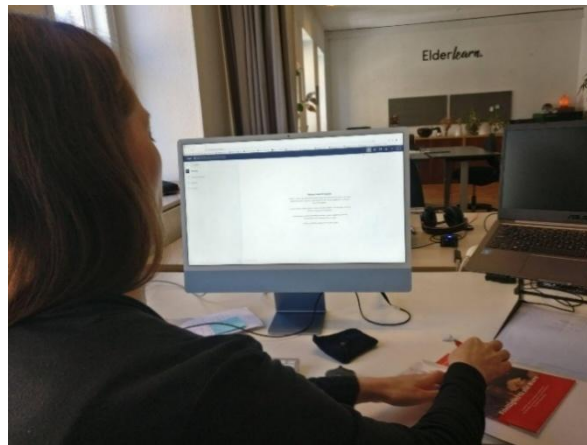
Photo Participant observation with Ronja, 2024.

Online Diaries

To obtain further insight into the day-to-day integration of the Kople system, we invited volunteer and employed match leaders from the three partner CSOs to create online diaries. These diaries ran over a three-week period and were designed to capture work that often remains invisible to the researcher's eye: asynchronous, screen-based interactions, and small but consequential moments of friction or success. Participants were asked to document their use of the system through short written reflections, screenshots, and descriptions of situations where Kople either supported or disrupted their workflows. Although they had the option to submit voice memos, all of them chose written entries.

We received five completed diaries—from one employed match leader at ATA, two volunteer match leaders at AA, and two employed match leaders at AEA. Initially, seven match leaders had agreed to participate, but two of them withdrew later, explaining that the task felt too overwhelming in addition to their other responsibilities. This highlights a methodological consideration in working with CSOs: while diary methods can produce rich material, they also risk overburdening participants—particularly volunteers—if not carefully calibrated to their available time and capacity. The approach draws on the principles of digital ethnography (Pink et al., 2016), which emphasizes following social and technical practices as they unfold across both digital and physical contexts, and designing methods adaptable to the rhythms and temporalities of participants' everyday work. By enabling match leaders to document experiences in real time, the diaries produced granular, time-sensitive accounts of digital interactions that would have been difficult to capture through observation alone. They also provided a space for participants to articulate how they interpreted system successes, frustrations, and affordances in relation to their responsibilities. Furthermore, the inclusion of screenshots created a visual record of the system in use, thus revealing where and how match leaders stored key relational information, which interface elements they relied on most, and which ones hindered their work. In one AA diary, a match leader described her reliance on the "personal information" page within each match profile. During calls, she would type quick, shorthand notes and then later rewrite them neatly so colleagues could access a clear and complete record. The screenshots she submitted show her navigating among the timeline, notes, and match overview functions, thereby illustrating how match leaders actively curate the digital traces of their care work. Other entries captured moments in which infrastructural frictions, such as minor delays in the call function, had disproportionate effects: disrupting first impressions with potential volunteers, delaying follow-ups, or prompting workarounds that bypassed the system altogether. In addition to my on-site observations, these diaries illuminated the micro-negotiations that shape digital volunteer coordination as well as how the same IT system could be valued differently depending on organizational routines and target group needs. In this manner, the diaries both documented use as well as offered a comparative lens on the socio-technical integration of Kople across three distinct organizational contexts.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Together with two research assistants from our research team, I conducted 27 semi-structured interviews with volunteer and employed match leaders, project leads, and developers involved in the EMOVE project. The purpose of these interviews was to gain an in-depth understanding of how each CSO approached matchmaking, how digital infrastructures shaped their everyday work, and how they navigated the tensions between relational care and organizational requirements.

The interview sample included

- Alzheimer Association: 10 interviews (volunteer match leaders and project leads)
- Association Equal Access: 7 interviews (employed match leaders and project leads)
- Association Together Across: 5 interviews (employed match leaders and project leads)
- Kople: 5 interviews (developers, UX designer, and project lead/CEO)

The interviews were conducted primarily in person at organizational offices or during field visits, with only a few that took place online via Teams or Zoom when travel or scheduling constraints made physical meetings impossible. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with informed consent. Our interview approach followed the principles of semi-structured interviewing as described by Kvale and Brinkmann (2015), balancing a prepared thematic structure with openness to follow the participant's personal narratives and priorities. This enabled comparability across interviews while leaving space for unanticipated themes to emerge. As Davies (2008) notes, this flexibility is particularly important in ethnographic contexts, where meaning is co-constructed in interaction and shaped by the researcher's presence in the field. The interview guides, developed collaboratively by me and the research team, were tailored to each organization and role our interlocutors held in the organizations. For the CSOs the interview guides included prompts such as those listed below:

- "Can you walk me through how you typically match a volunteer with a participant?"
- "Which parts of the IT system do you use most in your work and why?"
- "Can you recall a situation where the system either supported or hindered your work?"
- "How do you balance what the system requires you to document with what you think is important to remember?"

In interviews with Kople developers, the focus shifted to the design and development process:

- "How did user feedback influence your design decisions?"
- "Were there points at which the technical and organizational needs conflicted?"

The interviews also served as occasions for reflexive dialogue, in which participants reflected on our ongoing field observations and preliminary interpretations. This iterative exchange between observation and interview deepened the organizational practices and the ongoing design process of the IT system and thereby enabled me to start linking everyday matchmaking practices to broader infrastructural and organizational dynamics.

Workshops, Focus Groups and Development Meetings

A central feature of EMOVE's methodology was the integration of research into the project's co-design cycle. Drawing on Suchman's (2002) critique of the conventional separation between design and use, I approached the project with attention to what she describes as the need for "boundary crossings"; active collaboration between designers and users throughout development. Rather than treating "the user" as a surrogate category, Suchman calls for embedding multiple, situated perspectives in design processes through what she terms "located accountability." (ibid p.94; 96). These insights highlight the risks of design lock-in when user perspectives are only introduced after technologies are finalized. From the outset, I therefore sought to prevent such lock-in by ensuring that ethnographic findings were continuously fed into iterative design decisions through workshops and regular development meetings. I co-organized and attended ten workshops during the project period. These included onboarding flow-builder sessions, where match leaders mapped their ideal onboarding processes, and user insight workshops, where match leaders could articulate priorities, frustrations, and desired features. Several of these workshops were co-facilitated with a research assistant from Techno-Anthropology Lab, Aalborg University. The workshops became both sites for collaborative design and ethnographic spaces, where I could observe how user needs, organizational

constraints, and technical possibilities were negotiated in real time (Elgaard Jensen & Thorsen, 2023).

As part of the EMOVE research process, I also conducted three focus groups to explore shared experiences and challenges in adopting and using the Kople IT system. One focus group brought together representatives from all three EMOVE partner organizations, while the other two involved CSOs that had independently adopted Kople after its initial development. These sessions were explicitly designed as a knowledge-sharing forum: to exchange best practices, surface challenges, and provide users with a closed space to discuss frustrations that might otherwise be filtered in direct communication with the IT company. One employed match leader described how the malfunctioning of the call function, that are inbuild into the IT system, repeatedly undermined her work:

> *"(...) it's really bad for the first 5–10 seconds. During that time, we can't really hear each other, and the ringing tone continues. So I try to say, 'I think it will get better in a moment. I don't think you can hear me – but hey, now I think you can hear me. Could you please start over?' We try to work around it (...). But there are some who almost give up, right? They insist that they can't hear what I'm saying and then they hang up. For example, when I had to call someone who had expressed interest in becoming a volunteer senior. I called her, but she hung up and never became active. I cannot help but wonder if it was because she could not hear me clearly enough?"*
> (Match leader, Association Equal Access, 2022)

Her frustration with the call function was closely connected to her everyday practices of building trust through phone conversations. She emphasized how the first impression with a senior or newcomer could determine whether they agreed to volunteer at all. When this initial contact was repeatedly compromised by technical failures, it not only hampered recruitment but also projected an image of organizational incompetence: *"I kind of understand if they think, 'Do they know what they're doing if they don't even have a phone that works?'"* (Match leader, Association Equal Access, 2022). For the organization, such issues had serious consequences, as the IT system was meant to support their interactions and maintain trust with potential volunteers. Other organizations highlighted similar concerns. One CSO described how their volunteers and target groups began reacting negatively to the overwhelming number of automated messages such as reminders, evaluation requests, and follow-up emails that they received. Many experienced these communications as excessive and impersonal, which in turn created annoyance and frustration among participants. While such problems might seem like minor technical glitches, together they significantly shaped how match leaders, volunteers, and target groups experienced their engagement with social volunteer activities.

Although the IT company also had customers in Sweden and Germany, I chose to keep the workshops for the Danish CSOs due to language barriers and contextual differences. The focus groups were semi-structured and lasted approximately two hours each. All sessions were audio-recorded with informed consent and subsequently transcribed. After transcription, I compiled the most important inputs in anonymized form and shared them with the IT company, enabling

them to work with the insights and frustrations that emerged in the focus groups. The guide was structured to follow a funnel approach (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015): beginning with open-ended prompts regarding each organization's mission and digital journey, then moving into specific questions regarding their onboarding processes, early experiences with Kople, and reflections on the system's fit with their workflows. Participants were encouraged to draw on concrete examples, both "success moments" and points of friction, and to comment on each other's stories.

In addition to these workshops, I participated in 36 development meetings between May 2021 and June 2022. These meetings brought together representatives from the three EMOVE partner organizations, the Kople development team, and project researchers. Feedback was reviewed, design options debated, and user requirements prioritized or re-scoped. These meetings often functioned as what Galison (1997, p. 783) terms a *trading zone*: a collaborative space where actors with different professional languages, priorities, and accountabilities could negotiate a shared framework for action without erasing their organizational differences. The Kople IT system functioned as a *boundary object* (Star & Griesemer, 1989, pp, 393–394)—sufficiently flexible to accommodate diverse organizational needs, yet sufficiently robust to maintain a coherent form across contexts. For the CSOs, Kople was a practical tool to manage matches and document activities in ways that satisfied funders and municipalities; for Kople, it was a product to be standardized and scaled; for the researchers, it was both a research site and a means to embed ethnographic insight into live technical infrastructures of volunteering. The iterative nature of these meetings demonstrated that co-design was less about extracting "user input" and more about sustaining an ongoing negotiation across epistemic and organizational worlds, with the IT system as a shared, and contested, reference point.

Document and System Exploration

As part of the EMOVE fieldwork, I collected and analyzed internal organizational documents and training materials alongside hands-on exploration of the Kople IT system. The materials included onboarding manuals, workflow guides, tutorial videos, training presentations, and technical support documents produced by both the CSOs and Kople. These artefacts were not approached as neutral descriptions of practice but, following Law's (1994) concept of ordering devices, as instruments through which particular ways of working, seeing, and valuing are made durable. I approach these materials in line with Asdal and Reinertsen's (2022) practice-oriented method for document analysis, which treats documents not as passive records but as active participants in the practices they help sustain. From this perspective, documents are not simply "about" volunteer coordination, they actively order, configure, and occasionally constrain it. They embed assumptions regarding what counts as good practice, what is worth recording, and how relationships should be maintained. Following Asdal and Jordheim's (2018) notion of "texts on the move," these artefacts travel between contexts—from IT development meetings, to onboarding workshops, to the everyday work of match leaders—shifting in effect and meaning as they move.

One example is AA's *Guide to Kople* (2022), which presents a standardized three-phase model for volunteer matching and follow-up: preparing the match, confirming the match, and ongoing check-ins (See photo).
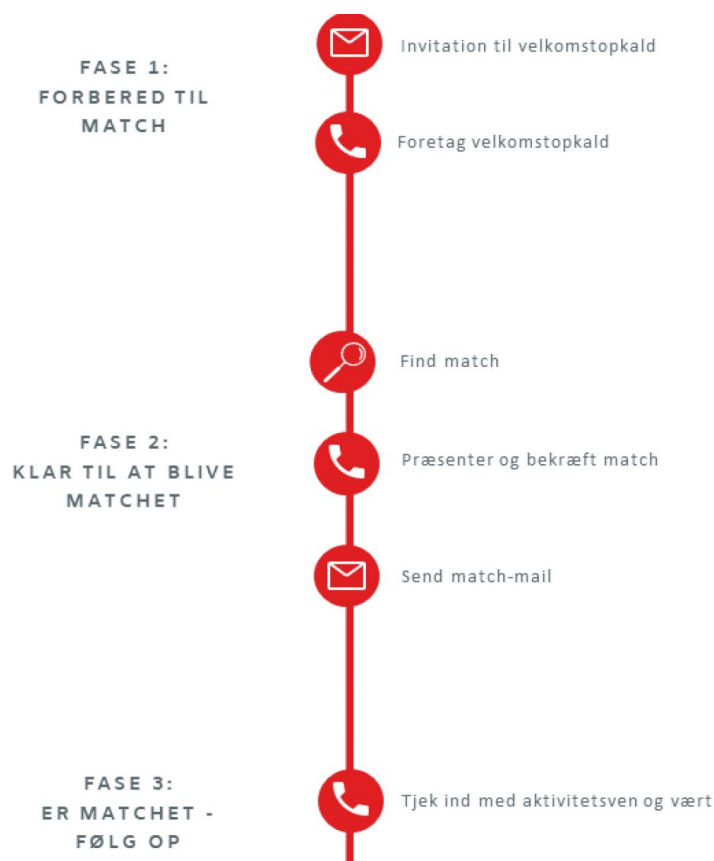

FASE 1: **FORBERED TIL** **MATCH**	Invitation til velkomstopkald
	Foretag velkomstopkald
	Find match
FASE 2: **KLAR TIL AT BLIVE** **MATCHET**	Præsenter og bekræft match
	Send match-mail
FASE 3: **ER MATCHET -** **FØLG OP**	Tjek ind med aktivitetsven og vært

Photo: AA's Guide to Kople with an overview of the match process.

The visual clarity of this model conveys a sense of linearity and control. However, during fieldwork, a volunteer match leader in a local branch gestured to the laminated version of the match overview on her desk and remarked: *"It's a good overview… but in real life, I might be in all three phases with the same volunteer, depending on the day."* (Volunteer match leader, Alzheimer Association, field note, 2023) Her comment encapsulated a recurring observation: match leaders frequently adapted or re-sequenced the steps in response to situational needs, relational cues, or unforeseen events. These friction between idealized workflow and situated improvisation became a key entry point for my analysis of *careful arrangements*. Using the Kople IT system on a trial basis provided me with another perspective. For example, the "Find a Match" view (see photo) made me curious about the embedded assumptions regarding what constitutes a "good" match. Mased on the photo of "Find a match" (see photo) a "good" match seemed to be build on proximity, shared interests, and availability, which can be found through filter and sorting functions. These functions worked well for many match leaders in their matchmaking work, especially when a lot of matches had to be done. However, in others, match leaders expressed that the algorithm's suggestions overlooked less quantifiable factors such as
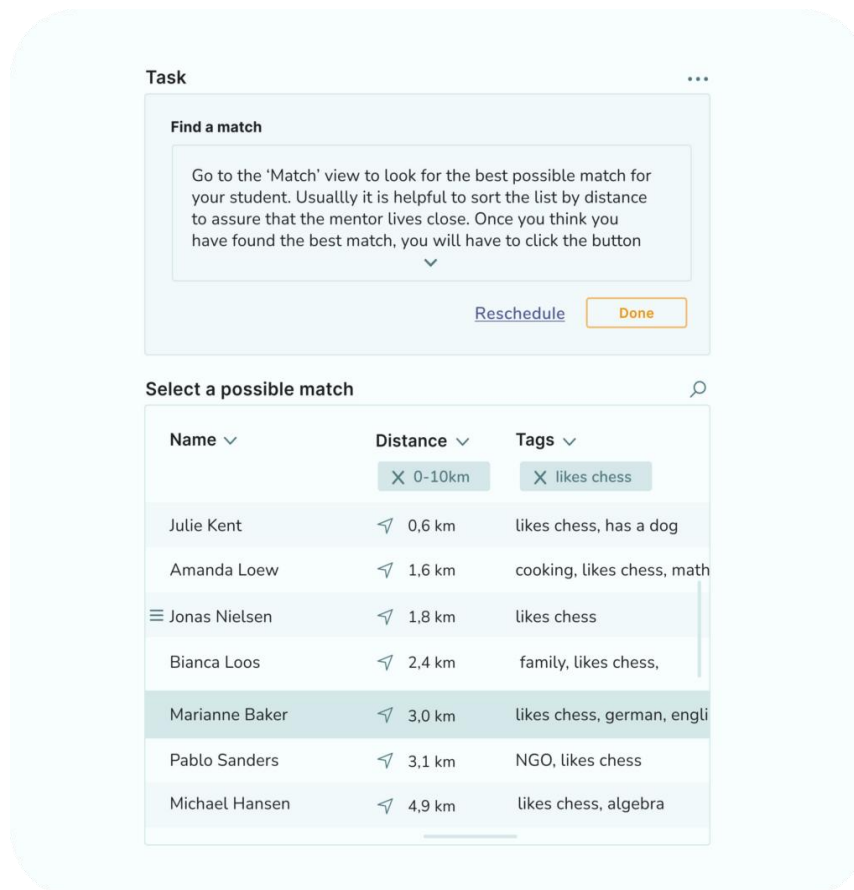
Task ...

Find a match

Go to the 'Match' view to look for the best possible match for your student. Usuallly it is helpful to sort the list by distance to assure that the mentor lives close. Once you think you have found the best match, you will have to click the button

⌄

Reschedule   Done

Select a possible match   🔍

Name ⌄	Distance ⌄	Tags ⌄
	✕ 0-10km	✕ likes chess
Julie Kent	◁ 0,6 km	likes chess, has a dog
Amanda Loew	◁ 1,6 km	cooking, likes chess, math
≡ Jonas Nielsen	◁ 1,8 km	likes chess
Bianca Loos	◁ 2,4 km	family, likes chess,
Marianne Baker	◁ 3,0 km	likes chess, german, engli
Pablo Sanders	◁ 3,1 km	NGO, likes chess
Michael Hansen	◁ 4,9 km	likes chess, algebra

Photo "Find a Match" view in the IT system. Testing version.

a volunteer's patience with long silences, a participant's fluctuating health, or the importance of humor and conversational style. As one employed match leader put it, while scrolling through the suggested names: *"Yes, these are all close by… but none of them will work for her. She needs someone calm, who doesn't mind silences."* (Employed match leader, Association Equal Access). The photo shows how the system presents a list of possible matches with name, distance and interest, which somehow flatten individuals into comparable data entries. Several match leaders described how this format made it difficult to get a sense of the person behind each bullet. To compensate, they often kept multiple tabs open simultaneously, drawing on notes, timelines, and message histories in order to patchwork a fuller understanding of each possible profile. In this way, the system's material script (Akrich, 1992), its encoded vision of matching, met the lived realities of care-based volunteer work, prompting some match leaders to improvise, override, or work around the digital interface to do their work in a fulfilling way.

In line with this, I also went through onboarding tutorials made by Kople, accessible through their webpage, that were designed to train new staff, and explain how to navigate IT system. As they worked well for introducing how the system was meant to be used, they also installed a certain imaginary of volunteer coordination for match leaders as an efficient, standardized, documentation-rich practice. For example, one video tutorial emphasized the importance of completing every data field before moving on, implicitly framing documentation not as optional but as a central pillar of matchmaking. In interviews and participant observations, however, some match leaders described strategically leaving fields blank when information felt

too sensitive or when completing them risked burdening volunteers with unnecessary questions, which is also described and analyzed in article 2 and article 3. Analyzing these documents and artifacts alongside observation and interview data made visible how infrastructural layers stabilize certain forms of care work while obscuring others. The workflow diagrams, structured data fields, and tutorial scripts both codified best practices as well as actively shaped what counted as good practice. In Latour and Woolgar's (1986) terms, these artifacts participated in creating facts regarding what volunteer coordination *is* and *should be*. By situating document analysis alongside participant observation and interviews, I was able to trace how these artifacts circulate within the EMOVE project and beyond, acting as boundary objects (Star & Griesemer, 1989) that can be read differently by developers, match leaders, and researchers while still holding sufficient stability to guide joint action. This attention to the movement, adaptation, and contestation of documents provides insight into the *careful arrangements* through which digitalization in civil society unfolds and that make up the infrastructures of volunteering.

Project Outputs

The EMOVE project generated a set of interlinked outputs, each shaped through the participatory, iterative process described above; each output has now moved beyond the confines of the original project and assumed a "life of its own" (Folker et al., 2025). I was directly involved in the design and delivery of all these outputs, working closely with project partners to ensure they reflected the situated knowledge generated through fieldwork and co-creation. The most tangible output was the Kople IT platform itself, co-developed with the three partner CSOs to support the complex and often sensitive task of social volunteer matchmaking. Initially tailored to the needs of three partner CSOs, the platform has since grown into a widely used digital tool for relationship-based volunteer programs in Denmark and abroad. It is now actively used by organizations such as LGBT+ Denmark, matching elderly LGBT+ individuals with younger volunteers to foster intergenerational care and solidarity; "Samværd, who is coordinating intergenerational matches between kindergartens and nursing homes as well as between families and elderly people with gardens; Nya Kompisbyrån (Sweden), who is running two job-market mentoring programs for migrant women, particularly Ukrainian refugees; Refugee Team (Netherlands), who is connecting refugees and local Dutch people via video conversations; and Studenten für Kinder Karlsruhe (Germany), who is facilitating connections between university students and children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

In addition to the digital platform, we produced a publicly available white paper that collects EMOVE's empirical findings into practical guidance for CSOs and public institutions considering the implementation of IT systems for relational volunteer work. Drawing on our fieldwork, the paper highlights critical considerations, such as organizational readiness, data ethics, and the centrality of user inclusion in the development process (See appendix 4). A short film was also created to communicate EMOVE's findings design and to illustrate both possibilities and barriers in connection to digitalized volunteer coordination. Targeted at practitioners and decision-makers, the film serves as both a dissemination tool and a conversation starter regarding the challenges and potentials of digitalization in civil society.

Finally, the project generated a series of academic publications that critically explore the intersections of care, technology, and organizational life, thereby contributing to ethnology, STS, and civil society research (Elgaard Jensen & Thorsen 2023; Bygballe & Jespersen 2023; Bygballe et al., forthcoming). In line with the EMH framework (Folker et al., 2025), these outputs exemplify how research findings can be mobilized beyond academic contexts, becoming tools, texts, and artifacts that circulate in new arenas, shape ongoing practices, and continue to generate dialogue after the formal end of the project.

Field Site 3: Network for Visiting Services in Denmark—A Cross-Organizational Knowledge-Sharing Forum

The third site of fieldwork was the Network for Visiting Services in Denmark, a peer-to-peer forum that brings together CSOs engaged in volunteer-based social-matching activities for individuals living in vulnerable or precarious situations. The network's members represent a diverse cross-section of the Danish civil society landscape, including health-related associations, disability advocacy groups, and elder care organizations. Participants include, among others, the Danish Multiple Sclerosis Society (Scleroseforeningen), the Danish Rheumatism Association (Gigtforeningen), the Alzheimer's Association, the DaneAge Association (Ældresagen), and Sammen på Tværs. The network also engages organizations such as the Danish Deaf Association, which works with linguistically and communicatively marginalized communities. While each organization operates independently, members share a common aim: to reduce social isolation and enhance well-being through personalized volunteer-based companionship. The target groups of the CSOs are diverse; older adults living alone or in care settings; individuals with chronic or degenerative conditions, such as multiple sclerosis, arthritis, or dementia; people with physical disabilities or sensory impairments; informal caregivers at risk of burnout; and others facing long-term illness, mental health difficulties, or social marginalization. Despite these differences, participants agree on the transformative potential of one-to-one relationships—whether in person, over the phone, or online—in creating social connection and relational safety, thereby fostering a sense of belonging and mutual understanding. My involvement with the network commenced in 2020 through the Volunteering for All Seniors project, where I was invited to present research findings alongside the project PI, Astrid Jespersen. As researchers in volunteer matchmaking activities and digitalization within the EMOVE project, we were subsequently invited to remain involved with the network, an invitation I gladly accepted. The network meets twice per semester, with hosting responsibilities rotating among participating organizations. Agendas are prepared collaboratively, thus reflecting the network's flat structure and dialogical culture. Often, a meeting theme emerges from a member organization that raises a pressing concern or question. For example, during one meeting a participant remarked,

> *"How do we find the people who are really in need of support? It's seems like it is always the same 100 people in every municipality who show up for the free dinners and movie nights."*(Participant observation note, December 2021)

This comment resonated widely among attendees, sparking a meeting dedicated to the challenge of reaching individuals who are most marginalized and often absent from existing community activities. This shared concern underscored the critical difficulties in engaging those who might benefit most from voluntary social work. Such challenges highlight the pervasive issue of identifying and engaging "hidden" populations who do not easily participate in traditional forms of civic engagement, requiring new approaches or extended support in order to be engaged in volunteer initiatives. In this way, the network formed a platform for diverse CSO who all work with social volunteer matchmaking programs to address shared challenges and develop strategies for identifying and supporting vulnerable populations. Thus, these collaborative discussions within the network often led to the development of new ideas for addressing issues in the matchmaking programs and refined methodologies for volunteer engagement, demonstrating a collective effort to adapt to the evolving landscape of social welfare in Denmark. Therefore, while the network was not designed to produce joint interventions, it nonetheless functioned as a platform for cross-pollination of ideas. It provided a vantage point for observing how CSOs collectively navigate challenges, such as volunteer recruitment and retention, balancing relational and administrative demands, training and education of match leaders and integrating digital tools into matchmaking activities. One illustrative case arose during a meeting where members discussed how the network could better guide citizens toward matchmaking programs that aligned with their profiles. Several initiatives had recently reported an increase in applicants whom they considered too vulnerable for their particular form of "visiting services" or matchmaking activity. Instead of excluding these individuals, organizations sought ways to redirect them toward more appropriate programs offered by other CSOs. To address this issue, the network began drafting an internal document that specified the target groups for each program and outlined referral procedures. This initiative clarified organizational boundaries, streamlined cross-sector coordination, and ensured that vulnerable individuals were connected with the most suitable form of support. In doing so, the network illustrated how cross-organizational collaboration can generate collective solutions to pressing welfare challenges, thereby enhancing the overall impact of social volunteering in the social welfare field. Another, more symbolic instance of the network's collective identity and cohesion was its participation in the Danish Red Cross anniversary celebrating 80 years of the *Besøgstjeneste* (visiting service) and *Vågetjeneste* (vigil service). The event gathered researchers, volunteers, policymakers, and the Danish Minister for the Elderly, underscoring the enduring place of visiting services in the Danish welfare landscape. By taking part in this celebration, the network not only affirmed its connection to a long-standing civil society tradition but also highlighted its role in adapting these practices to contemporary welfare challenges.

Photo: The Network for Visiting Services at the Danish Red Cross Anniversary for their visiting services and vigil service (2025)

Methods for the Network for Visiting Services

In contrast to the EMOVE field site, this network was not a central arena for sustained day-to-day ethnography. Instead, it functioned as an important complementary space to test emerging interpretations and to obtain alternative perspectives from practitioners with extensive expertise in volunteer coordination for matchmaking programs. In this sense, the network served both as an "expert panel" for my research and as yet another arena in the broader, multilayered infrastructure that sustains social volunteering in Denmark. My engagement with the Network for Visiting Services was structured around participant observation at its biannual meetings, supplemented by informal conversations with members during breaks and follow-up exchanges via email. Between 2020 and 2025, I attended 11 meetings in person, with participation interrupted by an international exchange during my PhD (July 2022 to December 2022) and a period of parental leave (May 2023 to March 2024). These meetings typically lasted three to four hours and combined plenary discussions, smaller breakout groups, and informal networking over coffee or lunch. I positioned myself both as a listener and a contributor, observing the dynamics of discussion, noting recurring concerns, and occasionally introducing findings from my other field sites as prompts for collective reflection.This approach enabled me to treat the network as both an empirical site and a sounding board, where early-stage analyses could be tested and refined in dialogue with practitioners. I sought ongoing consent from members to use anonymized observations in my writing, with the understanding that any identifiable details regarding organizations or individuals would be omitted. Further, as part of the reciprocity of this collaboration, I committed to returning to the network in autumn 2025 to present the findings of my PhD, thereby ensuring that the knowledge generated was shared with those who had contributed to it. Methodologically, this site emphasized the

value of engaging with meso-level volunteering infrastructures; the spaces where practitioners step out of their own organizational silos to exchange strategies, confront shared dilemmas, and collectively reimagine the future of volunteer work. My methodological approach here primarily involved participant observation, with full transparency regarding my role as a researcher. From the outset, I emphasized that I considered network members as practitioners with deep expertise and that my aim was to learn from and with them.

From multi-sited fieldwork to analysis: working with ethnographic material

The methodological choices outlined in the previous sections were designed to open different windows onto the infrastructures of volunteer matchmaking. The following section explains how I worked analytically across the ethnographic materials produced. It also shows how the analytical processes of the collaborative projects I was part of shaped and enriched my own work. The analysis of the empirical material generated throughout the fieldwork was a collaborative, iterative, and ongoing process. I treated analysis as integral to fieldwork, staying attuned to emerging patterns, tensions, and insights throughout the research period. All interviews and fieldnotes were transcribed, anonymized, and, where relevant, translated into English. Transcriptions typically took place within a few weeks of data collection, ensuring that contextual detail and embodied impressions were still fresh and could be included in the analytical notes. These texts then formed the basis of a systematic analytical process in NVivo, combining open coding (to surface emic categories and unexpected themes) with thematic coding (to consolidate patterns across sites and roles). Coding progressed concurrently with my fieldwork across the different field sites: early codes were drafted after the first interview blocks, then revisited and revised at regular intervals to avoid premature closure while still enabling comparability. In this sense, coding functioned both as a personal reflective tool and, in the collaborative projects, as an instrument of collective knowledge-building.

In Volunteering for All Senior Citizens, the analysis was shaped by joint work with a research assistant and the project PI, where transcripts and early themes were shared, discussed, and refined together. This collaboration influenced my own practice by foregrounding questions about relational scaffolding in matches, which later became central to my understanding of the hospitality infrastructures that underpins the social volunteer activity. In EMOVE, collaboration went even further due to the cross-disciplinary nature of the project. My own analytical work was closely entangled with techno-anthropology colleagues, who focused on use-in-practice and co-design, thereby complementing my ethnological attention to care, everyday practices, and infrastructural coordination. Together we co-coded transcripts, wrote analytic memos, and tested preliminary interpretations in shared workshops. Joint analysis meetings were held at regular intervals, where short empirical bundles (fieldnote excerpts, interview vignettes, screenshots, and documents) were presented and discussed. These sessions served as peer review, methodological calibration, and spaces of co-interpretation. Because EMOVE intertwined research with IT development, these meetings also ensured that analysis was aligned with partner needs and fed directly into design cycles. This cross-disciplinary dialogue between two research teams did not replace my own analysis but continually pushed it in new directions. For example, the collaborative analysis in EMOVE often made me attend

more systematically to the interplay between organizational routines and technical artefacts. One instance was the way we handled match leaders' frustrations and accounts of automated emails. In my field notes these were described in rich, situational detail, often tied to a specific volunteer or participant. But when these observations were fed into joint analysis sessions, we translated them into cross-cutting categories like "message fatigue" or "intrusive automation." This move resembled what Elgaard Jensen & Thorsen (2023) ended up describing as the "mixed blessings" of iterative design: on the one hand, simplification made it possible to act on the insights in development meetings, feeding directly into system revisions. On the other hand, it risked flattening the lived particularities that made the problem visible in the first place. Our analytical work therefore involved the same kind of tinkering they identify in design practice: holding on to complexity where it mattered, while allowing certain reductions to move the process forward. In this way, collaborative analysis was: an ongoing negotiation of what to keep, what to let go, and how to align different perspectives without erasing their differences.

The iterative design of the project, where ethnographic findings were regularly introduced into Kople's development process, meant that analysis could not be postponed to the end of the project. Instead, insights had to be made actionable and shareable continuously. This produced what I understand as "real-time analysis." For instance, diary entries describing frustration with automated reminders were quickly collated and presented as anonymized patterns, resulting in changes to message frequency and customization options. Similarly, observations of match leaders patching together multiple windows to "see the person behind the bullet points" led to redesigns of the match overview interface, so match leaders better could get an impression of the people they engaged with. In these moments, my own ethnographic sensibility was directly interwoven with the collaborative project's needs: the analysis was both mine and ours. In short, my analytical work unfolded in two registers. On the one hand, I pursued my own thesis questions through coding, memo writing, and theory-building across the multi-sited fieldwork. On the other, I engaged in extensive collaborative analysis, where insights were shaped in and through the projects themselves, sometimes reinforcing, sometimes reorienting my own trajectory. The interplay between these registers mirrors the central argument of this thesis: infrastructures, like ethnographic analysis, are not static backdrops but continuously adjusted, tinkered with, and cared for in practice. This distributed and processual form of analysis aligns with my broader methodological orientation, where data is not mined for stable "findings" but co-produced across sites, shaped by personal analytical sensibilities, project dynamics, and partner interactions. The result is an analysis reflexively attuned to the infrastructural, relational, and organizational complexities of digital transformations in civil society.

Fieldwork in a changing civil society landscape: dealing with change, continuity, and tinkering

The field site descriptions already showed how infrastructures of volunteering are never fixed but continuously reconfigured. This became even clearer in the long-term fieldwork, where I had to navigate organizational change, fluctuating priorities, and shifting staff compositions. Such changes directly shaped the conditions for doing ethnography: access, trust, and roles had to be repeatedly renegotiated. Of the three partner CSOs in EMOVE, two underwent significant

rebranding and organizational transformation during the project period. Elderlearn changed its name and organizational form to Together Across, moving from a social enterprise model into the framework of a volunteer association. Similarly, Forening Nydanskere was rebranded as Forening Lige Adgang (Equal Access), accompanied by a restructuring of its activities. The Alzheimer's Association also implemented internal reforms, particularly around professionalizing volunteer coordination. These shifts were not peripheral but deeply entangled with the adoption of Kople. Rebranding often came with new governance structures, revised protocols for volunteer engagement, and altered expectations for digital documentation, all of which I had to track as part of the infrastructural story. These changes and fluidity meant that my role as researcher had to be renegotiated repeatedly. Each time new project leads or match leaders joined, I reintroduced the aims of my study, re-established consent, and clarified procedures for feedback. Building trust was thus not a one-time investment but a reiterative practice. At the same time, continuities in people and practices allowed for longitudinal insights. Several match leaders remained throughout the EMOVE project, enabling me to follow their evolving work before, during, and after the introduction of the Kople platform. This made it possible to see how infrastructures were not adopted wholesale but tinkered with, adjusted, and sometimes resisted in daily coordination. The Network for Visiting Services provided a different kind of continuity. Although not all members were the same from meeting to meeting, many CSOs remained stable over the years, and their recurring participation allowed me to develop a deep understanding of how visiting services were organized, discussed, and problematized across the sector. Across these sites, the three CSOs that formed the empirical core of this study were not static "cases" but organizations in motion: transforming structures, shifting priorities, rebranding, and re-negotiating internal workflows. Documenting these shifts ethnographically, through meeting notes, field diaries, and follow-up interviews, was crucial to understanding how infrastructural arrangements are always both technical, organizational and relational. Despite this turbulence, I was able to build long-term relationships with many match leaders and project leads, which provided continuity and empirical depth. These relationships also raised ethical challenges: as trust deepened, I sometimes became a confidant, which required careful judgment about how to share critical insights in ways that protected individuals while still making organizational issues visible. This methodological experience resonates with engaged research models, where research journeys are non-linear and often improvised (Campus Engage, 2022). The metaphor of "tinkering with invisibilities" (Mol et al., 2010) captures not only what CSOs were doing with digital tools but also what I was doing as a researcher: constantly moving between the frontstage presentations of organized volunteering and the backstage negotiations, breakdowns, and repairs that made those presentations possible.

Reflections on engaged research and ethics

Across all three sites, ethics was a part of the everyday practice of research. Much like volunteer matchmaking itself, it required careful arrangements, ongoing negotiations of relationships, responsibilities, and accountabilities. As described earlier in the EMOVE section, the development meetings (36 sessions, 2021–2022) were key arenas where field insights were translated into design discussions, functioning as trading zones (Galison, 1997) in which the

Alzheimer Association, Equal Access, and Together Across could coordinate locally without full consensus, and where the Kople platform operated as a boundary object (Star & Griesemer, 1989), flexible enough to accommodate different practices, yet stable enough to hold a shared form. From an STS perspective, what came to the fore were Latour's (2004) matters of concern: tensions between efficiency and relational sensitivity; standardization and local discretion; documentation needs and the protection of relational nuance. Handling these frictions was both questions of design as well as ethics.

In the other field sites, ethical concerns also shaped the work. In Volunteering for All Senior Citizens, during home visits, participants often shared deeply personal stories, sometimes about health, loneliness, or migration. Ethical practice in these moments required more than a signed consent form; it meant deciding when to close my notebook, when to shift from observer to participant, and how to protect relational privacy. Providing feedback to the organization during its national expansion posed similar challenges: I had to balance the need to provide actionable insights with the responsibility not to reduce fragile and intimate matches to "cases" for organizational learning. In the Network for Visiting Services, the challenge was different: as both participant and contributor, I had to consider carefully what findings from my other sites could be shared without breaching trust, while still ensuring that my contributions were meaningful. The network also created a space of reciprocity, where my interpretations sparked discussion and were reshaped by practitioners' expertise, and where returning findings in an accessible form became part of my ethical responsibility.

All research activities in this dissertation were conducted in accordance with the Danish Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (2014) and the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR, 2016). Participants gave informed consent and all names are anonymized through pseudonyms, to protect confidentiality. Special attention was given to safeguarding the privacy and dignity of individuals in vulnerable situations, including people living with dementia, migrant experience, and volunteers whose roles involved navigating sensitive personal information. Yet, as already indicated, ethics in this project extended beyond formal compliance. Drawing on the Engaged Medical Humanities framework (Folker et al., 2025), I approached ethics as an ongoing, relational practice shaped by asymmetries, shifting obligations, and situated accountabilities that evolve over time. This meant not only securing consent at the outset but revisiting it during the project, particularly when organizational contexts changed, when my role shifted between observer, collaborator, and facilitator, or when findings were fed back into design. One such situation arose in relation to the everyday use, or non-use, of the Kople IT system. Over time, I gained the trust of many volunteer match leaders, some of whom shared that they did not always use the system as intended. In some cases, this was a deliberate choice, made to protect relational sensitivities or avoid burdensome data entry; in others, it was the result of struggling to navigate the system effectively. This raised an ethical question: how should I represent these findings within the project group, knowing they might reflect poorly on the system or be perceived as a criticism of organizational leadership? Complicating matters further, many CSOs also came to see me as an all and, at times, as a diplomatic channel through which their frustrations with the system could be communicated to the IT developers. This role required careful navigation. On the one hand, I wanted to ensure

that critical feedback from match leaders reached those in a position to address it. On the other, I had to consider how to convey such concerns in ways that preserved trust, avoided personalizing organizational tensions, and kept the collaborative spirit of the project intact. This ongoing process of balancing what to share, how to share it, and in which forum reflects the Engaged Medical Humanities emphasis on accountability as dynamic rather than fixed. My obligations were multiple and sometimes conflicting: to participants who had confided in me, to the project consortium seeking constructive feedback, and to the broader aim of producing ethnographically grounded insight. In practice, I approached this by triangulating findings across methods, anonymizing organizational-level examples when presenting in development meetings, and using cross-case patterns to raise issues without singling out individuals or organizations together with a good amount of tinkering. These moments of mediation can be seen as part of the socio-material fabric of the project itself: the researcher functioning as an intermediary node in an infrastructure of relationships, information flows, and political sensitivities. Just as CSOs require careful arrangements to align people, tools, and practices, so too did the ethical conduct of this research require ongoing adjustment, negotiation, and attentiveness to the relational conditions that made the work possible.
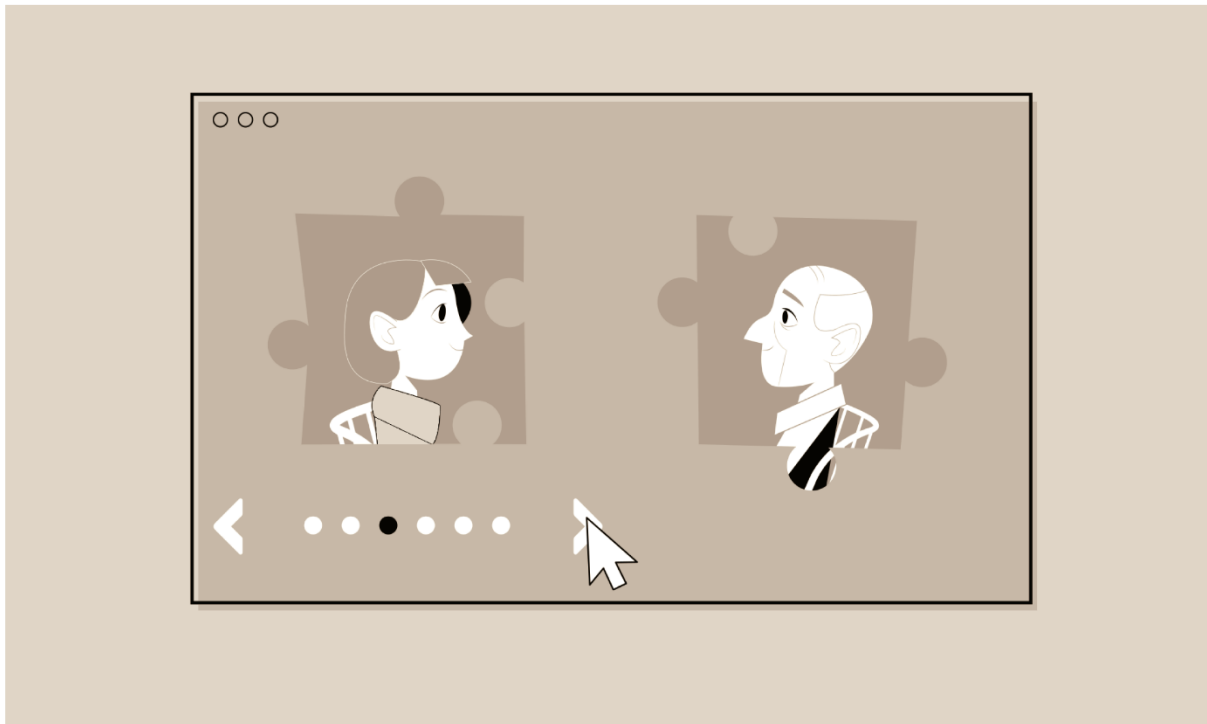
Illustrations of the infrastructures of volunteering: Applying IT systems for social volunteer matchmaking programs. The illustration resembles a web browser window or interface. Inside this window, two distinct profile portraits are shown within puzzle piece shapes. On the left, a younger person. On the right, an older person. Between these two figures, a series of dots indicates multiple pages or profiles and a cursor, points towards the navigation dots.

5. Presentation and Summary of Articles

Article 1: When Strangers Meet in a Volunteer Initiative: Understanding the Precariousness of Volunteering and the Organizational Infrastructure Supporting It. This article by Line Steen Bygballe and Astrid Pernille Jespersen examines the complexities involved in volunteer activities in Denmark, specifically through a case study of the Elderlearn initiative. Elderlearn matches older Danes with foreign language learners to create reciprocal, supportive relationships. The article highlights how volunteer work, despite its informal appearance, requires extensive organizational support and socio-material resources to succeed. Utilizing ethnographic methods and theoretical frameworks from Schutz (1944), Löfgren (2014), and Ahmed (2004; 2010), we argue that successful volunteer initiatives depend on carefully orchestrated socio-material and emotional preparations, underpinned by a professional organizational infrastructure that supports and sustains volunteer engagement. This article lays the groundwork by highlighting how seemingly informal volunteer encounters—such as those between older Danes and foreign language learners—are in fact deeply reliant on organizational scaffolding, emotional labor, and practical infrastructure. Volunteering, as shown in this study, is not spontaneous but precarious, requiring persistent effort and institutional care to unfold successfully. The focus here is on the foundational arrangements that enable strangers to meet and connect under safe and meaningful conditions.Published in Ethnologia Scandinavica, 53. 2023: https://doi.org/10.69819/ethsc.v53i.24667

Article 2: How Civil Society Goes Digital. An Ethnographic Study of IT System Implementation in Three Danish Civil Society Organizations. Written by Line Steen Bygballe, Torben Elgaard Jensen (AAU) and Astrid Pernille Jespersen (KU).

This ethnographic study explores the digital transformation of volunteer work in Denmark through the implementation of a new IT system in three volunteer organizations. Using John Law's concept of "modes of ordering," (1993) we investigate how each organization integrates digital tools into its workflow, highlighting how these systems can standardize practices, enhance coordination, but also disrupt existing routines and create new tensions. The article concludes that digitalization in civil society must carefully consider the unique characteristics of volunteer organizations and the varied ways these systems become integrated into daily operations, stressing the importance of context-specific adaptation. This article moves this inquiry further by exploring how digital systems mediate and reorganize these arrangements. Through the lens of IT system implementation across three NGOs, the article reveals how technologies can both enable coordination and introduce friction, standardize tasks and destabilize practices. It illustrates how digital tools do not simply support existing routines but reorder organizational life, thereby extending the concept of careful arrangements into the technological domain. *Submitting to Journal of Organizational Ethnography*

Article 3: Temporal tensions in civil society: An ethnological exploration of organizations navigating between voluntarism and professionalism in the Danish welfare state. Authored by Line Steen Bygballe, this article uses temporality as an analytical lens to explore the tensions between voluntarism and professionalization within Danish civil society organizations. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and Judy Wajcman's theory on time and technology (2015), the article identifies two opposing temporal modes of working: "Always-on," characterized by fast-paced, automatized, and digital-driven practices, and "Slow-down," grounded in relational care, presence, and situational judgment. Rather than treating voluntarism and professionalism as dichotomies, these temporal modes exist within CSOs, where they are continually negotiated according to diverse logics of professionalism. To capture these negotiations, the article introduces the analytical figure of careful arrangements. This figure makes visible how calibrations and recalibrations between temporal tensions take shape through assemblages of people, care practices, digital platforms, and welfare actors in constant flux. The article argues that in times of accelerated and digitally mediated sectoral collaboration, foregrounding the qualities of slow-paced, emotionally attuned engagement is crucial for sustaining social volunteer matchmaking programs.
Submitting to VOLUNTAS - International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations: https://link.springer.com/journal/11266

Collectively, these three articles offer a layered ethnographic and analytical engagement with the evolving landscape of social volunteerism in Danish civil society. Each article contributes a different entry point into what may be understood as a system of careful arrangements, a notion that captures the socio-material, affective, and temporal work involved in sustaining volunteer engagement in an increasingly professionalized and digitalized context. Across these articles, *careful arrangements* emerge as a situated analytical figure. It enables attention to the

layered, negotiated, and context-sensitive work involved in civil society organizations' responses to digital transformations impacted by increased hybridization and professionalization. Each article examines a different aspect of these arrangements, organizational, technological, temporal, while foregrounding the affective and ethical labor that holds them together. This analytical figure allows me to trace how volunteering is not just supported but actively produced through the continuous interplay in infrastructures of people, tools, time, and care.
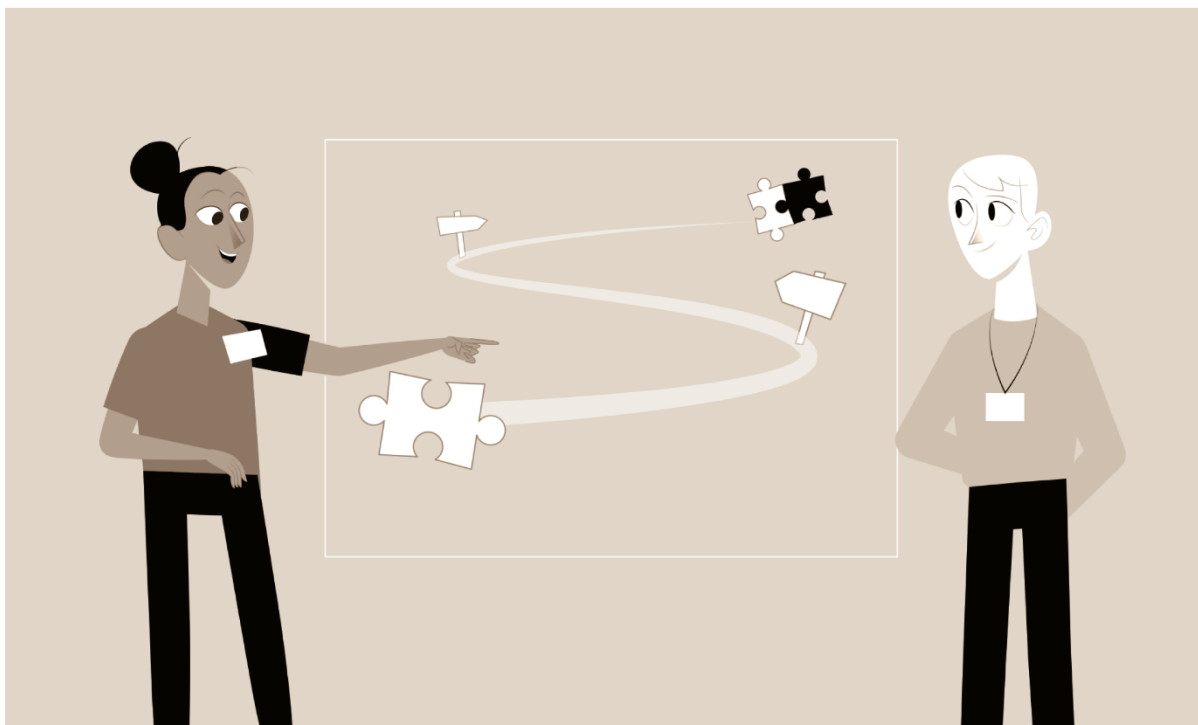
Illustrations of the infrastructures of volunteering: the educational aspect of social volunteer matchmaking, understanding the journey, navigating challenges, and effectively matching individuals (puzzle pieces). Illustration showing a guided process, a person pointing through a path with signposts, and puzzle pieces.

6. Contribution and Conclusion

This thesis set out to examine how infrastructures of volunteering are reshaped in a period where Danish civil society is marked by professionalization, cross-sector collaboration, and digitalization. The guiding research questions asked: *How does an ethnography of infrastructures contribute new insights into the digital transformations in care-oriented social volunteer work in the hybrid Danish welfare society? In what ways does the analytical figure of careful arrangements make visible both the generative and constraining frictions in organizing care-oriented social volunteer work via digital platforms?* This has been explored through an ethnographic investigation of how CSO's engaged in health- and social-related volunteering sustain their work with people in vulnerable life situations when their organizational environments are increasingly framed by managerial logics, digital technologies, and welfare collaborations. By following these processes across three sites; the encounters between volunteers in Together Across, the development and implementation of the IT system in the EMOVE project, and the National Network for Visiting Services, I have traced diverse infrastructures of volunteering and showed how the often mundane, invisible, and contested practices that underpin social volunteering are organized, challenged, and sustained in times of digitization.

The three articles that form the analytical backbone of the dissertation offer complementary perspectives on these transformations. Article 1 demonstrated how the seemingly informal meetings of "strangers" in Together Across is in fact scaffolded by extensive organizational work, emotional preparation from volunteers, and socio-material support. It showed that

sustaining volunteering is precarious and depends on infrastructures of care and coordination that often remain in the background. Article 2 explored the implementation of the IT system in three CSOs, showing how digitalization is not a seamless process of modernization but is mobilized within distinct organizational "ordering projects." The study revealed how the same technological system takes on different roles across contexts, sometimes streamlining work, sometimes disrupting it, and always entangling with local ambitions and constraints. Article 3 used temporality as an analytical lens to show how professionalization introduces competing temporal modes: an "always-on" pace of reporting, accountability, and acceleration, and a "slow-down" mode of relational care and trust-building. The article argued that these temporal tensions are not simply contradictory but are continually negotiated through careful arrangements to sustain meaningful volunteering. Across these cases, careful arrangements become visible as the contingent, dynamic, and relationally constituted ways in which infrastructures of volunteering are held together. Thus, by looking into these infrastructures of volunteering with the notion of careful arrangements, it made visible the assemblages of the socio-material negotiations, affective labor, and ethical commitments that make it possible to sustain volunteer work with and for people in vulnerable life situations in times of professionalization and digitization. These careful arrangements are often composed of practices that remain in the shadows of official organizational scripts: a volunteer staging a welcoming encounter to make a stranger (another volunteer) feel at home, a match leader bypassing a digital system by using a personal phone to protect confidentiality, or a match leader deliberately slowing down the matching process to preserve trust and care. These practices may appear as counter actions to dominant logics of efficiency or digitalization, but they are precisely what give infrastructures durability. In this way, these shadow practices and counter actions are integral to careful arrangements. Rather than depicting digitization as a force of straightforward change, the careful arrangements foreground the frictions and negotiations through which volunteers, match leaders, and organizations recalibrate infrastructures of volunteering in practice. It emphasizes that infrastructures are not only technical or organizational but also lived, felt, and constantly negotiated in everyday life, thereby providing a vocabulary for the vast amount of behind-the-scenes work that sustains civil society.

The findings and conceptual contributions of this thesis extend across several fields. To civil society studies, the thesis enriches debates on hybridization (Brandsen et al., 2005) by showing how civil society's role in welfare provision is neither a story of loss of autonomy nor of seamless integration. Instead, volunteering is continually reconfigured through situated negotiations. Careful arrangements make visible the work of sustaining volunteering under hybrid welfare regimes, offering a more nuanced account of civil society as both dependent on and transformative of welfare collaborations. The insights contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities inherent in the evolving landscape of digitalization within social volunteering and its implications for sustained engagement in civic action (Hine, 2024). By tracing volunteer infrastructures ethnographically, the study adds to cultural analyses of everyday life by showing how backstage practices such as documentation, maintenance, improvisation, and coordination are entangled with frontstage encounters of care in volunteer matchmaking programs. This foregrounds the generative role of seemingly mundane activities

in fostering resilience and adaptability within CSOs, highlighting how these practices collectively contribute to the endurance of civic action even amidst significant structural shifts (Højgaard, 2024). This broadens ethnological understandings of volunteering beyond motives and meanings to the mundane organizational and material scaffolding that makes it possible.

The thesis also contributes to STS debates on digitalization by providing an ethnographic case from civil society that demonstrates how digital technologies become embedded in organizational life through ordering projects and temporal negotiations. It shows how digital system embedded in volunteering infrastructures do more than support as they actively affect the ethical and temporal conditions of volunteer care work (Law, 1993; Star 1999). However, the thesis also shows how CSOs, rather than being passive recipients of digital tools, actively shape and adapt digital technologies to align with their specific goals and the dynamic needs of the communities they serve (Grubb, 2021). Thus, the thesis unpacks how digital technologies, far from being neutral tools, are deeply intertwined with the infrastructures of care in social volunteering. This reveals that digital technology, while offering new avenues for interaction, also introduces new vulnerabilities that demand specific interventions or practices to maintain the quality and equity of care (Alam & Houston, 2020). Thus, finally, the dissertation underscores the significance of relational, emotional, and invisible forms of labor that sustain care for people in vulnerable life situations through infrastructures of volunteering. By conceptualizing these as careful arrangements, it echoes feminist critiques of undervalued and invisible care work (Tronto, 1993; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017) while situating them in the contemporary transformations of civil society. Furthermore, the thesis highlights the risk of introducing too much "compulsory digital self-reliance" into social volunteering for and with people in vulnerable life situations, as it can exacerbate care gaps, transforming intended efficiencies into new forms of frictional socio-technical infrastructures that exclude some groups from participating in social volunteering. The ethnographic insights from this thesis also hold practical significance. As policymakers and technology developers increasingly turn to civil society to provide welfare services, it is crucial that digitalization is not treated solely as a matter of efficiency and compliance. This thesis demonstrates that meaningful social volunteering depends on infrastructures that support presence, discretion, and relational care as much as speed and accountability. Designing systems that enable these practices is essential if civil society is to remain a sustainable and inclusive space of support. By emphasizing the significance of qualitative aspects such as trust and personal interaction over purely quantitative metrics, CSOs can foster environments where both volunteers and target groups experience genuine connection and support. This includes acknowledging the invisible labor involved in navigating digital interfaces and ensuring that technological solutions enhance, rather than detract from, the core mission of empathetic engagement and social inclusion.

The thesis opens several avenues for further inquiry, offering opportunities to expand upon its foundational insights and explore the multifaceted nature of volunteer infrastructures. While grounded in the Danish context, the dynamics described resonate especially in other Scandinavian countries and beyond, calling for comparative studies of how different welfare regimes shape and influence the infrastructures of volunteering. Additionally, exploring the differential impacts of digital transformation on various volunteer demographics, particularly concerning digital literacy and access, would provide a more comprehensive understanding of

how to develop and ensure inclusive social volunteering models. Furthermore, longitudinal research could explore how careful arrangements endure or transform under shifting political and technological conditions, offering insights into the long-term resilience and adaptability of volunteer infrastructures. In line with this, there is a growing need to investigate how emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence and automation, intersect with the infrastructures of volunteering and what kinds of careful arrangements they invite or disrupt. Moreover, further research could examine the ethical implications of these advanced technologies in care work, particularly regarding data privacy, algorithmic bias, and the preservation of human-centered interactions within social volunteering frameworks. Finally, ethnographic studies could contribute to better understandings on the emotional and ethical labor that underpins social volunteering in processes of professionalization, asking how such labor can be recognized, valued, and redistributed in increasingly digitalized welfare landscapes.

In conclusion, this dissertation has sought to reframe how we understand the infrastructures of volunteering in a digital age. Much of the current policy and public discourse frames digitalization through the metaphor of a train in acceleration: organizations must either "get on board" or risk being left behind. This narrative emphasizes speed, inevitability, and modernization. The ethnographic analyses presented here however show that such a metaphor oversimplifies the realities of social volunteering. Digitalization does not move smoothly forward on fixed tracks; it generates frictions, detours, delays. By foregrounding careful arrangements, I have demonstrated that digital innovations are not merely a linear process of optimization but filled with socio-technical complex and ethically charged practices. What keeps CSOs in support for people in vulnerable life situations going is not a race to keep pace with an accelerating train, but the attentive work of holding infrastructures together in ways that safeguard care, trust, and presence. It involves complex negotiations, adaptations, and sometimes, the conscious decision to slow down or reroute in order to preserve the quality and relational integrity of care work. These careful arrangements often entail shadow practices and counter actions of patching, slowing down, or working around rigid systems to ensure volunteering remains meaningful for those who are engaged it in. Recognizing and supporting these careful arrangements is vital if this part of civil society should continue to form a space for care and democratic participation. Moving beyond the "get on the train" narrative means appreciating that digitalization is not a destination but an ongoing negotiation, where infrastructures of volunteering are continuously reconfigured by those who use, resist, and adapt them in everyday practice. This thesis thus argues for a more nuanced understanding of digital transformation within civil society, one that acknowledges the agency of volunteers and organizations in shaping technological adoption and the critical importance of maintaining human-centric values amidst increasing digitalization. This perspective highlights the necessity of balancing standardized digital solutions with localized, context-sensitive strategies to foster equitable and inclusive development.

7. Reference lists

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8. Collection of articles

Article 1

When Strangers Meet in a Volunteer Initiative
Understanding the Precariousness of Volunteering and the Organizational Infrastructure Supporting It
By Line Steen Bygballe & Astrid Pernille Jespersen

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[1] 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 Nordeafonden. 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.[2] The ongoing collaboration with Elderlearn can be described as a form of accompanying research,[3] 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.[4]

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",[5] 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 ob-jects" (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 embed-ded exclusion mechanisms. This points to the potential risk of people attaching differ-ent values and feelings to the same object – such as alcohol – which is the other object that caught our attention: the port, includ-ing the three small wine glasses. Whereas this situation ended with a "cheers", it could potentially have been an awkward and diffi-cult 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 ideolo-gies. 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 alien-ation or exclusion from affective commu-nities. Affective community refers to social groups or communities that are bound to-gether by shared emotions, values, or expe-riences, and Ahmed argues that the align-ment 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 vol-unteers 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 ta-ble in an attempt to establish a good social relationship:

I did not want to put rolled sausage[6] on the table if she could not stand it, so I asked:

"What religion do you have? Are you Muslim[7] 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 poten-tial 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 con-ditioned precautions about certain types of food. However, we argue that another in-terpretation 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 communication 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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Article 2

How Civil Society Goes Digital

An Ethnographic Study of IT System Implementation in Three Danish Civil Society Organizations

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Abstract

Danish civil society organizations (CSOs) have recently become subject to the progressive digitalization that has previously engulfed other parts of Danish society. In this article, we first identify a series of conditions for the digitalization of volunteer organization, including their idealistic raison d'etre, their limited resources and their changing roles vis- a-vis the welfare state. Second, we report an ethnographic study of how a new IT system was received and implemented in three different CSOs working with social volunteer activities. Drawing on John Law's notion of modes of ordering (1993), we examine the ordering projects that the system is made part of in the three organizations. Finally, we discuss what might be learned about the digitalization of civil society from the three cases. We conclude that support for digitalization of CSOs must build on an awareness of the unique conditions and circumstances of these organizations as well as the variety of ordering projects within them.

Introduction

> We work with an extreme amount of information. In the old system, which should have been retired a long time ago, we constantly tried to make new structures for how to register our workflows. With the new system, a lot of time is freed up because everything we do is logged automatically. So, we could finally drop our home-spun record system. (Project leader, Equal Access, 2022)

> Suddenly, she was gone. I'd forgotten to plug in the charger. My mistake. But there were other times when the integrated call function suddenly crashed during important talks. Since I make the call from the IT system and store all information there, it takes several minutes to reopen everything and find the person's phone number. So, I often use my own phone. For some of our members with dementia, even a minor disruption can cause insecurity, making this system unsustainable, in my opinion. (Volunteer match leader, Alzheimer's Association, 2023)

The above quotes illustrate the varieties of experiences people had when implementing a new IT system in CSOs. They indicate how the broader societal process of digitalization impacts the everyday work of CSOs. The digital transformation of civil society creates both more efficient and systematic workflows, but it also disrupts and disturbs already established work routines.

While digital infrastructures have become integral to public service delivery in highly digitized countries like Denmark (Schou & Hjelholt 2019; Aagaard & Pedersen 2022), the implications for CSOs —particularly those involved in social welfare—remain underexplored. Although prior studies have addressed the digital transformation of the public sector (European Commission 2020; United Nations 2020), as well as the professionalization of civil society (La Cour & Højlund 2008; Eliasoph 2011; Espersen 2024), less is known about how digital infrastructures are adopted and enacted in everyday organizational life within CSOs. This is particularly true for CSOs that navigate limited resources, unstable funding, and complex ethical responsibilities toward vulnerable populations (Brink et al. 2020; Vogelsang et al. 2021; Thewes et al. 2024).

In this article, we discuss the digital transformation processes of civil society in Denmark, particularly those organizations engaged in social and welfare tasks. Through an ethnographic investigation of the implementation of a new IT system in three Danish CSOs, we describe how organizational digital transformation unfolds in practice. The three organizations— Alzheimerforeningen (the Alzheimer's Association), Foreningen Lige Adgang (The Association Equal Access), and Foreningen Sammen På Tværs (The Association Together Across)—offer distinct perspectives, each serving a different target group and thereby reflecting the heterogeneity of civil society in Denmark. Despite their differing target groups, all three organizations work with social matchmaking programs that rely on an infrastructure that enables employees and volunteers to match, connect, and facilitate interpersonal and social relations. By examining how the organizations integrate the same new IT system into their everyday operations, this article zooms in on how they respond to and adopt the IT system as they make it a part of their everyday organizational life and continually evolving work practices. Specifically, we want to explore how the new system is given particular roles or functions in the organization, is mobilized for certain purposes, and is associated with particular hopes and ambitions. We use the term *ordering process* to indicate the ways in which a system becomes an influential part of already ongoing work and mobilized to do certain things.

The following research questions guide our analysis of the encounters between the CSOs and the IT system:

- *What goals and expectations of the IT system does an organization develop in the process of learning about, configuring, and implementing the system?*

3

- *How are the three organizations' volunteer work practices reordered in the process of implementing the new IT system, and what tensions emerge around the system?*

To analyze these dynamics, we draw on John Law's concept of "modes of ordering" (1993, 2002), which sensitizes us to the situated, heterogeneous, and often competing logics that shape how technologies are incorporated into organizational life. By doing so, we contribute to growing literature in science and technology studies (STS), civil society research, and digitalization scholarship that calls for more granular, ethnographic analyses of how digital infrastructures shape and are shaped by welfare provision and volunteer work.

In the following, we outline some of the conditions for the current digitalization of volunteer work in Denmark, focusing on the changing relations between the state and civil society and the digitalization processes of Danish society. Furthermore, we review recent discussions on the digital transformation of non-private and CSOs before describing our theoretical inspiration, research project, and methods forming the basis of our analysis. In the second part of the article, we report our own ethnographic study of three Danish CSOs in the process of implementing an IT system. In the final discussion, we reflect on how the diversity between the three CSOs lead to different implementation trajectories and approaches and to locally produced effects and consequences. The analysis thus contributes an empirically grounded understanding of the digital transformation of civil society.

Background and state of the art: Contemporary societal conditions for digital transformation of civil society

The changing role of CSOs across the Nordic welfare states

The Nordic welfare model is often described as characterized by political compromises, widespread local government autonomy, and close cooperation between the state and civil society. CSOs are likewise characterized by a high level of participation and founded in institutional trust (Enjolras & Strømsnes 2017). The dynamic relationship between the state and civil society has been the subject of extensive academic inquiry, as the role of civil society in the Nordic countries has changed significantly over recent decades (Enjolras & Strømsnes 2018; Espersen 2024). Scholars have pointed to increasing individualization, new immigration patterns, outsourcing of welfare tasks, and ongoing digitalization as prominent forces underpinning the changes (Enjolras & Strømsnes 2018; Espersen 2024; Grubb & Henriksen 2019). Other scholars argue that the changing organization of collaboration between civil society and the state, where features such as measurement and control play a bigger role, is marking a shift toward a professionalization of volunteerism (La Cour & Højlund 2008; La Cour 2014).

This points to an inherent tension, particularly concerning the role civil society should play. On the one hand, civil society is valued as an independent and democratic actor, contributing to innovation and citizen involvement. On the other hand, its growing role as a supplier of welfare services blurs the lines between the public, private, and volunteer sectors, raising questions about the sustainability of volunteer-driven welfare provision and the risk of undermining the volunteer spirit (Espersen 2020; La Cour 2012).

In Denmark the civil society boasts one of the highest rates of volunteerism in Europe, with around 40% of the population engaged in volunteer activities (Erlinghagen & Hank 2006; V Espersen et al. 2024; European Commission 2018).). Social and health care services stand as crucial fields for volunteer work, second only to cultural and recreational activities (CFSA 2016, 2018). In recent years, the outsourcing of welfare tasks to civil society actors has become a salient feature of the Danish welfare system. Scholars such as Mads Roke Clausen (2024) emphasized the 'civil potential' of volunteerism in addressing gaps left by the welfare state, particularly in times of economic strain. Clausen (2024) argued that Danish civil society's engagement is often framed as a response to the welfare state's perceived failures, such as in elderly care or social services. Similar to the previously mentioned trends in the Nordic countries, this has led to civil society taking on an increasingly professionalized role in service delivery, often under contract with Danish municipalities (Espersen 2024). This marketization of welfare has resulted in a growing focus on performance metrics, documentation, and accountability, which place new demands on CSOs (Espersen 2024, p. 140).

Digital transformation of the welfare state

In addition to the exceptionally high degree of volunteer work, important context for the case studies we report in this article is the fact that Denmark is a highly digitalized country. In several global surveys, Denmark is described as a leading country in the digitalization of society, particularly in the public sector, where comprehensive e-government services and digital infrastructure have transformed the delivery of welfare services (Aagard & Pedersen 2022; Schou & Hjelholt 2019; Meyerhoff Nielsen & Ben Dhaou 2023). The Danish Agency for Digitalization has spearheaded initiatives aimed at enhancing public service efficiency and citizen participation through digital platforms (Agency for Digital Government 2018). According to the European Commission's Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) and the United Nations E-Government Survey, Denmark consistently ranks among the top countries in terms of digital performance and e-governance (European Commission 2020; United Nations 2020).

This digitalization agenda, often referred to as the 'digital welfare state', has not only streamlined public services but is also impacting civil society actors, demanding similar digital approaches in their operations and interactions with both the state and citizens. The government's impetus for this pervasive digitalization has been to save on costs and to generate efficient new forms of collaboration within and between the public, private, and volunteer sectors. However, questions

and concerns about inclusivity and accessibility for all actors have continually been raised in relation to the constant push for further digitalization (Espersen 2024; La Cour & Højlund 2008; La Cour 2012). These questions are obviously key to CSOs servicing vulnerable groups of citizens (Andersen et al. 2024; Nino Carreras 2024).

As a further potential obstacle to the vision of smooth, forwardly progressing digitalization, there is now a heightened focus on the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and a growing concern with the inherent security risks of infrastructures. It has simply become more cumbersome and expensive to have digital infrastructure. This problem is particularly pertinent for the bulk of CSOs that lack stable financial security and rely on project-based funding from the public and private sectors, including municipalities and foundations (Bjerre, A., & Walther, L 2024; Hjære & Sørensen 2024). The uneven flow of funds leaves little room for these organizations to establish a stable digital infrastructure to support their work. Moreover, these organizations may be reluctant to invest in IT, since their organizational raison d'etres may compel them to spend as much of their funding as possible on their target groups rather than administrative tools like digital systems. In sum, there appears to be a variety of factors and good local reasons why the digitalization process in civil society is lagging behind other sectors . Nonetheless, the push toward digital collaboration continues to reorganize the landscape of civil society and public sector interactions.

The intersection of volunteering, welfare outsourcing, and digitalization in Denmark presents a complex, evolving landscape. While civil society continues to play a vital role in welfare provision, its growing professionalization and increasing reliance on digital platforms raise relevant questions about inclusiveness, sustainability, and the role of the digital in the future organization of civic engagement.

Digital transformation of civil society

In the field of digital transformation of organizations, research has mainly focused on technologies and strategy development in profit-oriented settings. As a result, research on digital transformation in non-profit and CSOs is scarce and in its very early stages. The few studies on digital transformation in CSOs all work from the assumption that digital transformation is highly needed and evident, as it is believed to yield a competitive advantage by accommodating the changing demands of customers, create new opportunities for communication, and streamline the workflows of organizations (Brink et al. 2020; Nahrkhalaji et al. 2018; Vogelsang et al. 2021). The few studies on digital transformation processes in non-profit and CSOs are primarily survey studies that explored the conditions and challenges for a successful digital transition. The studies called for organizations to get on the digital wagon and 'think and act more like profit-oriented companies' (Vogelsang et al. 2021). They also identified a list of challenges in digitizing organizations due to the specific characteristics of CSOs (i.e., volunteer work, volunteer membership, and donations), which make the transition tricky and challenging but nevertheless inevitable and necessary (Brink et al. 2020; Nahrkhalaji et al. 2018; Vogelsang et al. 2021). A key solution to this tricky situation,

according to the studies, is developing a digital transformation strategy and identifying specific fields of action within organizations that must be targeted to enable the digital transition.

While the studies mentioned above were based on a normative assumption that getting on the digital bandwagon will inevitably benefit CSOs, a recent German study took on a more careful approach to studying how and why CSOs adopt digital solutions. Thewes et al. (2024) explored the connection between digitalization and volunteer work through a mixed methods study. The authors developed a comprehensive definition of 'the digital', including email, social media platforms, teleconferencing tools, and project management tools. Based on this, they conducted a large survey that revealed that rural CSOs, despite their supposed need to integrate physically distant volunteers, tend to use digital tools to a lesser extent. Following up on this finding with a series of qualitative interviews, the authors suggested that the lower level of digitalization of rural CSOs can be explained by the comparatively older age of volunteers, by their greater focus on the 'sociality' aspect of volunteer work, and by the slow rollout of digital infrastructure in German rural regions.

In the context of our study, the findings by Thewes et al. (2024) are interesting in that they confirm our assumptions that different CSOs do different things with digital tools. However, while Thewes et al. (2024) were concerned with *if* and *why* CSOs adopt (or do not adopt) digital solutions, our ethnographic study takes a step further and explores *what* happens *when* organizations adopt a particular digital solution. In that sense, we move further into a discussion about how digitalization might gradually transform CSOs.

Theoretical resources for exploring the encounters between IT systems and organizations

The key object of analysis in this article is the encounter between three organizations and an IT system. In a broad sense, such encounters between technology on the one hand, and people or organizations on the other, have been analyzed extensively across various social science sub-disciplines that have turned their attention to the role of technology in society (Science & Technology Studies (STS), sociology of scientific knowledge, anthropology of technology, and human–computer interaction). In this article, we are mainly inspired by the field of STS that has called attention to several aspects of these interactions, in particular the always-situated, materialized, localized, and contested ways in which sociotechnical arrangements come into being (Callon 1998; Latour 1987; Mol 2002; Suchman 1987)

STS scholars have consistently argued against viewing technologies as neutral or merely instrumental. Instead, they highlight the mutual shaping of technology and society, emphasizing how technological systems embody assumptions, values, and often invisible forms of work and exclusion. Such technological systems are subsequently interpreted, enacted, or resisted by users in practice (Suchman 1987; Latour 1987; Star & Ruhleder 1996)

A central theoretical resource in our study is John Law's concept of 'modes of ordering' (Law 1993, 2002), which in our view summarizes and encapsulates a series of key ideas from the broader STS field and actor–network theory. Law develops this notion in his ethnographic study of Daresbury Laboratory, a major British research center, presented in the book *Organizing Modernity* (1993). Here he showed how various actors engaged in a series of efforts to do things in particular ways: *"...recurring patterns embodied within, witnessed by, generated in and reproduced as part of the ordering of human and non-human relations.*" (Law, 1993, p. 83) Reflecting on this pattern, Law coined the term *modes of ordering*, which he uses to describe the broad patterns of organizing efforts that take place in an organization

Law explicitly challenges traditional sociology's assumptions about a coherent social order by arguing:

> *"Perhaps there is ordering, but there is certainly no order... The idea that there is a single order ('the' social order) goes... And finally, the notion that social ordering is simply social disappears. Rather, what we call the social is materially heterogeneous: talk, bodies, texts, machines, architectures, all of these and many more are implicated in and perform the 'social'." (Law, 1993, pp. 1–2)*

Empirically, Law identifies four specific modes of ordering at Daresbury Laboratory: enterprise (competitive management), administration (bureaucratic efficiency), vision (strategic leadership), and vocation (scientific integrity) (Law, 1993, p.76). Importantly, these modes are not mutually exclusive or stable; they coexist and compete, empowering some practices while marginalizing others: *"Each ordering mode tells of ranking, and each tells of the (lowly status of?) other modes of ordering."* (Law, 1993, p. 116). Modes of ordering thus generate materially heterogeneous entities—agents, devices, social relations, texts, and infrastructures—that shape organizational life. In other words, in any organization, there are always multiple modes of ordering, none of which will ever be able to achieve full control.

Law's analytical framework rests on four core principles which guides what he calls "a modest sociology": symmetry, non-reduction, reflexivity, and recursion. Symmetry entails treating all social phenomena—humans, technologies, discourses—on equal analytical terms. Non-reduction means abandoning single-principle explanations; the social cannot be explained by recourse to "a last instance." Recursion describes the self-generating, processual nature of the social: *"... the image that we have to discard is that of a social oil refinery. Society is not a lot of social products moving round in structural pipes and containers... Instead, the social world is this remarkable emergent phenomenon: in its processes it shapes its own flows"* (p. 15). And finally, reflexivity requires researchers to recognize that they are also part of the networks they study: *"We too are products. If we make pools of sense or order, then these too are local and recursive effects..."* (p. 16). These principles guide our analysis by reminding us not to privilege

either technology or human action, but rather to examine their ongoing entanglements and recursive relations.

In our analysis, we utilize Law's 'modes of ordering' as a sensitizing device. When examining how the three organizations encountered the new IT system, we will tune into ordering projects that may already have been there and that may have configured, recruited, or mobilized the IT system to pursue certain purposes and ideals. In all of the cases, we will identify a primary ordering project that became a prominent driver for the implementation of the new system.

Case, methods, and analytical strategy

The case studies reported in this article were derived from the authors' participation in a Danish research and development project called Enabling the Matching of Volunteers (EMOVE)—a four-year project aimed at developing knowledge and tools that could help CSOs organize their workflows and make the right decisions when matching large numbers of volunteers, such as participants in a mentor–mentee program or a home visiting scheme.

EMOVE was sponsored by Innovation Fund Denmark and carried out between 2021 and 2024 by researchers from the Copenhagen Centre for Health Research in the Humanities (CoRe) at the University of Copenhagen, the Techno-Anthropology Lab (TANTlab) at Aalborg University, and Kople ApS, a private developer of software for the volunteer sector. The premise for EMOVE was the following argument: CSOs that are currently handling a continual task of matching volunteers in a somewhat 'handheld' way (e.g., by using a shared spreadsheet) may soon find that the matchmaking task will become far more complicated. The likely sources of complication may be increasing numbers of volunteers, turnover of staff, new demands regarding how to handle internal processes (e.g., the GDPR), or pressures to account for internal processes vis-à-vis funders and other external stakeholders. Responding to these new complications, EMOVE took as its main task to develop a comprehensive system that would support all aspects of the matchmaking process, from the registration of potential participants and the process of matching people to the follow-up on established matches and documentation of the entire process. The system also enabled all parts of communication with volunteers, including phone calls, messages, and emails (Thorsen et al. 2024).

It almost goes without saying that implementing a comprehensive IT system such as the one discussed above was not a small thing for the organizations. Not only did the process of configuring and implementing the system into specific organizations require the learning of many new routines, work practices, and technical skills, but it also caused members of the CSOs to raise 'existential' questions about what the organization was doing, who should be doing it, and how.

To support the iterative design process of the EMOVE project, three CSOs—Alzheimerforeningen (the Alzheimer's Association), Foreningen Lige Adgang (The Association Equal Access), and Foreningen Sammen På Tværs (The Association Together Across)—were involved in the entire process, starting from the first prototype in 2021. The early and intimate involvement of three organizations allowed the researchers to establish a prolonged engagement, enabling a comprehensive understanding of how digital transformation was taking place. In the EMOVE project, the two university partners had a series of opportunities to follow and investigate the evolving encounters between organizations and the new system. In the early stages of EMOVE, we conducted a study of how specific matches were handled and experienced by the people who were matched by the CSOs (Bygballe & Jespersen 2023). We interviewed members of CSOs about their current matchmaking practices. We organized several cocreation workshops, bringing together software developers with the future users of the system from the CSOs. Additionally, we conducted a comprehensive study of the software developers' design practices, focusing on how they received, interpreted, and handled user input at various stages of the development process (Elgaard Jensen & Thorsen 2023). Finally, but crucially, Bygballe (the first author of this article) and Thorsen (a research assistant from TANTlab) played very active roles in the phase where the three organizations were implementing the new IT system and onboarding their employees. Bygballe and Thorsen were physically present in the organizations for an extended period of time, acting both as advisors on the system to the employees and as liaisons conveying potential bugs and misunderstandings to the software developers. As active participant observers, they were able to gather a comprehensive overview of a broad range of aspirations and problems that developed with and around the new IT system. After the implementation phase, Bygballe continued the dialogue with the companies, giving her further insights into the roles and functions that the IT system came to play over time.

The variety of activities described above generated a substantial collection of empirical material from 27 qualitative interviews, 3 focus group interviews, 36 development and feedback meetings, 10 workshops, 16 participant observation sessions, and 5 online diaries. The material was transcribed and coded using NVivo software. The coding and subsequent analyses were inspired by the thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke 2006). In our analytical process, Law's "modes of ordering" also served as a coding lens: we identified instances where the IT system was linked to particular goals, logics, or concerns. These patterns were then used to trace how each organization enacted different ordering projects around the same technology.

In accordance with the GDPR, all interlocutors gave either written or oral consent. For this article, we drew primarily on material focusing on the implementation processes within the participating organizations. The interlocutors quoted in the article have been named using their title in their organization.

Analysis

A shared key characteristic of the three organizations is their engagement in matchmaking programs. These programs focus on pairing volunteers with specific target groups based on compatibility, fostering social interactions and providing care to individuals in vulnerable life situations. Compatibility is typically determined by a combination of practical considerations, such as proximity or availability, and personal preferences (e.g., shared interests or hobbies). For certain target groups, additional factors are considered; for example, when matching individuals with dementia, it is important to understand the type of dementia they have and the stage of its progression. Similarly, in mentorship programs, factors like professional experience within a specific field play a crucial role.

The success of the matched pairs hinges on the quality of the match, the ability of the match to establish a social relationship, and the organizational capacity to provide ongoing support to ensure that the relationships continue to function smoothly over time (Bygballe & Jespersen 2023). Thus, ongoing involvement and communication are often necessary to ensure a successful match. The matchmaking process typically begins with an automated screening phase, where volunteers fill out forms or questionnaires to provide initial information. This is followed by personalized assessments, such as interviews, allowing a match leader to get a picture of a volunteer's personality and specific needs. While the details of this process vary across organizations, certain principles remain the same: good matchmaking requires expertise and relies on a matchmaker's ability to get a deep understanding of the individual circumstances of both volunteers and target group. Thus, matchmaking is a form of care work that is very much mediated through the materiality of IT systems, phone calls, and emails, and it often lacks the face-to-face contact synonymous with other types of traditional welfare care work. The role of the new IT system developed in the EMOVE project is therefore multifaceted. It facilitates coordination and documentation, and match leaders rely on the system to document interactions, maintain participant profiles, and support ongoing relationships through regular reminders.

In the following analysis, we describe the organizing work, concerns and logics done in each organization as part of the IT implementation process. The ordering efforts illustrate how the IT system become embedded in organizational contexts, simultaneously shaping and being shaped by existing practices. The ordering modes are not static structures but ongoing processes through which actors attempt to stabilize meaning, manage complexity, and enact coherence within the fluidity of everyday organizational life. For each of the three cases, we begin with a brief introduction to the organization and its specific conditions and challenges. We then describe how the organization implemented and adapted to the new IT system and how it developed specific practices, procedures, and workarounds that gradually, and often with some friction, allowed the system to become incorporated into work practices. Finally, we explicate the specific ordering projects in which the system became a part in the organizations.

Equal Access: Uncertain funding and large turnover of temporary staff

Equal Access works to ensure equal access to education, employment, and community for everyone in Denmark, with a special emphasis on people of minority ethnic backgrounds. Founded in 1998, the association initially focused on integrating ethnic minority groups into the labor market under the name 'Forening Nydansker', the New Danes Association. Today, it promotes diversity and inclusion in collaboration with businesses, public institutions, and volunteers. Its key initiative is a mentorship program, where experienced professionals guide individuals from vulnerable groups, helping them navigate educational and career challenges. The organization's goal is to foster a more inclusive society where everyone can contribute to and benefit from a diverse work force. Despite its long-established presence, Equal Access operates with a relatively small headquarters. The organization has fluctuated in size over the years due to changing funding opportunities, a challenge common to many CSOs in Denmark. During our fieldwork, we observed that the organization managed a volunteer-based mentorship program that handled multiple collaborative projects with educational institutions and businesses across Denmark.

Given the size of its mentorship programs and the high turnover of employees consisting mainly of student assistants and interns, Equal Access recognized the need for an IT system that could standardize its workflows by aligning work practices and facilitating the transfer of knowledge, ensuring that critical information was not lost when employees left:

> It's our students and interns who are involved in matchmaking, where I'm more involved in the coordinating part. But I remember when I was a student and intern myself and was involved in matching; making a match took almost less time than the administrative part of it! Because you had to register and connect and send emails to this and that, and you also had to go into that email and change from one to the other, then you must attach files and send instructions, and you also had to remember to send an SMS and to remember to write down *everything* you've done. It just meant that sometimes, I could spend like two hours on matching and then spend the rest of the day just doing the administrative part. … The new IT system is just more efficient in terms of our interns' and students' time. (Project leader, 2022)

While the implementation of the IT system initially disrupted existing routines and required the reordering of workflows, the system emerged as a crucial stabilizing force enabling the more efficient use of time on the core task of matching and continuity, despite an ever-changing workforce.

> An intern working as a match leader highlighted the IT system's utility:
> I've been really pleased with the note function in the system this week. As I am finishing my internship at the end of June and need to transfer my mentoring

responsibilities to my colleagues, I've appreciated being able to document how the process has generally gone and what the next person should be particularly mindful of. It's fantastic that I can write a note that appears on both the mentor's and mentee's profiles. (Employed match leader, 2023)

The quote underscores the system's role in creating stability by standardizing the documentation of mentor–mentee relationships. The IT system provides a shared repository of knowledge that ensures smooth transitions between staff, which is particularly important for Equal Access, as it has many interns and student workers who are only employed for a limited time.
Even though the IT system does provide critical and highly needed stabilizing infrastructure, staff had to navigate around the system to uphold their care responsibilities:

My work phone rang; it was a young girl. She told me that her family did not know about her dreams of becoming a pharmacist or that she was calling us to get help. She was under a lot of social control; they controlled her phone as well by going through call lists and text messages. But as we must be able to stay in contact to provide her with a mentor, we arranged that only I would contact her, and I would call from my private number. I even made up a story in case one of her parents or siblings called back to check the number. This makes it crucial that I'm the main contact person for her and that my colleagues are aligned with this. We also need to keep her information safe and ensure we don't accidentally send a text about the mentorship program to her phone. (Employed match leader, 2021)

The quote illustrates the very careful handling of a highly precarious situation, where the match leader from Equal Access took informal, adaptive actions outside the system's standardized workflows. By navigating a limitation in the IT system's design that could have inadvertently compromised the young girl's situation, the match leader ensured the young girl's safety and confidentiality.
Another match leader pointed to another instance where the set-up of the IT system forced a staff member to work with parallel practices due to a potential risk of mishandling sensitive information:

Overall, I don't think the system has worked optimally for my tasks this week. I haven't used it extensively this week because I think it poses a lot of problems to my work. It's crucial for me to maintain trust and confidentiality with project participants. This week, I've been thinking a lot about how it's inappropriate that the journal function called 'note' is located so close to the 'communication' section. We simply risk sending journal notes as a message, which could have serious consequences for our relationships with the participants. (Employed match leader, 2023)
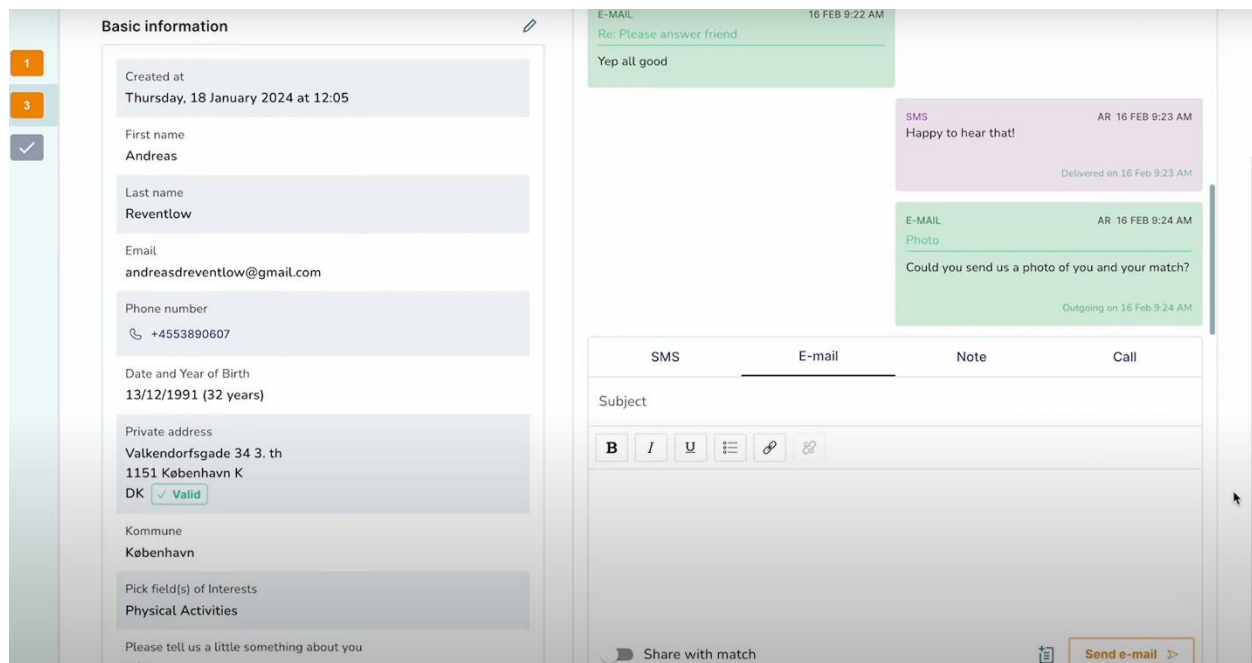
Photo 1: Screenshot of the IT system showing the communication and note function.

These concerns, combined with the earlier account, emphasize the mixed role of the IT system. While it facilitates standardization by organizing and storing critical information, its design also necessitates workarounds and parallel practices to safeguard the target group's welfare. These practices reveal the interplay between the benefits of the system's standardization capabilities and the human oversight required to maintain an ethical and effective matchmaking program.

In sum, the Equal Access case is an example of how the IT system was received and made a part of an ordering project focused on *standardizing* work practices. The IT system clearly achieved a measure of success in this respect; the organization members cited several examples of how the standard procedure and automatic logging in the new system made their work practices more efficient. At the same time, however, the organization members recognized the importance of a very different kind of ordering project. Some cases need to be handled with great care and confidentiality, indicating a concern with creating individual ad hoc solutions. The key issue that the organization appeared to be handling with the implementation of the new system was how to balance between two different ordering projects; it attempted to reap the benefits of standardizing work while leaving enough room for the ad hoc handling of delicate individual cases.

Alzheimer's Association: Holding together a scattered multitude of local departments

The Alzheimer's Association is dedicated to improving the lives of individuals affected by Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia. The Alzheimer's Association was founded in 1997 and has since grown into a significant patient association supporting individuals affected by

dementia. The association has approximately 8,000 members (Alzheimer's Association 2024). These members include individuals with dementia, their families, caregivers, and supporters. Its primary aim is to provide support, information, and advocacy for those living with these conditions and their families and caregivers.

The Alzheimer's Association has 13 local departments across Denmark, offering a range of activities and opportunities for engagement. One example is the so-called Activity Friends program, where a person with dementia is matched with a volunteer to engage in activities such as walking, having coffee, or playing board games. The Activity Friends program is managed by a project leader in the headquarters of the Alzheimer's Association, who collaborates with a large number of local volunteer match leaders across Denmark. These volunteers are the primary actors in matchmaking. The project leader described the need for an IT system as follows: 'I needed a system that could help me support and facilitate the work of the volunteer match leaders, and when I heard that this IT system had everything integrated, I knew we had to try it' (Project leader, 2021). This quote illustrates the project leader's perceived need for a more efficient way of managing volunteer activities. Prior to the IT system's implementation, volunteer activities were managed through various platforms, including emails, Facebook Messenger, Excel spreadsheets, printed contact sheets, and private phones.

The IT system was thus envisioned to be a tool for standardizing and stabilizing the multitude of scattered everyday practices of the organization. The hope was that it would act as a shared infrastructure supporting collaboration across the 13 branches and the head office.
While the project leader was enthusiastic about the new system, many of the volunteer match leaders were more ambivalent. The volunteer match leaders initially received the IT system with cautious optimism. They were interested in its potential and put effort into learning the system. However, many found the system constraining in some respects and began to develop workaround practices.

An employee at the Alzheimer's Association headquarters described how two volunteer match leaders responded to the new IT system:

> Well, Henriette and Ida have probably been the hardest to get onboard, and I think they are still running their own system. … They also have a lot of registrations (people to match), so for them, it's about keeping track of who has been waiting the longest, and things like that. For instance, they don't use the 'start matching' function. They talk about it internally before they proceed, but they also work very closely together, so it works fine for them. But yes, we've spoken to them about how important it is to document what they're doing in the IT system. I think they've also used their personal phones a lot. … They put a lot of effort into it, and I think they're the type of people who say, 'Now that we have our own system, it can't just be changed by headquarters'. (Employee, 2022)

This quote illustrates the friction that can arise when volunteers who have developed their own methods and routines are asked to conform to a standardized system. Henriette's and Ida's practices of using informal communication and personal phones clearly diverge from the intended workflows of the IT system. However, since they do eventually enter their matchmaking decision into the system, it is possible for employees at the headquarters to keep an eye on their activities. Therefore, while the system's intentions to standardize workflows was unsuccessful in this case, it still worked as a tool for coordination.

Other volunteers who were also skeptical about the system did not keep up their previous work practices. The volunteer match leader, who was mentioned in relation to the opening quote of this article, described how the system's interruptions and problems led her to doubt her own competence and to consider quitting her volunteer work: 'Because of these problems, I sometimes lose the motivation to work with it, especially when it's only me in the system—during holidays, weekends, or in the mornings' (Volunteer match leader, 2023). The headquarters appeared to be well aware of the risk of frustrating and losing volunteers. As one project leader put it, 'Volunteers are like sand in your hands—if you squeeze too tightly, the sand will slip through your fingers' (Project leader, 2021).

One of the specific features of the IT system that was discussed widely within the organization was the creation of so-called host profiles, which is the registration in the system of a new participant in the program. Again, the issue of standardization came into focus. The host profile is used when a volunteer match leader in the Alzheimer's Association has an initial interview with a dementia patient or a family member. After this, the volunteer writes key information into a text field in the system. In the text field, the Alzheimer's Association has provided a series of predefined questions as guidelines. One volunteer developed a practice of taking notes in a notebook during interviews and then later transferring these into text that follows the guidelines in the system. Another volunteer began by deleting all the predefined questions, which he found 'a bit too square for my taste' (Volunteer match leader 2023). Instead, he jotted down notes in the system, which he reviewed and saved immediately after a conversation. As these cases show, the organization made no efforts to enforce a standard work procedure, but at the same time, the volunteers did facilitate coordination by entering relevant material into the text field, which can later be read by others.

In sum, the Alzheimer's Association mobilized the IT system for a specific ordering project, namely coordinating a heterogeneous multitude of volunteers and local units. The coordination effort therefore centered on registering and sharing the *outcomes* of activities (who is being matched and what key information have we collected about them), but it refrained from attempting to standardize the ways in which these activities are conducted. The project of ordering the coordination of the organization thus coexisted with a considerable variety of different practices.

However, the coordination process was not only challenged by the variety of practices, it also depended on them, since the motivation of the volunteers appeared to be closely connected to their freedom to do things in their own ways. The space for coordination via the IT system was thus bounded and limited by the necessary existence of other more independent and erratic ways of ordering work in the organization.

Together Across: Responding to demands for professionalization and accountability

Together Across matches Danish seniors with newcomers to Denmark who are in the process of learning and practicing their Danish. On its homepage, the organization states that it 'aims to foster connections across generations and cultures and support the unique resources and life experiences of seniors to enhance social cohesion and contribute to societal unity'. The services developed by Together Across have gained significant interest from municipalities and private foundations that either wish to buy or support its services due to their ability to address the increasing societal challenge of loneliness. Together Across has grown significantly over the last few years, and, as of 2024, operates in more than 70 municipalities across Denmark. Its main business consisted of contracts with municipalities that hired Together Across to deliver the service of matching a specified number of seniors and foreigners. Despite this growth, all the matchmaking was carried out by a small team of employees in an office in Copenhagen.

With respect to its IT system, Together Across is in a somewhat different situation than the previously discussed organizations. From the early beginnings of the organization, Together Across invested in developing its own IT system to handle the ever-expanding number of matches. The system developed by Together Across shares many features with the system developed in the EMOVE project, although the new system also represented a significant update, not least because the new system incorporated all communication channels (phone, text, and emails). In addition to an earlier IT system, Together Across had also developed a rather efficient mode of coordinating activities and sharing knowledge; this occurred both by writing shared notes in the earlier system and by verbal communication in the shared office space where all matchmakers were located. However, despite the efficient internal operations and digital preparedness of Together Across, the transition to and fit with the new IT system was not always seamless:

> One employed match leader finds a great match, which she considers whether to make or not. The match persons are located in an area that currently is not part of any contract. However, she knows that a contract will start there in a few months. If she makes the match now, it will be considered 'free work', which would be unwise from a business perspective, although she is eager to match the two people who fit perfectly in her eyes. This leads to a larger exploration into how to 'reserve' the match or the match persons within the IT system. She can't figure out how she can postpone the match and whether her colleague, who will have responsibility over that area when the contract starts, can see the match if

she matches them. She discusses the matter with another employed match leader, and they begin a collective exploration into the system to find a solution. However, they end up writing a manual note to make sure that they remember it. (Over-the-shoulder participant observation note, 2022)

The episode described above is a somewhat peculiar case, but it is indicative of the type of operation that Together Across is running. The organization must constantly negotiate contracts with municipalities. As a part of this, the organization must have updated knowledge of how many matches it has created and in which contexts, as well as how many of these matches are still working, that is, if the seniors and foreigners are still meeting with each other on a regular basis.

The demand for this kind of knowledge was top of mind when Together Across was engaging with the new IT system. The manager of the organization asked for an easy way of extracting information about how many people were matched within a certain area and for how long. This information was needed for meetings with municipalities and other existing or potential clients. The first versions of the new IT system were clearly not attuned to this information demand, leading to a rather frustrated evaluation from the manager:

> The reporting tool (in the IT system) is still really bad. Everything is in English, and there are 537 rows, so you can't get an overview at all, and it's not clear what the numbers represent. I realized that I spend *way* too much time on reporting because the system doesn't deliver what we thought it would. It's basically not a report, just an Excel sheet with raw data—here you go! I think that's quite problematic. I wish I could just create my own system by combining, for example, SurveyMonkey, SurveyExact, and conventional CRM systems like Salesforce. (Manager at Together Across, December 2024)

The question of the quality and relevance of the reporting tools remained a contentious issue between Together Across and the IT developers throughout the project. At the end of the field work, the reporting tools had been improved, but the issue had not been resolved.

In summary, the case of Together Across illustrates an organization that was well-versed in using an IT system for standardizing its internal processes and coordination. With these parts of its operations in place, for Together Across, the implementation of the new system became an occasion to demand resources and tools that would equip management to quickly produce descriptions of the matchmaking work conducted by the organization. This type of ordering aimed at forging relations with municipalities that would hire Together Across to perform specific tasks. The organization tried but was ultimately frustrated in its attempts to mobilize the IT system as a part of its ongoing concerns and efforts to perform the role of a professional volunteer organization to which the welfare state would outsource specific tasks.

Discussion

In this article, we outlined some of the conditions for the current digitalization of volunteer work in Denmark. We noted the changing and broadening of the collaboration between civil society and the welfare state, leading to new tensions between professionalization and volunteerism, and in some instances, to a growing focus on performance metrics, documentation, and accountability. We also mentioned the pervasive digitalization of the Danish public and private sectors in recent decades, creating a situation where CSOs have sometimes been depicted as lagging behind. Finally, we covered some of the current discourse on the digitalization of the volunteer sector, where some commentators have made the clearly normative claim that the volunteer sector should begin acting like the private sector. Others, via broad cross-sectional studies, have argued that there are certain features of CSOs, such as the age and competences of volunteers, that hinder the successful adoption of new digital technologies. In the second part of the article, we reported our own ethnographic study of three Danish CSOs in the process of implementing an IT system. Our analysis was guided by the notion of modes ordering (Law 1993), which suggests that when technologies are made available to organizations, their members tend to mobilize the technologies to further some of the ongoing ordering projects—rationales, logics, or agendas—of the organizations. Following this line of argument, we explored how each of the three organizations appeared to have a primary ordering project into which the IT system became configured and incorporated among multiple modes of ordering in each organization.

For all the organizations, the first and perhaps most obvious observation was that the IT system did not do anything by itself. The software designers had 'hardwired' certain ideas into the system, such as the assumption that the organizations would configure the system to build a standardized workflow, which all members of the organizations would then follow. This *technical* configuration of the system happened in all cases, but what this meant to the organization and how standardized the work actually became were an entirely different matter, which was only brought into focus when we examining which ordering projects the system was made a part of.

In Equal Access, the IT system became a part of an effort to standardize the workflows and the registering of information. This standardization was crucial to the organization because it had always dealt with significant staff turnover. Accordingly, the leadership of the organization considered it a great benefit that the new IT system automatically saved and logged a great deal of information, as opposed to previously when volunteers had to remember to register information in a proper way.

In the Alzheimer's Association, the IT system became a part of an effort to coordinate and keep together a large and scattered organization with a multitude of different local departments and a large number of very committed long-term volunteers. The aspect of the IT system that was useful

to the organization was thus the features allowing the registering of what *had been done*, rather than the system's affordances to standardize how the work *should be done*.

Together Across was experienced in using a somewhat similar IT system and was therefore well-versed in using an IT system for coordination and work process standardization purposes. With the advent of the new system, the leaders had hoped for the IT system to become a part of their ongoing efforts to operate in a market where the organization would sell its matchmaking services to municipalities. In this context, the most appreciated features of the systems was its (currently only partially developed) ability to generate reports and data visualization that leaders could use to document the organization's work to external stakeholders and to convince them of the quality and efficiency of the organization's services.

Our observations of the different primary ordering projects across the three organizations led us to some general reflections on how to think about the digital transformation of the volunteer sector. In our view, it is unproductive to search for general factors that would make these organizations 'resistant to change' or prevent them from getting up to speed with the digitalization of the rest of society. The variety of implementation processes that we observed in our ethnographic study suggests that it is more relevant to ask what ordering projects these organizations can promote and facilitate by adopting digital technologies and resources. It is evident that there are many different answers to this question, and it therefore follows that one system implementation approach does not fit all. A standardized digital strategy, or a standardized configuration and implementation process, is likely to be counterproductive.

While our cases demonstrate some of the different benefits that may be achieved by the implementation of the IT system, it is also evident that the process comes with certain costs and risks. In addition to the financial costs of IT systems, it takes time and effort to learn new systems and adjust existing work practices. Several of our interlocutors also pointed to the ever-present risk of frustrating and losing volunteers. Since CSOs depend on unpaid labor that is motivated by the willingness to help others, CSOs must tread carefully when requiring change or when attempting to streamline idiosyncratic ways of carrying out work. At the same time, members of CSOs are also actors of contemporary society, where digitally mediated organizations have become the new normal. Despite the bumpy road ahead and the ongoing investment of effort required, each of the organizations seems to have found a unique way of making the features of the system serve a relevant purpose and support the core task of matchmaking. Across the three organizations, we observed that the meticulous involvement of people across the organizations and the long and tedious process of getting used to the new system combined with the possibility of getting human support from the company behind the IT system play a significant role in making the implementation of the system meaningful. With this article, we contribute to the literature on civil society digitalization by offering an ethnographic account of how a digital tool is implemented within three distinct organizational contexts. Through an STS-inspired analysis, we show that digitalization is not a linear or seamless process, but one embedded in heterogeneous

and sometimes competing organizational ordering logics. The future digital transformation of CSOs is likely to proceed in an uneven manner, just like the present-day digitalization of these organizations. In our view, the best way to support this process is to be aware of the peculiar circumstance of CSOs in a digitized welfare state and to remain curious about the different ordering processes of different organizations.

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Article 3

Temporal tensions in civil society

An ethnological exploration of civil society organizations navigating between voluntarism and professionalism in the Danish welfare state

Abstract

As civil society organizations (CSOs) take on expanded roles in welfare provision through closer collaboration with public and private institutions, new organizational hybrids are emerging—blending logics of public and private sector professionalism into the infrastructure of social volunteer work. This article applies temporality as an analytical lens to unfold how processes of professionalization in civil society, shaped by logics of efficiency, acceleration, and digitalization, generate temporal tensions within CSOs engaged in social volunteer matchmaking activities. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork among CSOs working with social volunteer activities and Judy Wajcman's theory of time and technology (2015), the article identifies opposing temporal modes of working: "Always-on," characterized by fast-paced, automatized, and digital-driven practices, and "Slow-down," grounded in relational care, presence, and situational judgment. Rather than dichotomies, they exist within CSOs, where they are continually calibrated and negotiated according to diverse logics of professionalism. The article conceptualizes these negotiations and calibrations between temporal tensions through the analytical figure of *careful arrangements*. This figure makes visible how these negotiations take place through assemblages of people, care practices, digital platforms, and welfare actors in a constant flux. The article argues that in times of accelerated, digitally mediated sectoral collaboration, it is crucial to foreground slow-paced, emotionally attuned engagement to sustain social volunteer matchmaking programs.

Keywords volunteering, professionalism, temporality, welfare, digitization

Introduction

"Some days, I feel like I'm being pulled between two very different speeds. This IT system really pushes for volume; process as many volunteer matches as possible, send reminders, get the documentation done, move on to the next case. But the volunteers just move at another pace. They need to prepare, to understand what's expected, to feel ready. That means long phone calls, detailed guidance, and time to build trust. If I try to hurry them, it only turns out badly—I tried it! Then they lose their sense of safety or confidence and stop altogether. Other times, I get them into a match that's not really good because I haven't been careful enough in the process, and then it falls apart. [...] You know, we work with a lot municipalities across Denmark to prevent loneliness among people who are especially vulnerable to it. Our social volunteer activity is free for the participants, but we work under contracts with the municipalities, who fund us. In return, we ensure that people are matched, do everything we can to build and support stable social relationships, and document it all. We have to report on everything—from the length of the relationship to whether it made them feel less lonely. It's professionalized down to the smallest detail. But still, so much depends on the human work of building a connection."

(Employed match leader, Association Together Across, Interview, 2023)

This statement, from the match leader of a national volunteer association that matches Danish senior citizens and people with migrant backgrounds, captures a transformation taking place within Danish civil society. It is not volunteers themselves but civil society organization (CSO) staff who are responsible for managing, matching, and documenting interactions between volunteers and participants.

While social volunteering activity remains "voluntary" in its delivery—based on unpaid, relational engagement—the infrastructure around it has become professionalized, shaped by contractual collaborations with municipalities, systems of accountability, and performance reporting requirements, most often facilitated through digital platforms and tools by a mix of employed and volunteer actors.

This development reflects a trend in which CSOs are increasingly integrated into the welfare work of delivering soft welfare services once considered the domain of the state (Højgaard, 2024; Kaspersen & Egholm, 2023). As collaborations between civil society, also known as the "third sector," public institutions, and private actors deepen, boundaries between the voluntary, public, and private sectors become more blurred. In Denmark, CSOs have traditionally complemented the welfare state by offering relational and trust-based services that public institutions are less equipped to provide (Espersen, 2024; Sevelsted, 2022).

Volunteer work is deeply embedded in a social democratic model that values collective responsibility and citizen participation (Grubb & Henriksen, 2018). As the welfare state evolves and faces demographic and economic pressures, civil society is increasingly called upon to take on welfare responsibilities, particularly in fields requiring relational, trust-based engagement and long-term presence (Espersen, 2024; Grubb & Henriksen, 2018)

These transformations are very much evident in Denmark's political landscape, where civil society is increasingly mobilized as a strategic actor in public welfare policy. For example, the Senior Citizens Act (Ældrelov, 2024) and the 10-year plan for psychiatry (10-årsplan for psykiatrien, 2025) position CSOs as partners in delivering and supporting related tasks.

Linked to the transformations are structural changes and temporal rearrangements. Volunteer-based organizations, especially those working to support people in vulnerable life situations[1],

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[1] I use the phrase *"people in vulnerable life situations"* to emphasize that vulnerability is not an inherent personal trait but arises through contingent circumstances. Following Butler's account of precariousness (2009/2016) as a universal condition of human dependency and exposure, and her later articulation of vulnerability (2016) as relational and shaped by social, institutional, and political contexts, I understand vulnerability as situational. It may emerge for anyone over the course of a life—through migration, illness, or mental health challenges—and is always conditioned by the environments and infrastructures in which people are embedded.

are increasingly expected to comply with formal standards of efficiency, accountability, and digital management to obtain funding and maintain partnerships with public institutions. Transformations are increasingly shaped by new public management logics in which acceleration is embedded with technologies promising speed, efficiency, and reach. However, they also introduce constant availability, responsiveness, and (presumably) ensured quality through documentation and regulation (Andersen, 2018; Kaspersen & Egholm 2023). These developments bring CSOs closer to public- and private-sector operational models, raising critical questions about the meaning and practice of volunteer work.

For many CSOs working with people in vulnerable life situations, this created tensions. As the opening statement emphasized, this professionalization brings with it new temporal demands: the acceleration of processes, expectation of constant availability, and measurement of outcomes in standardized timeframes, all of which must coexist with the slower, relational temporality of care—a rhythm shaped by the time it takes to build trust, understand the needs of a particular person, and adapt support as relationships unfold. In this mode, progress cannot be rushed or easily quantified; it depends on presence, attentiveness, and interactions developing at the pace of those involved.

Research focus and aim

Applying temporality as an analytical lens, this article investigates how processes of professionalization reshape both the organizational structures of CSOs and the temporal practices of their volunteers and employees. Specifically, the aim is *to analyze how Danish CSO actors navigate and negotiate the temporal tensions between voluntarism and professionalism.*

The article is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted among Danish CSOs that facilitate social matchmaking activities for people living under precarious and vulnerable conditions. Drawing on the material, I aim to demonstrate how diverse forms of professionalization are enacted and negotiated in everyday practices among CSO volunteers and employees.

I draw theoretical inspiration from feminist science and technology studies (STS) scholar Judy Wajcman's work on time and technology (2015). Wajcman's work is placed in the intersection of digital technology, temporality, and inequality, and I build on it by applying a temporal lens to understand how capitalist and bureaucratic ideologies are embedded in digital infrastructures

and shape the structure, practice, and experience of time in social volunteer work. Her perspectives enable analysis of how professional norms are experienced through time pressures, communication rhythms, expectations of availability, and emotional labor.

The article identifies opposing temporal modes of working: "always-on," characterized by fast-paced, automatized, and digital-driven practices, and "slow-down," grounded in relational care, presence, and situational judgment.

These temporalities do not simply exist side by side—they are continually negotiated in the practices of volunteer coordination. They are not on equal terms: the slower, care-driven mode is increasingly under pressure from the accelerated tempos of contractual obligations and digital management, requiring ongoing, careful arrangements to keep it in play. The negotiation between them can be understood through analytical figure of 'careful arrangements.' With it, I seek to capture assemblages of carefully orchestrated networks of people, technologies, work practices, digital platforms, and welfare actors. These are sustained through continuous negotiation and agreement about how volunteer work should be performed.

Tracing how 'careful arrangements' manage these tensions, the article shows how temporal negotiation is central to sustaining the relational qualities of volunteering in an accelerated welfare landscape. It thus makes an ethnographic contribution to civil society studies that examine the hybridization of the sector and the tensions between formal structures and relational, care-based work, engaging with discussions about civil society's evolving role within the hybrid welfare state (Eimhjellen et al., 2018; Henriksen et al., 2018; la Cour, 2014; Trætteberg & Sivesind, 2020).

Methodology

Multi-Sited Ethnographic Fieldwork

This article is based on ethnographic fieldwork for my doctoral dissertation in 2020–2025 (Steen Bygballe 2025), which entailed a multi-faceted, multi-sited design (Falzon, 2009; Marcus, 1995; Van Duijn, 2020) to examine the interplay between digitalization, professionalization, and the lived temporal experiences of volunteers and staff in Danish CSOs engaged in social matchmaking activities in support of people in vulnerable situations, which is also known as "visiting services" (Pedersen, 2023). These CSOs operate in a hybrid space relying on paid staff, public contracts, and volunteers in structured roles, reflecting both professional norms and elements of autonomy and relational value.

The research was focused on how professionalism and digital systems are enacted and temporally negotiated (Ballestero &Winthereik, 2021; Damsholt & Jespersen, 2014; Löfgren & Ehn, 2010). The approach allowed for exploration of the complex, context-dependent processes through which "always-on" and "slow-down" temporalities are negotiated.

Field Sites and data collection

This article draws on two ethnographic field sites.

Site 1: The EMOVE Project

The primary field site, where most fieldwork was conducted, was situated within the research and development project EMOVE – Enabling the Matching of Volunteers. EMOVE was funded by Innovation Fund Denmark and a collaboration between researchers from the Techno-Anthropology Lab (TANTlab) at Aalborg University Copenhagen, the Copenhagen Centre for Health Research in the Humanities (CoRe) at the University of Copenhagen, and Kople ApS, a private software developer for volunteering. The key aim of the project was to develop knowledge and tools improve digital volunteer matching by CSOs working with people in vulnerable life situations.

In practice this meant co-developing the IT system, Kople, through which all parts of social volunteer matchmaking could take place. The design and development process have been dealt with by collogues from the EMOVE research team (Elgaard & Thorsen 2023).

The ethnographic fieldwork was conducted at three Danish CSOs that co-developed and used Kople over a three-year period: The Alzheimer's Association (*Alzheimerforeningen*), the Association Equal Access (*Lige Adgang*), and the Association Together Across (*Sammen på Tværs*). Each coordinates volunteer-based one-on-one relationships with people in vulnerable life situations, targeting respectively individuals with dementia and their relatives in need of support for social activities, ethnic minority groups and people with migrant backgrounds seeking support through mentorship for education and work, and—within *Sammen på Tværs*—both elderly citizens and people with migrant backgrounds seeking social and linguistic support.

Other members of the research team were two professors, two research assistants, one student worker, and one PhD.

Ten workshops were conducted with the partner CSOs to understand their technical infrastructures and the practical, ethical, and organizational dilemmas encountered in processes

of digital transformation. They also functioned as collaborative design spaces (Nicolini, 2012). The CSOs used various digital tools. Two of the CSOs of them employed custom-built systems with automated reminders, digital surveys, and customer relationship management functions, while one CSO utilized more informal solutions, including spreadsheets, emails, and social media platforms.

Thirteen semi-structured interviews were held with match leaders (volunteers and employees), and fourteen project managers and organizational directors. The interviews explored how staff and volunteers understood and practiced their roles, how they perceived the introduction of digital systems, and how these developments influenced relational work, workflow, motivation, and organizational culture.

Participant observations (N=16) took place both physically in organizational offices (each 2–5 hours) and digitally via video conferencing platforms (≤2 hours). In these sessions, I followed paid employees and volunteers in their role as match leaders. In this role, they work with matching the organization's volunteers with their target group.

I followed the daily work activities of the match leaders as they used Kople for all matchmaking steps. Online participant observations were of volunteer match leaders who coordinated entirely from home. They shared their screen with me so I could follow their work tasks. This contributed insights into how digital platforms reconfigure both spatial and temporal aspects of volunteer work.

As Kople became more established and more CSOs started to apply the system, I initiated focus groups (N=3); one for the CSOs engaged in the EMOVE project and two for all the CSOs that used the system. The focus groups were centered on knowledge-sharing and best practices and provided them with a closed forum to air frustrations with the system that might not get through to the IT company otherwise. For instance, in one workshop, a match leader from a small CSO described how some of the automated reminders about upcoming social volunteer meetings went out on Sunday mornings, which she worried was *"too interfering with their private life"* for volunteer work. As it turned out, she could easily change the time and date of the automated reminders, but she had not known how to do so before meeting other match leaders at the focus group. This was one of many field encounters that attuned my attention to the role of time in matchmaking activities.

Site 2: Network for Visiting Services in Denmark

The second site for ethnographic fieldwork was in the Network for Visiting Services in Denmark, a collaborative peer-to-peer forum for CSOs engaged in volunteer-driven social support for people in vulnerable or precarious life situations. I participated in the network as a researcher in 2020–2025. It spans large, well-established associations to smaller/local ones. Digitalization varied, a lot as well as how they organized their everyday work between employees and volunteers.

During my time in the network, these were some of the CSOs that engaged the Danish Multiple Sclerosis Society (Scleroseforeningen), the Danish Rheumatism Association (Gigtforeningen), the Alzheimer's Association (Alzheimerforeningen), DaneAge Association (Ældresagen), and the Danish Red Cross (Røde Kors), Together Across (Sammen på Tværs), Visits in the Mother Tongue (Besøg på Modersmål), the Danish Deaf Association, SIND (a Danish Mental Health Association), and LGBT+ Denmark (the national organization for sexual and gender minorities). The network's target groups reflect this diversity, encompassing older adults living alone or in institutional settings, people with chronic or degenerative diseases such as multiple sclerosis, arthritis, or dementia, individuals with physical or sensory disabilities, informal caregivers at risk of social isolation, and persons experiencing mental health challenges or otherwise precarious life situations.

Despite considerable variation in mission, resources, and levels of professionalization, these CSOs share a commitment to reducing social isolation and enhancing well-being through personalized, volunteer-mediated, one-to-one social relationships. Some focus exclusively on in-person visits, while others employ phone or digitally mediated communication, or hybrid models, adapting their approach to the needs and capacities of their target groups.

I participated in 11 (~2-hour) network meetings in 2020–2025, interrupted by parental leave and international exchange as part of the PhD program, with the hosting rotating between the CSOs. The agenda was agreed upon from meeting to meeting, reflecting whatever was most pressing for the organizations.

Rationale for selection of field sites and methods

The EMOVE project provided sustained access to the practices of the three CSOs directly involved in the co-development and implementation of the Kople matchmaking platform. The long-term collaboration made it possible to follow match leaders and project staff closely as they navigated the interplay between digital systems, contractual requirements, and relational work of volunteer coordination.

In parallel, my participation in the Network for Visiting Services offered a complementary vantage point. I observed best-practice meetings where match leaders and project leads from a diverse range of organizations exchanged experiences, discussed challenges, and debated approaches to social matchmaking for vulnerable groups. These discussions illuminated sector-wide considerations about recruitment, training, and ongoing support for volunteers, as well as the dilemmas posed by professionalization and digitalization. Together, these two sites provided insights on how temporal tensions are managed across the Danish civil society landscape.

Access and interlocutors

Access to the three CSOs in the EMOVE project was established through my role as a researcher in the project consortium, which formally partnered with each organization to co-develop and test the Kople platform. This partnership provided permission for sustained ethnographic presence, including observation of daily coordination work and participation in internal workshops. I worked with organizational directors and project managers to identify match leaders and relevant others directly engaging with volunteer–participant matching and digital tools.

Access to the Network for Visiting Services was facilitated through an invitation to participate as a researcher to present insight from the research project Volunteering for All Senior Citizens,[2] on how to scale a volunteer visiting program while ensuring quality. After this first meeting, I was continually invited back to regular meetings as a participant. However, instead of quietly assuming that all members were fine with me participating, I actively created space for members to indicate if they no longer wished me to be part of the meeting in my role as a researcher. My involvement was thus revisited and reaffirmed several times over the years.

The sustained nature of my engagement reflected a reciprocal relationship: the network was offered insight into my research, while I, in turn, gained broader understanding of diverse volunteer matchmaking activities.

Across field sites, most interlocutors ended up being match leaders, as they worked closely with their target group and their volunteers—mainly through the IT system. While I draw on examples from both paid and volunteer match leaders navigating temporal tensions, I

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[2] This research also constituted the pre-fieldwork of my dissertation. See
https://core.ku.dk/forskning/frivillighed-til-alle-aeldre/

acknowledge that the dynamics are somewhat differently. For employees, the temporality is also shaped by contractual obligations, organizational hierarchies, and formal performance metrics, whereas for volunteers, expectations can emerge more subtly through moral commitment, relational responsibility, and the affordances of digital systems. However, considering the hybrid nature of the CSOs, I found it crucial to keep sight of all the actors involved in the infrastructure of social volunteering, as their roles are deeply interlinked.

All involved were informed about my research project, its aims, and what participation would entail, and informed consent was obtained from each participant before engaging in interviews, observations, or workshops.

Analytical approach

This study employed a practice-oriented methodology emphasizing the heterogeneity observed across organizational structures, digital infrastructures, and care practices. I focused on variations in target demographics and matching methodologies, organizational size and level of professionalization, infrastructural choices and digital adaptations, considering the advantages and disadvantages of IT systems in volunteer administration, particularly in contexts requiring sensitivity, such as mental health and social care.

Following transcription and systematization of the EMOVE ethnographic material in NVivo, coding was carried out in collaboration with the research team. This joint work strengthened the quality and consistency of the analysis. However, the way I draw on the EMOVE material in this article is based on my own assessment of the coded data.

In turn, the material from the Network for Visiting Services, originally compiled as meeting notes, was expanded into more detailed fieldnotes. I did not record these meetings, nor do I quote participants directly, as the space was intentionally created for open conversation without fear of "saying something wrong" that might later appear in print. Instead, the insights presented here are based on my fieldnotes; in a few instances, I include rephrased quotes approved by the CSO in question.

During thematic coding, patterns emerged that resonated with my focus on the infrastructure of social volunteering. In particular, examples relating to time, speed, and adherence to schedules became apparent, prompting my interest in the interconnectedness of temporal dynamics and technology and how these affect volunteering infrastructure and practices.

Altogether, the layered and longitudinal ethnographic material, produced through multiple methods that enabled triangulation and deep contextualization (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007), provides the empirical foundation for the analysis in this article.

Theoretical Framework

I draw on concepts and sensibilities from STS and actor–network theory (ANT), which offer a relational lens for examining how temporalities are produced and negotiated through socio-material arrangements. This resonates with Wajcman's background in STS/ANT, and her work on time and technology (2015) provided a key theoretical resource. I will unpack how professionalization of civil society, theoretically, can be opened up by applying theories of temporality. I begin by showing how temporality has been a central focus in ethnology and anthropology for analyzing the complex temporal structures of everyday life, forming the foundation and toolkit for my use of temporality. After, I specify how I apply the temporal lens within the context of professionalization and digitization by presenting Wajcman's work on time and technology.

In ethnology, anthropology, and sociology, time has been addressed not as a neutral or objective measure but as a cultural, social, and moral category embedded in lived experience and everyday practices. Within ethnology, Damsholt (2021) offers a comprehensive ethnological framework for understanding temporality as a plural and socially embedded phenomenon. She emphasizes that multiple temporalities coexist and are actively constructed through social practices (p. 24). Through a synthesis of work on temporality by scholars such as Frykman, Højrup, Foucault, Asdal, Ahmed, and Haraway, she provides a comprehensive toolkit for analyzing the complex temporal structures of everyday life, advocating an approach that attends to the multiplicity and negotiation of temporalities in cultural analysis. She illustrates these theoretical concepts through empirical examples, most notably the disruptions of temporal routines during the COVID-19 lockdown, where she scrutinizes how everyday time is composed of overlapping and contested rhythms that individuals must continuously navigate and reconfigure (p. 31). Other recent anthropological and ethnological scholars further develop this view by explicitly foregrounding temporality in the study of humanitarianism and volunteer practices, and in health humanities. Bendixsen and Sandberg (2021) show how volunteer work can be analyzed through different temporal modalities—e.g., the temporalities of crisis, care, and reflexivity—to reveal how volunteers engage ethically, emotionally, and practically over time (pp. 13–31). Their article, "The Temporality of Humanitarianism: Provincializing Everyday Volunteer Practices at European Borders", demonstrates that time is

not simply managed, but experienced, layered, ambivalent, and relational, shaped by broader political and social conditions.

Bønnelycke, Larsen, and Jespersen (2024) analyze how standardized temporal logics in clinical health interventions can clash with the lived, embodied temporalities of participants—in this case, pregnant women enrolled in a randomized controlled trial—revealing tensions between institutional scheduling and experiential time. In the article "Pregnancy as Window of Opportunity? A Danish RCT on Physical Activity During Pregnancy", they draw on de la Bellacasa's (2017) concept of timescapes to frame these conflicting temporal regimes (pp. 441–454).

Building on this tradition, I adopt a practice-oriented approach to temporality focusing on how time is structured, valued, and negotiated in volunteer organizations.

Time and technology

To unpack the dynamics in professionalization and digitization, I draw on Wajcman, who offers critical insights into how contemporary societies are shaped by shifting temporal regimes, particularly under the influence of modernity, capitalism, and technological development (Wajcman, 2006, 2008, 2015, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c). She critiques dominant assumptions about technology and efficiency while highlighting the social and political dimensions of time. Wajcman's concept of "temporal politics" emphasizes that technologies, particularly digital systems, do not simply restructure workflows but also define which types of labor are made visible, valued, or marginalized. In her book Pressed for Time - the acceleration of time in digital capitalism (2015), Wajcman challenges the widespread belief that technological advancements free up human time. Based on long-term studies in an office environment focusing on interruptions from calls, emails, and voice messages, Wajcman argues against a mechanistic approach to technologies as something constituting an environment of interruptions. Rather, employees are rarely in situations where their "only response is to attend to the call for their attention" (p. 98). She argues for a socio-material understanding of time and temporality entailing that both technologies and humans shape practices and concludes that digital technologies often intensify expectations of productivity, responsiveness, and availability (pp. 3–4). Wajcmans work builds on Hartmut Rosa's theory of social acceleration, which identifies three interconnected forms: technological acceleration (faster communication, production, transportation), acceleration of social change (shortened cycles of relationships, roles, and values), and acceleration of the pace of life (increased pressure to do more in less

12

time) (2013, p. 8). Rosa describes acceleration as a dynamic that can lead to alienation, where individuals feel disconnected from meaningful relationships with their work, others, and the world. As a counterpoint, he introduces the concept of resonance, defined as: "a mode of relation in which we are affected by something, respond to it, and are transformed in the process" (Rosa, 2019, p. 165). While I draw on Rosa's conceptual apparatus as a valuable diagnostic tool to understand the broader dynamics of modern temporality, my analysis leans more heavily on Wajcman's socio-technical focus. Whereas Rosa emphasizes the existential and relational consequences of acceleration, Wajcman provides a grounded account of how digital technologies embed, reproduce, and accelerate these pressures in everyday organizational infrastructures.

In more recent work (2021), Wajcman explores how calendaring and scheduling systems in professional settings reflect a linear, efficiency-driven philosophy of time. These systems privilege measurable activities, such as meetings, deadlines, and outputs—while devaluing unstructured time, emotional labor, and care work. Drawing on Star and Strauss (1999), Wajcman observes that such systems tend to overlook the matrix of visible and invisible work: "Affective work, the most difficult and deepest of all labours, requires 'quality time' that cannot be calibrated according to the temporal accountancy of rational scheduling" (p. 1285). She also draws inspiration from Virilio's theorization of modern life as shaped by a "dromocratic" logic—a politics of speed in which acceleration itself becomes a dominant organizing principle (Virilio, 1977/2006). Applying this insight, Wajcman shows that digital systems, while often framed as tools of flexibility, embed normative assumptions about how time should be allocated, measured, and valued (2015, pp. 22–23).

The critique Wajcman raises is particularly salient for volunteer-based welfare work, where the relational and emotional nature of engagement can conflict with institutional demands for documentation, speed, and standardized reporting. Although digital infrastructures, such as reporting platforms, automated communication, and volunteer scheduling systems, can provide greater efficiency, they also risk reducing care to a series of discrete tasks or metrics. As Wajcman (2019) succinctly puts it: "Far from simplifying life, the digital revolution has added layers of complexity and new demands" (p. 220). Moreover, technologies themselves are far from neutral. As Wajcman (2010) emphasizes: "Technology is not neutral—it embodies social norms, including gendered patterns of work and care" (Wajcman, 2010, p. 146). Thus, even ostensibly neutral digital infrastructure restructures who is visible, whose work is valued, and what kinds of labor risk becoming invisible. As Wajcman observes, "Calendaring software

conceals such embedded politics by normalizing certain types of time calibration while obscuring others. In the end, I argue, electronic calendars are emblematic of a long-standing but mistaken belief, hegemonic in Silicon Valley, that automation will not only ensure better time-management but deliver us more time" (2018, pp. 5–6).

While Wajcman highlights how calendaring software normalizes certain temporal calibrations and obscures others, this same segmentation can also obscure the slower, less linear, but deeply meaningful work happening in social volunteering.

Building on her temporal lens, this article examines how time is negotiated, contested, and redefined in the everyday practices of Danish CSOs. Temporality, understood through this perspective, becomes not just a background condition of professionalization but a central site where institutional logics, relational ethics, and human experiences intersect—sometimes creating friction, sometimes enabling resonance.

State of the art

This article focuses on Denmark, which has among the highest volunteer participation rates globally (Espersen et al., 2025; Vega-Tinoco et al., 2022) and advanced e-governance; where many welfare state services are administered through digital systems (European Commission, 2020; (Bittner et al., 2022; Morte-Nadal & Navarro, 2025; Nielsen & Jordanoski, 2020; Schou & Hjelholt, 2018; United Nations, 2020). This intersection of a strong tradition of civic participation alongside widespread digitalization creates a unique case for understanding how social volunteer activities supporting vulnerable populations in the social and health sectors are changing in times of rapid technological acceleration.

The study of volunteerism has deep roots in multiple disciplines, including sociology, political science, economics, and anthropology (Grubb, 2021). Research on volunteerism has expanded to encompass diverse theoretical and methodological approaches (Hustinx et al., 2010; Ma & Konrath, 2018).

According to standard definitions, to volunteer is to offer one's labor freely, without coercion or direct financial compensation, typically for the benefit of others or a cause (Wilson, 2000). Volunteering has often been associated with autonomy, intrinsic motivation, and relational engagement (Clary & Snyder, 1999) and is historically rooted in values of care, solidarity, and social responsibility (Musick & Wilson, 2008). Early scholarship on volunteerism often focused on its role in a democratic society, viewing civic engagement as a cornerstone of social

cohesion and a means of building "social capital" (Hine, 2024). More recently, scholars have examined the motivations and experiences of volunteers themselves, highlighting the diverse values, identities, and social relations that shape decisions to engage in this kind of volunteer work. The management and construction of volunteer work as a concept has been studied to deconstruct taken-for-granted understandings of volunteerism (Cour & Højlund, 2008; Højgaard & Egholm, 2024; Hustinx et al., 2022; McAllum, 2014; Overgaard, 2018; Shachar et al., 2019).

As discussed by Shachar et al. in the article "On Hybridization and Purification in Volunteering Research and Promotion ", the study of volunteerism often treats the concept as a fixed reality. However, it can be seen as a constructed phenomenon with boundaries managed and utilized by various actors (Shachar et al., 2019). Adopting this perspective shifts the focus from what volunteerism is to how it is strategically defined and performed.

This article applies a fluid, performative understanding of volunteering (Egholm & Kaspersen), one that is context-specific and changes over time. It varies across cultures, sectors, and institutional frameworks (Hustinx et al., 2010; Kaspersen & Egholm). In the Nordic welfare context, volunteering is often embedded within a state-supported model where civil society collaborates with public institutions in providing welfare services (Henriksen et al., 2018; Kohl et al., 2023).

The study of professionalism has a long and interdisciplinary history spanning sociology, organizational studies, and STS. However in this context I am focusing on the study of professionalism in connection to societal sectors: In the public sector, professionalism is often associated with control, transparency, and goal fulfillment under New Public Management (Freidson, 2001; Vedung, 1998). In the private sector, it is often linked to competition, productivity, and performance (Abbott, 1988). Civil society, in contrast, has traditionally been grounded in a value-based understanding of professionalism centered around ethical engagement and volunteering (Eikenberry, 2009; Henriksen, 2001). As CSOs increasingly adopt digital tools, formal procedures, and public funding mechanisms, these paradigms intersect, resulting in new hybrid forms of volunteering.

Denmark: Voluntarism and professionalism intertwined

Danish scholars la Cour (2014), Espersen (2015, 2024), Lundgaard Andersen (2016), and Henriksen (2001) have shown how professionalization can enhance legitimacy and foster cooperation with public institutions but also risks undermining core values of autonomy, flexibility, and participatory ethos.

La Cour (2014, 2022) explores how professionalization in civil society is shaped by imported logics from public administration and management, while also having its own logic of voluntarism (2014, p. 81). He argues that volunteer organizations become sites of boundary struggles where formalization and relational engagement collide. Drawing on systems theory and professions sociology, la Cour shows how civil society is caught between control and flexibility and how digital tools increasingly discipline volunteering (la Cour & Hoejlund, 2008). Similarly, Espersen (2015, 2024) illustrates how volunteering organizations, especially those operating in welfare delivery, face identity transformations under pressure from funding schemes, reporting requirements, and managerial rationalities. Volunteers risk becoming quasi-employees, and civil society may shift from participatory to instrumental logics.

Lundgaard Andersen (2019) elaborates on this development by conceptualizing CSOs as hybrid actors situated within neoliberal governance. She demonstrates how the adoption of market-like accountability and public-sector contracting shapes civil society practices, often resulting in "mission drift" where organizations prioritize deliverables over foundational values. These insights are critical for understanding the sectoral blending that underpins the current transformation of volunteerism in the Danish welfare state. When volunteer organizations are increasingly expected to deliver welfare services in partnership with public institutions, the boundary between paid and unpaid work, and that between public and civil spheres, become blurred (Eliasoph, 2011; la Cour, 2014).

This is particularly evident in Denmark, where volunteer initiatives are often integrated into formal welfare delivery systems. This alignment can risk "institutional isomorphism," where civil society actors begin to mirror the bureaucratic structures of public institutions, despite their distinct values and operational logics (Henriksen et al., 2018, p. 273). La Cour (2014) describes this as part of a broader hybridization of civil society in which volunteer organizations are caught between the logics of flexibility and control (2014, p. 79). He argues that collaboration between the state and civil society, especially in social welfare, often results in role confusion and value clashes. Rather than supporting grassroots engagement, partnerships may impose bureaucratic expectations that compromise voluntariness and relational depth.

16

Developments invite reconsideration of the conceptual clarity of "volunteer" and "professional." While they may appear as opposites in normative discourse, they are increasingly entangled in practice. For Hustinx and Meijs (2011, p. 6), the ability to volunteer cannot be reduced to individual choice alone but must be understood through what Meijs et al. (2006, p.39) call volunteerability: an interplay of willingness and ability shaped by individual capacities and by organizational arrangements and societal conditions. From this perspective, volunteering comprises a relational practice that is constantly negotiated and redefined within broader institutional settings. The distinction between formal and informal, paid and unpaid, or public and private is thus not always clear-cut. The professionalization of civil society challenges such binary categories and opens liminal spaces in which volunteers operate with both freedom and responsibility, autonomy and obligation. It is a hybrid, permeable phenomenon that defies rigid categorization. Researchers have shown how this hybridity is enacted in practice. Biermann (2025), for example, develops a typology of occupation-related volunteering and emphasizes how occupational competencies and employability intersect with volunteerability. Volunteers use their professional skills in ways that blur the line between formal and informal, paid and unpaid roles. Similarly, Evers and von Essen (2019) emphasize that volunteering and civic action are not distinct domains but overlapping and contextually shaped practices where boundaries are continually blurred and redrawn.

Others highlight how professionalization is negotiated through everyday practices and role work. McAllum (2018) introduces the figure of the volunteer as a "boundary worker" mediating between organizational demands for accountability and volunteer's own ethical commitments. As López-Cabrera et al. (2020) observe, such blurred divisions create tensions. Conflicts may arise between paid staff and volunteers when responsibilities overlap or remain ambiguous. Taken together, these perspectives underscore the importance of viewing professionalization not as a linear or unidirectional process but as a complex negotiation of institutional logics, organizational culture, and volunteer identities.

Building on these insights, this article explores how professionalism in Danish volunteer organizations is shaped by structural demands and enacted, contested, and redefined in practice. I engage with these debates by examining how acceleration, as both a technological and a cultural phenomenon, intersects with the professionalization of civil society, and I analyze how temporal norms are shaped and reshaped through digital technologies. The article thus contributes to civil society studies by showing how CSOs navigate temporal tensions in an increasingly hybrid landscape. It further adds by exploring the boundary work between welfare

professions and care-centered volunteering and by illuminating the blurring of paid/unpaid work and public/civil spheres. The contested terrain of professionalism under neoliberal governance highlights how digital acceleration reconfigures temporalities in volunteer work. While the field already has a well-established body of research, this article adds to it through an ethnographically grounded, qualitative approach that offers situated insights into organizational dynamics and lived experiences within these contexts.

Acceleration in Civil Society

> *"We build our 'business' on short-term projects—like the one you're following now, Activity Friends. We got funding for three years, so we have to move quickly to deliver on what we promised. At the same time, we need to protect our target group and volunteers, and make sure there's funding lined up after this ends so not everything collapses when Activity Friends stops. It's really from stepping-stone to stepping-stone. I would've preferred more long-term projects where we could build something solid—it takes time, and social matchmaking with people with dementia just can't be rushed."*

> (Interview, Project lead, Alzheimer Association, 2021)

This reflection captures how temporal pressures are embedded in everyday routine practices of CSOs working with social volunteer matchmaking programs for people in vulnerable situations. The need to rapidly implement, deliver, and secure future funding exemplifies the broader temporal logic shaping contemporary civil society.

It is within this context that we can understand the dynamics Wajcman and Rosa describe as a logic of acceleration: technological innovation, social change, and everyday life all move faster, leaving individuals with less time to form meaningful connections.

The professionalization of civil society can be understood in light of these broader temporal dynamics. In volunteer organizations, they manifest in subtle and explicit ways: in short-term activities (because the funding that makes them run is often short-term), and with digital platforms introduced to enhance coordination and efficiency in order to match volunteers and target groups, communicate, and comply with regulations.

All introduce new rhythms and expectations: short interventions, quick replies, continuous monitoring, and standardized procedures. Thus, professionalization through acceleration in civil society is not just a matter of doing things faster but about doing more, reaching more, and documenting more.

For the Alzheimer Association, this is evident through the projectification of volunteer matchmaking activities and demands to move quickly and be innovative in delivering on project goals while balancing and protecting their target group and volunteers. The project lead's frustration with short-term funding cycles and the need for constant adaptation points to a tension between the desire to build lasting relationships and the pressures of delivering measurable results within a limited timeframe.

In addition, in CSOs like Together Across, which opened up the article, this becomes evident through formal partnerships with municipalities and agreements that require them to make a specific number of matches, track the length and quality of their relationships, and regularly report on user satisfaction.

While such arrangements legitimize volunteer-based welfare initiatives, they also introduce a range of performance logic that aligns volunteerism with institutional accountability and measurable outcomes (Steen Bygballe 2025 et.al forthcoming).

Digital platforms as accelerating actors

Digital tools have become central to this acceleration. New IT systems are implemented to streamline tasks such as volunteer coordination, data registration, and communication. A particularly pressing issue has been the demand to comply with GDPR regulations, which has posed an ongoing challenge for many CSO project managers/leaders. I repeatedly heard these concerns raised in network meetings for visiting services, where participants grappled with how to reconcile data protection requirements with the practical engagement of volunteers.

These struggles illustrate a broader dynamic where digital systems not only create new administrative tasks but also reshape the organization of care work itself. Kamp et al. (2023) show how technologies in welfare provision alter how professionals perceive their roles and redistribute responsibilities to different actors and settings. My material suggests that similar processes unfold in CSOs. A project manager from the Danish Rheumatism Association explained during a network meeting: *"We can help more people now because the system*

automates so much. Basically it means, that we can do good for more people" (Network for visiting services, Danish Rheumatism Association, 2023).

However, the promise of digital efficiency can clash with the temporal and emotional rhythms of match leaders. A volunteer match leader from the Alzheimer Association, Ane, vividly captured this tension when she described how overwhelming and stressful it can be to navigate the digital system. Her screen showed a view of the Kople platform. In the left-hand panel, a list of volunteers is categorized under various matchmaking stages, such as "Ready to be matched" and ("Matched – follow up"). Beside volunteer names, small bell icons are highlighted in orange—visual markers that indicate pending actions or unresolved tasks in the system. It was during a session like this that Ane remarked: *"All those bells are ringing and clanging inside the system"* (Online participant observation, volunteer match leader, 2022).

The comment referred to the accumulating visual alerts on the interface—each bell symbol signaling something that needed attention, correction, or completion. The platform, designed to streamline and support human matchmaking work, instead appeared to flood the screen with a sense of digital urgency and unresolved workflows.

This moment captures the tension between system logic and relational practice. Rather than calming or clarifying the coordination process, the platform's notification system overwhelmed the user. What Ane addresses here is the fact that the system is built and designed to help one remember all the tasks one has—which can be everything from a text from a volunteer asking for guidance to a care worker in a municipality who has registered a person with dementia for an activity friend to more-or-less simple bureaucratic procedures, such as sending 3-month evaluation schemes out. For Ane, these notifications, though meant to assist her work, became a source of stress, an ever-present reminder of tasks to be completed, notifications to respond to, and deadlines to meet. This tension arises because the design of the system reflects an underlying assumption: that efficiency is achieved by getting the tasks done by the end of the day, which by some developers of the IT system were referred to as a 'zero-tasks worklist' design.

The aim of maximizing productivity by driving users to complete every listed task inadvertently embeds designers' values regarding workflow and task management and affects what match leaders focus on. Ane's experience mirrors Wajcman's point that digital scheduling tools embody "the eyes of a particular way of looking at time," embedding designers'

efficiency-driven values and normalizing a temporal logic in which productivity is measured by completing every task (2019, p. 1281). This clash emerged despite significant efforts to ensure the values and needs of CSOs were integrated into the system from its inception as part of the EMOVE project. While many aspects of these development processes succeeded in aligning with CSOs' needs and values, the zero-tasks feature vividly illustrates the inherent complexity of developing digital tools that truly resonate with the relational and nuanced activities of civil society. This is analyzed in more detail in work on iterative design strategies and the complex handling of user representations in system development (Jensen & Thorsen, 2023)

Temporal modes of working: "Always-on"

Professionalization has introduced new systems and structures into volunteer organizations and expanded the temporal and spatial boundaries of volunteerism through digital tools. As volunteer tasks move online, they are no longer bound by fixed hours or physical locations. This flexibility does opens the door for broader participation from those who have difficulties participating outside their homes, but it also gives rise to a new temporal mode of "always-on" working. The capacity to log in "just to check something" at any time blurs the lines between volunteering and non-volunteering, work and rest, autonomy and obligation. This part of the analysis explores how digital infrastructures shape new temporal rhythms of volunteer work. Drawing on Wajcman's notion that smart technologies extend labor into all areas of life (2015, p. 58), it discusses how especially volunteer match leaders must balance flexibility with the risk of overextension, especially in contexts where their personal commitment and moral motivation are central.

The case of Helle, a volunteer match leader at the Alzheimer Association, illustrates the risk of boundaryless volunteerism. Before joining the association, Helle was chair of her local ADHD association, where she devoted many hours to unpaid volunteering: *"I worked 70 hours a week—it was far too much, but I couldn't see it back then. […] I burned my candle at both ends"* (Interview, 2023). After burnout, Helle shifted to her current role where tasks are more restricted. She describes the convenience of working from home and checking the system on her own time but also acknowledges a latent risk of over-involvement: *"I'm fine with logging into the system when I feel I have the energy to do something. […] But it can also get out of hand if you're not careful"* (Interview, 2023). Helle's experience exemplifies how the moral pull of volunteering, when combined with digital access, creates a condition of potential permanent engagement. The platform is always there. So are the people waiting to be matched

or who have asked for assistance. This dynamic is also recognized by organizational staff. A project manager at the Alzheimer Association reflected on what makes a "good" volunteer match leader, noting that "spending enough time" in the IT system is seen as an important factor:

> **Project manager:** *The most important thing is probably the commitment because it also requires that you remember to focus on it. That you remember to log into the system and check if I've received any messages, and there... And some of them actually check it every single day.*
>
> **Interviewer:** *Okay, even if they're not "on" or have a shift every single day? Because they only have those 4 hours, right?*
>
> **Project manager:** *We say that on average they should expect to put in 2 to 3 hours a week, but it's not really practical to do 3 hours at the same time once a week. That was kind of what the volunteer match leaders in the northern part of Jutland[3] did at one point. But often then people have to wait for a week to be matched or to get a response. Luckily, now they've become a bit more flexible and have also spent more hours on it perhaps. So, those—the most important thing is probably that they have time for it and that they're ... yes, then go in and check up and people aren't left waiting too long.* (Interview, project manager in Alzheimer Association, 2023)

While the system is designed for flexible use, this scattering of time may undermine volunteers' ability to "log off." Volunteer match leaders, though unpaid, are expected to stay responsive, available, and emotionally attuned to the needs of their matches—sometimes blurring the lines between volunteering and personal life.

Rosa (2013) conceptualizes this shift through his theory of social acceleration, emphasizing that modern societies do not merely move faster but also lose the stable temporal structures that once organized social life. Acceleration, he argues, is experienced not only as a demand for speed but also as a chronic sense of being "always behind"—or, in the case of digitalized volunteering, being "always-on."

In this case, volunteers are no longer clearly "on-duty" or "off-duty"; instead, they are in a mode of constant readiness to respond, engage, and perform emotional labor. This

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[3] Here, the area the volunteer match leaders worked in is mentioned and anonymized.

reconfiguration of time challenges traditional understandings of volunteering as a bounded, voluntary activity, and it raises important questions about sustainability, inclusion, and the relational quality of volunteer engagement.

For many volunteer match leaders, digital flexibility is articulated as a strength. It enables individuals with limited mobility, full-time employment, or mental health challenges to contribute meaningfully to civil society. Helle explained: *"You can sit quietly at home and work on it when you have time. And still, you have sparring partners (other match leaders or project managers) you can reach out to."* (2023) This structure allows volunteers to combine their desire to contribute with the demands of everyday life.

Yet, while flexibility offers important opportunities, it also subtly redistributes responsibility. The temporal expectations embedded in digital systems—such as constant responsiveness, real-time reporting, and the requirement to "check in' regularly—can gradually erase the slow, attentive qualities that many volunteers value, and that are often essential when working with vulnerable groups. When these qualities are lost, not only do volunteers risk burnout, but the people they aim to support may also miss out on the relational continuity and care that such work requires. This is what Wajcman refers to as a "timepressure paradox" (2015, p. 16): how new digital technologies are imagined to reduce the time spent on performing different tasks, yet they not only introduce new tasks connected to using and maintaining the technologies but also a set new expectations about how time and labor should be managed. While some organizations recommend a standard of 2–3 hours of volunteer work per week, many volunteers exceed this guideline due to a personal sense of responsibility toward the people they are matched with. Ultimately, the "always-on" condition of social volunteer work reflects both new opportunities and profound new challenges. It enables broader participation, tailoring volunteer activities to fit contemporary, often fragmented lifestyles. However, it intensifies emotional labor, dissolves the protective boundaries between work and rest, and risks turning civic engagement into a form of unpaid, professionalized labor. Volunteers are not formally required to log in outside agreed-upon hours—but if no one else is available, they may feel morally obligated to do so.

As digital infrastructure becomes more embedded in CSOs, it fundamentally reorganizes how volunteer work is practiced and responsibility is experienced. These shifts are not inherently negative; flexibility remains crucial for inclusion and accessibility. But they demand critical reflection on how to preserve flexibility without letting it quietly transform into hidden obligations. This tension reflects the broader dilemmas of the temporal mode of "always-on"

particularly salient for volunteer match leaders: a condition that promises autonomy but, in practice, can extend volunteer work into all hours of the day.

Temporal modes of working: "Slow-down"

CSOs are thus increasingly shaped by public and private sector paradigms of professionalism—emphasizing efficiency through digitalization. These paradigms risk overshadowing a more subtle but essential dimension of volunteer work: temporal and relational commitments that unfold slowly, intuitively, and affectively over time. Yet, both volunteer and employed match leaders enact a counter-practice—a distinct form of professionalism that is not structured around acceleration but around attentiveness, presence, and care. This "volunteer professionalism" emphasizes slowness as a professional quality, particularly in contexts where the aim is not simply to deliver services but to build meaningful social relationships with vulnerable groups.

The concept of resonance (Rosa, 2019) offers a helpful lens. As noted, resonance refers to a transformative relation that requires mutual openness, emotional investment, and time (Rosa, 2019, p. 165; Rosa, 2021, p. 38). In contrast to acceleration logics, resonance cannot be planned or optimized. It unfolds slowly through repeated encounters, shared moments, and genuine connection. In my fieldwork I found this form of "slow-down" work practices in several places. One of the first times I encountered it was in a workshop for CSOs using Kople, where the Danish Red Cross participated with their program A Good Start in Life, where volunteer match leaders match volunteers with families who have newborns and for some reason or the other are in a vulnerable life situation, where social support could benefit. The volunteers visit the families weekly over a 6-month period. Many who register for this activity as either match leaders or visiting volunteers are themselves welfare professionals, working as midwives or health visitors, who describe their motivation in terms of what their paid work no longer allows. The project leader explained it this way:

> *"They are often full of frustration from their professional jobs. They tell me that they miss the time to be there for the families that they meet in their paid jobs. They come in, weigh the child, find everything is fine and leave again. They don't have time to screen for postpartum depression, give the care and advice that they want to or to follow the families over time and see their development."* (Workshop with CSOs using Kople, 2024)

24

They seek out volunteer roles to reconnect with the care and presence they feel have been eroded in their formal jobs. Volunteering becomes a way to act professionally, not through speed or efficiency but through continuity, presence, and relational depth. Their commitment is long-term and emotionally invested, exemplified by the program's completion rate: *"out of 350 matches, only one was discontinued"* the project lead explained. In this sense, professionalism in volunteerism is not defined by formal qualifications or metrics but by the willingness to give time generously and attentively.

I understand these actions through the idea of resonance, which cannot be instrumentalized; it demands a temporality that resists acceleration (Rosa, 2019, p. 253). These qualities are also evident in the case of Arne, a volunteer match leader in the Alzheimer Association, who underlines that a successful match of people with dementia and activity friends depends on his ability to get to know them well beforehand:

> *"I focus on the hosts—the ones seeking help, who have dementia. I ask them the most questions, to find out where they are, what stage their dementia is at, and what kind of humor and interests they still have. […] Often it's their relatives that make the call for them, and then you have to make an extra effort to get to know the person that you have to match. It's really a gut sense. I think I have pretty good intuition when I talk to people. I try to understand what the actual need is. […] We've had people who wanted to do sports or attend group training together or walk the dog or just drink coffee at home. Somehow, I need to figure out what the "shared third" that they can meet around is."*

<div align="right">(Interview, Arne, Alzheimer Association, 2023)</div>

Arne's approach exemplifies how matchmaking is a professional practice rooted in embodied knowledge and emotional intelligence. His reference to the *"shared third,"* a shared interest or humorous tone, demonstrates a relational expertise that cannot be reduced to a checklist. In the Network for Visiting Services, a project manager described how their volunteer match leaders often slowed down when they experienced a lack of personal "touch" with the people they had to match. This led to extra time spent on certain cases, where she noticed that the time is spent on both finding extra information and confirming it before continuing with the matching process. She commented that *"phone conversations seem a little longer, and the work a little more meticulous or careful"* (Notes from meeting with Network for Visiting Services, 2023).

This shows how "professionalism" sometimes means slowing down and investing time in relational work and countering the drive for efficiency. Here, temporality is re-shaped by the knowledge and competencies of the math leaders to ensure care, not just follow the tempo set by the system.

The ethnographic material showed that the introduction of automation can increase these temporal tensions. While it is intended to save time, CSOs expressed concerns about entrusting sensitive social tasks to automated processes. A project manager at the Danish Rheumatism Association reflected on this tension in relation to their visiting program:

> *"And that thing about something just being sent out by automation, I mean, it just sounds really great, and it's been really tempting, but then I sit here and I'm so afraid of it because we're dealing with people, we have to respect their time and their everyday lives, and they shouldn't feel spammed. This new IT system just makes me very overprotective of our data and of our volunteers and of our young people. They have enough to deal with in life. They shouldn't also have to deal with our mistakes."* (Workshop with CSOs using Kople, 2024).

Rather than embracing automation as a solution, the organization chose to manually handle tasks like sending texts and onboarding emails, despite the extra time and labor required. This cautious approach can be understood through Wajcman's critique of the dominant automation narrative, which often frames technological progress as inevitable, neutral, and inherently efficient. Wajcman (2017, p. 4) argues that while automation promises speed and optimization, it often obscures social and moral judgments embedded in technical systems: "Technologies are only as good as their makers [...] and there is mounting evidence that machine-learning algorithms, like all previous technologies, bear the imprint of their designers and culture."

The CSO's resistance to automated communication thus reflects a deeper sensitivity to the ethics of time and care. Their reluctance is not technophobic but grounded in a commitment to relational work and a desire to shield participants (both volunteers and target groups) from impersonal, misdirected communication that feels meaningless or intrusive. In social volunteer work, time is not simply a logistical resource to be saved but a medium of care and attentiveness. I connect this to Wajcman's broader critique of technological acceleration, where the critical issue isn't simply how fast technological change happens; it's the uneven way in which work, time, and resources are already distributed. Civil society's embrace of automation does not take place in a neutral space; it unfolds within preexisting structures of overload,

undervaluation, and scarcity. CSOs supporting individuals living with dementia, mental health issues, or social isolation are especially aware of these imbalances, and in some cases, push back, choosing presence over performance and careful manual handling over automated speed. Such care work does not fit neatly into standardized flows or pre-scripted interactions. Trust and flexibility are central, and these qualities are difficult to capture in performance metrics or automated workflows (Steen Bygballe et al. 2025 forthcoming). In response, some organizations engage in what might be understood as protective inefficiency—a deliberate choice to avoid full automation in order to safeguard the dignity, privacy, and emotional well-being of participants. This is evident in the cautious approach taken by staff the Danish Rheumatism Association, who, despite the system's capabilities, sometimes send onboarding texts and emails out manually rather than risk depersonalized communication or data errors. So, to act professionally and ethically, CSOs may need to slow down, resist efficiency, and reassert human judgment. Professional responsibility, in these contexts, is not about doing more with less—it is about ensuring that care remains relational, meaningful, and grounded in time spent rather than time saved.

This "slow- down" mode of working reflects how the goal for match leaders was not to exhaustively clear a task list but rather to maintain an overview and a sensitive awareness of where their attention is most critically needed at any given moment. Their work is fundamentally relational and long-term, where immediate completion of every notification is less important than strategically prioritizing tasks to foster lasting connections and ensure the well-being of those they serve. It is grounded in the ability and willingness to give time, not just in hours spent but in the qualitative sense of creating a relational space for genuine connection and careful deliberation. This form of professionalism is not residual or secondary to that of the public sector; it is different in kind. Sometimes, it fills temporal and emotional gaps left by an increasingly accelerated welfare system. Thus, this point illuminates another of the many paradoxes in volunteering: volunteer and employed match leaders sometimes offer what professionals in the public sector increasingly lack: time. the capacity to stay, listen, return, and witness change over time, which enable moments of resonance to emerge.

Careful arrangements: Negotiating temporal tensions

The diverse temporal modes of practice could lead the reader to think that they are dichotomous; however, the fieldwork suggests that they can be understood as being on a continuum, as they are always entangled, and both are increasingly needed. As mentioned, most CSOs working in social and health care are hybrid (Cour & Højlund, 2008; Espersen,

2024; Salamon & Anheier, 1998; Shachar et al., 2019), and they rely on paid staff, operate under public contracts, and engage volunteers in structured roles.

While these CSOs have professional norms, they also preserve elements of autonomy, flexibility, and relational value. The temporal tensions explored in this article—always-on and slow-down—exist within CSOs. They are not merely calibrated according to diverse logics of professionalism but continuously negotiated and sustained through what I term "careful arrangements": sociotechnical assemblages in which people, digital platforms, organizational routines, funding requirements, and professional norms participate in shaping what becomes possible. It is *care-full* in two senses. First, it is caring toward participants—protective in the sense of safeguarding their trust, dignity, and well-being, and attentive to individual situations. Second, it is careful in the sense of deliberate and pragmatic: continuously sorting out, within the constraints and possibilities of the assemblage, which temporal mode will best address the situation at hand.

These arrangements are assembled by human and nonhuman actors and embedded in and mediated by the sociotechnical environment: Kople's data structures and notifications, the metrics that are reported upward, the organization's relational mission, and volunteers' own ethical sensibilities. *Careful arrangements* are thus not static solutions but provisional, situated reconfigurations of the assemblage itself—tweaking the alignment of people, tools, practices, and institutional expectations to create the right temporal conditions for the task.

Seen in this light, careful arrangements make visible the distributed work of deciding when to follow the platform's always-on rhythm and when to protect the slower, more situated forms of care that are central to the mission of these organizations. The capacity to make these calibrations rests on individual skill and on the flexibility, affordances, and resistances built into the sociotechnical setup itself.

This case of using a digital tool for all processes of coordinating and facilitating for social volunteer matchmaking programs has shown how digital technology not only accelerated and fragmented match leaders' time but also embedded layers of visibility into their work, which has an underlying power on deeming what time should be used on. These digital traces can be understood as a form of *coded visibility* (Kamp et al. (2023); the platform does not simply record neutral data—it actively shapes what kinds of work become visible and valued.

In Kople, that visibility is tied to measurable, time-stamped activity, while slower, more relational forms of care—listening to a participant's worries, following up after a difficult

meeting—remain largely invisible to the system. However, these visibilities are not fixed; they are continuously adjusted through ongoing careful arrangements, for example, when match leaders delay match registrations until they have time for a careful write-up or cluster updates to avoid constant micro-interruptions. These tactics negotiate when to follow the platform's always-on rhythm and when to create space for attentive, relational work.

Understanding these ongoing negotiations as careful arrangements makes visible the sociotechnical assemblage in which digital infrastructure, organizational expectations, tacit knowledge, and ethical commitments are continuously calibrated. Careful arrangements are not static solutions—they are provisional, situated responses that allow match leaders to navigate between the fast-paced, surveillance-ready temporal mode of "always-on" working and the slower, presence-oriented temporal mode of "slow-down" working.

This framing emphasizes that the negotiation between temporal modes is not just a matter of individual preference or resistance. It is a collective, infrastructural practice shaped by the affordances of the technology, the metrics it privileges, the organizational logics of accountability, and the embedded expertise of those doing the work. In this case, both temporal modes are present. While my analysis takes a critical perspective on digital technology, I am not arguing that we would be better off without it. My aim is rather to shift the discussion toward how digital technology is used in facilitating and coordinating social volunteer work. Especially in connection to CSOs where the work revolves around caring for individuals in vulnerable situations, the pragmatic, hands-on orientation of care often means that technologies recede in importance, subordinated to the care relations they are meant to support. This pragmatic adaptation can result in digital systems becoming silent carriers of external logics even though the design process entailed implementing and incorporating CSO user needs from the start. When technologies arrive preconfigured with assumptions rooted in public or private sector ideals of efficiency, accountability, or professionalism, they subtly reconfigure what counts as legitimate care and who is recognized as competent actors (Star, 1999; Wajcman 2015), thereby risking the erosion of some of social volunteering's distinct qualities: its flexibility, relationality, and attentiveness to situated needs.

Conclusion

This article has examined how professionalization in CSOs generates and sustains temporal tensions. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in the Danish welfare context and informed by Wajcman's (2015) theory of time and technology, the analysis identified interlinked temporal

modes of working: "always-on," characterized by speed, automation, and digital mediation, and "slow-down," grounded in relational care, presence, and situational judgment. Rather than being dichotomous, these modes coexist in hybrid CSOs that blend public- and private-sector professional logics with volunteer ethics. To conceptualize how these modes are navigated, the article introduced the notion of careful arrangements. It captures how temporal tensions are calibrated through socio-technical assemblages of people, practices, digital platforms, institutional expectations, and ethical commitments. These arrangements are *care-full* both in caring for participants and in carefully deciding which temporal mode best fits a given task — whether that means leveraging automation to meet contractual reporting requirements or taking extra time for a comprehensive onboarding conversation. The article contributes to debates on the hybridization of welfare provision and the evolving role of civil society.

Sustaining meaningful volunteer engagement in an accelerated society requires recognizing the coexistence of multiple temporalities and supporting the infrastructural and organizational conditions that make careful arrangements possible. This entails recalibrating digitalization and professionalization agendas to preserve the slow-paced, emotionally attuned practices essential to relational care.

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Appendix 1

Engaged Medical Humanities — A Framework for Knowledge Production in Research Collaborations

ORIGINAL PAPER

Engaged Medical Humanities—A Framework for Knowledge Production in Research Collaborations

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Abstract

In the field of medical humanities, there has been a general call to understand biocultural entanglements and to break down rigid distinctions between culture and health, as well as disciplinary boundaries. In line with this call, we suggest a medical humanities approach that further breaks down the distinction between basic and applied research. We conceptualize this approach as *engaged medical humanities*, as it both contributes to ongoing theoretical discussions and engages in empirical settings. Based on our ten-year practice of conducting medical humanities research at the Copenhagen Centre for Health Research in the Humanities (CoRe), and by zooming in on two collaborative research projects, we discuss how we realize and navigate these diverse engagements. On this basis, we offer a framework for conducting engaged medical humanities research to encourage and inspire future projects. First, we discuss how we take our main inspirations from the critical medical humanities and engaged research. Second, we identify several challenges that arise when our research approach is put into practice. We focus on our collaborations with stakeholders outside of academia, discussing how we navigate collaborative complexities while emphasizing the importance of empirical sensitivity and fluid accountabilities in studying health issues. Third, we discuss our knowledge production, encompassing various formats spanning both theoretical and conceptual contributions within academia, as well as practical interventions and instrumentation aimed at societal needs. Finally, we offer reflections on the potential we see in our framework and discuss the conditions for further developing the engaged medical humanities in a Scandinavian context.

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Introduction

The field of medical humanities is sprawling and open-ended, with threads into diverse disciplines and their theories, methods, and areas of interest. This article outlines how medical humanities research is conducted in a Danish context, specifically at the Copenhagen Centre for Health Research in the Humanities (CoRe).[1] The present authors are all involved in CoRe, and by writing this article together, our aim is to collectively explore and share the various conditions and opportunities we have experienced working in the medical humanities. CoRe's research focuses on ethnographic and historical studies conducted closely with stakeholders such as patients, healthcare practitioners, patients' relatives, organizations, and authorities. Our studies of illness and health in everyday practices are engaged in a field in which actors, interests, and processes meet and diverge and in which political, social, and economic conditions mix with daily routines, expectations, hopes, and hopelessness (Jespersen 2021). With our research, we aim to uncover and discuss cultural and social complexities and challenges of health, illness, and medicine, offering insights to address them in twenty-first-century welfare states.

On this basis, we emphasize the necessity of an engaged medical humanities approach, offering this article as a framework for the *engaged medical humanities*. The framework fuses the hallmarks of the *critical medical humanities*, emphasizing the societal complexities and entanglements of health and illness issues, and *engaged research*, which emphasizes the active engagement and involvement of multiple stakeholders in solving complex societal challenges. We will state and demonstrate that this research approach transcends rigid distinctions between basic and applied research (Santos et al. 2022). We contend that prioritizing engagement with stakeholders and societal issues enriches our theoretical insights and research quality, while, conversely, our theoretical insights and contributions inform and enhance our engagement with practice, other disciplines, and societal partners. We therefore aim to discuss the potentials we see and experience in our engaged medical humanities approach, including the challenges, dilemmas, and research ethics raised by conducting medical humanities research in this manner.

With this article, we contribute a framework for thinking about engaged medical humanities encounters. It challenges the graphically neat and polished project plans we often meet in the literature on collaborative projects and in which our own and many others' funding applications and project descriptions are presented. As we have never experienced a project following an exact plan without challenges, surprises, and changes, the proposed framework allows for reflection on the troubles and messiness occurring along engaged medical humanities project trajectories and beyond. On this basis, we seek to contribute a more realistic framework in which to think about project complexities that cannot be simplified in accurate graphical setups or anticipated in initial project plans.

With this framework, we explore how to address the troubles of the engaged medical humanities. *We emphasize that this framework is for thinking: it encourages methodological and ethical reflections, including critical and sensitive thoughtfulness about the complexities that diverse research engagements and knowledge productions bring*. Drawing inspiration from Donna Haraway's (2016) concepts of *sympoesis* and *making-with*, our engaged medical humanities approach embodies an ethos of continual interaction and collaboration. Further inspired by Haraway (2016), we suggest that a way of "staying with the trouble" of the engaged medical humanities is to be mindful and explore how to navigate the complexities of various research engagements, which is exactly what this framework allows.

As our research engagements are always socio-materially situated, the framework necessarily takes shape in the particular research projects' settings and in the situations explored. We therefore introduce the engaged medical humanities via specific insights from two research projects to provide inspiration and guidance for critically reflecting on the challenges inherent in engaged medical humanities endeavors. The framework described here is thus formed by our analysis and discussions of these projects to illustrate and generate knowledge of how the messiness of the engaged medical humanities can be navigated. We present two sets of recurring concepts that have regularly surfaced across our research endeavors over the past decade. These concepts represent a selection of collaborative and academic challenges, obstacles, and potentials that are at stake in different ways. First, through the concepts of *trading zone* and *accountability*, we examine how mutual commitments and obligations in collaborative projects can both facilitate and impede research and interventions. Second, through the concepts of *theorizing* and *instrumentation*, we address the balance and entanglement between theoretical insights and practical applicability. By introducing this framework, we invite colleagues to utilize it to think critically about and address the chaos that diverse research engagements bring.

State of the art

The critical medical humanities have called for new reflection on how the humanities can critically engage with, relate to, and collaborate with the natural sciences, biomedicine, and health professionals (Carusi 2016; Engebretsen et al. 2020; Hansson and Irwin 2020; Macnaughton 2011; Viney et al. 2015). In opposition to the medical humanities, as the "supportive friend" of the medical sciences (as proposed by Brody 2011), which for decades has investigated health and medicine from varying humanistic perspectives, Viney et al. (2015) notably argued that taking a critical stance involves a more intensive engagement with "how health, illness, and treatment are constituted in and through tangled webs of human and non-human biosocial organisms, political–economic formations, discourses and affects" (2). Calling for both involvement in and the disruption of dormant "biomedicine truths" (Macnaughton 2011), critical medical humanities scholars insist on an inherent cross-disciplinary entanglement with the knowledge production and practices of biomedicine and the natural sciences (Fitzgerald and Callard 2016). In other words, they urge us to collaborate, engage, take risks, and intervene in health issues more directly (Engebretsen et al. 2020; Kristeva et al. 2018). We draw significant inspiration from this tradition, which forms an important cornerstone of our research approach, but as a predominantly theoretical development, we contend that the discussions taken by the critical medical humanities would benefit from empirical scrutiny (Fitzgerald and Callard 2016). Consequently, as a significant aspect of our research at CoRe, we prioritize an empirical, richly textured sensitivity (Whyte 2009) in our engaged medical humanities approach, exploring the analytical consequences of concepts such as entanglement and the bio-cultural and their practical relevance and applicability. In line with discussions of critical proximity in research (Birkbak et al. 2015), being "critical" of the critical medical humanities means that our engagements are not simply formed by a negative critique of the medical but as constructive and active engagements and involvements with health researchers, health policy, practitioners, etc. (Macnaughton 2011).

Similarly, engaged research frameworks have proclaimed that issues of health and illness must be understood as nested in an array of complex social and environmental systems,

calling for projects that engage and collaborate with all key stakeholders (Barkin et al. 2013; Haapanen and Christens 2021). In recent years, this has led to several reports, how-to guides, and frameworks emerging from research teams entering engaged research projects suggesting a stringent engagement process, determining the value of engaged research and its societal impact (Barkin et al. 2013; Campus Engage 2022a, 2022b; Cunliffe and Scaratti 2017; Haapanen and Christens 2021; Heney and Poleykett 2022; Lloyd et al. 2012). While our engaged research approach at CoRe is not clearly rooted in these frameworks, their discussions help us mitigate the aforementioned call of critical medical humanities scholars to engage and collaborate more directly with a broad range of actors in the welfare sector. The engaged research guidelines outline different project stages from ideation through data collection, analysis, implementation, and anchoring, often illustrated through cogwheels and phased process models culminating in a "light bulb" moment. It is a key principle of these guides that engaged research is "advanced with societal partners rather than for them," emphasizing the importance of an initial alignment of expectations regarding "engagement approaches," "responsibilities," and "roles" outlined before project kick-off (Campus Engage 2022a). Yet, while we acknowledge and recognize elements of our own processes in these recommendations, we emphasize that the project realities rarely conform to such generic frameworks, which smooth out the important work and ad hoc processes of maintaining, repairing, and negotiating the collaborations. When engaged research is depicted as mutually beneficial and based on alignment and joint agreement, it standardizes expectations and equalizes engagement since everything needs to be prearranged and predetermined. We argue that these generic frameworks, although recognized, neglect the complexity of the projects. For instance, the guidelines from Campus Engage state: "In real world applications, engaged research is messier and not as linear as depicted in the diagram shown in this document. Thus, the Engaged Research Framework, like Beck's tube map of London, is not a perfect representation; instead, it is a simplified model designed to encourage researchers to develop a clear and comprehensible plan for who is engaged across the lifecycle of the research project—when, why and how" (Campus Engage 2022a, 3). Even though the guidelines recognize the lack of real-life representation in the plans, they still call for a "clear and comprehensive plan." We agree that research projects need plans but maintain that the ideals of clearness and comprehensiveness promoted by the guidelines obscure the constant negotiations, balancing, and reformulation that constitute good project processes.

In line with recent discussions in the field of science and technology studies (STS), especially discussions of STS research as "Making and Doing" (Downey and Zuiderent-Jerak 2021), we diverge from engaged research frameworks and the way they accentuate and model collaboration and hence knowledge production as a somewhat linear trajectory extending from idea generation to end result and impact. As discussed by Downey and Zuiderent-Jerak (2021), such models tend to pass over the situatedness, messiness, and nonlinearity involved in knowledge production and knowledge travel. We concur with this criticism and pursue our engaged research in a more fluid, theoretical, and curiosity-driven manner than is typical of most engaged research frameworks, which is why our framework invokes unfolding project-specific experiences, conflicts, ad hoc situations, and (re)negotiations occurring during the project trajectories. Drawing inspiration from the critical medical humanities, the engaged research framework, and STS, our ambition is to devise an engaged medical humanities with an empirical, socio-material and (everyday) practice-based approach, which seeks accountable engagements inside and outside academia.

Two engaged medical humanities projects

In our analysis, we focus on two specific collaborative projects conducted at CoRe: *Lifelong Oral Health* and *Senior Practice*. These projects serve as examples of our research approach, acting as conduits between academia and broader societal stakeholders, as well as between traditional conceptions of basic and applied research. One project is based on engagement with healthcare institutions at a municipal level, whereas the other is based on engagements with a funding body and private companies. Our projects disseminate insights and initiatives widely, impacting not only the specific communities under investigation but also diverse research domains. Consequently, we investigate how this dynamic unfolds in practice—first, by describing the projects.

Project Description: Lifelong Oral Health[2] is a combined research and co-creation project initiated in response to a societal challenge: the escalating prevalence of dental issues and oral diseases among the aging population, particularly older persons in vulnerable life circumstances requiring professional care (Rouxel et al. 2017). The repercussions are profound, encompassing weight loss, malnutrition, and significantly heightened susceptibility to infectious diseases when physical or cognitive impairment impedes dental self-care (Klotz et al. 2018). The overarching project questions are as follows: Why is oral health poor among older people in vulnerable life situations? What initiatives can improve it? The project has unfolded over a five-year trajectory, extending from 2021 to 2025. Our closest project partners are dentists from the Community Dentistry research group at the Department of Odontology at the University of Copenhagen. Together, we work with two Danish municipalities—Greve and Frederiksberg—which are both collaborators in and focal points of our data collection, fieldwork, and testing of co-created initiatives. We work with local project teams set up at five different care units in the municipalities, encompassing homecare units, nursing homes, and a rehabilitation center. The teams comprise diverse stakeholders, ranging from healthcare workers and dental professionals to project managers, local care unit managers, and town hall managers. The research design encompasses register-based studies, questionnaires, clinical registrations, and—CoRe's primary area of responsibility—ethnographic field studies consisting of semi-structured interviews with older persons, relatives, care workers, dental practitioners, and various managers, along with focus group interviews with diverse municipal stakeholder groups. Furthermore, we have conducted participant observations and facilitated co-creation activities with all partners.

Project description: Senior Practice

Senior Practice[3] is a research project aiming to generate knowledge of mental well-being among older workers at small and medium-sized companies, and to find ways to promote it. The project focus comes from a significant challenge in the Danish labor market, where there is a shortage of labor and a demand for new initiatives to extend working life. Hitherto, political responses to extending working lives have focused on retirement reforms, economic incentives, and so-called "senior days" (monthly or weekly days off). A less prominent focus in the response has been on understanding the quality of later working life, including mental well-being, workplace dynamics, and the proper use of experienced workers. The overarching questions of the project are: What constitutes good later working lives and retirement transitions among older workers in a Danish context? How can companies support older workers' mental well-being? The collected data consist of

semi-structured interviews with older workers and their managers, union representatives, and/or human resource (HR) personnel, combined with participant observations with older workers to generate insights into their work practices and dynamics with colleagues and managers. The project is funded by the Velliv Association, which, according to its guidelines, at the time of application, did not grant funding for more than one year at a time. Therefore, the project has been conducted in three distinct phases based on three different research applications.

Trading zones and accountability

In this section, we examine the partnerships and stakeholder relations in our two projects. Specifically, we want to explore the opportunities and challenges inherent in engaging with societal partners, including funding bodies. Drawing on the American philosopher Peter Galison's (1999) concept of the *trading zone*, we seek to emphasize and reflect on the ontologically heterogenic exchanges that engaged research often entails. In addition, we use Donna Haraway's (2003, 2016) expansive reflections on *accountability* to explore the dynamic, hierarchical, and ethical complexities these collaborations imply. We utilize these concepts to break away from conventional project plans, arguing that a more nuanced framework is essential to capture the various navigational issues of the engaged medical humanities we propose.

The guidelines stemming from engaged research (Barkin et al. 2013; Campus Engage 2022a,b; Cunliffe and Scaratti 2017; Haapanen and Christens 2021; Heney and Poleykett 2022; Lloyd et al. 2012) often seem to emphasize stable and reciprocal relations, the predetermined alignment of expectations, and the assumption that all parties give and receive as central to successful project management and collaboration. As such, the guidelines emphasize a social contract and a plan that determines the sequence of actions of each partner or stakeholder. However, we note that these guidelines fail to capture the asymmetry, power dynamics, temporal fluctuations, and heterogenic stakeholder interests in the collaborations. In our experience, project relations are not stable social obligations, as they change and evolve throughout the projects and beyond. They are prone to sudden shifts in engagements and relations. The changing project contexts invariably shape trajectories and may hijack the pre-established agreements, or force the ongoing renegotiation of collaboration terms in unforeseen directions.

We find it useful to reflect on these complexities in terms of Galison's (1999) concept of the *trading zone*. Galison introduced the concept to facilitate exploration of scientific exchange between schools of physics unaligned within the same Kuhnian paradigms (Galison 1999; see also Collins et al. 2007), comparing this exchange to classical anthropological studies of trade between groups without a shared language. To Galison (1999), the physicists represented different subcultures that did not speak the same scientific language: "Like two cultures, distinct but living near enough to trade, they can share some activities while diverging on many others. … They can come to a consensus about the procedure of exchange, about the mechanisms to determine when the goods are 'equal' to one another" (p. 146). The trading zone is a site of exchange that is locally coordinated and mutual among heterogeneous actors without conflating the differences and disunity of the involved communities. According to Galison (1999), these subcultures are enacted through different means, such as goods and bargains, and by developing a pidgin language with which to communicate through exchanges, which do not necessarily

approach ontological agreement but recognize mutual benefit (Elgaard Jensen 2020). As emphasized by Collins et al. (2007), the notion of the trading zone concerns problems of communication and coordination that require the handling of differences and heterogeneity as the participating sub-cultures are not necessarily on an equal footing. Crucial for our analysis, these actors do not evaluate the exchanged goods uniformly, as the elements of exchange come with different degrees of importance or symbolic, cultural, or other kinds of value. Working as "social and intellectual mortar," a trading zone temporarily binds together communities and coordinates actions and beliefs despite ontological differences (Galison 1999). Understanding engaged research projects as trading zones, the intercultural bargains made across the ontological, contextual, sectoral, and administrative differences that inform the differentiating valuations of exchange become key in understanding and bolstering the continual negotiations and collaborations. As an alternative to the neatness of the engaged research guidelines, we find inspiration in this concept because it allows us to think about and address the heterogeneous and dynamic nature of the engaged medical humanities. In addition, it provides an opportunity to reflect on the various considerations and obligations—whether organizational, political, or personal—that we and our project partners face.

It is central to our argument that entering such trading zones makes us as researchers accountable to all involved project actors and stakeholders in ways that transcend mere adherence to predetermined contractual obligations. Our accountabilities extend to diverse stakeholders who contribute to and are impacted by the projects and evolve in ever more complex and negotiated pathways throughout the projects. In our collaborative projects, the stakeholders encompass the research community, funding bodies, (project) managers, employees, and individuals, including patients and their families. Each group has a stake in the project outcomes, although with varying degrees of formal recognition or mutual commitment. In exploring accountability in these complex collaborative environments, we find resonance in Donna Haraway's (2016) expansive concept of accountability, understood as an active, situated practice rooted in relationality rather than any universal or abstract moral obligation. Haraway's (2016) understanding of accountability emphasizes dynamic and asymmetric connections and engagements, as "we are not all response-able in the same ways. The differences matter – in ecologies, economies, species, lives" (29). For Haraway, accountability is not simply about delivering solutions but also about ongoing, mutual learning and adaptation occurring when multi-actor networks collaborate to create flourishing future conditions. Haraway has highlighted the complex and conflicting nature of collaborative processes, noting that it "makes strong demands on the littermates" (2016, 110) and requires "understanding how things work, who is in the action, what might be possible, and how worldly actors might somehow be accountable to and love each other less violently" (2003, 7), even in the face of "barely possible but absolutely necessary joint futures" (2003, 7). Haraway's concept of accountability further involves recognizing and addressing power dynamics in these collaborations to counteract dominance and control. Inspired by Haraway, we therefore acknowledge both the formal and informal hierarchies in our own and the collaborating partners' organizations. We thus draw on Haraway's concept of accountability in our engaged medical humanities framework, encompassing both our ongoing methodological considerations as well as the constant ethical and navigational reflections that guide our diverse engagements. This entails actively engaging with the needs and concerns of all stakeholders while also recognizing that we cannot accommodate every perspective. We thus move beyond static notions of accountability toward a more fluid and adaptive approach to work for more inclusive forms of engagement, ultimately

enhancing the integrity and impact of our research outcomes. Together, the concepts of trading zone and accountability underscore the importance of recognizing and navigating the difficulties inherent in engaged research collaborations. In particular, this combination of concepts facilitates an understanding of the power imbalances, unevenness, and asymmetries within the project trading zones and across the various (trading) partners involved.

Case: Senior Practice

It is a significant part of the Velliv Association's aim to support projects that enhance mental health across work life stages and to ensure that any insights gained are translated easily and quickly into tangible, practice-oriented tools that benefit the Association's target group of small and medium-sized companies (SMCs). According to the Velliv Association, SMCs seldom have the means and resources to ensure good mental support infrastructures for their workers; accordingly, the Association sees it as its mission to connect research on work life and mental health with practice through interventions. For researchers, this means that their projects must address challenges and needs experienced by SMCs, that SMCs must be involved throughout the projects, and that the results must be applicable in practice. For the Velliv Association, these requirements may seem logical and justified, but, as we will describe, they refer the responsibility to create engaged collaboration to the researchers, thereby installing an inherent asymmetry in the project relations.

During our initial preparations for the research project, the Velliv Association requested that a specific number of companies of a specific size be recruited for the project. To meet these requirements, we depend on companies being willing to participate so that we can pursue our research interest in investigating the mental well-being of older workers. Reaching out to, communicating with, and finally recruiting companies, however, involve a meticulous effort to align the specific interests of the companies with the overall purpose defined by the Velliv Association and our research interests. Local managers have to approve their employees using working hours to participate in the research project, taking time away from essential work duties, while estimating that this time will, in the long run, be profitable. Sometimes, unforeseen situations change that calculation, so we have experienced some companies withdrawing from the project due to shifting resources and priorities.

Two benefits we can offer the companies in exchange are our research expertise as well as our capabilities in developing practice-oriented instruments that could potentially benefit their work environments in the future. While the companies acknowledge the relevance of the research project and its aims and concur with the importance of the project aim, they may still find it challenging to determine whether the time investment is worthwhile, especially due to their small size, lack of resources, and uncertainty about the added value of our tools. The challenge we face, and the responsibility we have been given by the Velliv Association, is to convince the companies that, together, we will be able to address and develop solutions to problems that are close to them. One way of understanding our challenge is how convincing we must be in outlining the contours of a promising trading zone that resonates with the companies' interests and strategies. To be able to commencing a project depends on creating a joint but localized zone of activities, enabling coordination and exchange among the disparate actors involved. Furthermore, the objects, bargains, and pidgin language shared in the trading zone may serve as enablers of the activities (Galison 1999; Elgaard Jensen 2020).

In the Senior Practice project, we have observed that some companies are motivated to participate by the opportunity to brand themselves as socially responsible by engaging in a research project that addresses a high-profile societal issue, namely, the mental health and retention of older workers. For example, HR personnel advocated participation by emphasizing its positive significance and good publicity for the company. They saw collaboration with the university as a stamp of approval of their policies for older workers and as a way to boost their image as socially responsible companies. Photographs showing the researchers with company representatives became objects with different cultural and symbolic values, sometimes resulting in awkward trading exchanges. The companies featured the photographs in their newsletters to promote their image; similarly, we used the photographs in research communication to document our empirical and strategic engagements.

The project is closely linked to the current debate on ageism in the Danish labor market. The ageism debate is a "hot topic" in many sectors and among many actors of the labor market, often creating stark and contrasting positions and conflicts that could influence the collaboration. Partly to recognize and address this debate and partly to avoid possible severe disagreements between the participating partners (researchers as well as companies) regarding the interpretation and accountability for ageist practices, the project has developed a common language with which to mitigate any differences—a sort of pidgin language. Key to this pidgin language has been renaming the project in several communication outlets. It became especially clear to us that the term "senior employee" has negative connotations of being worn out and ready for retirement. Therefore, we have changed the project name used in the project's website, reports, and dissemination activities (e.g., a podcast) to The Experienced. These apparently insignificant situations and consensus-seeking activities, which can be understood as bargaining outcomes in trading zone terms, have a huge impact in creating a sense of accountability and connectedness—a sense that, in both cases, is not clearly described in the initial project description.

The Senior Practice project exemplifies how current Danish funding conditions call for complicated engagement among very different actors, with different mindsets, working practices, and ways of understanding the added value of collaboration. The case also highlights how the requirements of the funding landscape often refer the responsibility for creating and facilitating collaboration to the researchers. This responsibility is time-consuming and precarious to discharge, involving unforeseen bargaining situations. Applying the notions of the trading zone and accountability to understand these situations highlights the unevenness and asymmetry involved in collaboration. However, doing so may also bolster researchers' efforts to create relevant incentives that project partners find attractive and through which they can become connected to and accountable for the project. Altogether, the trading is often both awkward and difficult and requires ongoing thoughtful consideration. Yet, we consider it an inevitable precondition for many engaged medical humanities projects in order to gain access to and position us as researchers in strategically important arenas. It thus gives us a unique strategic opportunity, for example, to disseminate humanistic knowledge production in specific and deliberate parts of society.

Case: Lifelong Oral Health

In Lifelong Oral Health, we engage in various arenas and discussions inside and outside academia. Through our multifaceted engagement and exchange among diverse actors and fields, we navigate a web of entanglements. We are accountable in multiple directions. In the Lifelong Oral Health trading zone, we are bound by obligations to our

project collaborators, encompassing contractual agreements, joint applications, ethical considerations regarding informants, and legal framework commitments. Simultaneously, we are accountable for our freedom of inquiry and autonomy. Accountability in the Lifelong Oral Health project is therefore not an immutable principle; rather, it is susceptible to challenges and fluctuations. It is never fixed, meaning that our accountabilities to all the various actors, including ourselves, can collide with one another. In addition to being responsible for ethnographic studies, our work requires constant and sensitive navigation in a highly interdisciplinary and intersectional project design.

On one occasion in particular, our different accountabilities gave rise to conflict that, for a while, destabilized the collaboration with one of the municipalities. In this case, we can use the trading zone and accountability concepts to think about a specific conflict situation that suddenly arose during the project. The conflict centered on criticism of our municipal partners and their management of dental care, criticism voiced by the relatives of older persons in nursing homes whom we had interviewed in the project, and whether this criticism should be mentioned in a national report we were to publish about the insights and initiatives of the Lifelong Oral Health project. During our fieldwork, the dismayed relatives often described inadequate dental care as an example of how they believed their loved ones were not being adequately treated within the elderly care system. For instance, they said: "You have to get so ill before you get help here. Dental care is a good example of how the basics don't work in this nursing home"; "I actually thought the system would step up for us. I'm so hurt and angry about it. Excuse me, but should we try the welfare thing or what?"; and "It's a declining nursing home." Their criticism is relevant to the project since relatives often play a role in procuring dental care supplies, registering and scheduling appointments with dentists, and providing significant support to the care workers when older persons are confronted with dental issues and need professional daily dental care.

In the context of drafting the project report, we informed the municipal stakeholders in the project's steering group that the relatives' criticism would be mentioned in the report. Immediately afterward, the project managers and local managers in one of the municipalities emphasized that this worried them, and they asked us to ignore the criticism, as they did not find it relevant to the project or fair to the care workers. Additionally, they asked us for editing rights regarding the report and future communications and to be more loyal to the project. Although they did not explicitly threaten to withdraw from the project, they said things like "We didn't sign up for this," expressing doubts about their participation. At first, the weight of their concerns and requests took us by surprise. At the same time, we were alarmed about their request for editing rights. The project collaboration was immediately threatened as this conflict exposed the diverging accountabilities between two organizational "subcultures": on one hand, the municipalities risked political consequences and workplace repercussions because of our publishing of harsh criticism; on the other hand, we as researchers risked our research freedom and integrity if the criticism were not published.

The conflict lasted a few days, during which communication and attempts at mutual understanding were intensified. We initiated careful dialogue while ensuring that the communication was routed through one researcher and one municipal project manager, who had previously had good collaboration. They had several telephone calls characterized by personal trust and affective competence. During these calls, the municipal project manager referred to a huge breaking news scandal in the media about failures in Danish elderly care, which was notable and concurrent. It became clear to us that our partners were concerned that the quotations of the relatives would seep into the public debate, putting our partners at risk of a media scandal. In the phone calls, we

clarified that our focus in the report would be on recommendations around the relatives and that the criticism would not be framed sensationally, while emphasizing our freedom of research and editing rights over our publications. The project manager quickly became comfortable with the situation. The next few days of close communication therefore concerned making the other actors in the municipality—managers of different care units and upper-level managers at the town hall—feel comfortable. We formulated a reassuring email in careful, soothing, and de-escalating pidgin language, expressing our understanding of their situation while also presenting the importance of our freedom of inquiry, including not sharing editing rights. In addition, a joint meeting was arranged to address the issue; however, when all municipal actors responded to the email, saying that they were comfortable with the situation and that they had not considered the problematic nature of wanting editing rights and waived their demand for them, the meeting was cancelled.

Nevertheless, the conflict made it clear that the trading zone of this engaged research project was formed by the fact that in a universal, public healthcare system like Denmark's, elderly care is the task of municipalities, which are politically governed organizations subject to elections every four years. As a result, municipal leaders face considerable scrutiny from the media and fear of potential scandals. This makes engaged research with municipalities a difficult terrain to navigate, as, in this case, our accountabilities to the municipal stakeholders, the relatives, and ourselves as autonomous researchers collided. The situation created dilemmas, as we were aware of our formal and ethical accountabilities to everyone involved in the project, including ourselves, while being deeply interested in maintaining good stakeholder relations and securing the project. By understanding this conflict in terms of the concepts of trading zone and accountability, we stressed the project's complexities, which could not have been entirely predicted or prevented by institutionalizing the reciprocal relations and commitments through formal mechanisms such as legal instruments, contractual agreements, and oversight by ethical review boards. At the moment of potential crisis, our primary navigational device was not to return to the contract and the plan but rather to engage with the project as a trading zone: a place and a specific opportunity for encountering specific people and specific objects that could be brought together—opportunistically and pragmatically—on this occasion to solve the problem at hand. We also leaned into Haraway's (2016) idea of "staying with the trouble" and navigated the conflict through personal trust, pre-existing relationships, and affectual competence in order to discharge our various accountabilities. To us, this case exemplifies how engaged medical humanities projects are always situated and affected by local hierarchies, individuals, work environments, and, in this case, public and political atmospheres.

Viewing the various exchanges involved in engaged research through the conceptual lenses of the trading zone and accountability allows us to acknowledge that, while we and our partners may agree on the value and mutual benefits of these exchanges, we often approach one another as ontologically distinct "subcultures." We argue that the "trouble" inherent in these interactions is not only unavoidable but also productive. It is exactly through this trouble that we navigate and conduct the collaborative work of engaged research. Following Haraway's (2016) emphasis on "staying with the trouble," we seek to embrace the complexities and challenges encountered. For us, these concepts offer valuable analytical and practical guidance for understanding and addressing these challenges in project-specific contexts, regardless of whether the partners are municipalities, companies, or entirely different collaborators.

Theorizing and instrumentation

The practical outcomes of the research process are an overarching focus of engaged research (Mikesell et al. 2013). For the same reason, engaged research is often criticized for being overly simplistic and atheoretical (Delgado et al. 2011) and sometimes even in opposition to and hampering academic practice (Paphitis 2017). Simultaneously, there has been an increased demand for research that is relevant to a broader audience and has the potential to develop new knowledge, services, and/or technologies that can have practical implications. The appeal for societally relevant research is also reflected in the requirements of the current funding landscape, which often rewards product-oriented projects (Hinchcliffe et al. 2018). This often leads researchers to attune their research ideas to applicability, which feeds into discussions of the instrumentalism of privately funded research, such as critical discussions of the expansion of neoliberal ideals into spheres not traditionally included in market logics (Oladi 2013). The ongoing discussions of applied research also point to a potential conflation between consultancy work and research, exposing applied research to criticism for losing its responsibility to be a critical reflexive voice.

Despite the very relevant concerns raised, the criticism also advances an inherent dichotomy between theorizing and instrumentation, which we find problematic. Here, we argue that combining advice from engaged research with the theoretical ambitions of the critical medical humanities will promote a research approach that holds the potential for advanced theory building in parallel with developing practice-sensitive and applicable instruments. In our experience at CoRe, we have found that the path to conducting "good" engaged research involves a dynamic critical and creative exchange between theoretical thinking and what we have chosen to call instrumental thinking. Through this interplay, our research becomes both societally and scientifically relevant.

Theorizing-cum-instrumentation is an experimental work practice in which knowledge productions (both empirical and theoretical) are conjoined to foster and cross-pollinate practical and theoretical sensibilities. A key inspiration for our experimentation is Stengers' (2005) call to slow down reasoning. Although the project-based and thus time-bound character of our research at CoRe may seem in opposition to a call for slowing down and hesitation, by conjoining, confronting, and contrasting theory and tool making, we attempt to slow down by other means. In her cosmopolitical proposal, Stengers (2005) forefronts "the idiot" as a figure who, by slowing down and resisting conventions and consensus, produces an interstice (by asking what we are busy doing) and thereby creates a space for hesitation. The dynamic interplay between theoretical and instrumental thinking is our interstice, our site for hesitation, and our way to stop and (re)think: How can we make our knowledge production relevant and good? The tools we develop with practitioners—the so-called instrumentation of research—are embedded in theory, although sometimes invisibly. Simultaneously, it is by thinking with the practitioners and emphasizing their practices when developing tools that we build theory and materialize it. Therefore, theorizing and instrumentation are not opposites, but arguably can and should be deeply entangled when conducting engaged research. In the following, we explore the dynamic interplay between theorizing and instrumentation in the form of navigational issues that have emerged in the two projects because of different temporalities, collectives, inscriptions, and success criteria between the academic and external partners regarding the knowledge production, issues that are resolved in practice as we understand and handle it through the concept of theorizing-cum-instrumentation.

Case: Lifelong Oral Health

In our investigation and mapping of barriers to oral health in Danish elderly care, one of our key findings is that assisted daily tooth brushing is highly shameful and intimidating for the cared-for older people as well as the care workers. We found that older persons often experience shame related to their teeth and dental issues and that care workers find it intimidating to confront these issues and the mouth as such. This insight was gained through a collaborative process melding ethnographic narratives, activities with stakeholders, and theoretical discussions. This process has led to the conceptualization of tooth shame as a unique manifestation of bodily and health-related shame and, further, to a conceptualization of intimidation in care work. On one hand, these conceptualizations developed as we presented and discussed our findings with our municipal project partners. In particular, the care workers have welcomed the findings: they describe the findings as helping them understand behaviors and atmospheres regarding dental care, enabling their work. They have embraced the concepts and further developed local initiatives and instruments to address tooth shame. For instance, they digitally register dental issues and tooth shame and use individualized pocket cards to share tips and motivating strategies among care workers for each nursing home resident in need of dental care. Furthermore, the care units have disseminated the concepts and their initiatives to address them to other care units in the municipalities that are not part of the Lifelong Oral Health project.

On the other hand, the conceptualizations are highly informed by recent academic discussions of shame and intimidation. When we began to investigate these discussions, it became clear to us that both shame and intimidation are well-documented, yet underexplored, barriers to treatments, healthcare encounters, and health as such (Dolezal and Gibson 2022). Therefore, we became interested in how shame acts as a barrier to oral health in practice, which initiated follow-up fieldwork with this specific focus. On this basis, we have published a paper on how shame acts in socio-material settings and how it can be addressed in practice (Folker et al. 2025). Most research on shame is highly focused on philosophical, psychological, and individual-based approaches to shame. However, the Lifelong Oral Health project has allowed us to investigate how shame works in a collective practice. As such, the project's commitment to developing interventions through concrete collaborations is a key component of the novel focus on the social distribution of shame among the cared-for older persons, relatives, care workers, etc., in a collective and systemic care setting.

Our theorizing-cum-instrumentation work has sparked interest from other medical humanities research milieus, as we have been invited to present our work in lecture series abroad. This interest from international medical humanities researchers has not been related solely to teeth or oral health; instead, it has concerned our ethnographic socio-material approach to investigating shame. Furthermore, we have established international collaborations with researchers from the medical humanities to address tooth shame. It is the constant dialogue among our practice interventions, instruments, and theoretical work that creates the interstice allowing for a slowing down by other means and shapes our knowledge production. In this way, both our theoretical work and our practice interventions move within new arenas, far beyond the initial project design. The knowledge production process is manifested in both theoretical contributions and practice interventions that could never have been planned for or predicted at the project's beginning. Moreover, the concept of tooth shame has evolved in ways in which we, as researchers, are not necessarily involved regarding both theoretical discussions and practice interventions. To sum up,

our theoretical work and practice interventions not only go hand in hand but also inform, enrich, and take shape by each other.

Case: Senior Practice

Collaborating with a private foundation such as the Velliv Association is an opportunity to have research-based impact in the field of later working life, a time characterized by many stereotypes and prejudices. One of the most significant insights achieved during the first two phases of Senior Practice from 2019 to 2022 concerned the many stereotypes and prejudices surrounding older workers. Often, managers, coworkers, union representatives, and older workers themselves would state that older workers were slow, unproductive, or unmotivated. Throughout the fieldwork period, however, we observed that such generalizing and marginalizing statements were often contrasted with the actual older workers employed at the companies. As such, a distinction was made between the specific older worker in question, who was portrayed as energetic, productive, and motivated, and "the general older worker." Furthermore, managers and coworkers would seldom praise older workers to their faces; consequently, many of the older workers were afraid that they were perceived in line with their own prejudices concerning "declining older workers" who were "worn out." Although confident that they were still good resources for the companies, the ongoing lack of appraisal, combined with small comments about their age from managers and coworkers, would lead to internalized ageism. This affected their well-being and self-image but was often concealed from their surroundings. In many cases, we saw this as influencing the retirement decision, which could have been prevented with timely, relevant, and caring dialogues between the manager and the older worker.

This was a phenomenon we had not encountered in the existing literature, nor had it been addressed in existing tools for practitioners. We did, however, find many similarities between this psycho–socio–cultural complex and what has been termed "the impostor syndrome" by the American psychologists Clance and Imes (1978). Hence, from our data, we crafted the theoretical concept of "the worn-out syndrome" with which to understand these age-specific challenges in later working life. While the impostor syndrome addresses the insecurities early in working life, when young people doubt their own abilities and whether they deserve their positions, the worn-out syndrome addresses the insecurities of later working life (Aabo et al. 2023). Through our analysis and the development of the worn-out syndrome as a concept, it became clear that the participating companies needed tools with which to engage in dialogues about the practices and challenges in later working life.

When applying for funding, we promised the funder that we would create practice-relevant instruments; simultaneously, we had the freedom to wait for insights from the fieldwork before deciding what such tools should consist of. During this process, and in collaboration with societal partners, such as unions, employers, associations, pension funds, municipalities, companies, and nongovernmental organizations, we developed three tools with the aim of enhancing dialogues between managers and older workers. We established these collaborations with societal partners, inviting them to engagement and discussion in workshops, informal meetings, and the like. We wished to promote the idea that recognition and appraisal are still important in later working life, and that to extend working life, companies need to involve older workers in designing their working lives. This includes flexible working hours, reduced working hours, more vacations, fewer management responsibilities, and, importantly, the recognition of existing

resources, competences, and potentials to battle ageism in the company. In this process, we actively utilized the worn-out syndrome as a theoretical concept to apply when developing these tools. In other words, the worn-out syndrome has become a means for both our academic endeavors and tool development. Additionally, the tools became a means of materializing and conveying the worn-out syndrome, with the aim of anchoring research insights in practice in order to transform it and, as such, manifest its importance and impact.

One tool targeted management and HR personnel to promote the development of workplace policies to increase the focus on older workers; another tool targeted the older workers' closest managers and was intended to facilitate later work life interviews with older workers; and a third tool aimed to prepare older workers to discuss their thoughts, during later work life interviews, about lifelong learning, gradual retirement plans, and dream scenarios. In the tool for these later work life interviews, the guide is introduced with the words: "It can be sensitive to talk about age in the workplace. But research shows that age can play a positive role in working life if you manage to create a constructive and appreciative dialogue." Additionally, the manager is encouraged to initiate the interview by recognizing the older worker: "You are a valued employee whom I would like to keep as long as possible. We can continue as before, but if you have any wishes for us to organize the work in a different way, I am open to it. That is why I have invited you to this conversation." Although the worn-out syndrome is never mentioned in the tools, its presence is apparent. The worn-out syndrome also became an active resource not only in our thinking but also in the use of the tools, as stakeholders seem to endorse the tools exactly because of their academic origins and the authority given to the worn-out syndrome concept through its academic use.

Utilizing the worn-out syndrome as a theoretical concept enhanced our understanding of some of the challenges at stake in practice and the factors constituting a good later working life. Subsequently, among other theoretical concepts, the worn-out syndrome has been utilized as an analytical resource in our latest academic article to analyze the dynamics regarding competence development in later working life (Wulff and Lassen 2024). We continue to explore and develop its theoretical potential in our research, making it into an instrument with which to understand the complex dynamics among older workers and their surroundings. Our fieldwork data and experimentation with tool development keep informing the worn-out syndrome as a theoretical concept, and vice versa. On this basis, working closely with a private foundation and the companies has given us access and the opportunity to investigate and intervene in critical empirical settings regarding mental health and later working life. It is the theorizing-cum-instrumentation work that makes worthwhile all the troubles of the project trading zone, as described in the Senior Practice case.

A call for engaged medical humanities

In this article, we have demonstrated how CoRe's engaged approach to the medical humanities offers a compelling framework for conducting research that is at once academically rigorous and societally relevant. By proposing this framework, we have shown that while our engagement with both theory and practice can be conflicting and cumbersome, it is also a highly rewarding research approach, as it allows empirically informed theoretical contributions to various research fields, as well as theoretically based

practice interventions addressing societal needs. Our take on the medical humanities is deeply rooted in the critical medical humanities' call for entanglements in "real-world" settings (Fitzgerald and Callard 2016; Kristeva et al. 2018). On this basis, we suggest advancing the critical medical humanities by empirically exploring and stress-testing the entanglements in various real-world settings. In doing so, we have suggested a framework for the engaged medical humanities. More specifically, we have identified the specific kinds of troubles that arise when following our approach concerning project collaborations and knowledge production. These are not troubles that we wish to avoid; rather, as Haraway (2016) has put it, the aim is "staying with the trouble[s]," as they are highly important. Yet, it is for such troubles that we have gradually developed ad hoc handling strategies, as we have shown in the two cases discussed here. Furthermore, as part of our framework, we propose two sets of concepts through which to critically understand the engagements in both practical settings and theoretical discussions. First, we have suggested exploring our practice-based engagement with societal partners in terms of *trading zones* and *accountability* to understand the complexities, power relations, and ad hoc situations occurring in project partnerships that cannot be planned for or agreed upon in the initial phases of projects. These concepts have illuminated some of the ethical and practical conflicts and dilemmas that we, as researchers, must navigate, emphasizing skilled sensitivity (Whyte 2009), ongoing negotiations, and expertise regarding affectual, interpersonal, and group dynamics.

Second, we have focused on knowledge production in the engaged medical humanities through *theorizing and instrumentation*. As we have argued, both theoretical and conceptual research contributions and practice-based instruments and interventions are integral to our engaged medical humanities framework. In our analysis, we have shown how our diverse knowledge productions are deeply entangled in and informed by one another. Altogether, CoRe's engaged medical humanities framework allows for a deeper understanding of health, illness, and treatment as socio-material phenomena intricately linked with political, economic, and cultural dimensions. In this way, the engaged medical humanities offer substantial opportunities for impacting and enriching both theoretical and practical frameworks, with possible inspirations and takeaways for fellow researchers interested in this field of study.

However, our specific approach is conditioned by the Danish context. On one hand, the research conducted at CoRe is shaped by some of the major current challenges facing research in Denmark, including short-term projects, precarious employment conditions, and time-limited research periods. In the case of the medical humanities, there is also a lack of earmarked funding and educational programs. On the other hand, the Danish context provides ample opportunities to engage in medical humanities research. For instance, there is a significant Danish funding landscape that prioritizes practice-based research and inter-disciplinary collaborations. Furthermore, working as a research community, our engaged research approach develops and thrives as it continuously gathers and exchanges project experiences and trading zone maneuvering skills. Our many diverse projects over the last decade have given us a large network of collaborative partners inside and outside academia, and we benefit from an ongoing exchange and transfer of research competences between us and government agencies and municipalities, as former students and research colleagues from CoRe are in high demand. Our combined networks and knowledge products have an impact in these settings, as people, recommendations, instruments, and reports circulate and lead to changes because of their competences and high applicability in practice. At the

same time, we have experienced great interest from our theoretically focused peers precisely because of our empirical sensitivity and practice-oriented work. While the critical medical humanities calls for an entangled medical humanities, our proposal, based on the last ten years of research, is this framework for approaching the entanglements with empirical sensitivity, in order to investigate how they unfold and shape lived lives.

Data Availability Not applicable. All participating informants have been promised anonymity. It is impossible to anonymize the dataset completely.

Declarations

Ethics approval
• Lifelong Oral Health
 This study was approved by the Danish Data Protection Agency (514–0599/21–3000) in May 2021 and the local Research Ethics Committee at the Faculty of Health and Medical Sciences (504–0241/21–5000) on March 30th, 2021. The study was conducted in accordance with the American Anthropological Association Statement on Ethics (https://americananthro.org/about/policies/statement-on-ethics/).
• Senior Practice
 This study was approved by the Ethics Committee at the Faculty of Humanities. The study was conducted in accordance with the American Anthropological Association Statement on Ethics (https://americananthro.org/about/policies/statement-on-ethics/).

Consent to participate Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the two research projects.

Consent for Publication All individual participants also signed informed consent regarding publishing their anonymised data.

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.

We confirm that this work has not been published elsewhere, nor is it currently under consideration for publication elsewhere.

Endnotes

[1] CoRe is a research collective affiliated with the ethnology section at the Saxo Institute at the University of Copenhagen. It consists of ethnologists, historians, anthropologists, literature scholars, public health scholars, etc., working qualitatively with a broad understanding of health at the intersection of social science and the humanities. The projects hosted at CoRe are often engaged in interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral research collaborations.

[2] This project is funded by three sources: the Velux Foundation (veluxfonden.dk/en), which distributes funds generated partly through returns on assets and partly through a share of the annual profits generated by the private corporate group, VKR Holding A/S; the Foundations fund research in the humanities, humanistic praxis interventions, and initiatives related to vision issues; Sygeforsikring Danmark (sygeforsikring.dk/sundhedsdonationer), a member-owned insurance association funding health-promoting projects in Denmark through donating parts of its returns on investments; and the Faculty of Health and Medical Sciences at the University of Copenhagen (for more information, see odont.ku.dk/Forskning/sund-mund-hele-livet/).

[3] The funding source of this project is the Velliv Association (vellivforeningen.dk/soegstoette/), a philanthropic association for customers of the pension and insurance company Velliv. Approximately 20% of the returns go to charitable activities that promote mental health in Denmark, including the funding of research projects. The aim is to benefit and improve conditions for the Association's target group of small and medium-sized companies by supporting the development of new initiatives and tools (for more information, see core.ku.dk/forskning/seniorpraksis/).

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Appendix 2

Overview of ethnographic material

Appendix 2

Overview of ethnographic fieldwork for the PhD thesis

Field site 1: Volunteering for All Seniors Citizens

Semi-structured Interviews – 61 total

- **Matched Pairs** – 21 pairs (21 senior citizen volunteers, 21 newcomers)

    o 6 double interviews (5 in-person, 1 online)

    o 49 individual interviews (1 in-person, 48 online/phone)

    o Conducted twice where possible: shortly after the first meeting and again 1–2 months later

    o Focus: expectations, early experiences, and relationship development over time

- **Municipal Stakeholders** – 6 expert interviews (60–120 minutes) with staff from four municipalities:

    o Leaders in Elderly Care Services

    o Project managers in Health and Care Services

    o Preventive home visit coordinators

    o Social and health care assistants

    o Physiotherapist

    o Purpose: insights into local integration and support of the program

Participant Observations – 6 total

- Observations of matched pairs meeting in homes or public spaces

- Focus:

    o How they structured their time together

    o Approaches to language learning

    o Navigation of cultural and generational differences

The fieldwork was carried out together with student assistant Rebecca Søgaard

Field site 2: EMOVE – enabling the matching of volunteers

Semi-structured Interviews – 27 total

- **Kople –** *5 interviews*
    - 3 with Project manager and CEO of Kople
    - 1 with developer
    - 1 with UX designer

- **Alzheimer Association – 10 interviews**
    - *5 with volunteer match leaders*
    - *3 with project leaders and*
    - *2 with emplyeed match leaders*

- **Forening Lige Adgang – 7 interviews**
    - *3 with project leaders*
    - *4 with match leaders staff (interns, student assistants, etc.)*

- **Forening Sammen på Tværs –** *5 interviews*
    - 1 with CEO
    - 4 with project leaders and match leaders

Focus Group Interviews – 3 total

- 1 joint focus group with all three organizations
- 2 focus groups with extended network of organizations using Kople

Participant Observations / Over-the-Shoulder – 16 total
Conducted at all three organisations during office days, observing staff working with Kople and matchmaking. For Alzheimer Association, also online observations with volunteer match coordinators (distributed across Denmark).

- Alzheimer Association – *5* (4 online with volunteers, 1 on-site with superuser staff)
- Forening Lige Adgang – *5* on-site with match coordinator staff
- Forening Sammen på Tværs – *6* on-site with primary match coordinator staff

Workshops – 10 total
Covers onboarding flow builder workshops, user insight workshops, and joint workshops among the three organizations using Kople.

- Forening Lige Adgang – 4

- Alzheimer Association – 4

- Forening Sammen på Tværs – 2

Development Meetings – 36 total
Primarily test and onboarding meetings between CSOs project leaders and Kople. Most held from May 2021 to June 2022, then less frequent as the system was implemented and stabilized.

Online Diaries – 5 total
Three-week online ethnographic diaries documenting match leaders reflections, answering ongoing questions, and sharing screenshots/photos. Telephone voicemail was an option, but was unused.

- Forening Lige Adgang – 2

- Alzheimer Association – 2

- Forening Sammen på Tværs – 1

All of EMOVE research was carried out in collaboration with the two research assistants, Ann-Sofie Thorsen and Alfred Lund Felumb.

Overview of Fieldwork – Network for Visiting Services

Meeting Participation – 11 total

- Attended 10 in-person meetings and 1 online between 2020–2025

- Absences during an international research stay and parental leave

Meeting Format and Duration

- Each meeting lasted 3–4 hours

- Structure: plenary discussions, breakout groups, and informal networking over coffee or lunch

Role and Contributions

- Engaged as both observer and contributor:
  - o Observed how the different CSOs described their organization of the particular matchmaking activity and noted recurring concerns, problem and best-practices
  - o Introduced insights from other field sites to prompt reflection
- Used the network as both an empirical site and sounding board for early-stage analyses

Presentations

- Presented research insights twice during the period of engagement
- Planned final presentation of PhD findings after thesis submission

Participating Organisations

- Danish Multiple Sclerosis Society (Scleroseforeningen)

- Danish Rheumatism Association (Gigtforeningen)

- Alzheimer's Association (Alzheimerforeningen)

- DaneAge Association (Ældresagen)

- Danish Red Cross (Røde Kors)

- Together Across (Sammen på Tværs)

- Visits in the Mother Tongue (Besøg på Modersmål)

- Danish Deaf Association

- SIND – Danish Mental Health Association

- LGBT+ Denmark

Additional Activities and Ethnographic Fieldwork for PhD

- **Interview with the chair of the Copenhagen local branch of the Alzheimer Association** – Discussion of the organisation's local initiatives and volunteer engagement strategies.

- **Interview with a consultant from an IT consultancy** – Insights into digital solutions for social workers and municipalities.

- **Interview with a German NGO** – Exploration of their work with volunteer matchmaking programmes.

- **Interview with Rose Capp, Flinders University/Dementia Australia** – Expert perspective on developing volunteer activities for people with dementia, including challenges with digital engagement during COVID-19.

- **Interview with Befriendas (Australia)** – Introduction to a research and volunteer project connecting aged care residents with conversation partners; parallels with Danish visiting services.

- **Interview with association SUMH - young people living with disabilities** – Discussion of problems in establishing a good matchmaking structure and potential collaborations.

- **Interview with the chair of Håb i Psykiatrien** – Overview of organisational aims and volunteer involvement.

- **Interview with a volunteer from Håb i Psykiatrien** – Reflections on personal experiences and motivations.

- **Participation in TrygFonden's Network for Civil Society Research** – Attendance at meetings in October 2024 and spring 2025, involving presentations, thematic discussions, and networking with researchers and practitioners.

Appendix 3

Products from the Volunteer for All Senior Citizens project

Københavns Universitet

Frivillighed til alle ældre

Et kvalitativt studie af muligheder og udfordringer ved udbredelse og opskalering af et socialt frivilligt tilbud for ældre og udlændinge

Bygballe, Line Steen; Jespersen, Astrid Pernille; Søgaard, Rebecca

Publication date:
2022

By Line Steen Bygballe, Astrid Jespersen & Rebecca Søegaard

Volunteering for all senior citizens

A qualitative study of the opportunities and challenges associated with disseminating and upscaling a social volunteering scheme for senior citizens and foreigners

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Cover photo: Thomas Brolyng Steen

Why you should read the report

Dear reader,

This report can serve as a source of inspiration for those who work on disseminating and scaling up social volunteering schemes for senior citizens via an association, an NGO or a municipality. Several economic, social or organisational reasons may be attributed to dissemination and upscaling, all of which necessitate the use of new procedures.

This report presents a qualitative study of the socioeconomic enterprise Elderlearn and their attempts to disseminate and scale up the volunteering schemes they offer in municipalities throughout Denmark and thus to a larger part of their target population of senior citizens and foreigners. For Elderlearn this required the establishment of new work routines, a better understanding of the target group and the use of other communicative tools to handle the requirements of upscaling.

The report highlights the potential challenges of scaling and provides a number of specific suggestions for meeting these challenges. Focusing on Elderlearn and its work to facilitate meetings between senior citizens and foreigners who are learning Danish, this report aims to present insights from the accompanying research and thus inspire other parties working on the upscaling of voluntary activities for senior citizens.

The report is composed of two parts. **Part One** describes the volunteering activities facilitated by Elderlearn by presenting the story of Ellen and her meeting with Sorina. The six focus points of the analysis are then summarised, and the ethnographic material from the accompanying research is presented. Part One concludes with three short sections that; provide background

information and key details regarding Elderlearn, describe how Elderlearn work on upscaling and discuss the initiatives and organisational changes implemented by Elderlearn in this context

Part Two starts with a presentation of the volunteer senior citizens who are active in Elderlearn. This is followed by an analysis on what significance the upscaling has had on the senior citizens' experiences with Elderlearn. The analysis is divided into six sections, and each section is accompanied by one or more focus points that we recommend should be included in an upscaling process. Part Two concludes with a discussion about how several of the insights in this report have been converted into new practices in Elderlearn, thus showing how the recommendations in the report can be applied.

Contextual background

This report focuses on the Volunteering for all senior citizens project, which was collaboratively developed by the Copenhagen Centre for Health Research in the Humanities (CoRe), the socioeconomic enterprise Elderlearn and the association Danish Seniors with funding from the independent Danish philanthropic foundation Nordea-fonden. The purpose of the project is to give even more senior citizens in the municipalities of Denmark the opportunity to participate in Elderlearn's volunteer work. Elderlearn arranges meetings and thus fosters conversations between volunteer senior citizens and volunteer foreigners who want to improve their Danish language skills. From 2017 to 2018, Elderlearn's work primarily targeted the Capital Region of Denmark. Subsequently, from 2019 to 2021, Elderlearn facilitated relations between foreigners and senior citizens in more than 70 urban and rural municipalities across Denmark.

One of the effects of the dissemination and upscaling of Elderlearn's activities is that an employee from Elderlearn is not present to facilitate the first meeting between the volunteer senior citizen and the volunteer foreigner anymore. Therefore, this project has a special focus on ensuring that senior citizens constantly feel safe and sufficiently equipped to participate in Elderlearn's volunteering activities. Accordingly, this report focuses on the role of senior citizens.

Copenhagen Centre for Health Research in the Humanities (CoRe)
CoRe is a research centre in the Saxo Institute at the University of Copenhagen that conducts research into cultural analytical and historical aspects of health and illness. The centre manages interdisciplinary projects, often in collaboration with external stakeholders, in a number of fields, including ageing issues, lifestyle interventions and health understandings and practices. CoRe has previously conducted an accompanying research project on Elderlearn, and the current report also builds on this research [1].

Read more here: https://core.ku.dk

Danish Seniors
Danish Seniors is an association with around 90,000 members, and its purpose is to encourage senior citizens to make use of their own resources in social and cultural contexts for the benefit of both themselves and society. Danish Seniors organises and supports senior citizen clubs throughout Denmark, providing a good framework for senior citizens to participate in voluntary work.

Read more here: https://danske-seniorer.dk

Elderlearn
Since 2017, Elderlearn has facilitated meetings between foreigners who want to improve their Danish language skills and senior citizens. Elderlearn's main objective is to instil joy and meaning in senior citizens' daily lives, thus promoting their well-being, and to improve integration opportunities for foreigners. Elderlearn's work includes registering and pairing senior citizens and foreigners, arranging their first meetings and ensuring the smooth functioning of their relationships.

Read more here: https://www.elderlearn.dk

Ellen's Story:
"It keeps an old woman alive."

When Ellen fell and broke both her arms, she was forced to stay at home, but a tip from a physiotherapist made her volunteer with Elderlearn.

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.

Sorina is the volunteer foreigner whom Ellen converses with in Danish once a week. Their meetings began in the winter of 2019, but like so many others, they were forced to take a break due to the COVID-19 pandemic and they would instead talk over the phone every now and then.

Both women live in Holstebro. 27-year-old Sorina came to Denmark from Serbia as part of her study programme. She is now a qualified social educator and is enrolled in a social and healthcare training programme. Ellen, who lives in one of the municipality's dwellings for the elderly, worked as an administrative officer for 30 years and retired 15 years ago.

For many years, Ellen has been active in civil society in Holstebro through various associations and municipal schemes. She used to attend gymnastics classes and take French courses, and she was also the co-organiser of a book club.

However, she has become increasingly frail over the past two years. Last year, she fell on the pavement when she went to fetch her newspaper from the mailbox. She broke both her arms and had them in plaster for a long time afterwards.

"Unfortunately, this meant that I couldn't do a lot of things, and I've needed help with most activities. I've been really bored. It's not easy getting old," she said in the interview. During one of the many visits by municipal home carers and other healthcare professionals, a physiotherapist recommended volunteering with Elderlearn. "And so I did. And then Sonia visited me in my home, so it's as easy as it can be," Ellen stated.

Ellen enjoys sharing her life experiences, getting to know a new young person and providing support in learning Danish. "It keeps an old woman alive" she said. Ellen and Sorina both stressed that they value each other's company; it offers useful conversations for Sorina to learn from and, just as importantly, means that Ellen feels renewed and energetic in her otherwise monotonous everyday life. Before the pandemic restrictions, when Ellen felt up to it, they went on excursions together to the library, a local museum and a clothes shop.

After we have finished our coffee, Ellen concluded the conversation by stating, "Sorina will probably have other things to do in her life at some point than conversing with me, and that's how it is. But I could then imagine volunteering for a new one!"

Summary: Six focus points for disseminating and upscaling a social volunteering scheme for senior citizens

This section outlines the six focus areas that are analysed and presented in the report.

1 Cooperation partners

Map the stakeholders with whom cooperation is crucial, relative to the target group. There is often a need for stakeholders who are close to senior citizens in their everyday lives (e.g. home carers/healthcare professionals) as well as stakeholders who primarily handle coordinating work (e.g. activity and volunteering coordinators).

Focus on making the cooperation partners well equipped for their tasks and providing them with updates on an ongoing basis – especially persons with day-to-day contact with senior citizens, as they often play an essential role in whether the senior citizens want to participate.

2 Knowledge and motivation

Adjust communications to the target group on an ongoing basis.

Create relatable stories that the senior citizens can relate to if the volunteering scheme is communicated through local papers, TV features and social media.

Underline how volunteer senior citizens can contribute. This is an important motivating factor for their participation.

3 From registration to start-up

Clarify the information that is decisive for a good match of volunteers, especially in the case of a target group with special needs.

Stay in contact with the volunteers if there is a long waiting period. Provide information to indicate that they have not been forgotten and explain why there is a waiting period.

A long waiting period from registration to start-up requires the participants' reintroduction to the volunteering scheme.

4 Start-up

Create a simple narrative about the organisation and the volunteering scheme.

Plan out the initial conversation between the volunteer senior citizen and the staff of the volunteering scheme, as this will set the scene for the senior citizen's experience.

Use interview techniques adapted from research interviews, for instance, to establish a steady and professional conversation. It is particularly important to prepare for the conversation if there is great diversity among the target group of the volunteering scheme.

5 Initial period

Support the establishment of a good relationship by setting up a framework.

Create a start-up package containing the materials to be sent to the senior citizen's address. See an example of the contents of a start-up package on page 19.

6 Anchoring, retention and continued volunteering

Provide tools for a good conclusion to the relationship, thus setting the foundation for volunteers to enter into new relationships.

Start a network for volunteer senior citizens. This can support their feeling of being part of a larger community with a single joint purpose. Establish a corps of ambassadors if there are many resourceful volunteer senior citizens.

Ongoing surveys should be conducted to determine how the target group changes, when working with the dissemination and upscaling of a social volunteering scheme. This can be done by, for example, looking at the demographic factors of the target group.

CoRe's accompanying research

Accompanying research is a type of project-specific research in which continuous feedback and advice are provided. Accompanying research thus ensures that a development project receives specific feedback from an updated academic perspective and makes it possible to adjust the project along the way. Furthermore, close collaboration between researchers and project staff increases the possibility of the project's success.

Qualitative accompanying research
CoRe's accompanying research followed a qualitative ethnographic approach, with interviews, participant observations and workshops conducted from September 2020 to May 2021. The qualitative interviews and participant observations provided detailed insights into the volunteer senior citizens' experiences and reflections. We conducted semi-structured individual interviews, double interviews and expert interviews, which together provided a comprehensive understanding of the senior citizens' experiences, life stories and everyday activities as well as the role played by Elderlearn in this context.

The informant group consisted of both senior citizens and foreigners, but the focus of the accompanying research was on the volunteer senior citizens. The informants were recruited in cooperation with Elderlearn and, when being paired, were asked for their consent to be subsequently contacted by CoRe. The 61 interviews were conducted in Danish or English by an academic staff member or a student assistant from CoRe respectively. The interviews were conducted in accordance with the current legislation on the storage of personal data. All interviews were transcribed and encoded using the analysis program NVivo [3].

Preparation of insights
The analytical insights of the study were presented to and discussed with the cooperation partners at four analysis meetings and a concluding seminar. This process contributed to enhancing our contextual understanding and perspectives and to the further development of the analytical insights. Practical suggestions based on the insights of the accompanying research are being implemented by Elderlearn on an ongoing basis and are described further in the report.

Ethnographic material

Interviews with matched pairs:

Six double interviews
(five physical interviews and one online interview of two hours each)

49 individual interviews
(one physical interview and 48 online or telephonic interviews; introductory interviews were 45–120 minutes long, and follow-up interviews lasted 20–45 minutes)

Six participant observations

Six expert interviews
of 60–120 minutes with municipal stakeholders [2]:
one in Holstebro, two in Roskilde, one in Sorø and two in Syddjurs.

Activities:
Workshop for the development of the word game Ordet er dit (The word is yours), analysis seminars, closing seminar and ongoing presentations and discussions with Elderlearn and Danish Seniors.

Informant group

Informants:
21 pairs, i.e. 42 respondents (21 volunteer senior citizens and 21 volunteer foreigners)

Municipalities:
Copenhagen, Frederiksberg, Sorø, Roskilde, Aarhus, Nørager, Herning, Favrskov and Holstebro

Gender among the senior citizens:
Seven men and 14 women

Age among the senior citizens:
65-88 years

Help in the household:
Nine receive household help with food, cleaning, personal hygiene and/or medicine

Members of the household:
12 live alone, nine with a partner

Volunteer foreigners:
Gender among the volunteer foreigners: 19 women and two men

Age among the volunteer foreigners:
23–47 years

Background and key details about Elderlearn

Elderlearn – an inclusive volunteering scheme in progress
Denmark has one of the highest numbers of volunteers relative to other countries in Western Europe (Lindholm et al., 2019; Erling Hagen et al., 2006). The proportion of senior citizens who have served as volunteers has increased significantly over the past years in Denmark, particularly among those aged 67–77 years (Amilon et al., 2019), and senior citizens are especially active volunteers in the social area. However, not everyone has the opportunity to participate in voluntary activities, such as those belonging to minority groups. Furthermore, senior citizens with physical or mental health problems may opt out of voluntary activities, and mobility and accessibility issues may also affect their participation (Principi et al., 2012). Research has shown that volunteer work improves mental health, and voluntary participation in civil society helps prevent feelings of loneliness (Cattan et al., 2011;

Anderson et al., 2014; Kruse & Lassen 2021). Therefore, it is important to look at how inclusive volunteering schemes are developed.

Elderlearn is a voluntary activity in which there is no distinction between the giver and recipient under the volunteering scheme. The activity thus differs from conventional volunteering initiatives that have a clearer division of roles. The volunteer foreigner visits the volunteer senior citizen once a week for at least an hour, during which time the volunteer senior citizen helps the foreigner to learn the Danish language through conversations. This approach makes it possible for less resourceful senior citizens who, for example, need to stay at home to make a tangible difference in another person's life. Thus, the voluntary activity benefits both sides and helps create meaningful relationships. Participation is free of charge for both the senior citizen and the volunteer foreigner, as Elderlearn is funded by municipalities, foundations and the Danish Health Authority.

Elderlearn was established in September
2017

1.600
pairs of volunteers have been matched.

Elderlearn pairs have been matched in more than
70
municipalities across Denmark.

92%
of the total number of the volunteer senior citizens would recommend Elderlearn to others [4].

80%
of the volunteer senior citizens feel that they have been helpful.

The map shows the distribution of registrations and matches in Denmark. Blue represents volunteer seniors, and red represents volunteer foreigners.

Disseminating and scaling a volunteering scheme for senior citizens and foreigners

Scaling can be done either upward or downward. Regardless of the direction in which it takes place, scaling entails changes in the activity's scope and practices.

Upscaling of Elderlearn's practice has caused changes in the dissemination of knowledge about the organisation, collaboration with municipalities and matching of senior citizens and foreigners as well as Elderlearn's facilitating role. In addition, Elderlearn's upscaling has also resulted in the expansion of and changes in the demographic composition of the volunteers who participate in the activity.

In light of the above, the accompanying research aimed to address the following question:

What significance does scaling have for elderly citizens, and how does Elderlearn ensure that the quality of the volunteering scheme is maintained?

To this end, the implications of upscaling with regard to senior citizens were investigated, along with a focus on how the initiatives developed by Danish Seniors and Elderlearn for security and quality in the volunteering activity have worked for the participating senior citizens.

Scaling measures and organisational changes

This section describes the initiatives and organisational changes implemented by Elderlearn and Danish Seniors for the upscaling of the volunteering scheme:

Several types of cooperation agreements with municipalities:
Elderlearn has entered into several types of agreements with municipalities; some of these focus on a specific group of senior citizens, such as elderly people in nursing homes or elderly people who receive home help. The relevant municipal stakeholders are involved in informing senior citizens about the possibility of becoming active Elderlearn volunteers.

Elderlearn employees are not present to facilitate the first meeting:
Before the scaling took place, an Elderlearn employee would participate in every first meeting, facilitating the encounter and ensuring that the Elderlearn pairs got off to a good start.

Strategic and standardised communication:
Preliminary telephone calls and information about what volunteers can expect and how they can plan the first meeting are provided by the Elderlearn employees to ensure their preparedness. The volunteer foreigner receives emails containing potential conversation topics. Follow-up telephone calls are made after the first meeting and again after a month.

More specialised division of responsibilities among employees:
The responsibilities for each task have been divided among the employees, such that one employee is responsible for the actual matching of volunteer senior citizens and volunteer foreigners and for the initial conversations between the parties, while

another employee is responsible for all the follow-up telephone calls and for answering questions.

Development of Elderlearn's IT system:
The IT system has been developed to ensure that all work procedures are in a single place. Through the system, Elderlearn employees can get an overview of volunteer foreigners and volunteer senior citizens who want to be matched and also acquire a list of possible matches based on different criteria. In addition, the IT system gives employees notifications about when and how to follow up on Elderlearn matches.

The word game *Ordet er dit*:
The game was produced in cooperation with Copenhagen Game Lab, a company that develops learning games. *Ordet er dit* can be used by the two volunteer parties to get to know each other while speaking and learning Danish. This game focuses on getting the conversation going, rather than on participants competing with their knowledge of Danish words. The game was developed to be used at least four times.

Elderlearn's volunteer senior citizens

Implications of Elderlearn's scaling

The upscaling of Elderlearn has resulted in both positive and negative implications for volunteer senior citizens. The following six subsections review the most significant implications of the Elderlearn process.

Each section provides a specific example of the implications being discussed as well as some general focus areas when working on the scaling of a social volunteering scheme for senior citizens

A diverse group of volunteers
Elderlearn has a broad and diverse group of volunteer senior citizens, as the initiative appeals to very resourceful senior citizens who may choose to join the scheme because it is a flexible activity that can fit into a busy calendar, as well as senior citizens with fewer resources who, for example, need to stay at home.

Furthermore, among senior citizens who are already highly active in civil society, Elderlearn's activity is appealing because it offers a different kind of volunteering experience than conventional association-based schemes. This reflects the general volunteering trend in Denmark, where the number of volunteers in periodic network-based activities, rather than long-term activities at a specific association, has increased (Center for Frivilligt Socialt Arbejde [Danish Institute for Voluntary Effort], 2019).

Notably, senior citizens who experience health or mobility problems find Elderlearn's volunteering activity appealing because it

gives them the opportunity to do something for others in an easy and simple way from their own home. The activity only requires senior citizens' willingness to open their homes and have conversations with persons who would like to improve their Danish. Elderlearn thus creates a space for more senior citizens to participate as volunteers.

There may be limits to who can be volunteers
One of Elderlearn's greatest strength is that the volunteering activity can accommodate a highly diverse group of senior citizens. Nevertheless, the accompanying research indicates that there are limits to who can participate. In the expert interviews, several elderly care specialists pointed out that senior citizens who are chronically ill, cognitively impaired or have very limited physical capacity may have special needs that an ordinary volunteer cannot meet. If Elderlearn wishes to make the activity accessible to this group of senior citizens, it will require a upgrade of the volunteer foreigners´ qualifications.

1. Cooperation partners

4. Start-up

2. Knowledge and motivation

5. The initial period

3. From registration to start-up

6. Anchoring, retention and continued volunteering

1. Cooperation partners

The municipalities with which Elderlearn has cooperation agreements often have heads of elderly care services, volunteering coordinators, project managers and healthcare professionals as their contacts and cooperation partners.

In our expert interviews with a number of these stakeholders, it was emphasised that several municipalities have tried their hands at similar projects that match senior citizens with another group of citizens. The experts stated that there is much administrative work involved in establishing a social volunteering initiative and, as a project manager in Health and Care Services in the Central Denmark Region pointed out, "such matching is not all that simple". The project manager further stated that coordinating and facilitating the various tasks is too time consuming for employees who often also have other areas of responsibility. Therefore, many municipal stakeholders are enthusiastic about Elderlearn's initiative

and consider it an "all-round project", as a head of a section in elderly care services from Region Zealand put it. In other words, it is a project that does not entail additional tasks for municipal employees who already have a lot to handle.

Although Elderlearn handles all matching-related tasks, which is precisely what makes it attractive, it is still necessary for the organisation to have a well-functioning collaboration with municipal stakeholders and other parties with knowledge of the senior citizen group and the local area.

It is also essential that municipal stakeholders and other local players are involved and qualified to communicate and disseminate knowledge of schemes that are not locally based. It is, therefore, important for the municipal cooperation partners to receive regular updates about the project; being kept up to date and involved would also increase their motivation to disseminate knowledge about the scheme to the target group.

FOCUS POINTS

- Map the stakeholders with whom it is crucial to enter into a cooperation agreement, relative to the target group. There is often a need for stakeholders who are close to senior citizens in their everyday lives (e.g. home carers/healthcare professionals) and stakeholders who handle coordinating work (e.g. activity and volunteering coordinators).

- Focus on ensuring that cooperation partners are well equipped for assignments and providing updates on an ongoing basis, especially to those who have daily contact with senior citizens and thus play an essential role in whether the senior citizens want to participate.

2. Knowledge and motivation

The volunteer senior citizens stated that they heard about the activity primarily through advertisements and articles in local papers. Many also mentioned that they were recommended to participate by a municipal employee. Only a few have heard about the scheme through social media. Notably, municipal employees were found to play a crucial role in fostering senior citizens' interest in the scheme, having a convincing and approving influence. Børge, a man in his 60s from the Central Denmark Region who has been an active volunteer with Elderlearn for over a year, described the process as follows:

"The general manager came to me one day and asked me whether this was something for me. And I first said to her, "Know what? I bloody well have more than enough to do". But she then told me a bit more about it and asked if she could give them my telephone number. To Elderlearn, that is. So, I ended up saying that the worst thing that could happen was that I would say no to them."

With age, many senior citizens realise that they

have a surplus of care and time, which were previously spent on family members, work or hobbies. Communities that they used to be a part of begin shrinking, and this may lead to a need to do something for others among the senior citizens. Notably, the desire to contribute and do something good for others is highlighted as a motivator for the participation of volunteer senior citizens in Elderlearn.

At the same time, several volunteer foreigners stated that they found the Elderlearn scheme particularly attractive because of the opportunity to meet and interact with a senior citizen. They emphasised that senior citizens have great life experiences and the patience and desire to talk and impart knowledge. Sigurd, a man in his 60s from the Central Denmark Region, agreed with this perspective and explained how a senior citizen

"can act as a sounding board that a young person can bounce ideas off in relation to choices and thoughts".

FOCUS POINTS

- Highlight the ways in which volunteer senior citizens can contribute. Senior citizens are often motivated by a desire to be part of a community and to pass on their life experiences to others.

- Tailor all communications to the target group based on what motivates them.

- Share stories that senior citizens can relate to if the volunteering scheme is communicated through local papers, TV features and/or social media. Be careful not to provide a fixed type of senior citizen who can participate.

3. From registration to startup

Joining Elderlearn
Registering with Elderlearn takes place online via a registration form. Senior citizens can fill in the form themselves, call Elderlearn for help to register or get someone else, such as a relative or municipal employee, to register them. The registration phase always includes an initial telephonic conversation that provides volunteers with an introduction to Elderlearn and Elderlearn employees with a way to obtain important information about the volunteer, such as special considerations that need to be taken. Special considerations may also be noted in the registration form, but the accompanying research shows that senior citizens may be reluctant to use this option; therefore, it is important for employees to ask questions during the initial conversation. The conversation can also indicate the qualities of good and less good matches for the person in question.

Period between registration and start-up
In some places, the upscaling of Elderlearn has created a waiting period between the registration and actual start-up phases, primarily due to the demographic imbalance between the number of volunteer senior citizens and volunteer foreigners in urban and rural municipalities. It may be difficult to recruit foreigners in rural municipalities, while it may be difficult to recruit senior citizens in urban municipalities. If the waiting period from registration to start-up is long, senior citizens may forget what the Elderlearn volunteer scheme entails and that they even signed up for it. 76-year-old Kirsten from the Central Denmark Region stated,

"It's actually been more than two years since I registered for it. There hasn't been a match until now, so I actually can't remember why I signed up for it!"

To avoid the problems and doubts created by the waiting period and prevent senior citizens from withdrawing from the scheme, Elderlearn has established a mechanism by which status updates are sent to the registered senior citizens every month. These provide information about the waiting period and the reason for a waiting period, showing the senior citizen that they have not been forgotten. The message is sent by email, and those senior citizens who do not use email are called up. A waiting period may thus require senior citizens' reintroduction to the volunteering scheme to ensure that they are equipped and motivated to participate.

FOCUS POINTS

- Clarify the information that is decisive for a good match of volunteers, especially in the case of a target group with special needs. Having the right information is crucial for a well-functioning match. Be clear and precise about the information that is needed from the volunteer senior citizen.

- Stay in contact with the volunteers if there is a long waiting period. Provide information about the waiting period to show that they have not been forgotten.

- A long waiting period from registration to start-up will require the senior citizens to be reintroduced to the volunteering scheme.

4. Start-up

First meeting without employee participation
Before the scaling up of Elderlearn, an employee would participate in the first meeting between the volunteer senior citizen and the volunteer foreigner to create a safe environment. However, our study shows that implementing the start-up phase without the involvement of an Elderlearn employee has been without major problems, and many volunteers described the first meeting as easy and positive. Notably, equipping senior citizens for the first meeting via prior telephone conversations with an Elderlearn employee and ensuring the matched pairs are provided with conversation topics and the word game *Ordet er dit*, were found to be measures of great importance.

Starting up without an employee's participation was found to foster greater independence in the Elderlearn pairs, especially the senior citizens, who thus welcome the volunteer foreigners themselves. In addition, the meeting is now less like a visitor service, where the senior citizen "receives visits", but an activity wherein the matched volunteers are on an equal footing. Mikkel, a 69-year-old man from the Central Denmark Region, described it as follows:

"We're adults and don't need a babysitter."

Different experiences of information, communication and material
Despite their positive start-up experiences without the participation of an Elderlearn employee, the volunteer senior citizens' descriptions of the overall start-up period varied. Specifically, they differed in terms of how Elderlearn was introduced, and some senior citizens were unsure of whether Elderlearn is a local association, an NGO or

a company. This caused confusion among the volunteer senior citizens and created a sense of insecurity in some. For instance, Marie, a 66-year-old woman from the Central Denmark Region, stated,

"I've no idea what it is. They could be Jehovah's Witnesses or whatever!"

This reflects the underlying problem of divergent perceptions about what information is and how it should be communicated. While some volunteer senior citizens felt well equipped and well informed, others stated that they had not received any information. In this regard, 85-year-old Rigmor from the Central Denmark Region said,

"I haven't received any information from Elderlearn".

However, she later mentioned that "there have been calls from Copenhagen several times". Such responses indicate that many volunteer senior citizens do not consider telephone calls as sources of information (even though information is provided); they perceive telephone calls as conversations. Several senior citizens also requested that they would prefer to receive information by post. This may be because of the need to receive information in writing, arising from difficulties remembering information provided during a telephone conversation. Thus, it is important to have several communication channels in place, without restricting them to only written or oral modes, to accommodate a broad group of citizens.

A communicative scaling problem with respect to the telephone conversations

between Elderlearn employees and volunteer senior citizens in the start-up phase was also found. It revealed a need for different communication methods depending on where the senior citizens live in Denmark. The problem is not only geographical in nature but also reflects a mix of demographic and sociocultural differences that affect senior citizens' attitudes towards various communication modes.

FOCUS POINTS

- Ensure that the parties are well prepared for the start-up phase and provide room for independence.

- Create a simple narrative about the organisation and the volunteering scheme.

- Plan out the initial conversation between the volunteer senior citizen and the volunteering scheme staff. The conversation sets the scene for the volunteer senior citizen's experience.

- Use interview techniques, adapted from research, to establish a steady and professional conversation. It is particularly important to prepare for the conversation if there is great diversity in the target group of the volunteering scheme.

5. The initial period

Balancing expectations and establishing a relationship
In addition to the first meetings, the subsequent initial period may be difficult for Elderlearn pairs, as this is where their relationship is to take form and be established. Pairs tend to have gone through the most obvious topics of conversation by this point but remain without any in-depth knowledge of each other. The relationship may be fragile as it transitions from unfamiliar to familiar, and minor issues such as cancellation due to illness may create uncertainty about who will take the initiative in the next meeting. Therefore, it is important to provide support and inspiration for the volunteer pairs' interactions as well as recommendations for handling cancellations when the need arises.

Several senior citizens expressed their doubts about the volunteer foreigner's intention, and the friend/volunteer relationship was difficult for them to categorise. This doubt was clearly expressed by 72-year-old Tine from the Central Denmark Region, who did not understand why her 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 of 35 with two children and a Danish husband, so I thought: what on earth would she spend time with me for?"

Both individuals are volunteers, and they each help each other in their own way. They usually get to know each other well because conversation is the focal point of their meetings. A number of pairs eventually become fond of each other, and their volunteer relationship develops into a friendship. However, in many cases, this requires the volunteers to clarify, from the outset, their aims and intentions for the meetings in order to eliminate any doubts.

During the accompanying research, the project group worked on the development of a start-up package that can help prevent doubts and eliminate the information and communication problems described in subsection 4 above. The start-up package includes a guide on balancing expectations in the relationship, suggestions for topics of conversation, a description of Elderlearn and the game *Ordet er dit*, and it will be sent by post to every new volunteer senior citizen's address.

The language game *Ordet er dit*
The game *Ordet er dit*, which is sent out to senior citizens prior to their first meetings, will be included in the start-up package described in the above paragraph. The game was well received by the volunteers in this study, and it worked as a good conversation starter. The game can be played several times and helps volunteers cope with the social situation of meeting a new person during the start-up phase. This was underlined by 75-year-old Ellen from the Central Denmark Region when she talked about why she liked the game:

"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 umming and aahing without knowing what to say."

Several stated that the game was too easy in terms of the difficulty of the words. However, the main purpose of the game is not to learn a lot of new words but to get conversations started.

FOCUS POINTS

- Create a start-up package that can be sent by post to the senior citizen's address. The content of the package should provide support for a conversation about the volunteer's expectations for the relationship and address the common worries and doubts that volunteer senior citizens have. Accordingly, the package may, for example, contain the following:

• A guide on balancing one's expectations for a relationship, addressing concerns such as "what are we going to do?" and "how often should we meet?" and "what do we do in case of cancellations?"

• A flyer about the volunteering scheme with a simple explanation and a clear narrative.

• A game that can be used by the pair, possibly with varying levels of difficulty.

• An activity list with, for example, suggested topics of conversation, recommendations for adult literature in easy-to-read Danish and ideas for experiences/places to go (museums, library, and shops).

• A timeline of the milestones in a typical relationship, which can be used to draw a clear conclusion if the match is not right or if one of the parties would like to withdraw.

6. Anchoring, retention and continued volunteering

After the pairs begin to meet, Elderlearn usually sends follow-up communications in the form of emails, text messages and a monthly telephone call. Several senior citizens stated that they were happy with the follow-up calls they received as their questions were addressed.

Anchoring of the relationship
An Elderlearn relationship gets anchored at different times for each volunteer in a pair but usually when the relationship becomes more private in nature. This happens, for example, when the volunteers meet each other's spouses/families or help each other in their everyday lives. Many of the interviewed senior citizens referred to their respective matches as "my friend", which is indicative of strong relationships. However, there have also been examples of strong Elderlearn pairs who primarily focused on learning the Danish language rather than on building a close friendship.

Different attitudes towards help from the volunteer foreigners
Many volunteer foreigners who take part in Elderlearn want to help senior citizens. This may be welcome in some cases, whereas help can make the senior citizen feel stigmatised as helpless in other cases. However, during the lockdowns due to the COVID-19 pandemic, help was positively received, especially by senior citizens who felt isolated and needed (extra) help. Even though the senior citizens did not necessarily request help during the start-up phase of the Elderlearn activity, the volunteer foreigners' assistance was nevertheless of great importance to them.

A good conclusion is crucial to continued volunteering
The volunteer pairs meet in different ways – some for extended periods, others for shorter durations, some intermittently and others more regularly, with occasional breaks in between due to holidays, exams, illness, etc. The accompanying research shows that a relationship's success is not necessarily dependent on the length of the relationship but on its quality while it lasts and whether both parties feel that they contribute something to the relationship. There is great potential for long-term volunteering among senior citizens; many of them tend to be interested in connecting with another volunteer foreigner if interactions with their current match come to an end. Since foreigners have a much more specific purpose for the relationship than senior citizens, that is, to learn Danish, attaining the goal provides a natural point in time for them to conclude the relationship. Even though the vast majority of matched pairs continue to see each other for a long time and are happy about their respective relationships, there will always be some who have to stop the relationship for one reason or another and some who are not well matched. In these cases, Elderlearn can help facilitate a good conclusion, as this is crucial for the senior citizen's willingness to continue as a volunteer. Likewise, a bad conclusion will not only ruin the last part of the pairs' volunteer period but also taint the whole experience and thus have a negative impact on the senior citizen's willingness to continue as a volunteer.

Network and ambassadors
Several volunteer senior citizens expressed a desire to meet other volunteer senior citizens in their neighbourhood, wanting to acquire knowledge about other active participants as well as share their experiences with the other volunteers. 75-year-old Ellen from the Central Denmark Region stated,

"I really wanted to know whether there were other people in my local area who were also part of Elderlearn. We could then exchange experiences and the like."

Some of the resourceful volunteer senior citizens pointed out that they would like to contribute something extra if possible. This opportunity to appoint some volunteer senior citizens as ambassadors can strengthen their volunteer commitment and motivation and help ensure that the project is anchored in the local environment. Forming an ambassador corps of senior citizens can also prevent some of the scaling problems that Elderlearn has experienced in local areas. In cooperation with the municipalities, the network and corps of ambassadors can contribute to anchoring volunteer activity in civil society.

FOCUS POINTS

- Support the anchoring of volunteer relations by facilitating contact and providing the opportunity to ask questions.

- Provide the tools necessary for a good conclusion and thus encourage more volunteers to enter into new relationships.

- Start a network for volunteer senior citizens. This will support their feeling of being involved in a larger community with a joint purpose.

- Create an ambassador corps that taps into the potential of resourceful senior citizens.

Implementation of the insights from the accompanying research

Elderlearn, Danish Seniors and CoRe closely collaborated throughout the project period, which made it possible to incorporate insights from the scientific analysis directly in the scaling of Elderlearn. Thus, the research recommendations could be implemented in practice.

Changes in the IT system and registration form

The text in the registration form was adjusted, as well as the possibilities for obtaining information about special considerations. Automated text messages and emails generated by the IT system were rewritten to make them less generic and more easily understandable.

Communication with Elderlearn matched pairs and municipalities throughout Denmark

Elderlearn employees focus on targeted communication and have accordingly prepared a manual on good conversations based on information and interview techniques, which new employees can use as a guide.

Future strategic considerations for Elderlearn in relation to changes in Elderlearn's target group

An increase in the retirement age may entail a shift in the age group of senior citizens who take part in voluntary activities, as this group will spend more years in the labour market. Therefore, it is likely that there will be greater diversity among the volunteer senior citizens of the future, as the proportion of active senior citizen volunteers will be more concentrated in higher age groups, such as 82–87 years (Amilon et al., 2019). This development must be considered in Elderlearn's future work, so that the most relevant group of volunteers can be targeted on an ongoing basis.

The information sent out

Elderlearn is working on the start-up package that is to be sent out with the word game. The package includes a timeline for a typical Elderlearn relationship, a guide on balancing expectations and a simple description of Elderlearn; the materials are tested and developed on an ongoing basis.

Establishment of Elderlearn networks

It is being examined whether it is possible to establish local Elderlearn networks that are, for example, linked to the local branches of Danish Seniors.

The project group

Astrid Jespersen, *Associate Professor of European Ethnology and Head of Centre at CoRe*

Astrid Jespersen holds a Masters of Arts and PhD in European Ethnology, with a special focus on health research in the humanities. Astrid has long conducted research into ageing processes, lifestyle interventions and illness and health from an everyday perspective. She established CoRe in 2013 and has headed several interdisciplinary collaboration projects over the course of her career.

Line Steen Bygballe, *PhD student at CoRe*

Line Steen Bygballe holds a Master of Arts in Applied Cultural Analysis, and her primary fields of research are ageing, civil society and mental health. Line focuses on how volunteering can make positive contributions to social and health-related aspects, such as preventing loneliness and supporting integration processes.

Rebecca Søegaard, *student assistant at CoRe*

Rebecca Søegaard holds a Bachelor of Arts in European Ethnology and is working on her Master's degree in European Ethnology. Rebecca's primary fields of interest are minority studies, volunteering, cultural heritage and health research in the humanities.

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Footnotes:

[1] See report on previous accompanying research of Elderlearn, which describes and examines the actual activity and the relations between volunteer senior citizens and foreigners, here: https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59a56994f5e231d8777454d3/t/5c5d73924785d3e33e508673/1549628317687/elderlearn_onlineversion.pdf

[2] The municipal stakeholders hold the following positions: Head of Section in Elderly Care Services, Project Manager in Health and Care Services, Network Coordinator for Preventive Home Visits, social and health care assistants and physiotherapist making preventive home visits.

[3] The interview guide was continuously developed based on inputs and learnings from the study, and it was also adapted to each individual interview. The code tree was adjusted after the first 10 interviews to include more precise codes.

[4] This statistic is based on Elderlearn's survey, which was conducted three months after each Elderlearn pair began their interactions.
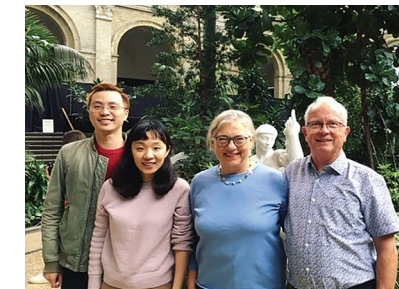
Appendix 4

Products from the EMOVE project:

4.1. White paper: Matchmaking in the Voluntary Sector

Tasks, Workflows, and IT Facilitation

4.2. EMOVE webpage and video: https://emove.ku.dk/

Aalborg Universitet

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DENMARK

Matchmaking in the Voluntary Sector

Tasks, Workflows, and IT Facilitation

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Matchmaking in the Voluntary Sector: Tasks, Workflows, and IT Facilitation

CONTENTS

PREFACE

This white paper is an outcome of Enabling the Matching of Volunteers (EMOVE), a four-year research and development project seeking to develop knowledge and tools that can help voluntary organizations make the right decisions when matching their volunteers. EMOVE was sponsored by Innovation Fund Denmark and carried out by researchers from the Techno-Anthropology Lab (TANTlab) at Aalborg University, the Copenhagen Centre for Health Research in the Humanities (CoRe) at the University of Copenhagen, and Kople ApS, a private developer of software for the voluntary sector.

The white paper is authored by the two university partners of the EMOVE project, with the aims of providing a concise description of matchmaking in the voluntary sector and identifying the opportunities and challenges of supporting matchmaking work by means of IT systems. Therefore, this white paper serves as a guide to voluntary organizations that are currently engaged in matchmaking and are seeking to develop and advance their operations.

Ann-Sofie Thorsen MA, TANTlab, Research Assistant in EMOVE

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Torben Elgaard Jensen PhD, Professor, Leader of TANTlab, Co-PI in EMOVE

## INTRODUCTION

The challenge of making good matches

Voluntary organizations, such as mentoring programs and visitor schemes, all depend on a crucial operation—the pairing or matching of people. This white paper offers guidance to voluntary organizations on how to qualify, systematize, and facilitate matchmaking work by means of information technology (IT) systems. These efforts are particularly relevant to voluntary organizations that are moving from a relatively simple situation with small numbers of volunteers to more complex situations with increasing numbers of volunteers, several concurrent matching programs, or increasing demands to document matchmaking processes and results for external funders and stakeholders.

This paper is organized as follows: **PART 1** presents a descriptive framework that specifies the different varieties of matchmaking tasks. Voluntary organizations may use this descriptive framework to clarify the nature of their matchmaking tasks. **PART 2** provides an overview of how IT systems may support and facilitate different parts of matchmaking work. We also provide a list of issues that voluntary organizations need to consider when implementing these kinds of systems.

PART 1
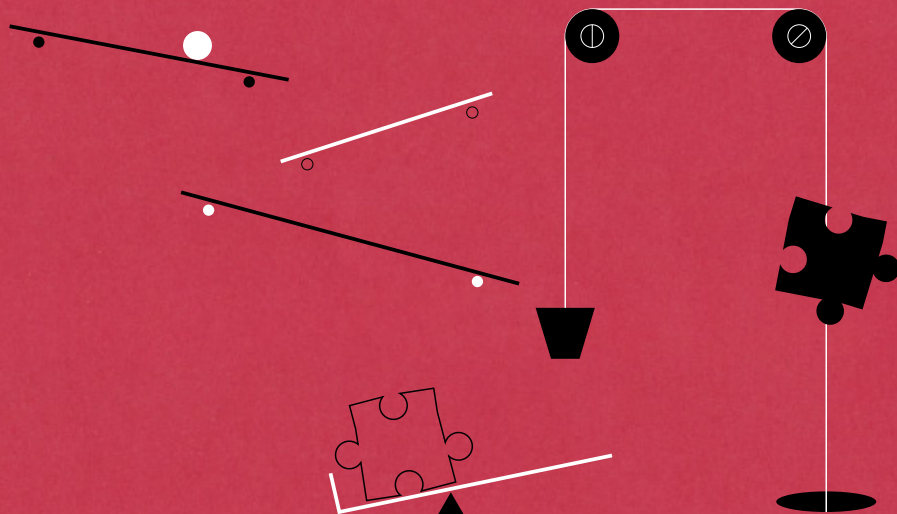
## A framework for describing matchmaking tasks

This section presents a broad framework for describing the matchmaking tasks of voluntary organizations based on four key questions:

- Who or what is being matched?
- How is the match prepared?
- What quality criteria apply to the match?
- What follow–up activities are conducted after the match?

In the following section, each of these questions is explained and exemplified in more detail.

1.1 Who or what is being matched?

A defining feature of all voluntary matching programs is the entities that are matched. Our review of the field of voluntary work suggests three basic types of matches:
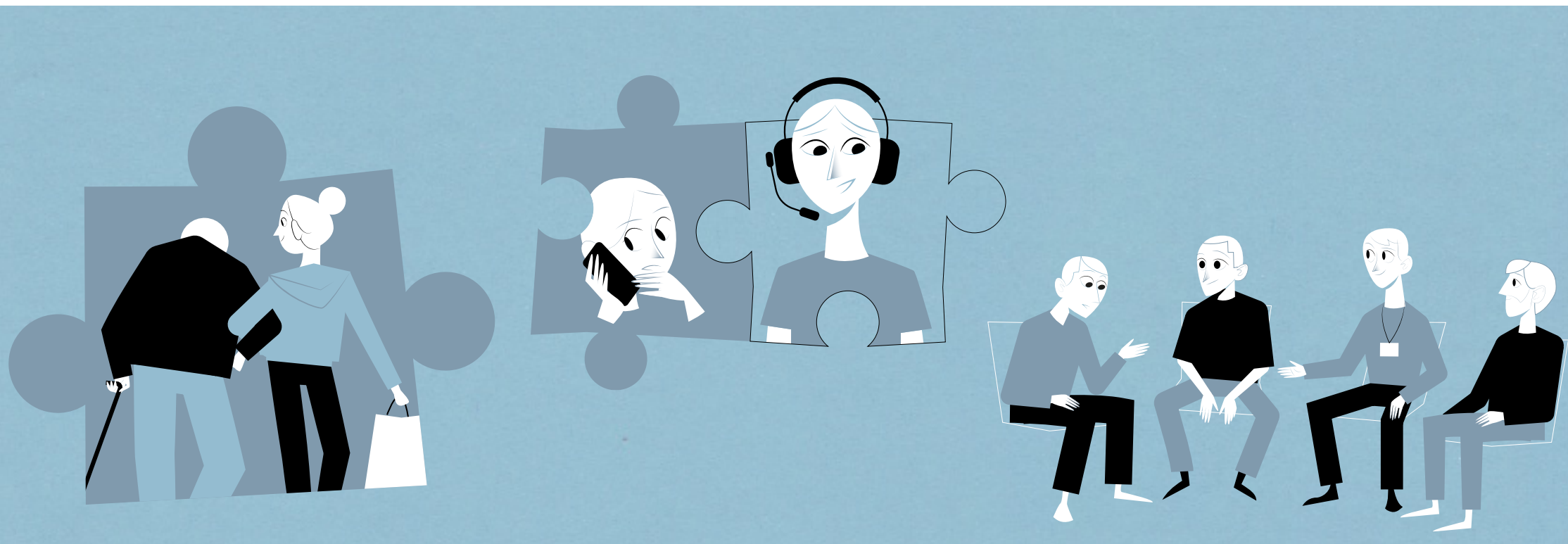
Person–to–person matches
Examples include mentoring initiatives, visitor schemes, and companion programs.

Person–to–task matches
Examples include allocating volunteers to man crisis hotlines and helplines; to work in soup kitchens, shelters, or crisis centers; and to participate in environmental restoration projects.

Person–to–group matches
Examples include group therapy sessions, networking groups, and volunteer disaster response teams.

1.2 How is the match prepared?

Matching programs vary considerably with respect to the activities carried out before specific matches are decided. The preparatory activities can be divided into three types:

Recruitment → Registration → Screening → Information → Training → Matchmaking
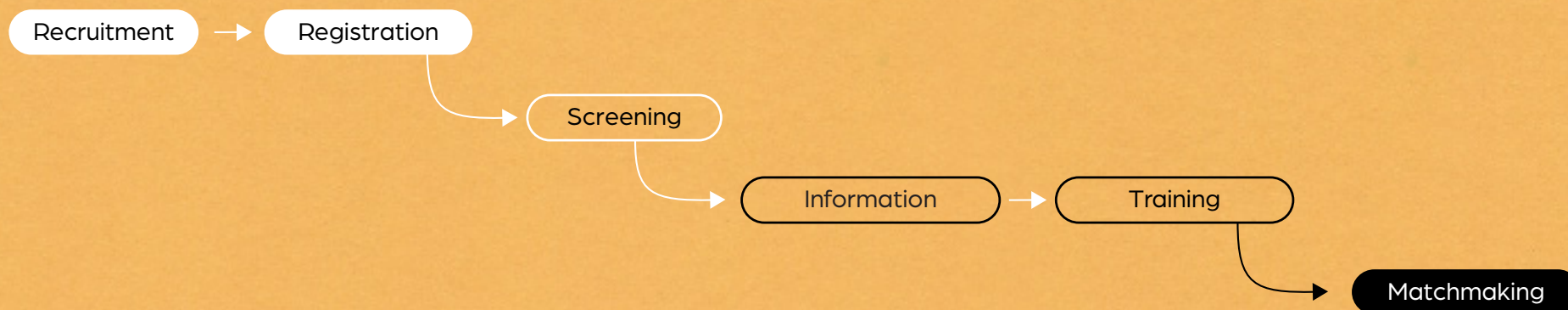
Recruitment and registration of potential participants

Voluntary organizations conduct information campaigns and other public relations activities to inform potential volunteers about their services. When a potential participant contacts the organization, an initial registration is normally conducted.

Screening

Most voluntary programs use selection criteria for their participants. In some cases, organizations apply clearly defined criteria, such as whether a person has citizenship, a driver's license, or a clean criminal record. These well-defined criteria may be combined with more qualitative assessments of eligibility; decisions to include or exclude participants may be based on the matchmaker's broad knowledge of how the program normally works and who usually benefits from it.

Information and training

Before deciding on an actual match, many voluntary programs prepare their participants by giving them written or verbal information about the purpose and specific activities included in the volunteer work. In some cases, potential volunteers have lengthy conversations with staff from the voluntary organization as part of the preparation. In other cases, systematic training is conducted before a participant is deemed ready to be matched. As part of the contact between the organization and the potential volunteers/receivers of volunteer services, practical circumstances, such as the starting date, location, and amount of volunteer work, may also be agreed upon.

In sum, organizations prepare matchmaking through a series of activities. It is the combination of these preparatory activities that sets the stage for a successful match.

1.3 What quality criteria apply to the match?

The *one and only* type of matchmaking known from romantic comedies is generally a misleading metaphor for the type of matchmaking work that takes place in voluntary organizations. Instead, these organizations solve the practical task of continually creating a flow of reasonably good matches given the circumstances, opportunities, and time constraints.

The small or large degree of complexity in matchmaking work can be illustrated by two examples.

The first example is a mentoring program in which several mentors have already signed up and are ready to help. When a new mentee enters the program, it is a relatively simple task for the matchmaker to search through the list of mentors and find the one best suited for the job.

The second example is a visitor scheme pairing language students and (native) older citizens. In this case, a matchmaker may have a handful of language students and a handful of older citizens who need to be matched. The somewhat complicated task for the matchmaker is to decide on several matches at the same time, essentially laying a puzzle that includes all or most of the students and citizens who are waiting to be matched.

As indicated by the two cases, the timing and size of the matchmaking task matter to the complexity of the task. However, even in the simplest case, organizations often consider several simultaneous criteria for a good match. The matching of two people may depend on when they are available, where they live, the matchmaker's perception of what they might have in common, and concerns about what might create conflicts between them.

Some parameters are easily included in the initial registration of potential participants, such as their addresses. However, other parameters may emerge only through the matchmaker's interviews and the preferences that the potential participants may state in these interviews. In the case of a Danish visitor scheme, we have seen matchmakers pay attention to a series of non–standard criteria for a good match, such as having the same sense of humor or having worked in the same line of business.

In general, matchmaking requires considerable attention to practical circumstances and a case–by–case weighing of criteria. For this reason, it is recommended that organizations facilitate peer training, internal knowledge sharing, and dialogue between the people who are doing the matchmaking work. Attempting to fully formalize or automate the matchmaking process and criteria is not advisable.
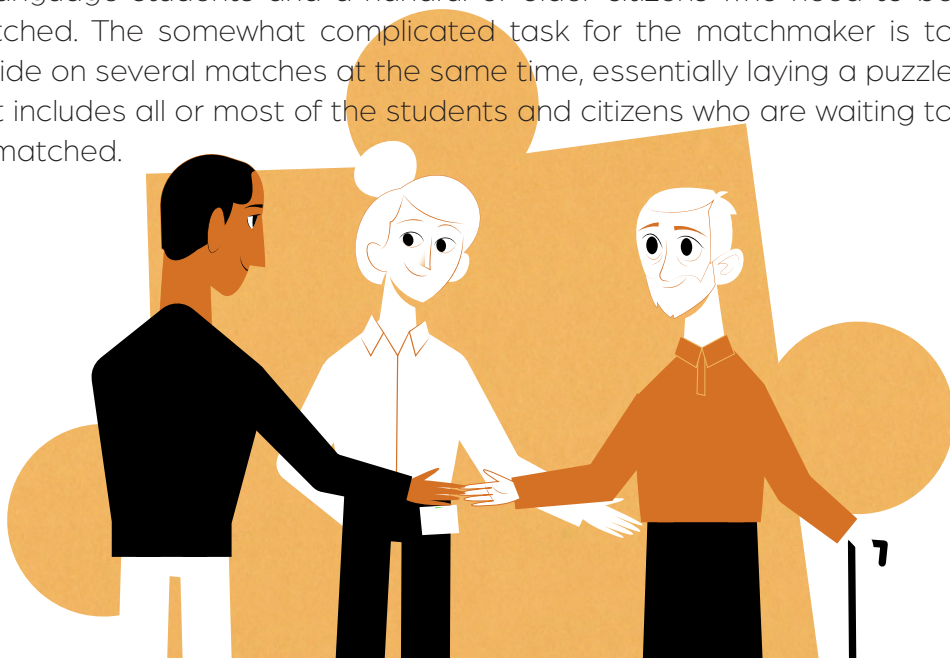
## 1.4 What follow–up activities are conducted after the match?

Voluntary organizations do not merely create matches; they also perform a series of follow–up activities.

Caring for and supporting the individual matches

Many organizations have procedures for troubleshooting the matches they have created. In some cases, the voluntary organization's staff contact the participants regularly, or the participants are asked to formally evaluate their satisfaction with the program. These contacts are occasions to motivate the participants, communicate norms and codes of conduct, negotiate conflicts, and sometimes break up matches and create new ones.

Documenting and improving the matchmaking program

Organizations often engage in some kind of evaluation, monitoring, or documentation of their activities. For instance, they may gather statistics on the number and durability of matches, or they may attempt to assess the effects of various measures, such as a preparatory course or regular check–up calls. The documentation of the organization's activities is often used internally to understand and improve the program, and externally to communicate with sponsors and other external stakeholders.
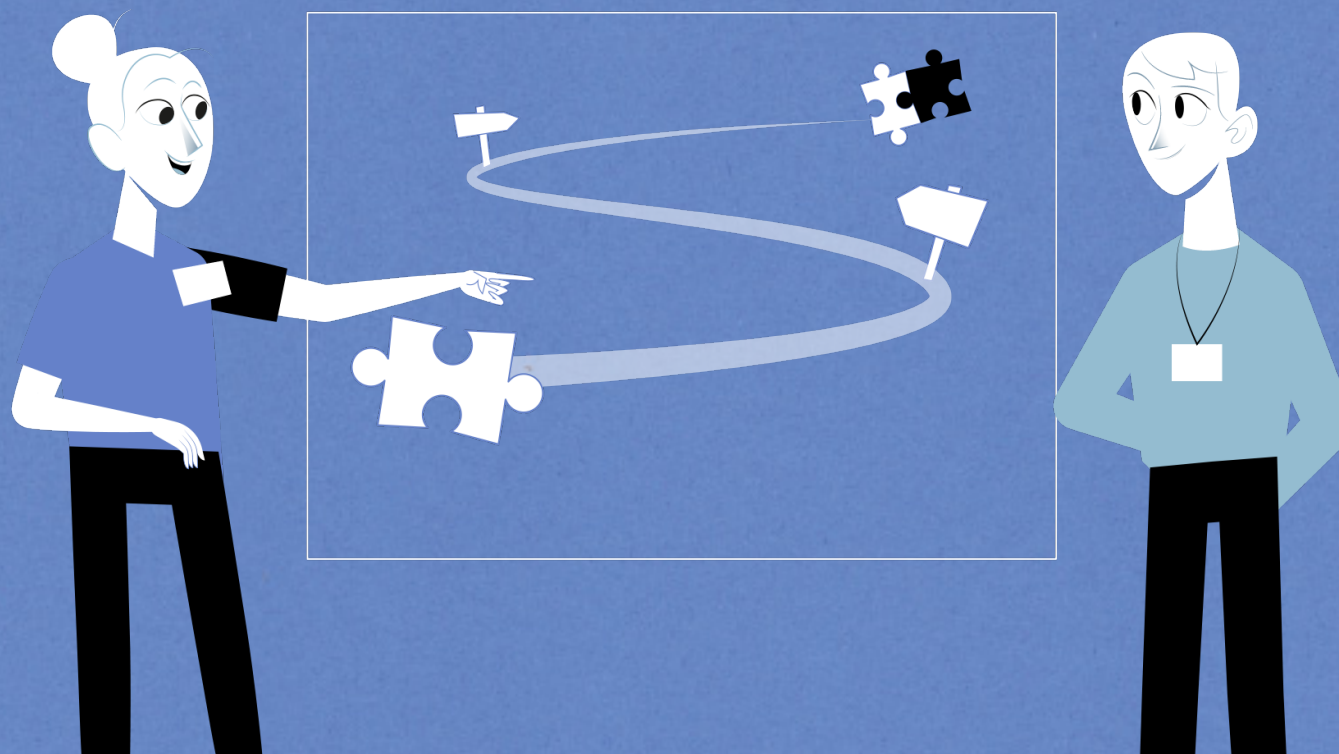
1.5 Framework for describing the matchmaking work of an organization

The various aspects of the matchmaking process outlined in Sections 1.1–1.4 can be summarized in the framework below. Organizations may use this framework to generate quick and concise descriptions of the key features of their matchmaking work.

Description of the matchmaking work	Name of the organization:
Who or what is being matched?	( ) person to person ( ) person to task ( ) person to group
How is the match prepared?	Recruitment and registration activities: Screening criteria: Information and training activities:
What quality criteria apply to the match?	Standard quality criteria: Examples of ad hoc quality criteria:
What follow-up activities are conducted after the match?	Activities that care for or troubleshoot individual matches: Activities that evaluate and improve the matchmaking program:

Table 1: A framework for describing matchmaking work

PART 2
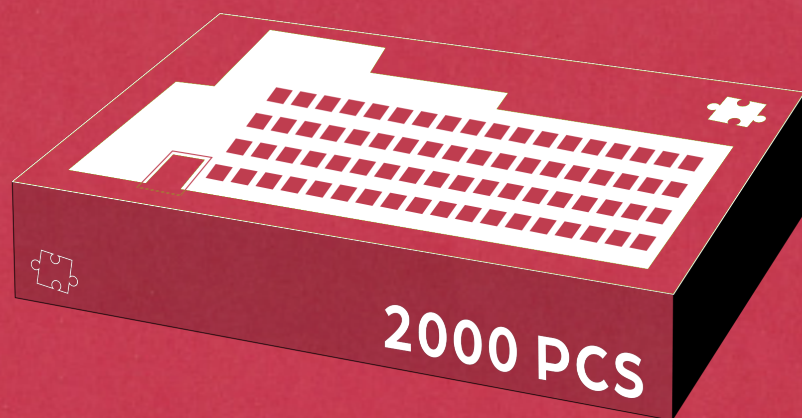
IT support and facilitation of matchmaking work

When voluntary organizations move from a relatively simple situation with small numbers of volunteers to more complex situations (see the Introduction), they may benefit from organizing the matchmaking work around an IT system. This is because several parts of the matchmaking process may improve from the formalization and systematization that the IT system offers, even as other parts may rely more on ad hoc criteria and a human touch.

In Section 2.1, we identify the parts of the matchmaking process that are likely to benefit from IT support. Following this, in Section 2.2., we describe some of the challenges and concerns that voluntary organizations must focus on if they choose to move toward an increasingly IT-supported matchmaking process. The description of these challenges is based on the EMOVE project, in which we conducted ethnographic studies of four organizations that recently implemented a software system to support their matchmaking work.

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2.1 How matchmaking can benefit from the support of an IT system

In this section, we describe how an IT system may ideally support matchmaking work. When using the term "IT system," we assume a system akin to a customer relationship management system or an IT system developed to support all phases of matchmaking. These kinds of systems are more comprehensive forms of IT support than, for example, a spreadsheet shared between a group of matchmakers. As a minimum, an IT system of this kind has the following features:

Searchable database:
The system builds on a database with files for all participants in the matchmaking program, and it makes this information available through a variety of search functions.

Administration of access rights:
The system allows managers to grant selective access rights to the people conducting the matchmaking, thus taking privacy and General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) issues into consideration.

Integrated communication:
The system allows matchmakers to integrate several streams of information, such as emails, telephone calls, and text messages. In this way, the system attempts to incorporate as much information as possible and discourage the use of multiple parallel systems.

Process structuring:
The system allows managers to define prescribed workflows, for instance, by setting up mandatory steps that must be taken before proceeding to the next stage.

Process documentation:
The system keeps track of communication, decisions, and actions related to specific cases or participants in the program.
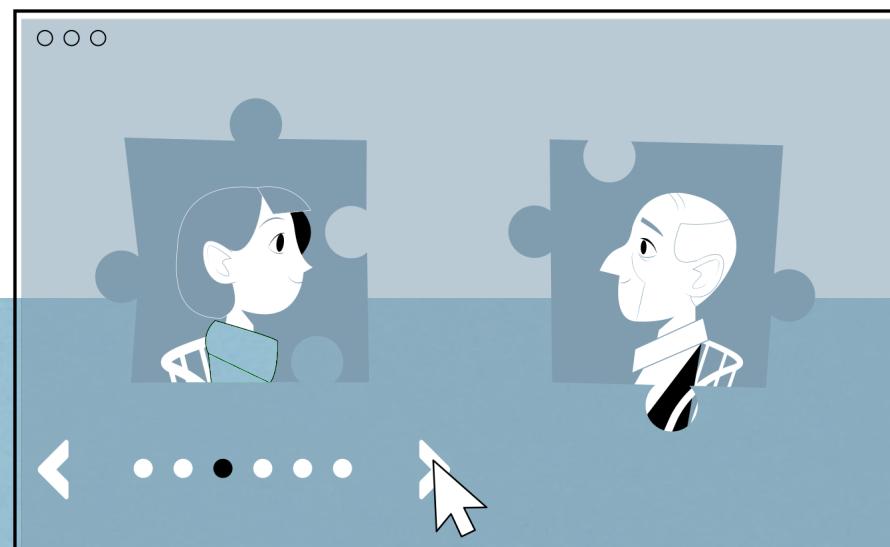
Table 2 outlines how an IT system may support or facilitate specific parts of a matchmaking process.
Table 2 builds on the descriptive framework from **PART 1**.

Table 2: Features of matchmaking work that are appropriate for IT system support

Key questions when describing matchmaking work		Possible support by an IT system
How is the match prepared?	Recruitment and registration activities: Screening criteria: Information and training activities:	Process structuring: The system may be set up to require documentation for the screening criteria before proceeding to the next stage.
What quality criteria apply to the match?	Standard quality criteria: Examples of ad hoc quality criteria:	Process structuring: The system may be set up to remind matchmakers of open (non-matched) cases. Searchable database: The system may provide search functions to assist with the matchmaker's overview of the potential candidates for a match. Searchable database: The system may provide matchmakers with full information on the particular candidates for a match, including free text notes from other matchmakers who have communicated with the candidate.
What follow-up activities are conducted after the match?	Activities that care for or troubleshoot individual matches: Activities that evaluate and improve the matchmaking program:	Process structuring: The system may remind matchmakers to follow up on matches after a given period. Searchable database: The system may gather accumulated information on the matchmaking work, such as the number and duration of matches and the correlation between specific features. Based on this, the system may provide basic data for exploring or reporting on the organization's matchmaking program.

2.2 Challenges and concerns when implementing an IT system to support matchmaking

Voluntary organizations differ significantly not only with respect to the nature of the matchmaking task they are solving but also with respect to how they practically organize matchmaking. In some organizations, matchmaking is carried out in one location by permanently employed full-time staff. Other organizations work at scattered locations, with a high turnover of people who are volunteers themselves. The diversity of organizational circumstances means that the implementation of an IT system is likely to follow different trajectories and that different resources are available to overcome the challenges that will invariably arise. Universal solutions do not exist. However, based on our ethnographic studies of four organizations, we have identified a series of recurrent issues that many, if not all, organizations have had to cope with in order to arrive at a reasonably well–functioning integration of people, workflows, and IT systems. In the following, we describe these issues in detail. Our hope is that the list of issues can inspire organizations to overview and reflect on the different aspects of their onboarding and implementation processes.

Technical preparation and configuration of the system
Transitioning to a new system requires several forms of preparation. One major task is to transfer the organization's current database into the format of the new system. A second major task is to set up the workflow of the new system and make decisions regarding its various opportunities for customization.

Bringing tacit knowledge and well–established practices into a new format
Organizations that implement a new comprehensive IT system to support matchmaking are usually already doing matchmaking through other means. The members of such organizations often have an elaborate understanding of the types of people participating in the program, as well as the range of standard and ad hoc quality criteria that may apply to the creation and troubleshooting of matches. Thus, investing time and effort in articulating previous practices and clarifying their relations to the new system is crucial to ensure the successful implementation of an IT system. In some cases, previously used criteria may be formalized as mandatory steps in the workflow organized by the IT system. In other cases, organizations may support the functioning of the IT system by setting up internal rules for how to use it. In an organization running a visitor scheme, the matchmakers may, for instance, agree among themselves that they will use a free text field in the system to always note anything that strikes them as peculiar about the participants' homes. Finally, in some cases, the implementation of a new IT system may be an opportunity to revise and improve previous practices.

Learning to operate the system

Organizations that have transitioned to an IT–supported matchmaking process have found it necessary to learn several new things at once. Beginning at the managerial level, learning how to set up new projects within the system is necessary. Each project may involve special workflow steps, quality criteria, and configuration of access rights. In other words, managers must learn how to define their new projects in terms of the system parameters.

The matchmakers—the people who create and follow up on the matches—must learn to operate the system and its features as part of their daily work. They must also learn what the system looks and feels like for the people who are participating in the matching program. For matchmakers, the amount of initial learning is sometimes experienced as quite significant. In general, it is easier to overcome the initial learning requirements in organizations with full–time matchmakers who use the system often and who work in close contact with their colleagues. More difficulties are experienced when matchmakers use the system intermittently and work alone.

Finally, the participants in matchmaking programs will often experience the transition to a new system as a change. Certain messages and procedures may look different and can, in some cases, require adjustment.

Data management and legal considerations

Many voluntary organizations are uncertain whether their established practices are living up to the new GDPR requirements. Transitioning to a new system does not in itself guarantee that all requirements will be met. However, the implementation of a new system is an opportunity to improve the data practices of the organization. This includes efforts to clean up or delete data in order to comply with the GDPR's data minimization principle.

Documentation and accountability

Voluntary organizations are often crucially dependent on economic support from external stakeholders. For this reason, an important part of implementing an IT system is to ensure that it delivers data that support the organization's need to document the work that it does. Securing these data can be a matter of making organizational rules for what data are entered into the system. It can be a simple matter of using the in–built reporting functions of the system, or it can be a question of developing analyses based on data exported from the system. In either case, using the opportunities for IT–supported documentation of the matchmaking work may be a significant contribution to the ability of the organization to gather necessary support from its stakeholders and funders.
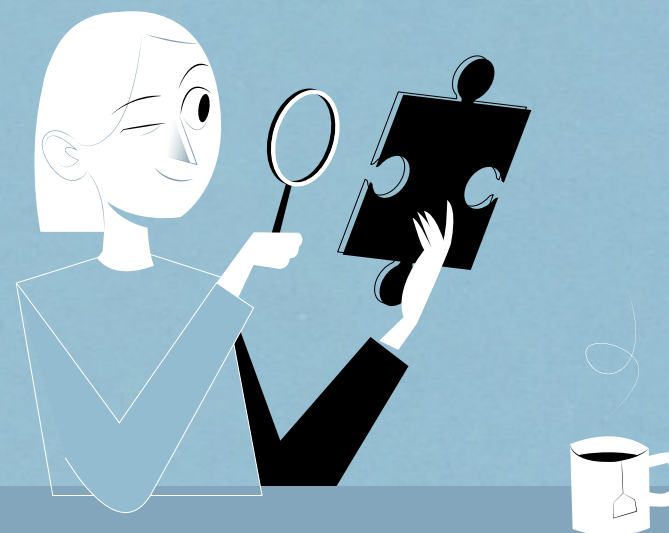
ABOUT EMOVE AND ITS UNIVERSITY PARTNERS

Enabling the Matching of Volunteers

(EMOVE) (2021–2024) is a research and development project that aims to develop knowledge and tools that will help voluntary organizations make the right decisions when matching their volunteers. The project was sponsored by Innovation Fund Denmark and carried out by researchers from the Techno–Anthropology Lab (TANTlab), the Copenhagen Centre for Health Research in the Humanities (CoRe), and Kople ApS, a private developer of software for the voluntary sector.

Homepage: www.emove.ku.dk

The Techno–Anthropology Lab

(TANTlab) is a research group at the Department of Culture and Learning at Aalborg University in Copenhagen. The research group investigates key processes of social and technical innovation that are critical to the challenges facing contemporary and future societies. The group focuses on how users and citizens may become actively engaged in the design and development of new technologies.

Homepage: www.tantlab.aau.dk

The Copenhagen Centre for Health Research in the Humanities
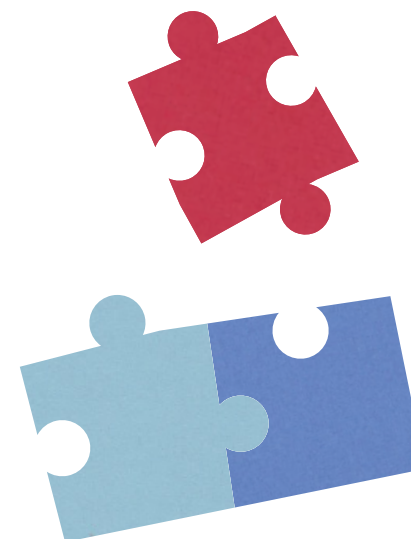
(CoRe) at the University of Copenhagen investigates the cultural, social, and historical dimensions of health and aging. The center is involved in cross–disciplinary research and innovation projects and collaborates with partners from all areas of society. CoRe focuses on health and aging processes in the welfare society and on lifestyle, mental health, and quality of life.

Homepage: www.core.ku.dk

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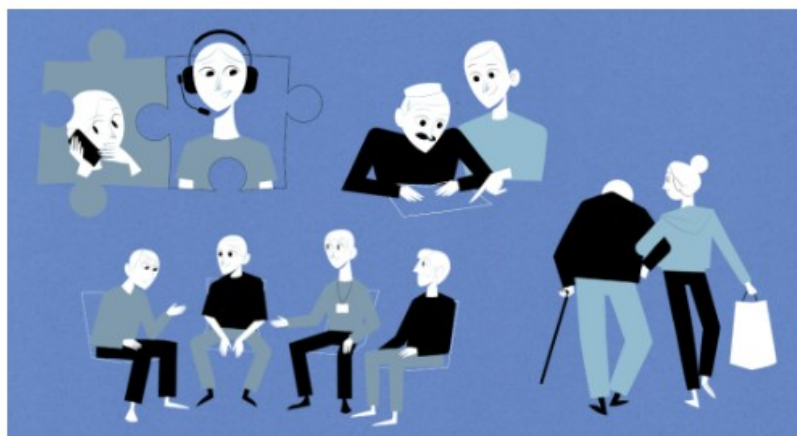## emove.ku.dk

EMOVE – Enabling the matching of volunteers

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About EMOVE

People

About EMOVE

EMOVE is a research and development project aiming to develop knowledge and tools that will help voluntary organizations make the right decisions when matching their volunteers.

Volunteer organizations play and increasingly important role in society, but often face an equally increasing number of challenges. Volunteer organizations play and increasingly important role in society, but often face an equally increasing number of challenges. In particular, matchmaking initiatives often become complex, when the number of volunteers grow, when multiple concurrent matching programs are in use or when external stakeholders increase demands for documentation on process and results.

The EMOVE project uses ethnographic methods to develop knowledge on the practical challenges of voluntary organizations, as well as developing a software tool that supports and facilitates the delicate process of matching volunteers.

The EMOVE project (Enabling the Matchmaking of Volunteers) is sponsored by Innovation Fund Denmark and carried out by researchers from the Copenhagen Centre for Health Research in the Humanities (CoRe), Teknoantropologisk Laboratorium (TANTlab), and Kople ApS, a private

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Taking care of matchmaking.