

# Volunteering in retirement migration: meanings and functions of charitable activities for older British residents in Spain

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## **ABSTRACT**

Volunteering is a ubiquitous and distinct feature of the British retired community in Spain, and for many older migrants volunteering constitutes a significant part of their post-retirement life abroad. Especially in the management and organisation of health and age-related problems voluntary organisations have come to play a crucial role not only for the British community but also for the Spanish host society and public health-care system. Furthermore, volunteering represents a valuable sphere of activity offering personal benefits for those who are actively engaged. Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in a charity organisation in the province of Alicante on the northern Costa Blanca, this paper examines the extensive functions that volunteering and charitable activities can offer British older migrants. The implementation of voluntary work within the specific context of retirement migration is identified as a multi-functional individual and societal resource. Volunteering for the retirees is described as a true means of adaptation to a new life context, and as a highly reflexive strategy of risk minimisation and self-realisation. This implies individual benefits and opens up possibilities of active ageing. Finally, volunteering will be analysed as a performative expression of transmigrants' cultural bifocality, reflecting both a high level of commitment to Spain as well as a specific feature of British community spirit and traditionalism.

**KEY WORDS**—international retirement migration, lifestyle migration, charity, volunteering, Spain, United Kingdom, philanthropy, leisure.

## **Introduction**

Retirement migration has now become a global phenomenon with destinations world-wide alluring pensioners with the prospects of agreeable climates, attractive landscapes, different cultures and ways of life, and quite

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often economic advantages due to cheaper living conditions. Factually situated somewhere between migration and tourism, a plethora of terms such as amenity migration, sunshine migration, later-life migration, gerontomigration and residential tourism, among others, have been coined in order to capture the different qualities and peculiarities of these processes of mobility which rigorously defy the characteristics of conventional categories of migration. However, international retirement migration – interpreted as a specific subtype of a wider phenomenon recently defined as ‘lifestyle migration’ (Benson and O’Reilly 2009: 2) – is the term that has been utilised most frequently in academic research on the issue (e.g. King, Warnes and Williams 2000; Rodríguez, Fernández-Mayoralas and Rojo 2004) and which most adequately defines the subject matter of this article.

The main factors that have contributed to the massive growth of retirement migration are the increased experience with mobility and travel (Eliot and Urry 2010; Urry 2007), economic affluence, the spread of communication technologies, the pluralisation of living conditions and the individualisation of retirement, as well as stable political conditions and the accessibility of destinations. This globalisation of retirement now discloses a world-wide panorama of *elderscapes* (Katz 2005), selected by affluent older citizens from diverse cultural and national backgrounds as their individual retirement choice.<sup>1</sup> Within Europe, the coastal and southern areas of Spain represent by far the most popular destination for largely northern and middle European retirees, of which British retirement migrants constitute the largest national group. According to the official Spanish municipal register of 2009 (*Padrón Municipal de Inhabitantes*), 374,600 citizens of the United Kingdom (UK) were registered in Spain, of which 176,952 were older than 55 years of age and therefore can in most cases be considered as retired or early-retired. In the *Comunitat Valenciana* (Autonomous Region of Valencia) – the regional example of this case study and better known as Costa Blanca among tourists and retirement migrants alike – 76,713 British persons above the age of 55 were officially registered, making it the most popular destination among British retirees.<sup>2</sup> Considering the fact that the incentives for official registration are low and spuriously feared by some for the bureaucratic effort, the real number of retirement migrants in Spain must be considered much higher, and in some Spanish villages along the coast European foreigners now outnumber the autochthonous population (Janoschka 2009a; Rodríguez, Lardiés and Rodríguez 2010). Although retirement migration to Spain is relatively well researched from a variety of academic disciplines, this paper seeks to shed light on two important aspects of the phenomenon which have not been given full attention so far: ageing and volunteering.<sup>3</sup> In general, ageing as a pivotal facet of retirement migration has only been insufficiently theorised in European research, the

vanguard ethnographic work of Caroline Oliver being a pleasing and highly informative exception (Oliver 2008). Furthermore, in European Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, in particular, a general lack of empirical and conceptual activity in problems related to ageing in contemporary Western societies must be noted (*see* Beck 2005: 10). This paucity of academic interest is even more evident regarding the analysis and theorisation of interrelations between migration and ageing (*see* Oliver 2008: 6). Since both ageing and migration represent key issues of the twenty-first century – with retirement migration considered to be a phenomenon yet to expand tremendously due to baby-boomers entering retirement age – a more profound empirical and theoretical engagement at the intersection of these research fields is needed.

The popularity and spread of volunteering and charitable activities among the British residents in Spain cannot be dismissed and has been perceived as an important social praxis (Durán 2004; Huber and O'Reilly 2004; King, Warnes and Williams 2000; O'Reilly 2000a, 2004a; Oliver 2008), and the British disposedness to volunteering and charity is publicly displayed in many forms. The English-language newspapers as well as the multitude of gratis print media are usually teeming with reports on charity dinners, fund-raising events and announcements made by the manifold charity organisations. Also, the expatriate radio stations regularly feature reports of charity events, and in most towns with a considerable British population there is at least one charity shop to be found raising money for philanthropic causes. Although charitable and volunteering activities may also be detected among other European resident groups in Spain, the British are obviously leading the field and no other resident group in Spain comes even close to the quantity and quality of their charitable projects and endeavours.

While the vital scene of clubs and associations and its high significance for the British expatriates in Spain has been widely described and acknowledged by lifestyle migration researchers in general (Casado Díaz 2009; Huber and O'Reilly 2004; Oliver 2008), up to now no in-depth investigation of a single charity organisation of British residents in Spain has been carried out, and the social meanings and functions of volunteering for older migrants have not been theorised satisfactorily. As a consequence, findings of the multidisciplinary branch of volunteering research have not been incorporated into hitherto existing studies of retirement migration. Furthermore, the Costa del Sol has constituted the geographical focus of all current research on British retirement migration to Spain so far, whereas the Costa Blanca further north has been largely neglected, despite its greater popularity among older British migrants. Consequently, this paper intends to close the above-mentioned research gaps. It shall investigate the meanings and functions of volunteering in retirement migration on two different

levels: initially it will explain the individual motivations and personal profits for the retirees actively engaged in charitable work and volunteering. The other central argument of the paper will be centred on the analysis of the wider societal and collective meanings of volunteering within the concrete situation of British retirement migration to the Costa Blanca.

### **Empirical approach and socio-spatial localisation**

The findings of this paper are based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted during several field trips to two Spanish coastal towns on the Costa Blanca between October 2007 and February 2008, totalling three months of field research. Additionally, regular returns to the site have been carried out and various aspects of the phenomenon of retirement migration to this particular area have been observed over the last five years. In consonance with anthropology's general methodological openness and reflexivity, a qualitative, multi-method fieldwork approach was chosen with participant observation and narrative in-depth interviews of retired British migrants representing the major sources of information. Participant observation as the distinguished method of anthropological research follows the aim of immersing oneself into the quotidian realities of social actors by actual participation in their everyday lives in order to reach a profound understanding of their ways of constructing and perceiving social realities (*see* Clifford 1988; Geertz 2000: 55–70). For this reason I purposely selected a purely qualitative and ethnographic approach, most of all in order to capture the subjective experiences that inform both ageing identities as well as the individual motivations for volunteer engagement. The main – though not exclusive – focus of the fieldwork and participant observation lies in a British charity organisation which was founded in 1977 as a neighbourly help project and since then has expanded to be a voluntary organisation comprising 200 members all along the northern Costa Blanca. More than 90 per cent of the members are of British origin according to figures observed by one of its managers, and most of the volunteers with a non-British national background have strong affiliations with the UK because they have either lived there for an extended period of time or are married to a British partner. The activities of this secular organisation are basically caritative and related to problems of age and health. The organisation offers, among many other things, a volunteer interpreter service at public hospitals and provides respite care for people at home or in hospital. Furthermore, it runs two shops, a fund-raising charity shop selling second-hand clothes, books and bric-a-brac, and a second one that loans free medical and home nursing equipment, such as crutches, wheelchairs and nursing

beds – utilities which are not provided for free by the Spanish public health-care system and are therefore highly requested. Additional activities encompass volunteer help with shopping and household chores for homebound people, hospital visits and the provision of general information on health-related issues in Spain, as well as the organisation of occasional fundraising events. In order to guarantee the anonymity of all people included in this study, all names of the people interviewed are invented and neither the real name of the actual charity organisation is given nor the names of existing geographical places. Instead the descriptor ‘The Charity’ will be used throughout the text. This particular organisation was chosen for two reasons. Firstly, it is the biggest and most established charity in the region run almost exclusively by retired older people, and secondly, as a self-help organisation, it is mainly concerned with issues that the retired community itself is affected by. Therefore, researching this organisation provides a combined look into the two spheres of volunteering and retirement migration which has not been accomplished by previous research. As a result, this approach not only provides information about the general significance of volunteering under the specific conditions of ageing and retirement, but simultaneously gives interesting insights into the wider problems and difficulties related to retirement migration to Spain.

During my ethnographic fieldwork, I tried to participate in most of the activities and services offered by ‘The Charity’, however, the work in the hospital and the charity shop represented the focal points. Besides participant observation, narrative interviews with the British retirees were the main source of information. In total, 25 interviews were conducted with British permanent residents between the age of 56 and 92 years, of which 20 were active members of ‘The Charity’. A guideline of questions was used throughout all interviews. The focus was intentionally placed on individuals whose principal residence is in Spain and those who express no intention of returning to the UK. This was done primarily to establish an analytical distinction between more seasonal, temporary and touristic types of retirement migration.<sup>4</sup> In order to diversify the sample of data, interviews were conducted with people of different characteristics such as age, lengths of residence in Spain, and level of engagement and roles occupied within ‘The Charity’, in order to obtain rich data. Therefore, I observed and spoke to volunteers in the charity shop, the hospital visiting team, people who provided help at home and interpreters in the hospital. All interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed and then analysed, codified and structured according to content and topics using the professional software for qualitative data analysis MAXQDA. Regarding gender, the majority of interviews (21 out of 25) were conducted with women, since approximately three-quarters of the people actively engaged in ‘The Charity’ were female. This

accords with insights from volunteering research that engagement in social and caritative activities is generally a female domain, whereas men tend to engage more in organisational and administrative affairs (*see* Backes 2006). Further complementary methods were applied during the fieldwork in order to intensify the knowledge and understanding of the retirement migrant's quotidian and social discourses through analysis of British newspapers in Spain, internet forums and chat rooms, broadcasts of the local British expatriate radio stations and other sources of popular culture. Also immersion into British everyday life in bars, clubs, theatres and churches, and explorative field trips to surrounding municipalities and sites of relevance (expatriate shops, cemeteries, flea markets) were undertaken. Personal and subjective impressions were recorded in a field diary.

The reflection of subjective experiences during and after the fieldwork process is important in the generation of anthropological knowledge, especially regarding the limitations of one's research approach (*see* Bailey 2007). I am aware that my research interest was curbed by certain aspects, such as my status as a young, male German researcher among older, mostly female British retirement migrants. However, I never had the feeling of being excluded. Quite the contrary: I was surprised about the general friendliness and also the openness I experienced, even in conversations about sensitive topics such as ageing, illness and death. Owing to its ethnographic research design and qualitative nature, this study does not intend to make absolute statements that can be readily generalised or claim representativeness for the whole collective of British retirement migrants in this part of Spain. Rather, it represents a personal interpretation of ethnographically gathered findings.

### **Retiring to Spain – opportunities and risks of ageing in migration**

'People come here for the weather' explained one of my informants, acknowledging the fact that retirement migration to Spain is first and foremost motivated by the warm Spanish climate (Rodríguez, Fernández-Mayoralas and Rojo 1998). The better climate enables people to spend more time outdoors, allowing an active lifestyle which the participants associated with health-related advantages. This reflected findings from a comparative study of British retirement migrants on the Costa Blanca who assessed their personal health more positively, have fewer problems with mobility, and felt more independent than their Spanish and British counterparts (La Parra and Mateo 2008). Another important factor for moving to live in Spain is the Spanish culture and way of life. The participants had a high emotional attachment to their new place of residence, and living in Spain for many

British retirees is accompanied by a great admiration for Spanish culture and its people (see O'Reilly 2002). Commitment to Spain often included contempt for a supposedly hectic and consumerist way of life in the UK and a determination not to return to Britain, characterised by Karen O'Reilly as a collectively shared 'myth of no return' (O'Reilly 2000a). This was also expressed in many of my interviews, where explanations such as 'I wouldn't go back to England if you're gonna ask, not for anything' (Laura, 76) were very common. This was reflected in home occupancy. Only one-quarter of retired British migrants in Spain own a second home in the UK, in comparison for example to 81 per cent of German retirees (Casado-Díaz 2006). The ultimate devotion of the British expatriates to Spain is most evident in the high number of interments in Spain (O'Reilly 2002; Oliver 2008). This was also attested in many of my interviews. For example, 'we've made arrangements' served as a code that one had already been organising a place at the cemetery. One impressive document of this great affection for and identification with Spain exists in a local cemetery, with a tombstone that was engraved with 'Son of Poland, Citizen of England, Lover of Spain'.

Another important aspect is the frequent use of the public Spanish national health service by British retirement migrants (Schriewer and Rodes 2008). British residents registered in Spain are entitled to full state health coverage of the national health service (see Oliver 2008: 108). Many of the informants were members of the Spanish system, sometimes accompanied by private health insurance policies. The general satisfaction with the Spanish national health service is very high among British residents, and statements such as 'all the medical treatment and facilities is superior to England' (Emma, 72), as well as the frequent use of attributes like 'efficient', 'terrific' and 'wonderful' were used by the participants to express their views. Retirement migrants use considerable skills and reflexivity in tailoring their individual health-care packages (see Ackers and Dwyer 2004). However, there are problems that affect some people, particularly at an older age. This situation of retired migrants in Spain who are advanced in age is a critical and little understood issue. Generally speaking, the decision to migrate after retirement represents an ambivalent undertaking. While retiring to Spain initially symbolises sun, autonomy, activity and an agreeable distance from the problems and discomforts associated with their former lives in Britain, ageing in migration might result in a number of possible risks and imponderabilities. A growing number of migrants that originally migrated to Spain in the 1980s, for example, are now reaching a lifestage where frailty and health-related problems can become a major obstacle in the perpetuation of their life-project of retirement abroad. However, the descriptions of the actual health situation of older retirement migrants in Spain are highly inconsistent and fragmented. On the one hand, British newspapers

use headlines such as ‘British expats trapped in the sun’ (Bowes 2006) or ‘Day when the sunshine retirement dream dies’ (Prescott 2007) to emphasise that ill-prepared emigrations lead to retirees living in precarious situations. Reports, such as the study from Irene Hardill and colleagues, evoke a similar image of many British retired migrants having serious problems centred around a very low language competence, dwindling pecuniary resources, loneliness, lacking social support networks, and the general scarcity of care homes in Spain (Hardill *et al.* 2005). The lack of public after-care, long-term care and nursing facilities in Spain, where informal care is usually fulfilled by family members, and the non-exportability of means-tested benefits and social assistance from the UK constitutes a problem. Difficulties may also arise when migrants return to Britain, where British nationals who have been absent for more than two years may be subject to a Habitual Residence Test to enable them to access services.

Nevertheless, authors such as King, Warnes and Williams (2000) appraise mass-media depictions in particular as alarmist and exaggerated. They emphasise the general success of retirement migration for the majority of people. Likewise, other studies accentuate the above-average satisfaction and health of the British retirees in Spain (La Parra and Mateo 2008) and highlight the infrequency of re-migrations to the UK due to precarious circumstances (*see* Oliver 2008: 106). The same ambiguity was found in the appraisals of the people working for ‘The Charity’, and amongst British clergymen and other experts outside ‘The Charity’. While they discussed health-related problems associated with ageing, they nevertheless stated that living in Spain for most of the people would signify a much better, healthier and more active life in comparison to the lives that they would have led in Britain. Due to the scarcity of statistical and qualitative data, a comprehensive analysis of the circumstances of expatriates at more advanced ages cannot be given. The recent economic crisis, the severe loss of purchasing power of the British pound, and the oversaturated real-estate market in Spain making it almost impossible to sell property at present has the potential to aggravate the number of people in precarious situations.

Regarding the ambiguous effects associated with retiring abroad mentioned above, a useful theoretical tool for the sociological interpretation of my findings is Beck’s theory of a ‘risk society’ (Beck 1986; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1994). According to this dictum, modern life is characterised by a multiplication of individual options that are generated by structural changes in contemporary western societies, such as dynamised biographic patterns, the dissolution of former class-ties and the withering of previous points of reference in one’s identity and contexts of socialisation. Along with freedom of choice, individualised social actors face a greater range of



personal risks that they have to assess independently and self-reflexively, thus becoming autonomous planners of their individual lifecourse (Beck 1986). Others depict an ambivalent and individualised modernity that has numerous consequences for one's life-management (Giddens 1995) or use metaphors such as 'liquid' and 'reflexive' to characterise the outcomes of a 'post-traditional' modernity (Baumann 2000, 2007; Beck, Giddens and Lash 1996; Sennet 2000). Retirement migration is an expression of this paradox, because it reveals the co-existence of risks and chances that individual actors have to calculate. Ageing and retirement represent risky situations in themselves that can, taken together, possibly lead to a potentialisation of individual risks (*see* Backes and Clemens 2003: 261). Therefore, the self-reflexive and autonomous calculation of the imponderabilities inherent in the project of retirement migration is of great importance. This also occurs in popular discourses on retirement migration that emphasise careful and thorough planning as a prerequisite for successful retirement migration. This is observed in extensive guidebooks and online discussion forums, as well as assertions of participants. 'Doing one's homework' was a phrase they used to circumscribe the necessity to organise one's emigration properly.

I argue that voluntary organisations like 'The Charity' have come to play a prominent role in tackling the major issues that are associated with the risks and problems that can occur when ageing as a retirement migrant in Spain. First of all, it assists with the problem of very low language competence in Spanish of the retirees, which is discussed by this 86-year-old woman:

I've been trying to learn Spanish for 20-odd years and it still does not come. I can get through, I can order a meal, I can go to the shops, I can say to the people 'how are you, how is the family?', but I can't carry on a conversation. I should have mixed with many more Spanish people. The next time I retire I'm going to go way up into the mountains where they don't speak anything but Spanish, because then I got to. Because here I haven't got to, at all. . . . You see I am just in a British enclave, so I never speak Spanish.

The day-to-day life of the people I observed occurred mostly within the British community. Contact with Spanish people is often wished for, but in effect is rare. Most services and tasks can be achieved by speaking English. However, in cases of medical treatment, Spanish competence is usually desired. The services offered by British volunteer organisations like 'The Charity' play a crucial role as mediating institutions. In 2008, the interpreter service of 'The Charity' provided around 4,500 interpretations, a clear indicator for the high demand of that service, as well as of the high number of British retirees who are members of the Spanish public health-care system for whom medical treatment without an interpreter would be very difficult. Secondly, the volunteers support people to live independently in Spain for as long as possible by searching for individual solutions to their difficulties.

‘The Charity’ does not provide long-term care, but a lot of support is given to people who are homebound in the form of visits and help with shopping. So obviously, ‘The Charity’ plays an important role in effectively mitigating some of the most pestering issues that British retirement migrants with health problems might be affected by. Through these services ‘The Charity’ creates security and confidence for British migrants in a phase of life that is characterised by unpredictable eventualities.

Besides these obvious functions, the charity organisation also carries implications for different individual and societal levels that go beyond the realm of offering help, particularly for those actively engaged as volunteers. The following section of this paper will discuss the various functions and meanings of volunteering in the context of retirement migration in more detail.

### **Retirement *and* migration – a twofold rupture**

Retirement involves a reconfiguration of social roles and everyday activities. In older gerontological works, retirement was described as a negative event involving a loss of societal status and work-related roles (*see* Luborsky and LeBlanc 2003; Phillipson 2002). However, recent accounts portray retirement and ageing within the context of individualisation and consumerism, characterising retirement in terms of a well-deserved ‘Third Age’ (Laslett 1989), a phase of autonomously fashioned freedom and activity (Fürstenberg 2002; Künemund 2000). Retiring abroad as a wilful and cognisant step to maximise one’s quality of life is a manifest expression of such strategies of ageing that are oriented towards activity and self-realisation (Breuer 2004). Despite these new and positive semantics, which have been criticised for their neo-liberal implications of lifelong productivity and personal responsibility (Katz 2005), permanent emigration after retirement for many migrants nevertheless represents an accumulation of drastic changes and potential stress. Release from the labour market is associated with a loss of occupational networks and roles, and migration signifies a leaving behind of private relationships with family and friends. Therefore, the concurrence of migration and retirement implies a twofold rupture. In order to rebalance this loss of social relationships, former sources of recognition, status and identity have to be re-built in the new place of residence. Active engagement as a volunteer with ‘The Charity’ was described by many social actors as a conscious means of socialising and making new friends, thus representing a highly reflexive and creative method of coping with the stress associated with the life transformation: ‘My husband and I we both worked and so we came out here and completely gave up work

and contact with many people. It's a good way of meeting people and mixing in, really, so that's why I came here', explained Karen (58), and Phillipa (64) described her participation as 'a way of getting into the community'. The possibilities of socialising offered by becoming an active member of 'The Charity' were constantly referred to as major benefits to the volunteers. Research on volunteering generally indicates a higher level of wellbeing and health is experienced by those who are actively engaged, with companionability, social networks and support being the main contributing factors (Erlinghagen and Hank 2006; McMunn *et al.* 2009). As I experienced during my participant observation, the degree of sociability differs within the organisation depending on the different settings and activities. Nevertheless I can generally testify a very enjoyable and affectionate atmosphere with a lot of chatting and laughter. The good atmosphere and fun at work was also described as a very positive aspect of volunteering by some of the interviewees. Having fun, experiencing positive emotions, stress reduction, personal fulfilment and wellbeing have equally been described in other investigations as a major benefit for people actively engaged in social and leisure-time associations with positive side-effects for both physical and psychological health (*see* Hutchinson *et al.* 2008).

### **Activity, relevance and continuity**

Besides fun and companionability, another major aspect that the social actors regularly referred to increased activity: 'Gets me out of the house, I put my make-up on, whereas normally I wouldn't bother' (Josephine, 76), 'And it's certainly getting up and doing something. As a widow for 20 years I probably wouldn't get out if it weren't for coming here on a Monday and a Saturday' (Jennifer, 76). These statements exemplify the importance that volunteers attribute to their job for their everyday life. The creation of daily routine has a special meaning in the context of retirement migration and serves as an anchor in the new life context abroad. Caroline Oliver, in her ethnographic study on ageing in retirement migration, has shown that the experience and use of time for many older people oscillates between the two poles of free and unstructured time-use (due to retirement) and filling time with meaningful activities or 'productive time' (*see* Oliver 2008: 65–80). The fact of living as a retired person in a holiday area dominated by tourist and leisure activities may lead to a lifestyle which is not considered satisfactory, as Jim (72) explained:

So, when I retired and I came out here and I bought a house and I was on holiday. I couldn't get off being on holiday. So I started to drink too much, ate too much, and finally I thought: 'This is ridiculous. I am not on holiday anymore.' So I had to

become in the real world, I had to think 'I live here' and get settled. So I started to work here.

For Jim engagement in 'The Charity' functioned as an anchor in this new place and contributed to a sense of living in a 'real world' that was separated from the diametrically opposed liminal space of 'tourism' and 'holidays'. Making a distinction between ordinary tourists and retirement migrants is a widespread discourse among the British resident community in Spain. This serves as a means of self-localising in a different social realm and setting thereby reifying one's own status as a resident living in Spain (O'Reilly 2000a, 2007; Oliver 2006; Waldren 1997).<sup>5</sup> As in the case of Jim, volunteering may be chosen as a way of filling one's time with an activity perceived as normal in order to create an identity distinct from tourist and holiday routines. Volunteering is viewed as an appropriate means of becoming active and structuring everyday life in retirement migration, because the time intensity of the activity and commitment can be determined according to individual temporal resources. The range of commitment I observed varied from two hours every three weeks to interpreters spending almost every day in the hospital. The possibility of autonomously adjusting one's level of commitment according to personal time schedules and obligations is another important aspect for many of the older volunteers, indicating their high level of reflexivity and agency. However, the work within 'The Charity' is not evenly distributed, and there is a highly dedicated core of personnel who do most of the work, while others participate occasionally in charitable activities. On one occasion, for example, I heard one of the very active volunteers, who was already in her eighties, complain about managing it all, and how her engagement was sometimes a bit too excessive for her. This resonates with observations of Caroline Oliver who, in her case study among British retirees on the Costa del Sol, describes how different levels of engagement were leading to tensions and fragmentations within various volunteer organisations (Oliver 2008: 76–81). However, 'The Charity' is a particularly large organisation and therefore does not suffer from a lack of volunteers and there is a constant influx of newcomers willing to help and offer their services. Nevertheless, the number of people with heavy responsibilities is clearly confined to a core group.

Additionally, volunteering is a socially productive field of activity that in many ways can contribute to a personal experience of relevance (Kohli, Freter and Langenhennig 1998; Kohli and Künemund 2000). Social recognition and approval are another aspect to be considered here, since philanthropic action as an expression of altruism and unselfishness has variously been described as a means to foster one's own contentedness (*see de Beauvoir 1995: 157*). The volunteers feel useful and needed through the high social relevance of their job, and even more through the

acknowledgements of gratitude which they receive, although interestingly the experience of thankfulness and appreciation as a motive for volunteering was only mentioned parenthetically by one respondent. The primary motivation to do something for oneself – such as making friends and creating a daily routine in Spain – was prevalent in the informants' accounts. This resonates with findings of volunteering research which states that a general change of motives has occurred within volunteering, with altruism and common welfare now being less relevant factors in favour of more individualised conceptions aiming at self-actualisation and personal fulfilment (Adloff 2007; Keupp 2004). The motive of self-actualisation was also corroborated by the fact that some volunteers seize the chance of offering personal skills and qualifications that can be integrated in some of the many services of 'The Charity'. For example, Susanna (77), an ex-nurse, now works as an interpreter, offering her medical as well as linguistic proficiency in French, German and Spanish. Aisling (61), a former retail-manager for a chain of charity shops, brings her knowledge from management, and Bob (70), the former owner of a bike shop and a landscape gardener, contributes his expertise by maintaining wheelchairs and assisting people with gardening jobs. These examples illustrate how volunteering can be used as a strategy to create biographical continuity. However, 'The Charity' is not a field of activity which exclusively attracts former professionals. There is a broad range of possible activities that allow people with very various professional backgrounds to contribute something in different fields. The contribution of personal skills produces self-confidence and a feeling of being needed as an individual with genuine qualifications and capacities. This is supported by other studies which have shown how volunteering offers an alternative strategy for gaining occupational satisfaction after retirement (Parry and Taylor 2007). This becomes even more important in the particular social context of migration after retirement, where volunteering offers the important chance to experience coherence in a life-context potentially prone to changes, risks and insecurity. A final aspect regards the capacity of the volunteers to create a sense of community, which must be seen as a 'key influence on the quality of life and on wellbeing in old age' (Phillipson 2007: 336).

Considering all these positive outcomes and personal benefits for the volunteers, the contribution of volunteering to a positive experience of ageing is beyond doubt. A plethora of gerontological studies have shown the interrelation between physical and mental activity and wellbeing in higher age in general (Howie 2007; Wray 2003), just as many studies verify the positive influence of volunteering on personal health and wellbeing (Knesebeck *et al.* 2007; McMunn *et al.* 2009; Siegrist and Wahrendorf 2005). However, bearing in mind the general satisfaction and above-average level of

health and wealth of British expatriates in Spain (King, Warnes and Williams 2000: 192; La Parra and Mateo 2008), the particular contribution of volunteering for a successful retirement experience seems to be only one factor among many others for this economically and socially privileged group.<sup>6</sup>

In the above section, charity and volunteering have mainly been analysed with respect to individual aspects, personal functions and significations of this activity for the social actors engaged in it. In the final section, I wish to focus on the wider and more general meanings and implications of this social praxis, particularly in the specific context of retirement migration and individualised modernity.

### **Volunteering as way of life: lived tradition and the creation of community**

As described above, volunteering is a widespread activity among British retirement migrants in Spain that cannot be found at a comparable scale among other groups of European retirement migrants on the Costa Blanca. However, while there are no reliable statistical data available to support this, observation of German and British retirement migrants during the past five years, and comparison of the number of British charity associations and volunteer activities with German activity in the region support this conclusion. Key informants, including German, Spanish and British doctors, clergymen and local politicians, supported this observation that there exists a particular British culture of charity that cannot be found among the other nationalities residing in Spain. But how can this particularly high inclination of the British to volunteer in comparison to other nationalities be explained? From a sociological viewpoint British expatriates are predisposed to volunteer due to their high socio-economic profile. Just as in retirement migration, voluntary work in Britain and other northern European nations is inextricably linked to middle and higher social classes (Hall 1999; McMunn *et al.* 2009; Tarling 2000). When asked to explain their high level of charitable activities, the expatriates frequently referred to charity as being a part of British culture and tradition. Josephine (77), a highly active interpreter for 'The Charity' in the hospital, explained: 'I think it's because it's an English way of doing things. Well, it's a charity, so we all work for a charity in England so we automatically come and join a charity out here. It's very much a way of life for the English.' Likewise, in many other descriptions the volunteers explained charity to be a specific and constitutive part of British culture which is deeply ingrained into their everyday lives. Many explained how they had grown up 'doing bits of good' and often working for a charity since childhood. In these representations volunteering appears as an internalised social praxis, a cultural disposition socialised through

education and lifelong experience, which they transferred to their new life context in Spain. This result is noted in other studies on volunteering in later life, whereby previous volunteering activities serve as predictors for a continuation of such actions in the future, also indicating that those who have volunteered before are most likely to remain volunteers at a later point of time in their life (Choi and Chou 2010).

A glance at British cultural history confirms this strong culture and tradition of charity work (Tarling 2000; Woodrooffe 2006; Wright 2001) and some authors speak of a 'British charity heritage' (Mulgan and Landry 1995: 14). While studies on volunteering in Europe point to a high level of voluntary engagement in all Northern and Central European countries, there is a stark contrast to the very low levels observed in Mediterranean countries, especially Spain (Börsch-Supan *et al.* 2005; Erlinghagen and Hank 2006), Britain seems to have a special status regarding volunteering and charitable activities. Political scientist Peter Hall (1999) describes how political and social developments have led to Britain having one of the most vital and distinct cultures of volunteering world-wide. German volunteering researchers also attest to a much higher pluralism of voluntary organisations in Britain than, for instance, in Germany (*see* Heinze and Strünck 2000: 196). Ultimately, the organisation of charity in specific countries plays an important role in determining the extent of charitable activities (*see* Adloff 2009: 1185). The pronounced charity culture in Britain and the cultural repertoire of philanthropic action developed by the social actors throughout their individual lifecourse must finally be understood as an important framework for the actions taken by the British retired community in Spain.

In former investigations, British expatriate clubs and associations in Spain have been described as vehicles for community-building (King, Warnes and Williams 2000; O'Reilly 2000a, 2002, 2004a; Oliver 2008). Karen O'Reilly has analysed how volunteering in particular contributes to the construction of what she calls a 'symbolic community' by reflecting traditional community values of equality, responsibility, caring and support (*see* O'Reilly 2000a: 125). These results are supported by findings of volunteering research, where the characteristics of volunteering as a social cement and means of group cohesion are regularly referred to – especially in individualised and post-traditional contexts (Keupp 2001; Klages 1999). These community-creating qualities become even more evident when interpreting volunteering as something like a lived tradition, as might be done in the case of the British retirees. Traditions are bequeathed customs, norms and social performances that maintain the cultural specificity and historic continuity of a group (*see* Welz 2001: 588). Additionally, as Anthony Giddens argues, traditions have a strong emotional and affective attribution, conveying trust and what he terms *ontological security* (1996: 128). The construction of

ontological security in retirement migration plays an outstanding role, particularly if one considers the great discontentedness of British retirees in Spain with modern life in Britain. This phenomenon was described by Karen O'Reilly as a 'bad Britain discourse' (2000a: 99) among the expatriate community, and it was definitely affirmed in my research, in which Britain was usually described as 'hectic', 'drab', 'consumerist', 'depressed', and 'full of crime', estimations which are closely linked to the myth mentioned above of not returning to the UK. On this account, the Spanish way of life is a huge pull-factor and the second most important reason to move permanently to Spain, playing an extraordinarily important role especially among the British residents (*see* Rodríguez, Fernández-Mayoralas and Rojo 1998: 193). The alleged Spanish traditionality is often used to create a dichotomy between the constantly emphasised negative sides of living in contemporary Britain and romanticising depictions of everyday reality in Spain. 'It's like England back in the thirties and forties' explained one informant (Ben, 71), while many others accentuated the safety, family-orientation and respect for older people as important aspects of Spanish traditionality contributing to the positive personal perception of their new place of residence.

British obsession with tradition and heritage has been widely described – in the form of humorous accounts (Barley 1999; Paxman 1999) as well as more critical objections (Hewison 1987) – and research has also indicated that longing for community and closely knit social ties are widespread among British pensioners, which is also mirrored in the trend of counter-urbanisation by wealthy retirees (Phillipson 2007; Phillipson *et al.* 2001). Considering the high importance of tradition mentioned by the informants, charity as a collectively shared and enacted tradition plays a crucial role in the construction of a desirable social environment. Tradition represents a powerful social discourse conveying notions of unity and a collectively shared basis of values and social norms (Hobsbawm 1983). Hence, charity and volunteering for British retirement migrants serve as prime agents in the construction of community by creating a bulwark of ritualised solidarity and institutionalised trust against the negatively connoted consequences of an individualised and post-traditional modernity (*see* Giddens 1995). Thus, the internalised tradition of charity is a symbolic – as well as a very concrete and practical – means of creating ontological security in a life context that, due to the simultaneity of ageing and migration, can be characterised by multiple insecurities and risks. Therefore, on an abstract and symbolic level, volunteering creates an assurance of social identities by typifying collectively shared values of responsibility and community, as well as emblematising a lived alternative version of a supposedly anomic modern Britain that is imagined to be threatened by moral and ethical decay. These findings are consistent with Phillipson's research on the meaning of community among



older people, who explains that ‘some older people can actively re-shape communities which are meaningful to them’ (2007: 336).

Due to the marked, but unintended, proximity of the explanations of the volunteers to Bourdieu’s habitus concept, I would speak of a *habitus of volunteering* in the case of the British retirement migrants that I interviewed. According to Bourdieu, habitus is, among other things, a class-specifically acquired disposition towards attitudes and behavioural patterns that generates and determines all social actions of an individual (Bourdieu 1982: 277–354). Such explanations of the volunteers as ‘it’s just something we do in England, and it’s just something we have always done’ reveal that charity and volunteering are a habitualised disposition characterised by an almost inevitable perpetuity informed by social upbringing and cultural heritage. Another important aspect of the habitus regards its function as a means of distinguishing between social classes. Oliver and O’Reilly have shown that, although class division is often referred to by lifestyle migrants as being much less significant in Spain in comparison to Britain, social distinction and class-based subjectivities continue to play an essential role that are reproduced in this new life context, particularly via expressions of cultural capital and personal tastes (see Oliver and O’Reilly 2010). With respect to the meaning of social class in the everyday culture of ‘The Charity’, I did not detect overt mechanisms of social distinction, although people from various social and cultural backgrounds were working as volunteers. It was quite clear that certain people with useful capitals and work-related experiences were occupying leading positions within ‘The Charity’, and that these people enjoyed an elevated social status. That was apparent through leading figures being referred to in conversations when they were praised. In her ethnography, Karen O’Reilly has shown how the use of surnames functions as a subtle marker of difference and social status among British residents (see O’Reilly 2000a: 131). I testify that the use of surnames is a widespread and common way of attributing respect and social status to specific social actors in daily discourse and communications.

### **Transmigrant bifocality and civic integration**

‘The Charity’ could at a first and superficial glance be easily characterised as an institution which only fosters the cultural and social separation of the British retirees in Spain by creating a familiar and comfortable environment. It mainly tackles the problem of the low language proficiency of the British community and therefore lowers the incentive for learning the language. When this is needed Spanish language competence is not an obligation since there are volunteers available to assist. ‘The Charity’ must also be

acknowledged for its contribution to cultural and social integration of migrants into Spanish society, that moves beyond an attempt to create a self-sufficient British community. Many informants wished to have more contact with Spaniards and integrate more with them, which has been observed by other ethnographic studies on British retirement migration to Spain (O'Reilly 2002). 'The Charity' epitomises the British commitment to Spain by helping to overcome some of the major issues that are created by the high level of ageing migrants in the region. In the interviews 'The Charity' was never discussed as an institution intended to support one's own community, but first and foremost as an institution intended to help Spanish society. This is illustrated in the following citation from a leading figure of 'The Charity':

We are immigrants. We're a pain in the neck! We cause a lot of problems. We do, because it's so many of us. It's like the immigrants going into England causing many problems. And we are causing the Spanish a lot of problems as well. We do! So this is why we all try to, with 'The Charity', to help them.

Therefore, 'The Charity' performs a paradoxical 'double function': on the one hand, it serves as a catalyst for internal British 'community building' while, on the other hand, it serves externally as a means of integration into Spanish society. Or, to put it in the terms of German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies, 'The Charity' fosters the 'Vergemeinschaftung' as well as the 'Vergesellschaftung' of the British expatriates in Spain (Tönnies 1991). Internally, it helps to create a comfortable social environment and community, while externally channels of integration are opened. For the active volunteers, for example, contacts with Spanish people are created on different levels, be it with officials in the hospital or with Spanish people coming to the charity shop as customers. Additionally, 'The Charity' as an official institution not only responds to the specific needs of the British community, but in many instances makes contributions to Spanish society, for example by raising money for the hospital. Therefore, the level of civic integration and participation inherent in the social work of 'The Charity' should not be overlooked by overstressing community-building, since both are important aspects when considering the societal implications of the phenomenon. This duality of meaning in the work of 'The Charity' is a palpable expression of what Steve Vertovec (2007) has described – in a review on literature on transnationalism – as transmigrants' 'cultural bifocality'. According to Vertovec, bifocality means 'having a life world oriented to, or grounded in, more than one locality', a 'dual orientation' of cultural orientations and affiliations, that is 'most clearly discernible in social practices and conveyed in individual narratives' (2007: 155). In the case of the Britons, this plural attachment and cultural bifocality is evident in the constant articulation of Spain as 'home' while simultaneously maintaining a strong cultural and

quotidian affiliation with Britain and British culture, for example through watching English satellite television and visiting British pubs and bars in Spain. ‘The Charity’ is an exact expression of this cultural bifocality, since it offers its services to the British as well as to the Spanish community. ‘The Charity’ signifies bifocal solidarity – as a support network with the British community, and as a mediating and donating institution within Spanish society. As such the volunteering activities – as well as similar forms of active social and political engagement that can be found among the retirement migrants in Spain, such as engagement in local politics, for example – indicate how new and experimental forms of lived European citizenship and participation are practised on a concrete level and how civic integration is creatively practised from below (Janoschka and Haas 2011).

## Conclusion

To sum up, volunteering and charitable engagement of the British community on the Costa Blanca plays a distinct role in the management and solution of problems related to older migrants with poor health. Furthermore, it is indicative of a high level of social capital among the British community. However, the general situation is complex and more profound research on the concrete situation of older migrants in Spain and their strategies of coping is required. There is no statistical data concerning the number of return migrations or the number of retirees in need of long-term care. In particular, the role of volunteer interpreting and care services should be examined more closely in order to dovetail private and public support structures. Besides the obvious advantages of self-help on a voluntary basis for both the host society and the older migrants, volunteering as an activity must be valued above all as an individual strategy of adaptation to a new life context. It provides extensive possibilities for the creation of social networks and establishing friendships, which contributes positively to the project of retirement abroad. Being active, having a structured daily life and the experience of social recognition and appreciation promise positive side-effects for the volunteers, such as high levels of enjoyment, feelings of control and possibilities for self-fulfilment. Furthermore, implementation of volunteering as a conscious coping strategy shows a high degree of agency and reflexivity on the part of some of the retirement migrants, positioning the volunteers of ‘The Charity’ far from disengagement. The case of the British volunteers on the Costa Blanca also shows how bifocal cultural orientations and relations come to express themselves in contexts of lived transnationality, since volunteering symbolises both British values and traditions and also solidarity and an extended identification with Spanish

society. This opens up channels of communication and fosters intercultural exchange, understanding and civic integration. While the study indicates the strong role of volunteering for the British community in the local area of the ethnographic study, it also opens up questions about the general meaning of self-help and private voluntary action in other retirement regions and for other national groups. Further interesting aspects concern the general situation of the older Northern European retirement migrants in Spain and the different strategies they employ when reaching a stage of frailty. Considering the general lack of qualitative and ethnographic research on the topics of ageing and socially productive activities, a more profound discussion is urgently needed in order to gain deeper insight into ageing and retirement in today's national and transnational life-contexts.

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### **NOTES**

- 1 Retirement migration has now become a world-expanding endeavour and global market for the tourism and real-estate sector alike. Apart from intra-national retirement moves and classic destinations such as Florida in the United States of America and the southern European and Mediterranean countries like Spain (Rodríguez, Fernández-Mayoralas and Rojo 2004), France (Benson 2009, 2010), Italy and Portugal (King, Warnes and Williams 2000; Roca, Oliveira and Roca 2010), new areas are constantly evolving as destinations for international retirement migrants. In Latin America, Panama (Jackiewicz and Craine 2010), Mexico (Croucher 2009; Sunil, Rojas and Bradley 2007) and Costa Rica (Janoschka 2009b) are among the most popular countries hosting mainly northern American retirees, while in East Asia Malaysia (Ono 2008) and Thailand (Howard 2008) are popular countries for Westerners and Japanese pensioners. Other upcoming countries for retirement migration include Morocco (Escher and Petermann 2009), Turkey (Nuzrali and O'Reilly 2009), Bulgaria (Kanef 2009), India (Devesh and Narula 2009) and China (Ma and Chow 2006).
- 2 All statistical data used here stem from the Spanish National Institute for Statistics, available online at [www.ine.es](http://www.ine.es) [Accessed November 2011].
- 3 For a selection of research done on international retirement migration in Spain, see Ackers and Dwyer (2002, 2004), Betty and Cahill (1999), Breuer (2004), Gustafson (2002, 2008), Haas (2010), Huber and O'Reilly (2004), Janoschka (2009a), Janoschka and Haas (2011), King, Warnes and Williams (2000), Mazón and Aledo (2005), Mazón, Huete and Mantecón (2011), O'Reilly (2000a, 2000b, 2002, 2003, 2004a, 2004b, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010), Oliver (2008), Rodríguez, Fernández-Mayoralas and Rojo (1998, 2004),

- Schriewer and García Jiménez (2008), Schriewer and Rodes (2008) and Waldren (1996, 1997).
- 4 In her typology of retired migrants, O'Reilly distinguishes between *full residents*, *returning residents*, *seasonal visitors* and *peripatetic visitors* (see O'Reilly 2000a: 52).
  - 5 For further elaborations on the relations between tourism and the so-called anti-tourism, see Buzard (1993), Gustafson (2002), MacCannell (1999), Meethan (2001) and Urry (2002).
  - 6 For the association between wellbeing in later life and socio-economic factors, see Knesebeck *et al.* (2007).

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