

## 8. Conclusion

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This research set out to explore the lived realities of activism by, with and for refugees and migrants in activist groups in Hamburg. Thereby, it contributes to a growing body of literature from multiple disciplinary fields that question the supposed neutral standard of who is addressed as a citizen, an activist or a political subject. I accompanied activist groups, conducted interviews and experienced diverse organizing contexts and dynamics in Hamburg. Besides contributing to the existing research on migrant rights activism, I aimed to develop a perspective focused on social movement studies in particular. The research process followed constructivist GTMs. Therefore, the emerging conceptual developments are grounded in the empirical data and were integrated with existing theories from other research contexts, particularly intersectional feminist, post-colonial and critically-engaged theories. Exploring Transversal Solidarities is the resulting overarching conceptual proposition to capture migrant rights activism from a social movement perspective.

Especially in times of a global pandemic and more recently the war in Ukraine, references to *solidarity* seem ubiquitous. While my research does not capture the developments due to Covid-19, it has become evident that refugees and migrants without (clear) status are among those struck hardest. Due to living conditions that most often do not allow for proper precautionary and hygiene measures in themselves and due to not being considered in most rhetoric and political claims to solidarity. Even more recently, millions of people fleeing the war in Ukraine pose further questions. While it is certainly imperative to receive and assist them, it is striking how things that have been called for but were ignored for years suddenly are being discussed and even realized (for some). I believe that in such settings it is even more relevant than before to question which positionings are taken for granted and which are left behind and marginalized.

Migrant rights activism also engages for this. My research shows how challenging practicing and negotiating solidarities is, even within activist groups. It captures meanings, ambivalences and uncertainties that are present in migrant rights activism in Hamburg. It offers empirical, conceptual and methodological insights. In this chapter, I first outline this research project by linking its objectives to its findings, subsequently I address the limitations that these have and finally I point to directions for future research.

### **Linking objectives and findings**

The first few chapters of this book were concerned with delineating my research context (Chapter 2), methodologies (Chapter 3) and relevant existing literature (Chapter 4). The rich range of empirical observations about the lived realities of activist organizing for migrant rights in Hamburg were presented in-depth in Chapter 5. The analytical categories were developed from the empirical material and later evolved based on existent research on migrant rights activism, mainly from various migration and citizenship approaches. They capture various dimensions of internal dynamics, which I presented through the storyline *Negotiating Solidarities*. It already addresses some gaps identified in existing literature in general and social movement perspectives more in particular. My further conceptual developing in Chapter 6 raised several contributions concerning these empirical insights by advancing them in dialogue with research perspectives that emerge from social movements but are often not explicitly engaged from a social movement studies perspective.

This publication's overarching conceptual proposition is *Exploring Transversal Solidarities*, which links my empirical research to existing studies on similar struggles and to intersectional feminist, post-colonial and critically-engaged theories. The concept, as well as the linkages, cannot offer an exhaustive account of migrant rights activism in Hamburg, of course. Still, I hope that it can offer valuable starting points grounded in exemplary explorations. On a methodological and analytical account, these findings emphasize the importance of conceptualizing social movements in closer dialogue with these same movements. These heterogeneous groups organizing for migrant rights show particularly clearly that addressing them either as identity politics or through resource or political process models does not do justice to their complexities and ambiguities.

Migrant rights groups are heterogeneous in the sense that activists come with a particular variety of intersecting positionings. This has very concrete consequences in terms of inequalities, dynamics and power relations within activist groups. Existing research on migrant rights movements sustains my empirical analysis of existing power relations between refugee, migrant and German activists (see e.g. Ataç, 2016; Glöde & Böhlo, 2015; Johnson, 2015; Steinhilper, 2017). However, it also becomes clear that an intersectional perspective calls for not seeing this as a set and binary differentiation and losing other power relations out of sight (Cissé, 1996; Langa, 2015; Ünsal, 2015; Yuval-Davis, 2010). Black feminists' advancement of intersectionality as an analytical lens proves extremely valuable in capturing this (see e.g. Combahee River Collective, 1977; Crenshaw, 1989; hooks, 2000b). Yuval-Davis' and McDonald's conceptual takes on addressing movements through the meeting of individual and collective experiences further strengthen the case against too easily reducing movements to single-issue struggles (McDonald, 2002; Yuval-Davis, 2011). All these insights are essential when exploring what solidarities might look like in migrant rights activism. They centrally underline that solidarities are not a stable construct that is easily established between clearly positioned or delineated people or groups. Instead, solidarities are continually being challenged and negotiated within groups in terms of inadvertent dynamics but also through explicit discussion. My research shows that habits, practices and interactions can reproduce inequalities and complicate practical solidarities also within groups. This could receive further attention in future research.

The activities shaping migrant rights activism in Hamburg are diverse as well. Groups engage in various activities that are differently interpreted as more or less *political*. This includes classical, public mobilizations addressing broader society and institutional politics. However, it centrally also involves practical support activities for individuals and groups, creating spaces for personal contact and engaging in various processes to address existing inequalities and power relations internally. Existing research on migrant rights activism confirms this by often focusing on everyday political practices as a less visible form of political engagement (see e.g. Ataç et al., 2015; Köster-Eiserfunke et al., 2014; Nyers & Rygiel, 2012; Piacentini, 2014). Embracing feminist perspectives also underlines that the political cannot be reduced to publicly visible acts addressing institutional politics to obtain policy change (see e.g. Hanisch, 2006; hooks, 2000a; Martin et al., 2007). Structural inequalities and practical needs-based activities addressing them define activist real-

ities. Lister stresses the profoundly political nature of many practices through a feminist conceptualization of citizenship (1997). This is also consolidated by Bayat's insights on non-movements' characteristics entangling marginalized groups' everyday realities with their micro-level political practices (2010). Hill Collins accentuates how binary thinking and analysis are conceptually reinforcing power differentials (1986). All the addressed activities can be rising small-scale attempts of building solidarities. That particularly the interpretation of activities as political emerges as a controversial part from my empirical data yields potential for further exploration.

Finally, activist groups engage in resisting continuous challenges and experiencing lack of change. Aims and success are ambiguous issues in activist groups because activists regularly experience positive moments as well as disappointing and disillusioning ones. However, the implicit and explicit negotiating that occurs through building spaces for personal relationality and developing together as groups are intriguing dynamics concerning the practical figuring out of solidarities. The positive and the challenging relationalities and emotions involved in this partly emerge in existing research on migrant rights activism (see e.g. Erensu, 2016; Fadaee, 2015; Johnson, 2012; Ünsal, 2015). Some social movement and political practices perspectives offer valuable elaborations on such aspects in movements more generally (see e.g. Bang & Sørensen, 1999; Derickson & Routledge, 2015; Goodwin et al., 2000; Nicholls & Uitermark, 2017). Once again, intersectional feminist theories enable further exploring conceptual engagement with negotiating practices, building spaces for more continual movements (see e.g. hooks, 2000b; Johnson, 2015; Kabeer, 2005). Yates' and Lin and colleagues' developments of prefigurative politics are compelling additions when exploring these movement-internal negotiating and practicing of solidarities (Lin et al., 2016; Yates, 2015). How activists find ways of balancing the constant threat of worsening conditions with moments and activities they experience as empowering and that keep them going despite their exhaustion can be a promising starting point for further research.

The overarching conceptual proposal emerging from these contributions is *Exploring Transversal Solidarities*. It is firmly grounded in my research and the existing theories through which the contributions were analytically developed. I integrated Yuval-Davis', Hill Collins' and Lin and colleagues' perspectives to formulate the key messages of the concept, stressing the importance of moving beyond dichotomies, engaging in transversal dialogue and experimenting with practical solidarities. I think that approaching migrant

rights activism through this concept captures the complex relational character of groups continually figuring out how to deal with inequalities, power relations and controversies in and beyond the movements. There is no one definitive meaning of solidarities in social movements, of course. Instead, the case of migrant rights groups in Hamburg shows how activists and groups are juggling various dynamics that implicitly and explicitly address solidarities. Positionings, relations and emotions result in individuals' and groups' realities challenging *easy* claims to solidarities. They also display how activists actively engage in negotiating what possible ways might be there—a process that takes time and energy and also backlashes but lets some learnings and concrete practices emerge as well where it seems to me that solidarities are taking a concrete shape.

### **Addressing limitations and pointing to directions for future research**

Of course, it is important to point out the limitations of these results and relate them to directions for future research. Methodologically speaking, I believe that a more explicitly and radically participatory and/or activist research design would have further benefited the carving out of academic and activist knowledge. The variety in positions explored here through my own positionality surely limits the view taken on migrant rights activism. It would have been hugely beneficial to realize such a research project in a more collective and collaborative way. For example, a promising participatory element would have been to conduct focus group discussions with further activists, for instance to discuss analytical results. I planned this but eventually decided not to realize it due to time restraints and the framing as a dissertation project naturally limiting its collaborative potential anyways. Both in terms of data generation and analysis, collaborative methodologies might have also enabled a more expansive engagement with language. This could have raised further promising insights in such a multi-lingual research context.

This also implies that it could be promising to widen the reach of this research by exploring further cases in more localities or by engaging more explicitly with the transnational forms that migrant rights activism very clearly contains. A mixed-methods approach might move such small-scale explorations into more systematic studies of these movements by increasing the number of participants and further focusing analysis of solidarities in migrant rights activism. Alongside existing work in migration and social movement studies, a comparative perspective could offer insights into structural

differences and similarities in various contexts. This might be especially relevant when considering the additional effects of the global pandemic since 2020, the resulting challenges for, but also the development of, new forms of this kind of activism. An engagement with and through digital forms and tools of activism could raise new insights here.

GTM research aiming at developing theory brings another challenge that this study faced because, especially when exploring a particular local context, this goal is ambitious. The findings of this publication do not pretend to be representative, generalizable or exhaustive. Yet, as shown, the conceptual propositions offer promising starting points to develop theory and research on migrant rights activism from a social movement perspective. It could further strengthen my analysis to engage in a more explicit dialogue with the social movement theories I am criticizing, on the one hand, and existing conceptualizations of solidarities, on the other. However, both would have gone beyond the scope of this research, engaging in the already complex task of linking various disciplinary fields concerning this local exploration of migrant rights activism. I do not see my contribution as a finished endpoint. Instead, I hope to have developed a proposition to be further explored.

In fact, more research is needed to develop a conceptual framework that might be more concise in terms of its capturing of movement dynamics explored here through migrant rights activism in Hamburg. Future research should analytically and empirically engage more with intersectional positionings and relationalities without collapsing positionings and identities. Regarding migrant rights activism, this involves further research on power relations in the movements, in terms of those resulting from legal status but without losing sight of the more complex realities of further ones, such as race, gender or class. Generally, I believe that paying more attention to the internal dynamics in movements, including relationalities, emotions and negotiations, is essential. However, as a cautionary note, I want to acknowledge that this has to come with a self-reflective and critical research perspective to not unreflectively contribute even further to the academic exploitation of marginalized and activist forms of knowledge.

Finally, the explicit engagement with the fields most active in the study on migrant rights activism, such as critical citizenship studies as well as critical border and migration approaches, could have been further developed. While I delineate these fields in Chapter 4, in the following analysis this engagement remains selective. This results from the focus on developing a conceptual take on solidarities aimed at social movement studies. Further explo-

ration of it in relation to, for instance, critical citizenship perspectives could be very fruitful. Similarly, the engagement of fields that I identified as emerging from movements themselves but little engaged in social movement studies certainly also remains limited. I focused on pointing out promising starting points, but I cannot pretend to have done full justice to the depth and range of all these critically-engaged perspectives. BPoC, intersectional feminist and/or post-colonial and Southern theories are powerful empirical and analytical research perspectives that the Northern mainstream of research fields needs to engage with in (self-)critical and careful ways. These perspectives can also enable further exploration of the intersections between movements.

### **Moving on...**

As a constructivist grounded theory project, this research set out to develop theory. Since it evolved into starting to propose new angles to conceptualizing migrant rights activism, it hopefully has some relevance to scholars from various disciplines who are studying this kind of activism. Without pretending to have developed a full-fledged theory, it certainly offers interesting starting points for future research on the subject and in the field of social movement studies, as displayed previously. Future research could interestingly explore the here just initiated conceptualization of solidarities in migrant rights activism further and link it to other social movements. This study emphasizes the need for more trans-disciplinary awareness, especially when it comes to multi-disciplinary movements and research contexts.

As a research project guided by interpretive philosophies and sympathetic to activist scholarship, this publication also hopes to develop useful thoughts for practical engagement. Chapter 7 is one way in which I tried to address this by pointing out strategies that, from my understanding, emerge from activist contexts for engaging and developing with the dynamics addressed in this research. This will be especially true for mixed group contexts. Still, given that all groups are mixed from an intersectional perspective, I hope that it can be useful even in seemingly more homogeneous groups. However, I recognize that it is the more central step to take for privileged positionings, individual and collective. I think that an application to future research is that my findings show the importance of taking activists' perspectives into account more seriously. It follows from it that more research should engage in working more closely *with* movements, in the research process and concerning debating results and putting them to practical use.

Finally, indeed, as a personal journey throughout an about five-year-long period, this dissertation project has accompanied me into the professional sphere outside of university as well. In the practical context of an institution also engaging for migrant women's rights, I would claim that this publication might also have some relevance for professional practitioners—at least in the lived process, this is true for me. Throughout the last two years, I have realized that the concepts I encountered to matter to me as an activist and academic have proven to equally matter to me as a practitioner. However, this might be limited to professional, institutional contexts that, in one way or the other, aim to work in solidarity with or for migrant rights, especially from a predominantly white-German institutional perspective.

It will have become clear that this research contains much more than academic knowledge production for me. I believe that as activists, practitioners and academics it is most promising, if challenging, to embrace the tensions that come with acknowledging and fighting intersectionally unequal positions. In this sense, transversal solidarities as the conceptual take of this research emerges in all dimensions and relations. It stretches from my own positionality as a person to the lived realities I set out to explore, the philosophical groundings of my research, the methodological choices I took, all the way to the presented results. It has been challenging and very enriching to explore, experience and understand the potential of conceptually undoing binary dichotomies to practically embrace complex, intersectional and ambiguous perspectives that have been there all along.