

Empathic Humanitarianism: Understanding the Motivations behind Humanitarian Work with Migrants at the US–Mexico Border

Ricardo Gomez

University of Washington

Bryce Clayton Newell

University of Oregon

Sara Vannini

University of Sheffield and University of Washington

Executive Summary

The growing numbers of vulnerable migrants seeking shelter and refuge in the United States and Europe are finding increased racism and xenophobia as well as renewed efforts by humanitarian volunteers to offer them aid, sanctuary, and protection. This article sets forth a typology to better understand the motivations of volunteers working to help migrants in need of humanitarian assistance. Why do people go out of their way to offer humanitarian aid to someone they do not know and, in some cases, they will never meet? What are the drivers of altruistic behavior of humanitarian volunteers in the face of rising injustice, nationalism, and xenophobia?

In answer to these questions, we offer a typology centered on empathic concern, differentiating secular/faith-based motivations, and deontological/moral-virtue motivations, with particular behaviors in each of the four resulting categories: the Missionary Type, the Good Samaritan Type, the Do Gooder Type, and the Activist Type. We also suggest four additional self-centered (non-altruistic, or not-other-centered) types (Militant, Crusader, Martyr, and Humanitarian Tourist).

The nuances offered by this typology can help organizations working with migrants and refugees better understand and channel the enthusiasm of their volunteers and better meet the needs of the vulnerable populations they serve. This is especially important at a time when migration is being criminalized and when humanitarian aid is deemed unpatriotic, if not outright illegal. In the face of increased nationalistic and xenophobic messages surrounding migration, we need to articulate the altruistic humanitarian motivations of volunteers in the context of migration aid.

Our typology may also be used to understand altruistic behaviors in other contexts such as disaster relief, community organization and activism, international adoptions, or organ donations to strangers, among others, in which altruistic empathic concern can be an important motivation driving people to act for the well-being of distant others.

Keywords

motivations, empathy, empathic concern, humanitarian action, undocumented migrants, migration

Corresponding Author:

Ricardo Gomez, University of Washington Information School, Seattle, WA 98195, USA.

Email: rgomez@uw.edu

Introduction

With the mountains of Mexico visible in the distance, we are out on a Tuesday afternoon with humanitarian volunteers in the southern Arizona desert. The summer heat has reached its peak. It is hard to walk a mile among the thorny bushes along visible migratory trails as the temperature reaches 115° F (44° C). We are riding with humanitarian volunteers who refill water stations in the desert — their way of helping to prevent more migrants from dying of heat and exhaustion during dangerous clandestine border crossings. These volunteers are ready to provide information, food, and medical assistance if they encounter migrants. But they rarely do. They refill water tanks and replace gallon jugs of water that they hope will help save someone's life.

We repeatedly asked these humanitarian volunteers, "Why do you do this?" A common response included different versions of "I cannot just stand by when people are dying in the desert. I have to do *something*." Although this response likely does not capture the depth and nuance of any one individual's humanitarian motivations, it certainly suggests a desire to alleviate suffering and, in the end, to do *something* to that end, no matter how small.

What motivates people to do something — to go out of their way to alleviate the suffering of people they do not know and will likely never meet? To answer this question, we reviewed the literature on humanitarian action and altruistic motivations and found that this question is only explored partially and in a fragmented fashion. Based on its scattered bits, we propose a framework to help understand the different motivations that drive humanitarian volunteers, such as those we observed and interviewed at the US–Mexico border, to do something in their pursuit to reduce the suffering of others. Such a framework of motivations for humanitarian action is particularly important to understanding why people are taking action to reduce the suffering and deaths of vulnerable migrants amid the polarized discourse about immigration in the United States today.

Unauthorized migration is not a new phenomenon. There are hundreds of people who become unauthorized immigrants each day in the United States: most enter legally and overstay their temporary visas (Warren 2019), and some — a minority — cross the country's southern border without authorization. Crossing the border without authorization used to be easy, largely due to much less border enforcement activity than we see

today, and migrants used to cross back and forth doing seasonal work and returning home to their families (Chomsky 2014; De León 2015). With the rise of nationalism and xenophobia and the criminalization of undocumented migration, families are being separated and children are being held in cages in inhumane conditions, according to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Office of the Inspector General, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), and numerous media reports (Office of Inspector General [DHS] 2019; Rose and Allyn 2019; Stieb 2019; ACLU n.d.). These practices, coupled with stricter policing, surveillance, and the construction of physical walls and fences, have regulated migrants' border-crossing behaviors with two main consequences. First, those who successfully cross the border without authorization tend to remain in the United States, where they settle and find ways to bring their families (Argueta 2016, 28–29), rather than moving back "home" with the ebbs and flows of seasonal work. This tendency to stay contributed to an increase in the number of permanent undocumented migrants living and working in the United States (Chomsky 2014). Second, criminalization of migration and surveillance has moved border crossing to more remote and dangerous regions, resulting in more migrants dying due to exposure to heat, cold, exhaustion, and thirst (Kerwin 2001; Rubio-Goldsmith et al. 2006). The desert along the US–Mexico border is itself being weaponized, used as a tool of what is called "prevention through deterrence" (Slack et al. 2016; Williams 2016; Soto and Martínez 2018). These practices have turned the Arizona desert into a killing field (De León 2015).

The displacement of unauthorized border crossing to more remote regions has rekindled a movement of humanitarian response seeking to alleviate the humanitarian crisis of death and suffering related to unauthorized migration. A growing movement of local and grassroots initiatives have sprouted along the US–Mexico border to prevent more migrant deaths in the desert. European equivalents have emerged in the waters and beaches of Greece and Italy to prevent more migrant deaths in the Mediterranean. There are growing numbers of grassroots humanitarian responses, or instances of "volunteer humanitarianism" (Sandri 2018), led by citizens driven to *do something* or *do the right thing* in the face of the humanitarian crisis resulting from large-scale human migration. Humanitarian aid "seeks to save lives and alleviate suffering of a crisis-affected

population. Humanitarian assistance must be provided in accordance with the basic humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality and neutrality, as stated in General Assembly Resolution 46/182” (ReliefWeb 2008, 29). These efforts are frequently not led by large and established humanitarian organizations, but by groups of volunteers, students, retirees, activists, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and churches, synagogues, and other faith-based organizations; they represent the definition of humanitarian volunteers: “people who offer their time, energy and expertise to help those in need without expecting any kind of benefit in return, be that financial, material, or otherwise” (Komenská 2017, 46).

In the face of preventable suffering and death, humanitarian volunteers, like those we interviewed in southern Arizona, are called to action. Volunteer humanitarianism in the context of migration can be seen as an expression of empathic concern, a powerful example of “empathy-induced altruistic motivation” (Batson, Lishner, and Stocks 2015). Given the profound inhumanity of current migration policies, the ground zero of “doing the right thing” is to prevent unauthorized migrants from dying in the desert. These humanitarian actions offer a common bond of humanity based on altruism rather than egoism: efforts are not in self-interest, but for the welfare of others.

If empathy is “the moral glue that holds civil society together” (Calloway-Thomas 2010, 7), how is empathy contributing to the resurgence of volunteer humanitarianism in the context of unauthorized migration? Are these humanitarian volunteers politically motivated, driven by moral outrage, or fueled by compassion?

In this article, we present a review of related literature to help understand altruism as a motivation for humanitarian action. Based on this review, we developed a framework to help understand such motivations, and we used this framework to examine the motivations of 20 humanitarian activists (mostly volunteers) working to reduce the suffering and deaths of undocumented migrants near the US–Mexico border. The proposed framework helps to explain what drives humanitarian volunteers to go out of their way to help others, with little material benefit — and often additional discomfort and risk — to themselves.

In the remainder of the article, we present a brief overview of the literature related to humanitarian action and humanitarian motivations, and then suggest a typology

of empathy-based humanitarian motivations in the context of unauthorized migration. Next, we discuss the motivations of humanitarian volunteers we interviewed at the US–Mexico border, using the proposed framework for humanitarian motivations as a lens for the analysis. As with any typology, the distinctions we propose are conceptually useful, but individual experiences are far more complex and easily cross the boundaries from one type of motivation to another.

Humanitarian Action and Its Motivations

Early use of the term *humanitarian* coincided with the growth of the antislavery movement, which is often considered one of the first instances of humanitarianism (Laqua 2014). World War II saw the emergence of humanitarian action directed at alleviating the suffering and averting the slaughter of Jews (e.g., people hiding Jewish families in their homes), which was sometimes “followed up by denouncing government laws and action” in an effort to become “the conscience of the community” (Hassing 2014, 274). After World War II, humanitarian organizations became more visible. These organizations tended to see themselves outside of politics, providing impartial relief to those in danger: “Their operations were frequently staffed by individuals with little or no experience, who jumped into the fray believing that all they needed was a can-do attitude and good intentions” (Barnett 2005, 725).

After the end of the Cold War, humanitarianism became increasingly institutionalized and professionalized (Suski 2012). After 1990, rather than simply providing relief, humanitarian agencies sought to work with states to eliminate the underlying causes of conflict (Barnett 2005). They gained recognition and attracted large numbers of donors, who in turn demanded that the agencies show accountability and effectiveness; this gave humanitarian organizations more legitimacy, and led them to adopt professional codes of conduct for intervention, instruments for measuring impact, and specialized training and career paths for their professional staff (Barnett 2005). Nonetheless, there are still many small, volunteer-led humanitarian organizations. We focus on the motivations of humanitarian volunteers working to alleviate pain and suffering of migrants, operating outside of large, established, professional humanitarian organizations.

Humanitarian Motivations: The Role of Empathy and Compassion

The question of what motivates someone to engage in humanitarian action has been studied in various disciplines, although we find no useful and operational typology of such motivations. “One of the challenges . . . of the literature on the relationship between knowledge of humanitarian suffering and the response to that knowledge, is that it spans several disciplinary fields such as experimental psychology, social psychology, moral philosophy, sociology, political science, media and cultural studies, and linguistics” (Orgad and Seu 2014, 9). Terms such as *empathy*, *sympathy*, *compassion*, and *pity* are frequently used in discussions of humanitarian motivations. Suski suggests that even though humanitarianism is an ambiguous concept, it applies to a variety of social actors, including individuals, organizations, and states; humanitarianism ranges “from those who donate to international charities, to those who intervene on the part of states to end human rights abuses, and even sometimes to those who show humane feelings towards animals” (Suski 2012, 124–25). Others see humanitarianism as “an ideology, a movement and a profession,” all of which share “the broad commitment to alleviating the suffering and protecting the lives of civilians caught up in conflict or crisis” (Donini 2010, s220).

Käpylä and Kennedy offer a narrower definition of humanitarianism that focuses on relieving “the suffering of distant strangers” (Käpylä and Kennedy 2014, 257). Building on the notion of humanitarianism as concerned with distant others, Jansen (2017) also seeks to understand why people feel compelled to help strangers. Jansen suggests that solidarity and bonding can occur even when humanitarian actors do not live in the same place as those they wish to help because of a “moral sensibility to the essential precarity of human life; to the given that we are always ‘already, and from the start, dependent on a world of others’ and therefore have to ‘preserve the lives of those . . . we do not know, and did not choose’” (Butler 2015, 108, 121, in Jansen 2017, 60). As we shall see, the notion of community of humanity and of distance (“distant strangers” for Käpylä and Kennedy [2014] or “distant others” for Laqua [2014]) is of particular importance to humanitarian volunteers working to alleviate suffering of migrants at the US–Mexico border. Most of the humanitarian volunteers leave water in the desert but never encounter any of the migrants they

intend to help. Volunteers find traces of the migrants in the empty water bottles (and other abandoned items), and evidence of their help in the reduction in the number of documented deaths in the desert.

Compassion and empathy are central drivers of many discussions of humanitarian motivation. Calloway-Thomas suggests a definition of empathy that is helpful to understanding it as a motivating force: *empathy* is “the ability ‘imaginatively’ to enter into and participate in the world of the cultural Other cognitively, affectively, and behaviorally” (Calloway-Thomas 2010, 8). Laqua maintains that while religious reasons may have driven some, just as secular ideas about solidarity may have motivated others, regardless “of whether support actions were religiously, ethically or politically inspired, we can trace their underlying commonalities. . . . [H]umanitarian actions created ‘networks of concern’ that allow us to trace the ‘boundaries of compassion’” (Laqua 2014, 180–81). A “feminist ethics of care” is expressed by a group of women volunteers known as Las Patronas, who have fed thousands of migrants from Central America along Mexican train lines during the past two decades (Montes and Paris Pombo 2019).

A central concept to understanding empathy as motivation for humanitarian action is empathic concern, or, in the words of Daniel Batson, “empathy-induced altruism” (Batson et al. 2002, 2016; Batson 2013). Altruistic motivations are important because they are centered on the needs of the *other* as opposed to the *self*; their ultimate goal is to increase the welfare of the *other*. Building on the notion of empathic concern, Batson suggests the empathy–altruism hypothesis (Batson, Lishner, and Stocks 2015): that is, empathic concern felt for a person in need produces altruistic motivation to relieve that need. Empathic concern requires (1) the perception that another person is in need, and (2) that there is intrinsic value in the other person’s welfare.

The idea of truly altruistic behavior, acting with the goal of benefiting another, rather than universal egoism as a driver is at the center of our understanding of motivations for humanitarian volunteers. Nonetheless, a singular focus on empathic concern is not enough to understand the variety and diversity of motivations. There are few discussions of the different types of motivations for humanitarian action, which is part of the reason we propose a tentative typology of humanitarian motivations, to enable deeper understanding of the motivations behind humanitarian actors working to alleviate the suffering of

migrants. Donini (2010) speculates that motivations for humanitarian action vary widely, from personal reasons such as craving a life of adventure, and ethical reasons such as desiring to promote human rights and effect meaningful change, to religious reasons. Komenská (2017) goes deeper in pointing out that the immense challenges of working in the field mean that the primary motivation of humanitarian actors cannot be career gain. Instead, she suggests that “we need to look at the moral sphere of those involved in humanitarian action and their willingness to do ‘good.’ . . . Moral motivation is of particular importance . . . as other sources of motivation are difficult to identify or sustain during humanitarian work” (Komenská 2017, 147–51).

In a tentative (although incomplete) typology, Komenská suggests three moral motivations for humanitarian action: (1) *proximity* (or convenience): “a strong emotional bond to the community and the affected place,” which may instill in some humanitarian actors an instinct to protect it. According to Komenská, this is frequently the most limited motivation, based on local emotion and generation of empathy (although it is antithetical to the motivations behind much “volunteer tourism”). (2) *Popular ethics* (or virtue ethics), which reflects a recent trend to search for direct experience and empathy with the suffering and vulnerable as a way to obtain, preserve, or increase social status. This type of motivation has given a popular face to humanitarianism as a fashionable activity, a vacation activity, or something people actually pay to do, with its resulting social media presence and promotion (some call it “humanitarian tourism,” “selfie humanitarianism” [Freedman 2018], or “volunteer tourism” [Mostafanezhad 2014]). This type of popular ethics as a motivation may be more self-centered than altruistic, and it can frequently cause additional problems when volunteers get in the way or are not prepared to confront the hard choices and frequently invisible work on the ground. (3) *Axiological preferences* of the moral agent (or “moral law” of categorical imperatives [secular] or commandments [faith-based]): Komenská argues that both religious belief and political ideology are drivers for humanitarian engagement. “These volunteers see their motivation as value-based; it is based on values such as humanity, caring, altruism, democracy, empathy, and solidarity, which are then articulated in moral laws (e.g., categorical imperatives, commandments, etc.) and understood as the person’s moral duty” (Komenská

2017, 150). These three moral motivations are a useful starting point, but among other limitations, they mix self-centered and other-centered (altruistic) motivations, and they mix secular and religious motivations, all grouped together as “value-based.” Even though they draw from shared “boundaries of compassion,” faith-based and secular motivations may be different.

Wilson and Brown argue that “rigorous distinction between secular and religious humanitarianism often breaks down empirically” (Wilson and Brown 2009, 1), and that humanitarian action is inherently political: “while humanitarianism is clearly political in its implications of solidarity . . . it is also an ethos embedded in civil society, one that drives secular and religious social and cultural movements, not just legal and political institutions” (ibid., 2). The political or apolitical nature of humanitarian action has been strongly debated. While for some humanitarian action is outside politics, concerned only with alleviating human suffering, for others it is a political act. Freedman (2018) insists that claims for humanitarian action as apolitical are not morally sustainable:

[T]his neutral and apolitical approach is no longer morally sustainable in a situation in which European [and American] governments could — and should — be held responsible for the way in which their actions (and non-action) have dramatically exacerbated the dangers and insecurity faced by refugees, leading in some cases to the death of refugees. . . . The problem is not the apolitical nature of volunteer humanitarianism, but the way in which it masks the responsibility of political authorities and systems, which have created and maintained this situation of ‘crisis.’ (Freedman 2018, 108)

Similarly, Mostafanezhad argues that volunteer tourism contributes to an “anti-politics of international humanitarianism” (Mostafanezhad 2014, 116), in an attempt to depoliticize humanitarian action: “the popular humanitarian gaze as a geopolitical assemblage discourages the volunteer tourist from examining how her or his everyday life is intertwined in the reality of struggle and poverty of the communities that he or she seeks to benefit” (ibid., 117).

Typology of Motivations in Humanitarian Volunteer Action

Building on the literature discussed above, we suggest a typology of motivations for humanitarian action that is

centered on empathic concern — that is, it is other-centered rather than self-centered. In other words, it is driven by altruism rather than egoism. The typology distinguishes between different kinds of drivers along two axes: a *secular/faith-based axis* (the motivation is primarily secular or primarily religious) and a *moral-virtue/deontology axis* (the motivation is primarily driven by an ethics of moral virtue [virtue ethics] or by deontology [rules or principles-based ethics]). The resulting typology includes four roles embodying the types of motivations that serve as primary drivers for humanitarian engagement by volunteers. As with any typology, the lines that separate one type from another are less sharply drawn in practice than they appear on paper, but they are useful and indicative of trends and relationships. For each type of motivation, we suggest a descriptive label, a relative position in the secular/faith-based and moral-virtue/deontology axes, and a brief description. The proposed typology is summarized in Figure 1 and explained in the following sections.

Empathic Concern as a Driver for Altruistic Humanitarian Motivations

At the center of the typology is the notion of empathic concern, or empathy-induced altruism as a common driver for humanitarian volunteers. Empathy requires the capacity to perceive that another person is in need, and that there is intrinsic value in protecting that other person's well-being. Empathic concern is altruistic or *other-centered*, rather than egoistic or self-centered. Humanitarian volunteers engage in their humanitarian action to benefit the other, not themselves.

Do Gooder: Motivated to “do something” to reduce suffering, although sometimes unclear about what actions may be most impactful or what is causing the suffering in the first place. This type of motivation is mostly secular, and mostly informed by moral virtue and doing the right thing.

Good Samaritan: Motivated to carry out pious service and follow religious teachings in help of the other. See Luke 10:25–37 for the parable of the Good Samaritan that inspires this label, as well as the names of two of the humanitarian organizations discussed below. In the parable, Jesus favors good deeds and mercy over ethnicity and religion — in fact, he chooses an outsider: “it is the foreigner, the schismatic, the Samaritan — maybe the rough equivalent of today's Mexican unauthorized immigrant or Syrian refugee” (Kerwin 2016, 1). This type of motivation is

mostly faith-based (following Scripture or vocation), and mostly informed by moral virtue and doing the right thing.

Activist: Motivated to protect human rights, protest abuses, and promote social justice; frequently guided by a progressive political ideology and plan of action. This type of motivation is mostly secular and mostly informed by deontology (categorical imperative, rules).

Missionary: Motivated to protect the sanctity of human life, guided by core religious principles such as the Ten Commandments. This type of motivation is mostly faith-based and mostly informed by deontology (categorical imperative of the Ten Commandments or similar moral principles).

When humanitarian volunteers are acting out of self-centered motivations rather than empathic concern, the typology of motivations is transformed, based on the same axes of secular/faith-based and moral virtue/deontology. Also, in this case, we suggest descriptive labels: Humanitarian Tourist, Martyr, Militant, and Crusader. They are summarized in Figure 2.

The most salient difference between the two proposed typologies, like two sides of a coin, is the altruistic versus self-centered motivation for humanitarian action. In both cases, humanitarian volunteers can be driven by secular or faith-based motivations, and by moral virtue or deontology (rules). But when altruistic empathic concern is the driving force, the humanitarian motivation is truly other-centered rather than self-centered, regardless of whether it is secular or faith-based, or whether driven by moral virtue or deontology. For example, there is a certain symmetry between the Militant type (self-centered) and Activist type (other-centered), because they are both secular and deontological, just as much as there can be a symmetry between the Good Samaritan type and Martyr type, both of which are faith-based and draw from the ethics of moral virtue. There are similarities between the faith-based deontology of the Missionary type and Crusader type, even though the former is more clearly anchored in altruistic empathic concern and the latter in more self-centered motivations. Finally, it is self-centered rather than other-centered motivations that distinguish the secular, moral virtue of the Humanitarian Tourist type from the Do Gooder type. Nonetheless, we recognize that the boundaries between these boxes (and the two typologies) are fuzzier and more porous than their illustrations imply; the two sides of

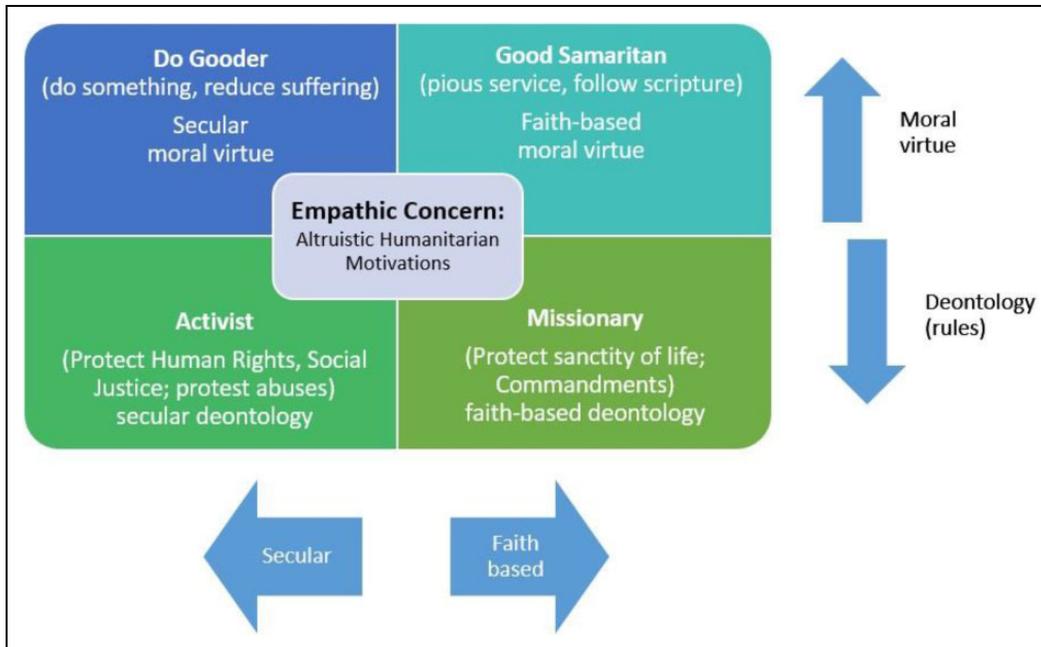


Figure 1. Empathic concern: Typology of altruistic humanitarian motivations.

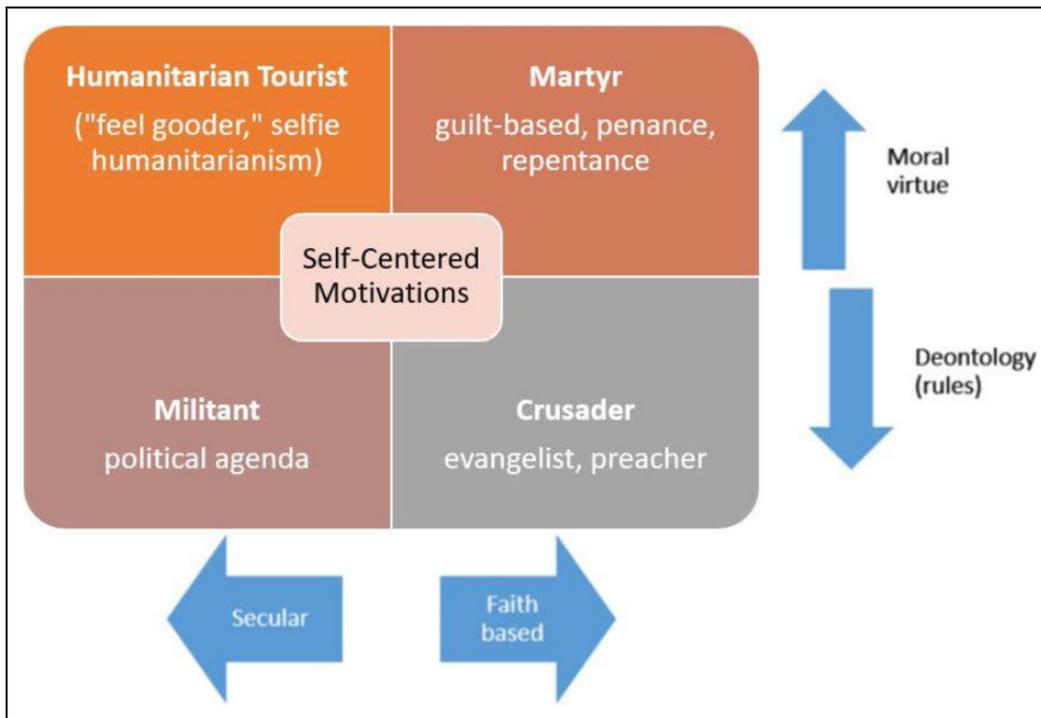


Figure 2. Typology of self-centered motivations.

the typology (self-centered and other-centered) can sometimes coexist, and individual people can experience and express motivations that mix and match among the different types proposed here.

Using these typologies of humanitarian motivations, in the next section, we examine the experiences of humanitarian volunteers working at the US–Mexico border in and around Tucson, Arizona.

Humanitarian Organizations at the US–Mexico Border

The US Border Patrol’s Tucson (Arizona) Sector covers about 260 miles (418 km) of the US–Mexico border. According to US Customs and Border Protection official statistics, 16,748 migrants were detained in the Tucson sector in fiscal year (FY)2019; this is about half the number of detentions in El Paso (26,593) or San Diego (34,745), and a third of those in Laredo (47,915), for a total of 126,001 in FY2019 (US Customs and Border Protection 2019). Eighty-two were found dead in the desert in the first six months of 2018 in the Tucson sector alone (tucson.samaritans.org) — about one every two days — and about 3,000 have died in the desert since 1999 (humaneborders.org). The desert is used as part of the “prevention through deterrence” immigration policy of the United States (De León 2015).

In July 2018, we conducted 20 interviews and spoke informally to many more staff and volunteers of four humanitarian organizations working in the Tucson sector of Arizona: Humane Borders, Tucson Samaritans, Green Valley-Sahuarita Samaritans, and No More Deaths.¹ Most of the people with whom we spoke were retired professionals with successful careers behind

them. They moved to Arizona, or chose to stay there, because they love the location: the desert is incredibly beautiful, and the Tucson area can be a relatively inexpensive place to live. Most of the people we talked to started volunteering when they arrived in the region or when they retired from full-time employment, mostly after 2000. Many volunteer with, or have been part of, more than one local humanitarian organization, combining volunteering with activities that fit their lifestyle and possibilities. They all seem to know and respect one another, even though they have differences in activities and approaches. They were all very generous with their time and resources, taking us with them on water runs to the desert and meeting us at their homes or places of work.

All volunteers with whom we spoke were focused, in one way or another, on preventing more migrant deaths from dehydration and exposure in the Sonoran Desert of Arizona. They leave water caches (whether in the form of gallon jugs or large tanks) in various locations along the migrant trails, or they search for migrants in distress and offer them humanitarian assistance in the form of water, food, medical care, and information.

Most of their work is concentrated in a narrow strip of desert 40 miles (64 km) wide and 60 miles (97 km) deep along the border in Pima County. This strip of desert

¹No More Deaths is a humanitarian organization initiated as a coalition of community and faith groups also related to the Presbyterian Church, today working more closely with the Unitarian Universalist Church of Tucson. Volunteers tend to be younger and more activist than the mostly older, retired volunteers with Humane Borders and the Samaritans. They frequently hike longer distances carrying water, and they have had a medical camp set up on private land in the desert to provide medical assistance to migrants in need. We held only informal conversations with volunteers with No More Deaths as part of this study.

Humane Borders is a faith-based humanitarian organization started around 2000 to offer water and other humanitarian aid to migrants in the desert. Volunteers with Humane Borders emphasize that their work is done “within the legal system”: they communicate regularly with both the Border Patrol and the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner about their activities, and they have permits for each of the 38 water stations they maintain in the desert, on either public or private land. Each water station is marked with a tall post topped by a blue flag that can be seen from far away in the desert, and the tanks are clearly identified with their logo and a portrait of the Virgin. Water stations are stationary and need to be accessible by road, because they consist of 55-gallon blue plastic barrels filled with water that is regularly checked and refilled from a specially conditioned truck. Humane Borders seeks permits to set their water stations in strategic locations based

on reports of deaths — which they carefully map — by the Pima County medical examiner.

Tucson Samaritans and Green Valley-Sahuarita Samaritans are two related humanitarian organizations providing aid to migrants in the Tucson sector of Arizona. They originated in the Southside Presbyterian Church, memorable for its progressive actions since its creation in 1906 and for the central role of its minister, John Fife, in creating the Sanctuary movement in the 1980s (Carney et al. 2017). Both organizations are dedicated to dropping water in the desert and searching for migrants in need of help. They operate in roughly the same region as Humane Borders, but in a different way: they leave a few one-gallon water containers at strategic locations along known migrant trails, which they have plotted with GPS onto topographic maps. Their water stations tend to be away from the roads and require walking on the trails. They can also change frequently, adapting to the changing patterns of use in the desert. In addition to providing water, Samaritans track and frequently collect empty water containers and other items left behind by migrants. Like Humane Borders volunteers, Samaritans may offer food, water, or first aid to migrants if they encounter them in the desert, but they do not offer transportation or phone calls, and will call Border Patrol if someone is in serious need of medical attention.

where water is left by humanitarian organizations is sandwiched around the Tohono O'odham Indian Reservation and the Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, neither of which allows humanitarian organizations to leave water on their land. According to information provided by the Pima County medical examiner and analyzed by Humane Borders, the number of deaths is lower in the strip of desert where humanitarian organizations leave water than in the other areas where they do not, and fewer deaths are recorded north of their water stations or routes, which makes humanitarian organizations confident that their *water stations help to prevent deaths in the desert* (Humane Borders n.d.).

Why Humanitarian Volunteers Want to Help Others

We wanted to understand why people want to spend their time volunteering to offer humanitarian aid to migrants they may never personally encounter in the desert. They leave water and hope it saves someone's life. They all want to do something to alleviate the suffering of others.

The Missionary Type

All the humanitarian organizations we interacted with were founded as faith-based initiatives, with primarily Christian roots. For some volunteers, their actions were clearly driven by their religious core principles. For example, Sister Marta (all names changed), a nun working at El Comedor, is anchored in her vocation as a nun, which provides the foundation for her motivations to do her humanitarian work:

In the first place, it is a life option for me as a religious nun, a woman consecrated to the mission of the Eucharist, it is part of our projects that we have in our congregation. But I think what moves us is the solidarity and affection for people, and that we want them to have a different life, with more dignity. . . . [E]ver since I joined the congregation, I liked helping those in need . . . the most vulnerable. And I am motivated by Pope Francis as well, all his theology, and everything he has done. I believe it is a space of the religious life, where we have to be, we have to answer this great mission we have, of commitment, of service, of love for all people. (Marta, El Comedor)

This type of faith-based vocation based on the rules of religious life (the **Missionary** type, in our proposed typology, in whom faith is combined with deontology

as the driving force) was relatively rare among our interviewees.

The Good Samaritan Type

While the founders of the humanitarian organizations, and some of their key religious leaders, certainly fit into the Missionary type, the volunteers doing the day-to-day work include a broader variety of (lay) people who better fit the **Good Samaritan** type (two of the organizations we interacted with, the Tucson Samaritans and Green Valley-Sahuarita Samaritans, originated as faith-based humanitarian organizations and feature "Samaritan" as part of their name; nonetheless, as we shall see, not all their volunteers are motivated by faith). About half the people with whom we spoke indicated that their motivation to help others was rooted in a secular shared sense of humanity. They still draw inspiration from their faith, but are more focused on service and "doing good" by helping those in need, reflecting what we have called the **Good Samaritan** type (faith-based, moral-virtue motivations). For example, Natalie told us about how she started volunteering with Tucson Samaritans:

I heard a little bit about it before, I thought that would be a good thing to do, you know? A lot of people are doing that, and I had a former pastor of mine suggest that we all do it as a group. (Natalie, Tucson Samaritans)

The importance of faith was minimized by the majority of the volunteers with whom we spoke. In fact, some recognized that even though their organization was founded by clergy and that might have been the original source of inspiration, faith was not a requirement to participate in the humanitarian action.

The Do Gooder Type

For Jack, the important glue bringing volunteers together was "wanting to do the right thing in life" regardless of whether it is secular or faith-based (or whether both are combined, their distinction becoming irrelevant). Other volunteers expressed a secular, non-faith-based motivation of their humanitarian work. For some the drive was doing one of many small things that added up to doing something bigger, while for others it was doing something to save someone's life or promote social justice. They represent the **Do Gooder** type (with secular, moral-virtue motivations). This type is exemplified by two volunteers who drove us around to bring water to

a station. They spoke of “a lot of little reasons, there’s no one big reason.” They talked about how they could not sit by idly while people were dying in the desert, and they wanted to do something. “What we’re doing is nothing heroic. It’s one small part to a larger enterprise,” they pointed out. In some cases, we perceive seepage of self-centered motivations in the Do Gooder, which makes them closer to the “feel-good” drive of the Humanitarian Tourist. For example, Bryan coupled his urge to help those in need with his own need:

[A]nd it’s an adventure of course, because I’m a guy who loves to go out to the desert any time I can, I do a lot of hiking, I love to do orienteering, I mean, this is orienteering applied, trying to find all these different sites. (Bryan, Tucson Samaritans)

As such, the Do Gooder might be motivated to use their skill, talent, or passion to serve others.

The Activist Type

For another group of volunteers, the drive to do the humanitarian work and the urge to do something to prevent deaths in the desert were inspired by migrants’ inherent right to life. “This is a person’s life, this is a person’s life!” says Shirley (Green Valley Samaritans), pointing to the artifacts she found during some of her countless trips to the desert. This insistence on the inherent worth of a person’s life invokes the idea of protecting human rights and promoting social justice, in what we have called the **Activist** type (motivated by a secular deontology). Bryan describes his frustration with the difficulty of even counting the number of deaths:

The number of deaths per year is the motivating factor for me, if you wanted to pick out one number, one, I heard 241 died out here last year, the Border Patrol said it was 65, you know everybody has a different number, so I don’t know what the number is, but it’s too many, and it’s never published in the *New York Times*, it’s never published in the local paper, I’ve never seen the number, but people are dying out here every day, especially in this kind of weather, I can imagine, and that’s probably the motivating thing for me, it’s to prevent deaths if we can . . . even one. (Bryan, Tucson Samaritans)

Similarly, Luisa at El Comedor insisted that “migrants deserve to be treated humanely, not the way they are being treated by the government today;

especially those with children,” while Susan, from Humane Borders, argued that migrants “are fellow human beings and so we have a responsibility to help them.” Bryan, from Tucson Samaritans, pointed out that the water stations may not be enough humanitarian action for more politically active volunteers, who choose to work elsewhere.

Bryan’s statement points to the existence of more Activist-type volunteers whose activities go beyond leaving water and aid in the desert. They are pursuing a more political agenda of protecting human rights, protesting abuses, and promoting social justice. One example is those who participate as observers of Operation Streamline, the “courtroom spectacle” (Blewer 2015) of immigration hearings in the Federal Immigration Courthouse in Tucson that result in the rapid removal of many migrants. Volunteers who observe Operation Streamline sit and watch, bearing witness and hoping that the proceedings are less egregious and the detainees feel less lonely because of their presence in the courtroom. Some volunteers participate in protest events, communicate with legislators, and write for their organizational newsletters or other media outlets.

Blurred Boundaries and Shifting Motivations

As we saw with the case of Jack, above, the distinction between faith-based and secular motivations was sometimes blurry. Others talked about how age plays a role in their motivations, which have sometimes shifted throughout time.

Cameron described himself as a retiree who was looking to do something other than watch television, and at the same time helping others so they do not die in the desert. In our conversation, he insisted that his motivations were not religious but secular. Nonetheless, he later revealed he is a retired chaplain. Faith has been an important driver all his life, but he chose to minimize that aspect of his motivation while talking about the experience of being a humanitarian volunteer.

Similarly, Bryan (Humane Borders) talked about how the younger volunteers who tend to go to No More Deaths are “like a peace corps, they’re that kind of mentality, they’re aggressive, politically active, risk takers, they’re in court a lot”; while older volunteers like him are more passive and subdued. Ernest (Tucson Samaritans) pointed out that younger volunteers (with No More Deaths) tend to do long hikes and climb mountains,

while older volunteers do not like sleeping on the ground and like having a bathroom nearby. At the same time, younger volunteers are sometimes more willing to embrace technologies such as Global Positioning System (GPS) and online tools than the older generation of volunteers, although this is not always the case.

These examples confirm that while our typology of motivations is useful to understand the phenomenon of empathic concern as a driver of humanitarian action, the boundaries between the different types of motivations are fuzzier than the illustration implies, and their distinctions sometimes fail to hold up to the rich experience of individuals.

Conclusions

We suggest that the framework described in this article can help us better understand what drives people to do something to alleviate the suffering of distant (and sometimes not-so-distant) others. This is of particular importance in the current context of polarization in the discourse, policy, and practices related to migration, in which vulnerable migrants are dying or being abused by authorities, and humanitarian volunteers are going out of their way to do something in the face of inhumane treatment and unnecessary suffering of others. Our proposed framework differentiates faith-based and secular motivations, as well as moral-virtue and rules-based (deontology) motivations, suggesting a typology of altruistic and egoist humanitarian motivations. The experiences of the humanitarian volunteers who we interviewed — those who maintain water stations in the desert at the US–Mexico border in the hope of alleviating the suffering and preventing the deaths of asylum seekers and undocumented migrants crossing the border in Arizona — can be better understood in the light of this typology.

The Do Gooder type (secular, moral virtue) is driven to do “the right thing” to reduce the suffering of migrants and asylum seekers. Even if it is only a small thing, they reason, small things add up when combined with other people’s actions. The Good Samaritan type (faith-based, moral virtue) is driven to “help my brothers and sisters” who are suffering in the desert because helping those in need is a Christian/Jewish/Muslim/Buddhist thing to do. The Activist type (secular, deontology) is driven by the need to protect human rights and promote social justice, and recognizes in every migrant a human

being who deserves full rights and protection. Finally, the Missionary type (faith-based, deontology) is driven to protect the sanctity of life, guided by religious laws such as the Ten Commandments or other moral principles; volunteering to help migrants is part of the mandate of a religious life or vocation.

Although the motivations of some might fit cleanly within one category, any one person’s humanitarian motivations likely extend among these categorical boundaries, and their motivations undoubtedly change throughout time. Although not intended to prescribe or predict behaviors and acknowledging the limitations of typology, the proposed framework may be used to help understand the motivations for other types of altruistic behaviors such as humanitarian action in disaster-relief operations, organ donations, international adoptions, or international development, in which altruistic deeds — acts of generosity, kindness, and compassion — are not motivated by the desire for personal gain but to achieve the good of others. The proposed framework helps us to understand the motivations driving humanitarian volunteers who leave water for migrants on the trails of the Arizona desert. As discussed by Calloway-Thomas (2010), empathic concern stems from the ability to enter into, understand, and participate in the world of the Other. Recognizing their humanity and putting a human face on migrants help to drive the empathic response of humanitarian volunteers.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

- ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union). n.d. “Immigration Detention Conditions.” <https://www.aclu.org/issues/immigrants-rights/immigrants-rights-and-detention/immigration-detention-conditions>.
- Argueta, Carla N. 2016. *Border Security: Immigration Enforcement Between Ports of Entry*. Washington, DC: Congressional Research Services. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/homesecc/R42138.pdf>.

- Barnett, Michael. 2005. "Humanitarianism Transformed." *Perspectives on Politics* 3(04):723–40. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592705050401>.
- Batson, C. Daniel. 2013. "Of Empathy-Induced Altruism." *Social Psychology and Economics*, 281.
- Batson, C. Daniel, Nadia Ahmad, David A. Lishner, and J. Tsang. 2016. "Empathy and Altruism." In *Oxford Handbook of Hypo-Egoic Phenomena: Theory and Research on the Quiet Ego*, edited by Kirk Brown, and Mark R. Leary (pp. 161–74). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Batson, C. Daniel, Johee Chang, Ryan Orr, and Jennifer Rowland. 2002. "Empathy, Attitudes, and Action: Can Feeling for a Member of a Stigmatized Group Motivate One to Help the Group?" *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 28(12):1656–66. <https://doi.org/10.1177/014616702237647>.
- Batson, C. Daniel, David A. Lishner, and Eric L. Stocks. 2015. "The Empathy–Altruism Hypothesis." In *The Oxford Handbook of Prosocial Behavior*, edited by David Schroeder, and William Graziano (pp. 259–68). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Blewer, Robyn. 2015. "The Court as Spectacle — The Prosecution Project," Research Brief 15. The Prosecution Project. <https://prosecutionproject.griffith.edu.au/the-court-as-spectacle/>.
- Calloway-Thomas, Carolyn. 2010. *Empathy in the Global World: An Intercultural Perspective*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage.
- Carney, Megan, Ricardo Gomez, Katharyne Mitchell, and Sara Vannini. 2017. "Sanctuary Planet: A Global Sanctuary Movement for the Time of Trump." *Society & Space*, May. <http://societyandspace.org/2017/05/16/sanctuary-planet-a-global-sanctuary-movement-for-the-time-of-trump/>.
- Chomsky, Aviva. 2014. *Undocumented: How Immigration Became Illegal*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- De León, Jason. 2015. *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail*, vol. 36. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Donini, Antonio. 2010. "The Far Side: The Meta Functions of Humanitarianism in a Globalised World." *Disasters* 34(April):S220–37. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7717.2010.01155.x>.
- Freedman, Jane. 2018. "Amateur Humanitarianism, Social Solidarity and 'Volunteer Tourism' in the EU Refugee 'Crisis.'" In *Humanitarian Action and Ethics*, edited by Ayesha Ahmad, and James Smith (pp. 94–111). London: Zed Books.
- Hassing Arne. 2014. *Church Resistance to Nazism in Norway, 1940–1945*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Humane Borders. n.d. "Humane Borders Water Stations Sonoran Desert." <https://humaneborders.org>.
- Jansen, Annette. 2017. "We the People, or We Humanity? Bonding as a Global Community." *Etnofoor* 29(2):59–82.
- Käpylä, Juha, and Denis Kennedy. 2014. "Cruel to Care? Investigating the Governance of Compassion in the Humanitarian Imaginary." *International Theory* 6(2):255–92. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752971914000025>.
- Kerwin, Donald. 2001. "Chaos on the US-Mexico Border: A Report on the Migrant Crossing Deaths, Immigrant Families, and Subsistence-Level Laborers," CLINIC "At Risk Immigrants" Report series. Washington DC: Catholic Legal Immigration Network. <https://doi.org/10.14240/atriskreport5>.
- . 2016. "A Faith-Based Reflection on the Global Crisis in Refugee Protection," address delivered at Furman University, South Carolina. <https://cmsny.org/publications/kerwin-a-faith-based-reflection-on-the-global-crisis-in-refugee-protection/>.
- Komenská, Katarína. 2017. "Moral Motivation in Humanitarian Action." *Human Affairs* 27:145–54.
- Laqua, Daniel. 2014. "Inside the Humanitarian Cloud: Causes and Motivations to Help Friends and Strangers." *Journal of Modern European History* 12(2):175–85.
- Montes, Verónica, and María Dolores Paris Pombo. 2019. "Ethics of Care, Emotional Work, and Collective Action of Solidarity: The Patronas in Mexico." *Gender, Place & Culture*, 1–22.
- Mostafanezhad, Mary. 2014. "Volunteer Tourism and the Popular Humanitarian Gaze." *Geoforum* 54:111–18.
- Office of Inspector General (DHS). 2019. "Management Alert — DHS Needs to Address Dangerous Overcrowding and Prolonged Detention of Children and Adults in the Rio Grande Valley," Office of Inspector General no. OIG-19-51. Washington, DC: Department of Homeland Security. https://www.oig.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/assets/2019-07/OIG-19-51-Jul19_.pdf.
- Orgad, Shani, and Irene Bruna Seu. 2014. "The Mediation of Humanitarianism: Toward a Research Framework." *Communication, Culture and Critique* 7(1):6–36. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ccr.12036>.
- ReliefWeb. 2008. "ReliefWeb Glossary of Humanitarian Terms." <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/reliefweb-glossary-humanitarian-terms>.
- Rose, Joel, and Bobby Allyn. 2019. "Scenes of Tearful, Flu-Stricken and Underfed Migrant Kids Emerge in New

- Accounts.” NPR.org, June 27. <https://www.npr.org/2019/06/27/736781192/scenes-of-tearful-flu-stricken-and-underfed-migrant-kids-emerge-in-new-accounts>.
- Rubio-Goldsmith, Raquel, Melissa McCormick, Daniel E. Martinez, and Inez Magdalena Duarte. 2006. “The ‘Funnel Effect’ & Recovered Bodies of Unauthorized Migrants Processed by the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner, 1990–2005.” <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3040107>.
- Sandri, Elisa. 2018. “‘Volunteer Humanitarianism’: Volunteers and Humanitarian Aid in the Jungle Refugee Camp of Calais.” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 44(1):65–80. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1352467>.
- Slack, Jeremy, Daniel E. Martínez, Alison Elizabeth Lee, and Scott Whiteford. 2016. “The Geography of Border Militarization: Violence, Death and Health in Mexico and the United States.” *Journal of Latin American Geography* 15(1):7–32.
- Soto, Gabriella, and Daniel E. Martínez 2018. “The Geography of Migrant Death: Implications for Policy and Forensic Science.” In *Sociopolitics of Migrant Death and Repatriation*, edited by Krysta E. Latham, and Alyson J. O’Daniel (pp. 67–82). New York: Springer.
- Stieb, Matt. 2019. “Everything We Know about the Inhumane Conditions at Migrant Detention Camps.” *New York Intelligencer*, July 2. <http://nymag.com/intelligencer/2019/07/the-inhumane-conditions-at-migrant-detention-camps.html>.
- Suski, Laura. 2012. “Humanitarianism as a Politics of Emotion.” In *Emotions Matter: A Relational Approach to Emotions*, edited by Dale Spencer, Kevin Walby, and Alan Hunt (pp. 124–36). Toronto: University of Toronto Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3138/9781442699274.12>.
- US Customs and Border Protection. 2019. “Southwest Border Inadmissibles by Field Office Fiscal Year 2019.” <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/sw-border-migration/of-sw-border-inadmissibles-fy2019>.
- Warren, Robert. 2019. “US Undocumented Population Continued to Fall from 2016 to 2017 and Visa Overstays Significantly Exceeded Illegal Crossings for the Seventh Consecutive Year.” *Journal on Migration and Human Security* 7(1):19–22. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/2331502419830339>.
- Williams, Jill M. 2016. “The Safety/Security Nexus and the Humanitarianisation of Border Enforcement.” *The Geographical Journal* 182(1):27–37.
- Wilson, Richard, and Richard D. Brown. 2009. *Humanitarianism and Suffering: The Mobilization of Empathy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.