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Abstract

This research project examines the dual liminality experienced by Eritrean asylum-seeking intercultural mediators who are employed as linguistic and cultural translators by the Israeli state and aid organizations serving asylum seekers in Israel. Focusing on these mediators' work and personal lives and the subjective meanings they attach to their professional roles, this article seeks to understand how their work as mediators and knowledge of the language affects the nature of their liminality. It thus provides an opportunity to learn about the challenges and dilemmas these intercultural mediators face and overcome. This qualitative study based on interviews, reveals that asylum-seeking mediators experience dual liminality resulting from their personal and professional legal status. On the one hand, they lack permanent legal status in Israel and belong to a community that is in "legal liminality," and on the other, they provide services linked directly or indirectly to the Israeli authorities and their organizations. Thus, their role places them in an interstitial position between the state, the host society, and those receiving their services. We argue that this dual liminality creates a distinctive and complex reality for the mediators, enabling them to challenge their situational liminality, cope with their legal liminality, and act as agents of change and the voice of their community.

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The number of refugees globally has grown significantly in recent years, and those seeking asylum have increased even more dramatically (IOM, 2019; Kritzman-Amir, 2015; UNHCR, 2019). The relatively new category of "asylum seekers" was rarely used before 2014. Since then, the number of people classified as asylum seekers has grown, and the classification itself has gained legitimacy (IOM, 2019). Its validity allows states to grant asylum seekers temporary immigration status while waiting for a decision to be made regarding their refugee petition. This temporary condition places asylum seekers in a liminal legal category until their final status is determined (Gold, 2019; O'Reilly, 2018; Zetter, 2007).

Asylum seekers are particularly vulnerable due to the circumstances that forced them to emigrate and the traumatic experiences of their journey (Connell, 2012; Williams, 2005). When this study was conducted, between 2018 and 2020, approximately 32,000 asylum seekers lived in Israel. Of these, 71% were originally from Eritrea and 20% from Sudan (Population & Immigration Authority, 2019). Various motives drove asylum seekers and refugees in Israel to leave their native countries: some suffered persecution due to religious, political, or tribal affiliations; many were forcibly conscripted into armies with slave-like conditions; others fled before conscription; while some were persecuted because of their sexual orientation or were victims of domestic violence. Most asylum seekers cannot apply for recognition as refugees, but rather, receive group-based "temporary protection" lacking any entitlement to civil rights or social services and that can be terminated at any time (Kritzman-Amir & Shumacher, 2012). Asylum seekers may live in Israel with residence permit 2A5, under "temporary collective protection," for "asylum seekers." Their civil status is in legal limbo: while neither integrated nor deported, their chances of being granted residence status are practically nil (Gold, 2019; Kritzman-Amir, 2015).

Despite Israel's highly developed tradition and infrastructure of immigration absorption, asylum seekers have not been handled by the official absorption systems, which apply exclusively to integrating Jews and their families, in accordance with the Law of Return (Kritzman-Amir & Shumacher, 2012). To date, few official provisions have been made for asylum seekers.

These newly arrived persons have crossed not only geographic borders, but also linguistic, cultural, and identity borders. Language barriers and communication difficulties exacerbate their vulnerability, making it difficult to obtain public services and undergo the process of requesting asylum. Asylum seekers often face discrimination adversely affecting their labor, housing, and healthcare rights (Gez & Schuster, 2018; Keller et al., 2003; Schuster, 2009; Stavans & Goldzweig, 2008).

In this state of "liminal legality," a space simultaneously controlled and abandoned by the law, asylum seekers experience constant uncertainty, particularly regarding the expiration of their protection against deportation (Sabar & Shir, 2019). The law determining their legal status is ambiguous about their relationship with the state, their access to state services, and their civil, social, and political rights (Barak-Bianco, 2019; Cvajner & Sciortino, 2010; Menjívar, 2006). Because of their ambiguous legal status, asylum seekers are not entitled to health and welfare services, except in extreme circumstances or emergencies; instead, they largely receive social, legal, and health services from nonprofit aid organizations (Kritzman-Amir, 2015) that work intermittently with the government in various social services.

Thus, they also find themselves in a liminal place concerning the health, psychological, social, and economic aspects of their lives (Conlon, 2011; Harrell-Bond & Voutira, 1992; O'Neill, 2010; O'Reilly, 2018). Their temporary legal status creates a space of "liminal legality," where "legal violence," perpetrated against them under state

and legal auspices, permeates their daily lives and private spaces (Barak-Bianco, 2019; Menjívar & Abrego, 2012; Menjívar,2006; O'Reilly, 2018).

This article addresses liminal legality's complexity and its expressions among asylum seekers in Israel who work formally as translators, but in practice, serve as cultural and social mediators. This liminality stemming from their ambivalent legal status places mediators in a legal limbo characterized by transience and uncertainty (Bhabha, 2009; Menjívar, 2006; Sabar & Shir, 2019; Turner, 1967); this compounds their professional liminality, rooted in the tension between working with the host country's professional team while also being asylum seekers lacking permanent status. We argue that mediation is affected by political and social circumstances—transience, marginalization, and the ongoing threat of deportation—that result in dual liminality between their personal lives and professional legal status. Their work as mediators generates an activeness that challenges the passiveness inherent in their legal liminality and extends beyond their defined roles.

Focusing on mediators' significance and the link between their status as asylum seekers and their professional role as intercultural mediators, this paper views mediation as an activity that challenges their liminal status as asylum seekers.

Empirically, asylum-seeking mediators in Israel and their experience of legal limbo have received little attention. Thus, this project contributes to the research and body of knowledge in the field of transnationalism (Boccangi, 2012; Levitt & Khagram, 2007; Levitt & Glick-Schiller,2004; Author, 2018) regarding linguistic access for those lacking permanent status, in Israel and around the world.

Intercultural Mediation Language and Civic Liminality

The liminality of asylum seekers is further reflected in their success in acquiring the local language. Legal liminality, together with their temporariness and uncertainty, daily struggles, marginalization, and tendency to reside in ethnic and linguistic enclaves, makes most asylum seekers indifferent about acquiring the local language. Asylum seekers in Israel do not formally study Hebrew, unlike their counterparts in many European countries. Consequently, they depend upon translators and mediators for daily interactions (Chiswick & Miller, 2005; Mesgena, 2015). Nevertheless, after living in Israel for over a decade, many choose to study Hebrew, despite their uncertainty and Israeli society's refusal to make them feel welcomed. Language acquisition results from an individual and instrumental determination to understand one's rights, feel more secure, make the voice of the community heard, and challenge the receiving state and society's perceptions and actions. Thus, language acquisition challenges certain aspects of the "politics of belonging" (Eisenberg, 2019; Yuval-Davis, 2006) and the passiveness inherent in liminality while also creating control mechanisms and anchors of certainty (Author, 2018). Some motivated asylum seekers in Israel have acquired the language, leveraging this resource to become professional translators and mediators.

Beyond linguistic translation, intercultural mediation involves cultural mediation between a migrant minority and the receiving society, its institutions, and organizations. Mediation is accomplished by mediators and translators whose origins are similar or identical to those of the migrant community and who are versed in its cultural codes and values. Intercultural mediation is, therefore, is a sociopolitical action (Doerr, 2010, 2018; Jakobson, 2000 [1950]; Shemer, 2016; Tribe & Morrissey, 2003). The mediators are tasked by their employer organizations with instilling confidence in

the immigrants and reducing suspicion and distrust. Their mediation also promotes dialogue with immigrant organizations and the state, contributing to the immigrant community's personal and collective wellbeing (Shemer, 2016). Mediators provide asylum seekers lacking the local language with the fundamental ability to speak, and be understood, engendering a degree of certainty within the ambiguity characterizing legal liminality. Mediators develop strategies of self and communal representation from a position of weakness in social power relations and the liminality of their temporary status.

Research has dealt extensively with the psychological aspects of the work mediators and translators perform with torture victims in conflict zones and refugee camps, along migration routes, and in receiving/host countries (Gez & Schuster, 2018; Miller et al., 2005; Schuster & Baixauli-Olmos, 2018; Splevins et al., 2010; Tribe & Morrissey, 2003). Such work profoundly affects the mental wellbeing of mediators, themselves refugees and asylum seekers with personal traumas and lived experiences (Brune et al., 2011; Miller et al., 2005; Splevins et al., 2010; Williams, 2005).

Likewise, much of the research has focused on asylum seekers' interactions, specifically discourse, with authorities in host European countries (Jacobs, M., & Maryns, K. 2021; Maryns, 2015; Määttä, 2015; Pöchhacker & Kolb, 2009). For example, scholars have noted that mediators and interpreters play an important role preparing the written records upon which adjudicators base their decisions regarding asylum seekers (Killman, 2020; Määttä 2015; Pöchhacker & Kolb, 2009). This focus on different aspects of the mediators' agency allows us to recognize "interactional and interpersonal factors" (Inghilleri, 2016) and "structural and institutional constraints" (Inghilleri, 2015; Määttä, 2015) that affect the tasks interpreters and mediators perform.

Exploring these functions and constraints can illuminate the shifting multiple roles assumed by intercultural mediators throughout a given situation (Downie, 2017).

While intercultural mediators have been the subject of many studies, their legal status has rarely been addressed. This article contributes an important perspective, highlighting the challenges of working for authorities while their own status as asylum seekers places them in a liminal category tantamount to legal limbo.

By focusing on the mediators and analyzing their professional practices, the dual liminality of their situation becomes clear. Our analysis concerning this dual liminality's implications when the mediators themselves lack a secure status reveals a critical need for a welfare policy recognizing asylum-seeker mediators' significance.

Method

This project involves fieldwork conducted during 2020, accompanying asylum seekers in their interactions with aid organizations and state institutions, and mapping government ministries, local authorities, and organizations that employ asylum-seeker mediators. This led to approximately 14 semi-structured in-depth interviews with mediators who arrived in Israel from Eritrea between 2007 and 2011. Of 18 asylum seekers identified as regularly-employed interpreters/mediators in Israel, we interviewed 14.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted. The questions dealt with the personal migration journey of the mediators and life without permanent status in Israel. Some of the questions examined the mediators' employment experience and the professional dilemmas of their position, the complexity of the relationship between them, the organizations' representatives and the recipients of the service and the implications of their position on their personal lives.

Interviewees were located and contacted through personal acquaintances and mediated by aid organizations. The purpose of the study was explained and they consented to the use of the interview materials. To maintain their privacy, we emphasized that we would use pseudonyms. Most of the interviews took place in quiet rooms in the organizations and lasted between sixty to ninety minutes. All but three interviews took place in Hebrew. The interviews were recorded and transcribed to identify salient patterns and produce themes, as is customary in qualitative studies.

These mediators work in seven organizations and one local authority in welfare, law, medicine, and mental health. The questions covered their personal immigration history, their lives as nonpermanent residents of Israel, and their work as mediators, including employment history, professional dilemmas, the complex relationships with organizations' staffs and those they provide services to, and the impact on their personal lives. The interviews then underwent a narrative analysis to identify themes and categories. This research also employed a qualitative interpretive approach that views the subjects' reality as a whole rather than in isolated segments. Focusing on what is invisible to the researchers—the unique subjectivity of the interviewees—this approach aims to depict their world through the cultural lens through which they view it and their place in it (Sabar & Shir, 2019).

Results

Mediation on the Ground: Mediation not of the State but Representing the State

Each country takes a different approach to providing linguistic access and intercultural mediation. The language services made available to immigrants depend on structural blocks, political constraints about funding, initiatives to mediate linguistic and cultural barriers, and the state's specific immigration position (Doerr, 2018; Schuster & Baixauli-Olmos, 2018). In Israel, the mediation services available to

asylum seekers are very limited, and nonprofit organizations, not public institutions, are responsible for what is available. We identified eight nonprofit organizations that regularly employ intercultural mediators and discovered that some of these mediators worked for several organizations simultaneously. Furthermore, some of these organizations also engaged volunteer interpreters, while others (particularly daycare and afterschool centers) did not work with mediators at all. The boundary between formal and informal mediation was unclear in these contexts, and it was difficult to quantify the number of interpreters and mediators active in these organizations. After mapping the government ministries and local authorities dealing with large numbers of asylum seekers, we found that of eight relevant ministries, four employ interpreters and mediators via external tenders and interpreting services. Just one local authority employs interpreters directly, and two are aided by nonprofits. The others do not engage mediators. This mapping reveals that intercultural mediation exists in Israel primarily because of the nonprofit sector and formal recognition of this sector's role. In practice, however, mediators are generally perceived as representing the state, although it barely recognizes them.

Mediation Creating an Imagined Civil Status

The central tool employed by mediators is language. The interviews clearly demonstrated language's power to reduce the liminal status of service receivers and providers. The mediators interviewed learned Hebrew independently—on the street, while incarcerated, while working, or through the media. Some knew English before arriving in Israel. A sense of duty toward their fellow community members led those with a command of these languages, and of Tigrinya, Amharic, and Arabic, to volunteer in nonprofit organizations that aid refugees and asylum seekers. Their employment allowed them to learn about the areas in which the organizations were active and

acquire legal, medical, psychiatric, and psychosocial terminology. This knowledge provided a sense of independence, control, and security, transforming them into experts and influenced their perception of status as relayed by Nahum:

> *I learned a lot. About people, rights… I am not afraid; I am not afraid of court. I've been to court; I've been to the police. I don't need an interpreter. I know everything, what to say, I know how to get a restraining order, everything. I go there, and [they] say to me, "You. You're Ethiopian? You're Israeli-Ethiopian!!"*

Rita told us that she works for an organization providing psychosocial aid, where she interpreted and assisted a group of women suffering from domestic violence for about two years. Rita herself also suffered physical and emotional abuse from her husband, but thanks to her Hebrew and her work for the organization, she acquired the knowledge and tools needed to obtain a divorce. She now shares these tools with women she supports outside the organization's framework. Her command of Hebrew and familiarity with her rights are so impressive that public service providers often assume she is an Israeli citizen of Ethiopian origin.

Hagos also described how his identity as a transient asylum seeker is ambiguous when he speaks Hebrew:

> *They [the legal system] cannot tell whether I'm Israeli or Eritrean. Usually, they think I'm Israeli. Usually, they don't expect that someone from the community can come, so you get a little respect… They don't expect that a person who is from the community has this right to work in this [thing].*

Nahum, Rita and Hagos demonstrate how they are perceived as citizens by people in the aid organizations, and especially those in government, due to their

language skills. Their language expertise provides them an "imaginary status," since it is inconceivable that they are not citizens if they interpret for the state and speak fluent Hebrew. Asylum seekers also believe the mediators have been granted permanent residence status and are surprised when they learn otherwise. This misconception creates social hierarchies and internal conflicts. Samhar and Rita:

> *Like the community, I also renew my visa every month… and people are in shock when they see me at the visas […] What am I doing here? I came to renew […] maybe it, maybe I'm a citizen* (Samhar).

> *If they are telling me [things] crying and it's really hard for them, I tell them, "don't go thinking here that I am working here and smiling all the time because I have a good life. I'm like you […]" I tell them I was also like that, you know, getting home to see my children at 9:00, 10:00 pm […] "What?!" They think like I have a wow life […] I'm Eritrean, a refugee like you.*' (Rita)

Acquiring the local language reinforces a sense of control and self-confidence in refugee existence and challenges legal liminality. Mastery of the language enables mediators to help other asylum seekers, and exposes them to professional knowledge about public services and the law and allows them to become "knowledge experts," transmitting that knowledge to members of their community. Proficiency in several languages means, according to the cultural values expressed by Rita, command over and access to a broad store of linguistic and cultural knowledge, transforming the mediator into "five people or three people," someone with significant power stemming from linguistic mastery. Likewise, there is a close correlation between speaking Hebrew and perceptions of these mediators' residency status by organizations and state representatives, and by their own communities. Because of their proficiency in Hebrew,

both groups believe the mediators have permanent residence status. This misperception affects their position as mediators, by attaching an active, sociopolitical significance to their work.

Dynamics of Professional Relations Between the Mediator and Other Actors in the Mediation Process: The Professional Liminality of Mediation

The interviews reveal that mediators experience professional liminality—suspended between aid organization staff and the recipients of their services. This liminality stems from their belonging to two worlds simultaneously: the state in the context of their professional role and their communities as asylum seekers with temporary legal status. Ostensibly, their mediating role is neutral, translating without bias or involvement. In practice, however, the tensions inherent in mediation make that role an active one with unique emotional implications for their personal and professional lives.

Mediators Between Organization Staff and Asylum Seekers: "NGOs and the State Look the Same"

According to the interviews, most asylum seekers perceive nonprofit organizations and the state as one and the same. This perception affects the professional standing of mediators because they are often caught in the middle and are the target of asylum seekers' frustration:

> *Sometimes it's… a problem. People get angry, and begin to insult the social worker. If she says that we cannot get this approved, or we cannot provide things like this, they become aggressive. Then it's difficult for me, also because I know my community, they don't understand about what a nongovernmental*

organization is. We try to explain, but … they still don't understand. They think it [the organization] is the government. (Smart)

These perceptions exacerbate daily struggles, the lack of state recognition, and the limitations of nonprofit organizations' power to challenge mediators and confront them with the intense stress of the asylum seekers. This affects both the translation of the interaction and the dynamics that are formed.

Samhar described the difficulty of being caught in the middle and her sense of responsibility to both sides, making her role as mediator even more complex:

I hear the language first like they are talking and all the anger, and all the disrespect and that they let out, and it's up to me how I get it out to the social worker, … I don't know how much people appreciate what it is be a mediator, it's not easy…it's a lot of responsibility.

Helen recounted that when service recipients express anger at the team, she tries to calm them down and let them explain themselves, even if team members are simultaneously pushing her to explain what is being said:

Why? Because I hear the language first. So, they say tell her this, you understand. You are from my community. Explain to them. They… are Israeli. You have to explain to them… Sometimes they also curse. And then I say, "Think carefully and tell me." But the Israelis [the staff] say to me "what did he say? What did he say?"… I tell her "Wait. I want to talk to him. If he really meant it or not."… I don't want to just translate. But they [the staff] don't have patience. They don't.

Some mediators chose not to translate everything the service receivers throw at them, even if they become targets of frustration:

There are things we don't translate for the staff or for … If it is cursing in anger or [at] me, then you, you prefer… not pass it on. At the end of the day, they [asylum seekers] are like you [the mediator] and the social workers keep working with me after they are gone.

Constant Testing: Mediator as Brother and Expert, or as Traitor Representing the State of Israel

In addition to misconceptions regarding their legal status, mediators are often associated by asylum seekers with the state and seen as professionals/translators with personal motives. Most mediators feel the clients are constantly testing them, demanding they solve their problems, and expecting more from them than the Israeli staff members. Thus, when the mediators are unable to help, asylum seekers assume this is a choice motivated by personal interests, such as protecting their own legal status and livelihood. Daniel describes this as a pressure cooker:

Look, we see both sides. First of all, the side of the person, you know him. And then the other side, the side of making a living and then we are in a pressure cooker… But when I see here a sick person or a person who really needs help, and he comes to you and you try with all your power, and then he says to you: well, you [intercultural mediators] don't help us by sitting here, and its… then you have this feeling here that you are exploding.

Samuel reinforces the claim that mediators are perceived as traitors and snitches, or as collaborating with the establishment by pressuring asylum seekers.

We find ourselves conflicted… Part of the community, even a large part… think of us as traitors. Collaborating with…with strangers to torture them or pressure them… If a person comes and… you solve his problem, he will appreciate you,

will adore you to the end. But a person who comes…where there is nothing you can do, and if I tell him it can't be done… then, it comes to raising a hand and such, like curses, threats…like you are traitors.

Mediators experience tension between their shared identity as asylum seekers, living together outside work, and the expectations of them, on one side, and the imagined perception of permanent civil status on the other. This complex position, stemming from political, cultural, and social contradictions, underscores that mediation is not a neutral practice.

Mediation Creates a Special Status and Agency that Enable a Challenges to Liminal Status

This unique tension generates a singular status and agency within the organization and beyond, which enable a challenge to their liminal status as asylum seekers. For example, Smahar initiated a project for an NGO on sexuality and Johannes participated in meetings at the Knesset.

Other mediators recounted incidents where they encountered difficulties translating the words of service receivers, or refused to translate words that touched on subjects that are taboo in Eritrean culture, such as male rape. Their ethnic and cultural affiliation with the service receivers undermined their ability to maintain professional neutrality and do their job. In such situations, mediators found themselves conflicted between their professional responsibility to translate and their loyalty to their culture. Helen:

Wow. The difficulties… when a man tells you "I was raped,"…I don't feel like translating. I say it is difficult for me to translate…It's hard for me to hear.

Sexuality is a taboo subject in Eritrean culture. Samhar recounted her reluctance when she was asked to mediate between a counselor from an organization promoting sexuality and the group participating in a workshop on family planning at one of the organizations:

> *It has always been difficult for me to speak about sexuality and how to explain… It's like I was embarrassed to even say the words, and someone came from Open Door, wanted to teach the group for pay, etc. The director said to me, "Samhar, you have to be with her." So, I told her, '"No. It's too heavy. I can do whatever you want, but about this, I can't [say] the words. If I am embarrassed with the words, what will the group think?" So, she said "No. you have to…"*

Samhar eventually found a solution translating pamphlets on sexual education, studying the topic independently, and adapting it culturally. Her efforts were effective: the workshop was successful, and Samhar is scheduled to lead the sessions herself next year. Her role expanded, and she became a community counselor.

> *It was really amazing, and I had ideas. I bring things from Eritrea, from my parents, from the family. We had an amazing group…And my director and someone from Open Door thought I should study, run these groups. So, I studied for a year, I finished the test, and I'll take over the second year in October.*

Johannes, who has worked for many years as a mediator, studied Israeli politics, participated in meetings of various organizations and became a leading activist who made it to the halls of the Knesset: "*It's true that I'm an asylum seeker, but I realized that I had to fight, that from translating I learned a lot, and in the end I was in the Knesset more than once for various meetings that discussed us, asylum seekers.*"

These activities demonstrate that, despite the complexities and challenges of mediators' duties as, the mediator position can merge with personal interests and challenge their legal liminality.

Emotional Implications of Mediation Work for Mediators

Mediation has considerable emotional consequences extending beyond the work itself. Mediators are exposed to their clients' traumatic experiences and testimonies. Every one of the mediators interviewed spoke of the emotional effects of mediation, noting that the stories they hear affect them personally.

Helen spoke of a client who survived trafficking and slavery and then worked in prostitution to repay the ransom paid by community members. This affected her so deeply that she dreamt that the client was her daughter, calling in sick the next day. Samhar said that when she thinks of work, she has no peace:

> *I compare myself to them […] I trade places with them. I take their problems upon myself, and I say, if it was me, what could I have done, or why didn't this happen to me and did happen to them?*

Yamani also described the emotional burden:

> *When you hear sad things, you also take something of it with you…. even if you are a mediator, you bring something home. You experience it…. At first it was hard to hear hard things, there were situations at home where I would cry, really, cry with his pain….*

Nahum, tortured in the camps in Sinai, found it difficult to discuss his personal experiences:

> *Sometimes I can't even continue translating because of really difficult stories, both because it is difficult to hear and because it sometimes takes me back to Sinai.*

Secondary trauma is a common phenomenon among mental health professionals. The expectation that mediators remain professional and strong and that they not show weakness while translating only makes it more difficult. Despite this, they often use their own personal stories to calm and support clients:

> *It helps them, I think, it motivates them. I tell them to keep fighting and that they must forget things and live, forget the past because you can't go on like this… sometimes it is so difficult to translate, when it is really difficult, it gets into my head, I take it home, it makes me collapse. (Nahum)*

Some mediators described how the intensive treatment they provide and its positive outcomes also help them:

> *Each treatment I do, I also treat myself… the symptoms of most of the patients, also the experiences they had, are experiences I also had and the symptoms are the same symptoms. I manage to get over it, but I am like everyone, the uncertainty, the things we went through on the way, and like… being a stranger, being far…from your home, it's not easy. These are things that make the situation of most of our patients there terrible, so…I can get really depressed with the first patient, …and then when the second patient arrives, it's possible that he will cure me, because sometimes you also see patients who change, and*

you see them shaping their lives, standing on their feet, and that makes you happy and gives some kind of satisfaction. (Samuel)

Every mediator claimed that as time passed, and with professional training and psychological guidance at the organizations, they were better able to deal with the difficult testimonies. Spending time with friends, listening to music and watching television, talking to other mediators, and going to church also helped.

The Importance of Mediation in a Refugee Existence

Mediators reported also performing mediation activities outside of formal working hours, accompanying organization staff making house calls, traveling to conferences, and assisting in translation. They also accompany asylum seekers to hospitals, clinics, and educational institutions, assisting them with translations, bureaucratic and linguistic mediation, and navigating public spaces. Thus, they fill the roles of municipal authorities, nonprofit organizations, and public institutions.

Samhar and Asmarat live in southern Tel Aviv, close to a neighborhood with a high concentration of asylum seekers. They describe requests received outside the framework of their job:

I live near Salame [Street]. I walk around, it happens with my children in the playground; they ask me about the job, they catch me at the kindergarten, and the community center, and it's not part of my working hours… I work outside too [laughs]. (Samhar)

When I go to church it's sometimes difficult. I get stopped and asked things and I want to be with my children and my husband. Sometimes I don't go so I have a little quiet, but always. I know it is important that I help people. (Asmarat)

Nahum noted that his telephone number is known in the community, and people needing a telephone translation call him:

> *In my other job there are times I find myself in the warehouse spending 25 minutes translating for someone who is in the hospital. There are little things people ask me […] calling at unusual hours… sometimes there are days with no calls, and [sometimes] 8–10 calls.*

Daniel also testifies to the critical importance of informal mediation and the many requests he gets:

> *I get sent messages all the time. At the Interior Ministry, what did they say to me? Read, tell me, translate for me. At the gym, when they go in they have to sign, what this? Sent to the phones, to Facebook, especially Facebook…they're constantly mailing me, Daniel, translate for us, translate this, translate this, everything! Aside from also translating everything on television or the newspaper or something...that has to do with the community, right? So, they see me and say: help us with this too. So, as much as I can I help.*

All the mediators described playing a role extending beyond the formal definition of mediation. In a refugee existence, mediation becomes primarily informal mediation, entailing practices such as translating conversations and documents and filling out forms. Informal mediation is a burden for mediators, usually taking place during their own time, without compensation. This affects their personal lives and poses a dilemma about balancing their needs with those who need assistance. Still, most feel they cannot ignore the requests; they act out of a sense of duty, an inner drive to help, and in recognition of the importance of their role.

Challenging Legal Liminality: Activities Beyond the Aid Organization

Most mediators used terms such as empowerment, satisfaction, and mission to describe their formal and informal work. Moreover, their positions as mediators enabled them to launch their own initiatives within the community, in the organizations, and related to policies regarding asylum seekers. The mediators transmit information in Tigrinya to the community through social networks and engage in social activism by meeting with Knesset members and participating in demonstrations. Samuel, for example, created a Facebook page after realizing that many community members were not familiar with their labor rights and obligations. Here he posts professional information about medical, legal, and bureaucratic rights in Tigrinya. With his command of Hebrew, he can share other information on his page:

> *Over time at my job, where I sometimes work at the labor court, I discovered that the community doesn't understand… what is the right and what is the obligation of the employer and also the employee… Now, I started this Facebook page…I dedicate myself, I try to improve the community's knowledge…I [visit] websites, like Kol Zchut [All Rights] and the like. I read things and I try to use it and translate and write it on Facebook, so… it [helps] people.*

Many mediators reported their impact during demonstrations or as participants in Knesset committee discussions:

> *I did a lot for the community. I organized some of the big demonstrations, I spoke on stage, and I spoke at the Knesset. Everyone in the community knew me because of the organization I worked in. (Yosef)*

The interviews revealed that mediators' work generates activities across a range of fields within the community and beyond. As they see it, their work may "only" provide professional support, but it is relevant at every level: personal, client (asylum seekers), organizational, and even the policy level. Despite the dual liminality of their existence and the misconceptions regarding their status, mediators succeed in making a difference in mitigating their liminality and place, creating stability and meaning in a chaotic world. Formal mediation transcends the boundaries of the role; it is part of their daily lives and helps them deal with their liminal status. Mastery of the asylum seekers' language and sharing the experiences of their refugee journey are key to their role in negotiating their own civil status and that of their community.

Discussion

"Intercultural mediation" represents the transition between cultures and emphasizes the back-and-forth between two sides (Shemer, 2016). In the world of asylum seekers, intercultural mediation occurs while on the move, reflecting the refugee experience, marginality, and temporariness. Intercultural mediators, whose ethnocultural identity is identical or similar to that of the asylum seekers they provide services to, forge important bonds with the local service providers, since beyond the linguistic divide, many cultural differences and traumatic refugee experiences divide them. Intercultural mediators help close the gaps, improve access to community services, and enhance the quality of those services and the trust between the two sides. Intercultural mediation, which mediates both language and culture, is distinguishable from translation or linguistic mediation.

This research has shown that intercultural mediators face dual liminality: personal and professional. Personally, they are asylum seekers with temporary

residence status, while professionally, they are an integral part of the nonprofit teams that assist asylum seekers. As such, they are often viewed by asylum seekers as representatives of the establishment.

Unlike most asylum seekers, mediators successfully learned the Hebrew language, providing them with a measure of control and security in their personal lives and helping them deal with bureaucracy. Mastery of the language also allows them to challenge passiveness, policies, and social perceptions by taking action that helps themselves and their communities. There is abundant research on migrants' language acquisition and motivation to learn a foreign language (Dörnyei, 1994, 1998; Gardner & Lambert, 1959; Schuster, 2009). This paper further elaborates on how language enhances one's sense of belonging and serves as a resource in challenging civil categories. Although mediators have a liminal legal status, language creates a feeling of belonging. They are motivated to acquire the language auto-didactically precisely because it helps them challenge their liminality and acquire social influence.

In a reality where liminal subjects experience marginality, social inferiority, and limitations on their rights, the interviewees link command of Hebrew to empowerment. They believe that those lacking local language skills are more vulnerable to being taken advantage of. Thus, their command of the language enables them to acquire knowledge in different fields in the organizations employing them, which helps them to advocate for their rights and rights of those seeking help and advice from them. In essence, mediators become "knowledge specialists" passing that knowledge on to their community members. This reveals the affinity between discourse (language), knowledge, and power, as described by Foucault (1979); through a circular process, access to knowledge of the language and the discourse creates power, which then creates knowledge. Lack of access to language and discourse marginalizes many

populations from the circles of power (Foucault, 1979). Mediators' cultural understanding equates control of a language with control of a reservoir of wisdom, providing access to vast cultural and linguistic resources and imbuing the mediator with immense power.

As noted, mediators' command of additional languages contributes to social mobility and blurs social identities and boundaries. It also establishes a social hierarchy between mediators and those using their services. In their clients' eyes, mediators successfully "crossed" into citizenship. Mediators' work in nonprofit organizations is perceived as evidence that they changed their civil and professional status and acquired cultural and social capital. Consequently, some clients believe that mediators act out of personal interest and view them as part of the organizations serving government policy, even as snitches and traitors to their community. Mediators' employment by public governmental institutions further highlights their liminality: they simultaneously lack legal status and are part of the establishment.

The interviews reveal that mediators are also in liminal space due to their employment status. They are temporary workers in the space of power relations between service providers—white citizens—and consumers of these services—stateless strangers of color. Asylum seekers often view the mediator as "omnipotent," someone who can and must solve their problems. Expectations of the mediator are greater than of other staff members in the aid organization. Thus, they sometimes find themselves in situations where they must choose between performing their professional duties objectively and going beyond their neutral professional role, helping the clients who expect them to do so because of their ethnocultural affinity. As a result, mediators are constantly being tested by the clients. A mediator who can help is one of their own.

Otherwise, he becomes an extension of the host society: inadequate (Shemer, 2016) and the target of anger and frustration (Williams, 2005; Zara, 2011).

Analyzing the interviews reveals that the mediators, in their liminal refugee status, play a dual role as informal intermediaries in addition to their formal mediation duties. Formal mediation is conducted through paid employment by nonprofit and government institutions, and private translation companies, according to the criteria established by the employers. Half of the mediators interviewed did not undergo formal training before beginning their work, relying on the knowledge they developed through their experience gained on the job and their informal translating within the community. Mediators and translators also perform their services informally on a voluntary basis. They are well-known within their ethnic enclave, their telephone numbers are public knowledge, and they are expected to assist in various aspects of exercising rights, filling out forms, and finding *ad hoc* solutions to problems, all during breaks or after working hours. They are motivated by a sense of responsibility and shared destiny with their community. The primary rewards are personal satisfaction, empowerment, and the community's esteem and respect. Our research shows that both these models—formal and informal mediation—are part of the liminal space occupied by asylum seekers, with the distinction between them tending to blur. Living on the margins means that some basic needs are not formally addressed by aid organizations or government institutions, and mediators fill that gap.

The mediators are not merely conduits of information, but also guides, "counselors and bringers of hope," "bureaucratic and technology mediators," and "social and political activists." Indeed, the mediator hears the asylum seekers' problems and speaks for them to the establishment. Many are community leaders because of the combination of language, refugee experiences, and status.

Mediators deal with an additional layer of liminality stemming from the paradox of being both caregivers and care receivers. They are professional caregivers, with experience from working in aid organizations, but that experience dealing with asylum seekers' hardships exacerbates their own post-trauma. Unsurprisingly, there is an ongoing ethical debate among scholars and mental health professionals about the suitability of refugees and asylum seekers working as mediators because of the potential risk of triggering their own traumatic responses (Miller et al., 2005).

Nonetheless, research on employing mediators who have experienced trauma to work with refugees and asylum seekers found that the advantages outweigh the disadvantages (Miller et al., 2005). Thus, having experienced similar traumas and sharing the same legal status makes it easier for mediators to establish trust with their services' recipients. Furthermore, their role in aid organizations provides hope of success for refugees.

Mediators' work is emotionally intense, which affects their personal and professional lives. They develop a range of coping strategies, including talking with friends, psychological treatment, repression, and going to church, as well as interacting and sharing their challenges with other mediators.

Studies posit that mediators' personalities and training contribute to positive professional and personal growth. Exposure to the intensive treatment of asylum seekers and refugees by their employers provides satisfaction and meaning (Splevins et al., 2010). The present research confirms this finding: the mediators' work contributed to their self-esteem, professional empowerment, and ability to influence outcomes within the organizations.

Politically, their command of Hebrew allows mediators to represent themselves and the community within liminal legal space and to demand recognition of their rights as part of their work for aid organizations. They take part in campaigns, research, and information gathering that later serves policy-makers. Mediators are key members of the aid organization team, functioning as bridges to the community. They are also part of the social process. As social activists and community leaders, they collaborate with other activists, as in the general strike of January 2014, or during the 2017–2018 deportations, and in emergencies, they independently help complete requests for asylum (Eisenberg, 2019). Such actions demonstrate how command of the local language and their informal and formal activities challenge the passiveness imposed by their liminality and by the politics of belonging. Through their work for aid organizations, mediators are witnesses to the power relations and structural inequality in the interactions between the state and their community; as such, their social and political influence extends far beyond their defined roles as neutral mediators.

Proximity to power within aid organizations helped relieve the uncertainty and fear about the future felt by some mediators. Only two of them claimed that the threat of deportation in 2018 affected them professionally or emotionally. Others expressed confidence in their aid organizations' power to prevent deportation, based on their familiarity with the organizations' work. Some of the mediators interviewed are in the process of filing for a visa to Canada, testimony to less uncertainty.

Conclusions

In summary, the present research examines the complexity of dual liminality and its expressions among asylum seekers in Israel working formally as translators, but in practice, also working as cultural and social mediators. Their ambivalent legal status as asylum seekers lacking permanent status places mediators in a legal limbo characterized by transience and uncertainty. The research present how language is a significant tool that alters their civic status and allows them to challenge their civic liminality. These mediators therefore operate in an in-between, dual reality—between the community to which they belong as asylum seekers and the community of organizations and the state to which they belong professionally. The resulting complex relationships the mediators form, the challenges they face toward both worlds they inhabit, together with their innate activism, enables them to influence policy, thereby helping their community.

Unlike other research focusing on asylum seekers' and their mediators' psychological dimensions, this study examines the complexities arising from the mediators' new, liminal civic status. Mediation then not only is influenced by policy decisions, but also affect them. It is critical for both host countries and asylum-speaking communities that mediators be allowed to continue to operate within both these spheres, taking account of the mediators' liminal civil status and the complexity and importance of their role in mediating between the two.

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