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Asylum Seekers Working as Mediators in Israel: The Impact of Legal Liminality

--Manuscript Draft--

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Keywords:	Liminality, Asylum Seekers, Refugees, Intercultural Mediation, Migration, Community Translation, Legal Liminality
Abstract:	Together with the numbers of refugees rising globally, those seeking asylum have increased dramatically, as more countries grant temporary status to those awaiting determination of their refugee petitions. As asylum seekers, they dwell in legal liminality, having neither the civil rights or service access of citizens nor the rights of those officially recognized as refugees. In countries like Israel, where immigration policies indefinitely prolong such legal liminality, asylum seekers are afforded only “temporary collective protection” without entitlement to services. To the extent that aid is available, it is provided by an informal network of NGOs. Within this context, a semi-formal network of “mediators” has arisen from among asylum seekers. Having acquired the host country’s language, they are employed by NGOs and volunteer in their own communities, providing not only language translation and interpretation assistance, but also intercultural translation. Using in-depth, semi-structured interviews of 14 mediators, this study explores the professional, communal and personal impacts on mediators of prolonged legal liminality. It shows how language can be a significant tool that can alter perceptions of civic status and challenge legal liminality. Formally leveraging the skill set of mediators by cooperating with and directly employing them in government offices, can help to stabilize an especially vulnerable and transient community, benefiting both the state and asylum seekers.

22.7.22

To: Peter Titzmann, Associate Editor
International Journal of Intercultural Relations

Re: Corrections and Resubmission of Manuscript: IJIR-D-22-00017

Dear Mr. Titzmann,

Thank you for the comments on our manuscript (IJIR-D-22-00017), now titled, "Asylum Seekers Working as Mediators in Israel: The Impact of Legal Liminality." In response to the reviewers' helpful comments, we substantially refined, clarified, and restructured the manuscript. In addition, as advised by Reviewer 2, a native English speaker has thoroughly reviewed the manuscript.

Below are the reviewers' comments and our responses.

INTRODUCTION:

- **Reviewer 1**: "The first section after the abstract, for instance, needs to be reorganized as it's confusing and not coherent." In addition to a reorganization of this initial section, **Reviewer 1** also requested that additional context be provided to frame asylum seeking in Israel.
    - Authors' response: The **Introduction** has been completely revised, providing definitions, historical and policy context for the Israel case, a brief literature review to frame the importance of the research questions, the research question itself, and overall guidance on the structure of the paper.
- **Reviewer 2:**
    - Liminality: "Liminality needs to be properly defined: . What does this concept mean in the article?"
        - Authors' response: We have narrowed the use of liminality to refer primarily to the legal liminality that characterizes all asylum seekers and have defined it as follows: *…while asylum seekers await the outcome of their petition for refugee status, they dwell in a liminal legal category,* ***defined as having neither the civil rights or access to social services, education and employment of citizens, nor the rights of those officially recognized as refugees****."*

- Mediators: "The author seems to use interchangeably concepts of mediators, translators and interpreters. All of these must be properly defined - what meaning author gives to them?"

    - Authors' response: The text now reads as follows (p. 6): *Despite the barriers to language acquisition in Israel, having acquired proficiency in the country's dominant language, a group of asylum-seeking mediators* ***bridge the space between other asylum seekers and the state, as well as healthcare, social service and educational organizations, providing not only language translation and interpretation assistance, but also intercultural translation. As part of their roles, they often also help fill out forms and applications, accompany other asylum seekers to state institutions (e.g., courts, government offices and hospitals) and translate documents.*** *Such positions in other countries are generally filled by qualified professionals; however, in the absence of an Israeli 'system' for addressing the needs of asylum seekers, these mediation roles are filled by asylum seekers themselves.*

METHODS

- **Reviewer 1:** "The methodological section is scarce and not carefully explained. Qualitative methodology has to be carefully explained, the same applies to participants and results."

- **Reviewer 2:** "… more background information is needed about mediators in question. For how long have they lived in Israel? How did they learn Hebrew? What other languages do they master? How did they become mediators? What tasks do they perform as mediators? Did they have any mediation training? Is their job payed? On what basis their job is considered as a professional? What kind of material do they translate? Who translated interview fragments into English? Is the research quantitative or qualitative? Why has this methodology been chosen? And the participants? How have they been chosen? Methodology has to be reorganized." … "Interviews' questions … must be clarified."

    - Authors' response to both reviewers: The reorganized **Methods** section now contains relevant details on how the sample of mediators was selected and their characteristics; the reasons for choosing qualitative, semi-structured interviews; the interview questions; and the approach used to analyze interview transcripts.

RESULTS/DISCUSSION

- **Reviewer 1:** "If results have been divided in different sections, it should be stated in the Results section. Who is Nahum? one of the participants?"

    - Authors' response: **Results** are now organized according to their relevance to our three-part research topic (professional, communal and personal impact). The introduction notes that interviewee pseudonyms, along with direct quotes from the interviews, will form the basis for the results. In addition, with the exception of a framing introductory paragraph, all discussion and/or interpretation previously appearing in the **Results** section are now part of the **Discussion**.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSIONS

- **Reviewer 1**: "Conclusions are also very shallow…. Conclusions should be extended. The authors should start by stating the problem and how the research has tackled it. Most of the main findings should also be mentioned. If any, limitations and future research should also be included.

    - **Authors' response:** We appreciated the opportunity to refine our conclusions. The concluding section now includes a description of the study's limitations, possible future research and overarching reflections on the power of language to challenge perceptions of legal status.

Again, we thank you and the reviewers for their careful reading and constructive comments.

Asylum Seekers Working as Mediators in Israel: The Impact of Legal Liminality

HIGHLIGHTS

- The number of asylum seekers globally has increased significantly.
- In some countries, they experience prolonged legal liminality, with limited rights.
- Informal language and cultural mediators bridge the community-state space in Israel.
- Interviews with mediators in Israel explore the impacts of legal liminality.
- Language alters the perception of civic status, challenging legal liminality.

ABSTRACT

Together with the numbers of refugees rising globally, those seeking asylum have increased dramatically, as more countries grant temporary status to those awaiting determination of their refugee petitions. As asylum seekers, they dwell in legal liminality, having neither the civil rights or service access of citizens nor the rights of those officially recognized as refugees. In countries like Israel, where immigration policies indefinitely prolong such legal liminality, asylum seekers are afforded only “temporary collective protection” without entitlement to services. To the extent that aid is available, it is provided by an informal network of NGOs. Within this context, a semi-formal network of “mediators” has arisen from among asylum seekers. Having acquired the host country’s language, they are employed by NGOs and volunteer in their own communities, providing not only language translation and interpretation assistance, but also intercultural translation. Using in-depth, semi-structured interviews of 14 mediators, this study explores the professional, communal and personal impacts on mediators of prolonged legal liminality. It shows how language can be a significant tool that can alter perceptions of civic status and challenge legal liminality. Formally leveraging the skill set of mediators by cooperating with and directly employing them in government offices, can help to stabilize an especially vulnerable and transient community, benefiting both the state and asylum seekers.

Keywords: liminality, asylum seekers, refugees, intercultural mediation, immigration, community translation

1. INTRODUCTION

The number of refugees globally has grown significantly in recent years; those seeking asylum have increased even more dramatically as more countries utilize the relatively new category of “asylum seekers” to grant temporary status to those awaiting determination of their refugee petitions (IOM, 2019; Kritzman-Amir, 2015; UNHCR, 2019). Asylum seekers are typically motivated to leave their home countries in response to religious, political, sexual orientation or tribal affiliation persecution, to being forcibly conscripted into armies with slave-like conditions, or as a result of domestic violence.

By definition, while asylum seekers await the outcome of their petition for refugee status, they dwell in a liminal legal category, defined as having neither the civil rights or access to social services, education and employment of citizens, nor the rights of those officially recognized as refugees (Gold, 2019; O’Reilly, 2018; Zetter, 2007). Moreover, the social, psychological and economic impact of this ‘liminality’ is often exacerbated by the circumstances that forced them to emigrate and/or by traumatic experiences endured as they sought asylum (Connell, 2012; Williams, 2005).

While “legal liminality” describes the conditions endured by asylum seekers globally as they await final status determination, those in Israel face unique challenges. Despite Israel’s highly developed tradition and infrastructure of immigration absorption, non-Jewish asylum seekers have not been handled by the official absorption system, which applies exclusively to integrating Jews and their families, in accordance with the Law of Return (Kritzman-Amir & Shumacher, 2012). Not only are policies for non-Jewish refugees less than a decade old, but, more generally, there are cultural barriers to welcoming non-Jewish immigrants.

Lacking a formal public system, most of the approximately 32,000 asylum seekers in Israel—most of whom come from Eritrea (71%) and Sudan (20%) (Population & Immigration Authority, 2019)—cannot apply for recognition as refugees, but rather, are granted *residence permit 2A5* which provides only "temporary collective protection." Such protection, which can be terminated at any time, does not entitle them to civil rights or social services (Kritzman-Amir & Shumacher, 2012). In this legal liminality—neither integrated nor deported—their chances of being granted residence status have, to date, been practically nil (Gold, 2019; Kritzman-Amir, 2015). Consequent to their liminal legal status, asylum seekers in Israel are not entitled to health and welfare services, except in extreme circumstances or emergencies. Instead, they largely receive social, legal, and health services from an informal network of nonprofit aid organizations that work intermittently with the government in various social services (Barak-Bianco & Raijman, 2015; Kritzman-Amir, 2015; Menjívar, & Abrego, 2012).

Within the extended legal liminality resulting from a policy of intentionally refusing to consider refugee status petitions, it is perhaps not surprising that a semi-formal network has arisen of what we term "mediators" from among asylum seekers. Prolonged legal liminality, together with daily struggles, marginalization, and a tendency to reside in ethnic and linguistic enclaves, often makes most asylum seekers indifferent about acquiring the local language. Furthermore, unlike their counterparts in many European countries, asylum seekers in Israel are not offered the opportunity to formally study Hebrew. Consequently, they depend upon mediators to help with important interactions (Chiswick & Miller, 2005; Mesgena, 2015; Stavans & Goldzweig, 2008).

Despite the barriers to language acquisition in Israel, having acquired proficiency in the country's dominant language, a group of asylum-seeking mediators bridge the space between other asylum seekers and the state, as well as healthcare and social service and educational organizations, providing not only language translation and interpretation assistance, but also intercultural translation. As part of their functions, they often also help fill out forms and applications, accompany other asylum seekers to state institutions (e.g., courts, government offices and hospitals) and translate documents. In other countries, such positions are generally filled by qualified professionals; however, in the absence of an Israeli "system" for addressing the needs of asylum seekers, these mediation roles are filled by asylum seekers themselves.

A number of studies find that intercultural mediations—conducted by mediators with origins, experiences, cultural codes, and values that are similar or even identical to those of others in the migrant community—take on both social and political significance (Doerr, 2010, 2018; Jakobson, 2000 [1950]; Shemer, 2016; Tribe & Morrissey, 2003). This is because, inevitably, mediators are tasked by their employer organizations with contributing to the immigrant community's personal and collective wellbeing, instilling confidence and reducing suspicion and distrust, and promoting dialogue between immigrant organizations and the state (Shemer, 2016).

Research has also dealt extensively with the psychological aspects of the work that mediators 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 shows the profound impact on the mental wellbeing of mediators, especially

those who may themselves be refugees or asylum seekers with their own 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 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 play an important role in preparing the written records upon which adjudicators base their decisions regarding asylum seekers (Killman, 2020; Määttä 2015; Pöchhacker & Kolb, 2009). Focusing on multiple and shifting roles assumed by intercultural mediators illuminates both "interactional and interpersonal factors" (Inghilleri, 2016) as well as the larger "structural and institutional constraints" (Martínez-Gómez, 2015; Määttä, 2015) that underlie these roles.

Despite their importance, particularly in countries like Israel, with policies designed to indefinitely prolong legal liminality, little is known about the mediators who, simultaneously, experiencing the "legal liminality" of asylum seekers while *also* working on behalf of NGOs and the state as employees beyond the well-known psychological impact of mediating on behalf of often traumatized asylum-seekers. Given the extent to which asylum-seeking mediators are relied upon by other asylum seekers as well as by the state and NGO aid providers, this study endeavors to explore the impact on their professional, communal and personal roles of their liminal legal status. Moreover, by focusing on the implications of linguistic access for those lacking permanent status (whether in Israel or elsewhere in the world) this study contributes to the research and body of knowledge in the field of transnationalism (Author, 2018; Boccangi, 2012; Levitt

& Khagram, 2007; Levitt & Schiller, 2004), providing as it does a lens for making visible how people form their daily routines, activities, and institutional affiliations that connect them to more than one society, while simultaneously giving us as researchers the impetus to reassess our understanding of how literacy and communicative practices define asylum seekers' professional, communal, and personal identities in relation to multiple localities and communities.

The paper is organized as follows: Section 2 (Methods) details the approach used to identify participants for in-depth interviews, provides a description of their characteristics, and details the method used to analyze interview transcripts. Their experiences, as they relate to the professional, communal and personal impact of mediation among those who share the same liminal legal status as those for whom they mediate, are analyzed in Section 3 (Results). Section 4 (Discussion) considers the relevance of our findings for our primary research questions. We conclude in Section 5.

2. METHODS

This qualitative study relied on interviews of regularly employed asylum-seeking mediators in Israel. Services available for helping asylum seekers in Israel navigate language and cultural barriers are very limited, with NGOs, and not public institutions, providing most available services. In 2019–2020, we mapped the landscape of NGOs, government ministries, and municipal authorities serving large numbers of asylum seekers to better understand the network of government offices and NGOs most likely to interface with asylum seekers and to identify potential mediators (also known "interpreters" or "translators" by their employer organizations) who would agree to be interviewed..

To access government information, we applied for information under the Freedom of Information Act. In response to eight applications for information, four government ministries responded that they employ mediators through tenders and external translation companies, one ministry reported that it did not employ mediators, two did not respond at all, and one referred us to another ministry. In our appeals to seven municipal authorities, two indicated that they provide language services to asylum seekers, one municipality hires ad hoc translation services in situations where stateless people receive assistance from the Ministry of Welfare, two municipalities reported that they were aided by NGOs, and two more replied that they do not employ mediators at all. Among the eight NGOs we contacted, seven—including those offering health, mental health, welfare and legal services—regularly employ mediators, most of them in half-time positions.

Using information supplied by NGOs and suggested contacts, we used a snowball sample that consistently identified the same 18, regularly-employed mediators as potential interviewees. Mediated by the NGOs, we sent emails inviting their participation, explaining the study's purpose and our commitment to ensuring their privacy. Of the 18 contacts, 14 agreed to be interviewed and consented to the use of the interview materials. Most (12) of the interviewees ranged in age from their early 20s to mid-40s and had arrived from Eritrea between seven and 13 years earlier; the remaining two had arrived from Ethiopia. Thirteen of the 14 spoke at least three and languages, with three speaking five. Five had studied Hebrew in school; others learned the language in the course of their daily lives. All were employed by NGOs, four also did temporary work in government offices, and all provided additional volunteer mediation

services. Half received some formal training from the NGO where they worked, either before or during their employment. The interviews lasted between one and two hours and took place in quiet rooms at the NGOs where they worked.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen in order to give interviewees the freedom to raise topics and issues that the researchers might not have anticipated. The questions probed the possible consequences of mediators' legal status for their professional, communal, and personal roles. In addition to gathering descriptive information about their immigration history, their lives and language acquisition in Israel, and their work as mediators, including their employment history, two additional sets of questions asked about their experiences in two areas. One set of questions explored whether there were professional or communal consequences to being an asylum seeker on the one hand and serving the asylum-seeking community on the other. In particular, we sought to understand expectations of mediators among both community members and other NGO employees. A second set of questions probed the personal consequences—both positive—of being a mediator.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Using narrative analysis, each researcher independently, and later collectively, identified patterns, themes and categories. Our qualitative interpretive approach views the subjects' reality as a whole rather than in isolated segments. By focusing on the unique subjectivity of our interviewees, we aimed at depicting their world through their own cultural lens and their location within it (Sabar & Shir, 2019).

3. RESULTS

The results of our analysis are detailed below and address, in turn, the professional, communal and person impact of mediation among asylum-seeking mediators in Israel. In all three domains, the interviewees (whose pseudonyms are provided along with direct quotes from their interviews) reported experiencing a liminality beyond the legal liminality that typifies the status of all asylum seekers in Israel. They sought to bridge multiple roles in both professional and communal spaces. While the emotional and physical toll of their work may not be surprising, the ways in which it engendered an agency that challenged their legal liminality may be an unexpected consequence of policies that indefinitely extend legal liminality among asylum seekers.

Impact on Professional Roles

Between service providers and service recipients

The ways in which both NGO staff and other asylum seekers view mediators, with their command of Hebrew, leads to unique professional experiences. The interviews reveal that, in addition to experiencing the legal liminality common to all asylum seekers, mediators experience what we might describe as an additional *professional liminality*. Suspended between their roles as professionals in NGOs and their position as recipients of the same services as other asylum seekers, they experience both *legal* liminality and *professional* liminality. 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 professional implications.

For example, with their command of Hebrew, both other asylum seekers and NGO staff often assume that mediators have permanent residence status, attaching an active, sociopolitical significance to their work. As described by Hagos, his identity as an asylum seeker is ambiguous when he speaks Hebrew:

> *They [the legal system] cannot tell whether I'm Israeli or Eritrean. [Because of my Hebrew], 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 [area].*

Despite the misperceptions arising from their linguistic abilities, however, shared culture with their clients can lead to professional difficulties. For example, some interviewees recounted incidents in which they encountered difficulties translating the words of another asylum seeker, or in which they refused to translate words that touched on taboo subjects (such a male rape—a taboo in Eritrean culture). As Helen related, ethnic and cultural affiliation with the service receivers can undermine the professional neutrality needed to do their job, challenging mediators to struggle with their professional responsibility to translate and their loyalty to their culture:

> *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.*

Similarly, sexuality is a taboo subject in Eritrean culture. Samhar recounted her reluctance when she was asked to mediate between a counselor from an NGO promoting sexuality and a group participating in a workshop on family planning:

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…"

Between formal and informal mediation activities

Finally, mediators reported that they often engaged in mediation activities outside of formal working hours, accompanying NGO staff to make house calls, traveling to conferences and assisting in translation. They also informally accompany asylum seekers to hospitals, clinics, and educational institutions, assisting them with translations, bureaucratic and linguistic mediation, and navigating public spaces. As described by Samhar and Asmarat, who live in southern Tel Aviv close to a neighborhood with a high concentration of asylum seekers, they often receive requests for help outside the framework of their jobs:

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…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, [when they have to sign an intake sheet] they [call to ask] What's this? [Requests for help are] sent to the phones, to Facebook, especially Facebook…They're constantly mailing me, "Daniel, translate for us, translate this, translate this, everything!" [This is on top of] 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.*

The experience of playing a role that extends beyond the formal definition of mediation was described by all the mediators. From the interviews, informal mediation can be a burden for mediators, usually taking place during their own time and without compensation, posing a dilemma about how to balance their own needs with those of people needing 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

skills to other asylum seekers, often their friends who do not have other qualified people to whom to turn for help.

Impact on Communal Roles

Mastery of the language enables mediators to help other asylum seekers and exposes them to detailed knowledge about public services and the law, making them seen as “knowledge experts” by 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 seen as having significant power stemming from linguistic mastery.

Between NGO staff and asylum seekers

According to the interviews, most asylum seekers perceive NGOs and the state as one and the same. This perception affects the how the asylum-seeking community views mediators—a perception that often leads to mediators finding themselves caught in the middle and a 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. (Smara)*

These perceptions exacerbate the daily struggles of the mediators. Also experiencing the lack of state recognition and the limits of NGO assistance, they nevertheless have to figure out how to convey the intense stress experienced by asylum seekers. This affects both the translation of the interaction and the dynamics that are created. For example, 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 [with]…all the anger and all the disrespect 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 NGO staff, she tries to calm them down and let them explain themselves, even while staff 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 [staff] say to me "What did he say? What did he say?"…I tell her "Wait. I want to talk to him [to see] 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.*

In response, some mediators report that they choose not to translate everything the other asylum seekers say, even if it means that the mediator becomes the target of their frustration:

There are things we don't translate for the staff…If it is cursing in anger or [directed 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.

Between respected expert and community traitor

Beyond having to translate the anger and frustration experienced by some asylum seekers, mediators are also often associated by asylum seekers with the state and seen as having personal motives. Most mediators report that clients constantly test them, expecting more from them than from Israeli staff members, and demanding that they solve their problems. When the mediators are unable to help, asylum seekers assume that this is because the mediator is motivated by personal interests, such as protecting their own legal status and livelihood. Daniel describes this as feeling like he's in a pressure cooker:

Look, we see both sides. First of all, the side of the person – you know him [personally]. 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 [mediators] don't help us by sitting here."…Then you have this feeling here that you are exploding.

Samuel reinforces the claim that mediators may be perceived as traitors, even snitches, or as collaborating with the establishment by pressuring asylum seekers:

We find ourselves conflicted…Part of the community, even a large part…thinks 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 [that something] can't be done…then, it comes to raising a hand and such, like curses, threats…like you are traitors.

Between reality and imagined legal status

Mediators experience tension between the identity as asylum seekers they share with their clients and the imagined perception that mediators have the power associated with those who have permanent legal status since it is inconceivable to other asylum seekers and NGO staff alike that mediators are not citizens, given their role and their ability to speak fluent Hebrew. This complex position, stemming from political, cultural, and social contradictions, underscores that mediation is not a neutral practice. Moreover, 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)

Impact on Personal Roles

The interviews revealed the professional and communal impacts on mediators who share the same liminal legal status as those whom they serve. As this section describes, the interviews also described the personal impacts on mediators—both negative and positive.

Emotional implications of mediation work

Our interviews confirmed previous research that describe the considerable emotional consequences of mediation work. 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, who had been tortured in a transit camp 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 while translating such difficult stories can make the job more difficult. 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. They also reported that spending time with friends, listening to music and watching television, talking to other mediators, and going to church also helped. Despite the difficulties, however, mediators also told us that they often use their own personal stories to help calm and support their 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 performing mediation while other asylum seekers receive therapeutic support (as, for example, from a mental health professional) also helps them:

Each [time I mediate during a mental health session], 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 managed 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)

Agency: The unintended consequence of state policy?

The central tool employed by mediators is language with its attendant power to reduce the legal liminality of both mediators and the other asylum seekers they serve. The mediators interviewed learned Hebrew independently—on the street, while incarcerated, while working, or through the media. In addition to having a command of Tigrinya, Amharic, and/or Arabic, some also knew English before arriving in Israel. A sense of duty toward their fellow community members led those with a command of these languages to volunteer in NGOs that aid asylum seekers. In turn, their employment allowed them to learn about the areas in which these organizations were active and further acquire legal, medical, psychiatric, and psychosocial terminology.

Such knowledge, combined with their mediation experiences, had consequences for many mediators' sense of their own legal liminality. It provided them with a sense of agency—contributing to feelings of independence, control and security, and transforming them into experts in their own eyes and from the perspective of their communities, 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 an Israeli-Ethiopian!!"*

Similarly, Samhar—described above as encountering her own cultural difficulty translating words related to sexuality—later initiated a project for an NGO on sexuality. She eventually found a solution, translating pamphlets on sexual education, studying the topic independently, and adapting it culturally. Her efforts were effective: the workshop in which she was initially asked to mediate 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, became a leading activist who eventually 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.*

Rita told us that she works for an NGO that provides 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, like others interviewed for this study, public service providers often assume she is an Israeli citizen of Ethiopian origin.

Activities beyond the aid organizations

Most mediators used terms such as empowerment, satisfaction, and mission to describe both their formal and informal mediation work. Their positions as mediators enabled them to launch their own initiatives within the community and in the NGOs in which they worked, and in relationship 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, after realizing that many community members

were not familiar with their labor rights and obligations, created a Facebook page where 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.*

Similarly, 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)*

4. DISCUSSION

The mediators in our study illustrate the role of "intercultural mediation" as the transition between cultures that 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, its marginality, and its temporariness. Intercultural mediators, whose ethnocultural identity is identical or similar to that of the asylum seekers whom they service, forge important bonds with the local service

providers despite the fact that the linguistic divide and many cultural differences and traumatic refugee experiences separate them. In fact, intercultural mediators help close the gaps, improve access to community services, and enhance the quality of those services and the trust between asylum seekers and government and NGO staff.

Like mediators around the world, those interviewed for this study provided asylum seekers lacking the local language with the fundamental ability to speak and be understood, engendering a degree of certainty within the ambiguity characterizing the legal liminality experienced by asylum seekers generally. However, *unlike* most mediators elsewhere in the world, those we interviewed were *also* current asylum seekers themselves, enduring an extended legal liminality that is the consequence of Israeli policy of granting permanent refugee status to only tiny fraction of non-Jewish petitioners. Exploring the professional, communal and personal impact of dwelling in this liminal legal space while *also* serving the community as mediators was the goal of this study.

We found that mediators in Israel navigated multiple ambiguous roles. As professionals, they were, at once, asylum seekers with temporary residence status, while at the same time an integral part of the NGO teams that assist asylum seekers. With their command of Hebrew, both other asylum seekers and NGO staff often assumed that they had permanent residence status. Shared culture and traumatic experiences also challenged their professional ability to mediate when the subject touches on taboo cultural topics.

Finally, the interviews reveal the degree to which that mediators dwell in a professional space that may also be characterized as liminal. They are temporary

workers operating between white citizen service providers and stateless asylum seekers of colors who consumer those services. Despite their own liminal legal status and limited power, other asylum seekers often view mediators as “omnipotent,” people who can and must solve their problems. As a result, mediators are constantly being tested by the clients. A mediator who can help is one of their own; otherwise, they are seen as an inadequate extension of the host society (Shemer, 2016) and the target of anger and frustration (Williams, 2005; Zara, 2011).

At the communal level, they were, at once, part of NGO staff, but without the resources and power of staff who were citizens. As such, both other asylum seekers and NGO staff often, and incorrectly, assumed that mediators who speak Hebrew well have legal status in the country. As a result, they were sometimes viewed by asylum seekers as representatives of the establishment. In their clients’ eyes, mediators successfully “crossed” into citizenship and their work in NGOs 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.

As in other studies, our interviews confirmed that emotional challenges are inherent in the work of translating the traumatic experiences of asylum seekers, particularly when the mediator has had similar experiences. Not surprisingly, 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). However, the interviews *also*

revealed that, despite mediating from a position of weakness in social power relations and the legal liminality caused by their temporary status, many mediators unexpectedly reported a profound sense of agency that both mitigated and challenged their feelings about their own legal liminality.

In part this is an expected finding. 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 the complications of bureaucracy. Mastery of the language also allowed them to challenge passiveness, policies and social perceptions with their ability to take action that helps themselves and their communities—a finding in line with 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 the ways in which language enhances a sense of belonging and serves as a resource in challenging civil categories. For the mediators in our study, language created a feeling of belonging, enabling them to challenge their liminality and acquire social influence. Using their command of the language, they were able to acquire knowledge and better advocate for their own rights and the rights of those seeking help and advice—in demonstrations, campaigns, research and policy discussions. Mediators became social activists and community leaders, working in collaboration with other activists. Although they reported the strain of being called upon for their skills outside the NGO framework, they were proud of their work and, in some cases, even independently helped others complete requests for asylum (Eisenberg, 2019).

In essence, mediators become “knowledge specialists” passing that knowledge on to their community members, revealing the affinity between discourse (language), knowledge, and power, as described by Foucault (1979). Mediators’ cultural understanding equates control of a language with control of a reservoir of wisdom and critical information, providing access to vast cultural and linguistic resources and potentially imbuing the mediator with power within their community, as well as the capacity to effect important policy changes. As witnesses to power relations and structural inequality in the interactions between the state and members of their community, their social and political influence may extend far beyond their defined roles as mediators.

5. CONCLUSION

This study explored the professional, communal and personal impacts of prolonged legal liminality on the asylum seekers who have acquired their host country’s dominant language and provide mediation services. It shows how language can be a significant tool that can alter the perceptions of civic status and challenge the outcomes of legal liminality. As our interviews document, mediators operate in additional liminal spaces—between professional and service recipient, between formal and informal provider, between reality and others’ imagined perceptions of their legal status, and between trusted community member and traitor. The interviewees describe the challenges inherent in their roles, but also relay the stature that can accompany language acquisition and the mediation it enables. In a perhaps unintended policy consequence, many mediators described acquiring levels of personal agency that not only enabled

better personal control over their own life circumstances, but also the ability to exert influence on policies affecting their community.

Despite the significance of our findings, we note its limitations. Although we are reasonably certain that the 14 mediators who participated in the study represent most of the regularly-employed, asylum-seeking mediators in Israel, 14 is a small sample population. The work would benefit from comparative studies with both asylum-seeking and citizen mediators operating in other countries. Another limitation is our study's focus on employed mediators. Many members of the asylum-seeking community in Israel help one another by voluntarily offering mediation service. Some community members also reportedly use private and foreign translation companies in their interactions with government offices. Future research that probes the impact on mediators of all kinds would help to sharpen conclusions about the professional, communal and personal impact of legal liminality.

Despite these limitations, this study successfully demonstrates that, even without state support, skilled mediators arose to provide critical language and cultural translation services. Formally leveraging the skill set of mediators in government ministries by cooperating with and directly employing them, can help to stabilize especially vulnerable and transient community, benefiting both the state and asylum seekers generally.

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