**In between - Civil status and mediators- Eritrean Asylum Seekers Serving as Mediators in Israel**

**Abstract:**

This research project examines the double liminality experienced by Eritrean asylum seeking intercultural mediators who are employed as linguistic and cultural translators by state and aid organizations serving the population of asylum seekers in Israel. The primary focus of this study is these mediators' work, their personal lives and the subjective meanings they attach to their professional roles. The results of this qualitative study, which was based on interviews, reveal that asylum seeking mediators experience a double liminality that stems from their personal legal status and their professional status. On the one hand, they lack permanent legal status in the State of Israel and belong to a community that is in "legal liminality," and on the other hand, they provide services linked directly or indirectly to the Israeli establishment and its organization. Thus, their role places them in an interstitial position, between representatives of the State and the receiving society and those who receive their services. We argue that this double liminality creates a unique complexity, which enables the mediators to challenge their situational liminality, deal with their legal liminality, and act as agents of change and the voice of their community.

**Key words:** liminality, asylum seekers, intercultural mediation, Eritrea, community translation

**Introduction**

The number of refugees across the world has grown significantly in recent years, and the number of those among them seeking asylum has increased even more dramatically (IOM, 2019; Kritzman-Amir, 2015; UNHCR, 2019). The very category 'asylum seekers' is relatively new and was rarely used prior to 2014. Since then, however, the extent to which this category has been employed has grown and it has received new validity (IOM, 2019). This validity allows various states to grant asylum seekers a temporary status – "in between categories" – until a decision is made whether they should be categorized as refugees or not. This status places them 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 immigrate and the traumatic experiences of their journey (Connell, 2012; Williams, 2005). Beyond geographic borders, they also cross linguistic, cultural and identity borders. Indeed, language barriers and difficulties in communication exacerbate their vulnerability and make it particularly difficult to negotiate public services and the processes of receiving asylum, including discrimination and adversely affecting their labor, housing and healthcare rights (Gez & Schuster, 2018; Keller et al., 2003; Schuster, 2009; Stavans & Goldzweig, 2008).

This article addresses the complexity of liminal legality and its various expressions among asylum seekers who serve as mediators. This liminality stemming from their legal status, places mediators in a legal limbo characterized by transience and uncertainty (Bhabha, 2009; Menjívar, 2006; Sabar and Shir, 2019; Turner, 1967) that compounds their professional liminality stemming from the tension between being members of the receiving country's professional team on the one hand, and being asylum seekers who lack permanent status themselves, on the other. We argue that mediation is an action that is affected by political and social circumstances. The circumstances faced by asylum seekers in Israel – transience, marginalization and the ongoing threat of deportation – result in an experience of double liminality: between their personal legal status and their professional status. Their work as mediators generates an activeness that challenges the passiveness created by legal liminality and, furthermore, extends beyond their defined roles.

This paper focuses on the significance and link between their status as asylum seekers and their professional role as intercultural mediators. It presents mediation as an action that challenges their liminal status as asylum seekers.

 Empirically, asylum seeking mediators in Israel and their experience of being in limbo have received very little attention. Thus, this project contributes to research literature and to the body of knowledge regarding linguistic access for those lacking permanent status, both specifically in Israel, and more generally, around the world.

**Theoretical background**

At the time this study was conducted, between 2018 and 2020, about 32,000 asylum seekers lived in Israel. Of these, 71% were originally from Eritrea and 20% from Sudan (Population & Immigration Authority, 2019). Asylum seekers may live in Israel with a residence permit 2A5, under "temporary collective protection", a temporary status for 'asylum seekers.' Their civil status is a legal limbo; they are neither integrated nor deported, yet their chances of receiving a stable residence status are practically nil (Gold, 2019; Kritzman-Amir, 2015). As such, they find themselves in a liminal place also with regards to other aspects of their lives: health, psychologically, socially and economically (Conlon, 2011; Harrell-Bond & Voutira, 1992; O’Neill, 2010; O’Reilly, 2018). Furthermore, the temporary legal status given to asylum seekers creates a space of 'liminal legality,' where they experience 'legal violence' perpetrated against them under the auspices of the state and the law and permeating their daily lives and private intimate spaces (Barak-Bianco, 2019; Menjívar & Abrego, 2012; Menjívar,2006; O’Reilly, 2018).

In this state of 'liminal legality;' in a space simultaneously controlled by the law and abandoned by it, asylum seekers experience constant uncertainty, and especially uncertainty as to the expiration of their protection against deportation (Sabar and Shir, 2019). Thus, the law determining the legal status of these immigrants is ambivalent in its definition of their interactions with the state, and their degree of access to civil, social and political rights and to state services (Barak-Bianco, 2019; Cvajner & Sciortino, 2010; Menjívar, 2006). Because of their ambivalent legal status, asylum seekers are not entitled to health and welfare services from the state, except in extreme circumstances or emergencies. Asylum seekers in Israel, thus, mostly receive social, legal and health services from non-profit aid organizations (Kritzman-Amir, 2015). These organizations are non-governmental, but they do work closely with representatives of the state in various systems such as the education and legal systems.

**Intercultural Mediation**

The liminality of asylum seekers is further reflected in the acquisition – or failure to acquire – the local language. Their legal liminality, together with the sense of temporariness and uncertainty, daily struggles, marginalization, and their tendency to reside in ethnic and linguistic enclaves cause most asylum seekers to be passive about acquiring the local langue. In Israel in particular, and in contrast to many European countries that offer language courses, asylum seekers do not study Hebrew formally. As a result, asylum seekers in Israel depend upon translators and mediators for their daily interactions (Chiswick & Miller, 2005; **Yaron** Mesgena, 2015). On the other hand, after more than decade in Israel, many chose to study the local language, in order to facilitate their work and daily life despite the uncertainly and Israeli society's refusal to make them welcome. Language acquisition is the result of individual and instrumental determination to understand one's rights, to feel more secure, to make the voice of the community heard, and to challenge the perceptions and actions of the receiving state and society. Language acquisition thus challenges certain aspects of the "politics of belonging" (Eisenberg, 2019; Yuval-Davis, 2006), as well as the passiveness inherent in liminality, and creates control mechanisms and anchors of certainty (Talmi-Cohn, 2018). Some of those who acquired the language then transformed this resource into a profession and work as translators and mediators.

Intercultural mediation describes an overall practice that involves not just linguistic translation, but also cultural mediation between a minority of migrants and the receiving society, including its institutions and organizations. Mediation is carried out by mediators and translators whose origins are similar or identical to those of the migrant community and are versed in that community's cultural codes and values. Intercultural mediation is therefore considered a socio-political action (Doerr2018; Jakobson, R. 2000 [1950]; Shemer, 2016; Tribe & Morrissey, 2003). The mediators accompany professionals from the organizations where they are employed, and are tasked, among others, with instilling confidence in the immigrants and reducing suspicion and distrust. Their mediation also serves to promote dialogue, thereby contributing to the personal and collective wellbeing of the immigrant community (Shemer, 2016). The presence of the mediators provides asylum seekers without mastery of the local language with the fundamental right to speak, be heard, and understood, thereby making possible a degree of certainty within the uncertainty that characterizes legal liminality. In other words, 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 literature has dealt extensively with psychological aspects of the work mediators and translators carry out with victims of torture in conflicts zones, in refugee camps, along migration routes, and in receiving countries (Gez & Schuster, 2018; Miller et al., 2005; Schuster & Baixauli-Olmos, 2018; Splevins et al., 2010; Tribe & Morrissey, 2003). This work has significant effect on the mental wellbeing of mediators who are themselves refugees and asylum seekers with their own traumas (Brune et al., 2011; Miller et al., 2005; Splevinis et al., 2010; Williams, 2005).

Likewise, much research has focused on asylum seekers’ interactions with authorities in receiving European countries, and specifically on discourse (Jacobs, M., & Maryns, K. 2021; Maryns, [2015](https://www-tandfonline-com.rproxy.tau.ac.il/doi/full/10.1080/0907676X.2019.1615518); Määttä, [2015](https://www-tandfonline-com.rproxy.tau.ac.il/doi/full/10.1080/0907676X.2019.1615518); Pöchhacker & Kolb, [2009](https://www-tandfonline-com.rproxy.tau.ac.il/doi/full/10.1080/0907676X.2019.1615518)). For example, scholars have noted that mediators and interpreters play an important role in the production of the texts that are the written records upon which adjudicators base decisions regarding asylum seekers (; Killman, 2020; Määttä [2015](https://www-tandfonline-com.rproxy.tau.ac.il/doi/full/10.1080/0907676X.2019.1615518); Pöchhacker & Kolb, [2009](https://www-tandfonline-com.rproxy.tau.ac.il/doi/full/10.1080/0907676X.2019.1615518)). This focus on different aspects of the mediators' agency allows us to take account of ‘interactional and interpersonal factors’ (Inghilleri, [2016](https://www-tandfonline-com.rproxy.tau.ac.il/doi/full/10.1080/0907676X.2019.1615518)) and ‘structural and institutional constraints’ (Inghilleri, [2015](https://www-tandfonline-com.rproxy.tau.ac.il/doi/full/10.1080/0907676X.2019.1615518); Määttä, [2015](https://www-tandfonline-com.rproxy.tau.ac.il/doi/full/10.1080/0907676X.2019.1615518)) that effect the performance of various tasks which interpreters and mediators carry out. Attention to these roles and constraints can illuminate the shifting multiple roles assumed by intercultural mediators throughout a given meeting or situation (Downie, [2017](https://www-tandfonline-com.rproxy.tau.ac.il/doi/full/10.1080/0907676X.2019.1615518)).

Despite being the subject of many studies, very few have dealt with the legal status, or lack thereof, of intercultural mediators. This article contributes an important perspective to the literature by highlighting the challenges entailed in working for authorities while their own status as asylum seekers places them in a liminal category that means they are in legal limbo.

By focusing specifically on the mediators and analyzing their professional practices, the double liminality of their situation becomes very clear. Our analysis consequently focuses on the implications for mediators of this role in the context of a temporary situation where they themselves lack a secure status. This research has revealed a critical need for a welfare policy which recognizes the significance of asylum seeker mediators.

**Methodology**

This research project is comprised of fieldwork carried out during 2020, and which entailed: accompanying asylum seekers in their interactions with aid organizations and state institutions; mapping of government ministries, local authorities, and organizations which employ asylum seekers as mediators. This led to about 14 interviews with asylum seeker mediators who arrived in Israel from Eritrea between 2007 and 2011. These mediators work in seven organizations and one local authority, in areas that include welfare, law, medicine, and mental health. The questions covered their personal immigration history, their lives as non-permanent residents of Israel, and especially their work as mediators: their employment history, professional dilemmas, their complex relationships with the staff of their organizations and those they provide services to, and the implications of their roles for their personal lives. The interviews then underwent a narrative analysis. This research, furthermore, also employs the interpretive qualitative approach, which attempts to view the subjects' reality as a whole, rather than isolated segments. This approach focuses on that which is invisible to the researchers – the unique subjectivity of the interviewees – and aims to reflects their world through the cultural lens with which they themselves view their world and their place in it (Sabar & Shir, 2019).

The 14 mediators interviewed for this project were part of a total of 18 asylum seekers we identified who are employed regularly as interpreters/mediators in Israel.

**Findings**

**Mediation from the ground: Mediation that isn't of the state but represents the state**

Each country takes a different approach toward providing linguistic access and intercultural mediation, based on the relationship between human rights and immigrant status. Language services are made available to immigrants, or not, depending, among others, on structural blocks, political constraints related to funding, initiatives to mediate linguistic and cultural barriers, and the state's specific stance regarding immigration (Doerr, 2018; Schuster & Baixauli-Olmos, 2018). In Israel, the mediation services available to asylum seekers are very limited and what is available is the result of the efforts of non-profit organizations. Very few services are offered by public institutions. We identified eight non-profit organizations which employ intercultural mediators on a regular basis, and discovered that some of these mediators worked for a number of organizations at the same time. 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 thus, it was difficult to precisely quantify the number of interpreters and mediators who are active in these organizations. Following a mapping of government ministries and local authorities which deal with large numbers of asylum seekers, we found that of the eight ministries queried, four employ interpreters and mediators via external tenders and interpreting services. Just one of seven local authorities employs interpreters directly and two are aided by non-profit. The others do not engage mediators at all. This mapping reveals that intercultural mediation came to exist in Israel primarily because of the needs of the non-profit sector and formal recognition of their importance. However, as we shall show, in practice, mediators are generally perceived as representing the state, even though it barely recognizes them.

**Mediation creating an imagined civil status**

The central tool employed by mediators in their work is language. The interviews clearly demonstrated that language is a power that undermines the liminal status of both service receivers and service providers. The mediators interviewed learned Hebrew on their own – on the street, while incarcerated, while working, or through the media. Some knew English even before arriving in Israel. A sense of duty towards their fellow community members led those with a command of these languages, in addition to Tigrinya or languages like Amharic and Arabic, to volunteer in non-profit organizations aiding refugees and asylum seekers. Their employment in these organizations allowed them to accumulate a great deal of knowledge in the areas the organizations were active in and learn legal, medical, psychiatric and psycho-social terminology. This knowledge provided a sense of independence, control and security and transformed them into experts, as relayed by Nahum and Rita:

*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, how to bring the argument forward, I recorded it. You don't need proof, I know how to get a restraining order, everything. I'm independent. I go there, and [they] say to me, 'You. You're Ethiopian? You're Israeli-Ethiopian!!*

Rita works for an organization providing psycho-social aid, and as part of that work 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 knowledge of Hebrew and her work for the organization, she acquired knowledge and tools that helped her obtain a divorce. She now relays these tools to women she supports outside the framework of the organization. Her command of Hebrew and her familiarity with her rights are so impressive that public service providers often assume she is an Israeli citizen of Ethiopian origin.

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

*They [the legal system] cannot tell whether I'm an Israeli or an 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… That I come as an interpreter or, that you are the government's interpreter. That, they don't expect that a person who is from the community has this right to work in this [thing].*

These quotes from Rita and Hagos demonstrate how, thanks to their linguistic skills, different people in the aid organizations, and especially people from the government, perceive them as citizens. Their language expertise provides them with an "imaginary status," since it is inconceivable that they are not citizens if they interpret for the State and speak fluent Hebrew. On the other side, asylum seekers too believe that these mediators have been granted permanent residence status and are surprised when they learn otherwise. This misconception creates social hierarchies and internal conflicts, as described by 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. Some people see me at the visa, like they are shocked, 'what are you doing here?"* (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 that too, I'm like you […] I tell them I was also like that, you know, getting home to see my children at 21-22 o'clock … 'what?!' They think like I have a wow life […] What do you think? I earn like you. No more. I get 20 percent deducted[[1]](#footnote-1) like you […] 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, but beyond that, it exposes them to professional knowledge and allows them to become 'knowledge experts', transmitting that knowledge onwards to members of their community. Proficiency in several languages means, according to the cultural values expressed by Rita, command over a reservoir of wisdom, since that proficiency gives one access to a broad store of linguistic and cultural knowledge and transforms the mediator into "five people or three people," that is, into someone with significant power stemming from linguistic mastery. Likewise, there is close correlation between command of Hebrew and perceptions of these mediators' residency status by representatives of the establishment and the state, as well as by their own communities. Because of their proficiency in Hebrew, both groups believe that these mediators have a permanent residence status. This misperception affects their position as mediators, by attaching an active, socio-political 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 the aid organization staff and the receivers of their services. This liminality stems from their belonging to two worlds: representatives of the state in the context of their professional role and asylum seekers with a temporary legal status, simultaneously. Ostensibly, their role as mediators is considered neutral, one in which they are supposed to translate without bias or involvement. In practice, however, the tensions inherent in their role as mediators make that role an active one, and as such, it has unique emotional implications for their personal and professional lives.

In the next section we will discuss the professional position of mediators in the context of perceptions of the state and of the aid organizations by asylum seekers (receivers of their services), as well as the dynamics between Israeli service providers (social workers, for example) and the mediators. Then we will discuss the professional tension created by their common identity as asylum seekers from the same country sharing similar experiences. Finally, we will characterize the mediators' patterns of action as shaped by these tensions.

**Mediators in between organization staff and asylum seekers: "NGOs and the state look the same"**

According to the interviews, most asylum seekers perceive non-profit 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 is… a problem. Like, people get angry, and they begin to insult her, the social worker. For example, if she says that we cannot get this approved, or we cannot provide things like this, they become aggressive. Then it is difficult for me, also because I know my community, they don't understand about what a non-governmental organization is. We try to explain, but they… they still don't understand. They think it [the organization] is the government. (Smart)*

These perceptions accompany the struggles of daily life, lack of state recognition, and the limitations of non-profit organizations' power in challenging the mediator and confronting him or her with the intense stress of the asylum seekers. They affect both the translation of the interaction and the dynamics that are formed.

Samhar described the difficulty of being in the middle and her sense of responsibly toward both sides. She says this makes 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 I hear it, and it's up to me how I get it out to the social worker, it's hard… I don't know how much people appreciate what it is be a mediator, it's not easy, it's heavy, it's difficult, it’s a lot of responsibility.*

Helen recounted that when those receiving services express their anger at the team, she tries to calm them down and let them explain themselves, even if the 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. You understand? Explain to them. They… They are Israeli. You have to explain to them… Sometimes they also curse. You? No. The team? Yes. Because sometimes they cannot help? Yes. And then I say, 'Think carefully and tell me.' But you know all those words, 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 didn't mean it.'… I don't want to just translate. But they [the staff] don't have patience. They don't.*

Because of the complex situation, some mediators chose not to translate for the organization staff everything that the service receivers throw at them, even if they are the target of the frustration:

*There are things we don't translate for the staff or for … If it is cursing him in anger or if he is cursing me, then you, you prefer to take it alone and not pass it on. At the end of the day they [the 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 their own personal motives. Most mediators felt that the clients [asylum seekers] were constantly testing them. As far as they were concerned, the mediator can, and must, solve their problems. The expectations from them were higher than from the Israeli staff members. Thus, when they are unable to help, asylum seekers assume they are motivated by personal concerns, such as taking care of their own legal status and livelihood, and do not want to help. Daniel describes this as a pressure cooker:

*Some people who know us specifically, whom we live with day to day… They know our problems and who we are… 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… We get along as much as we can, right? 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. Some people say: You aren't helping us, you are here just for your money and you aren't taking care of us. And there are people who say to us: it’s good that you are here. If you weren't here, we wouldn't exist […] mediators who work at organizations, it is really hard for them, you are blamed and always they say that you are selling us out together with the Israelis, like that you are not helping us together, there are lots of stories about each of the mediators.*

Samuel reinforces the claim that mediators are perceived as traitors and snitches, or as collaborating with the establishment in putting pressure on asylum seekers.

*We find ourselves conflicted… Part of the community, even a large part, you can say, think of us as traitors. Collaborating with us... with strangers to torture them or put pressure on them… If a person comes and you solve it, you solve his problem, he will appreciate you, will adore you to the end. But a person who comes, for example, where there is nothing you can do here, and if I tell him that it can't be done… then, it comes to raising a hand and such, like curses, threats, you are snitches, you are this, you are that, like you are traitors.*

Being constantly tested stems from the tension between the mediators' common identity as asylum seekers, living together outside the context of work, and an expectation of commitment from them, on the one hand, and the imagined perception of permanent civil status on the other.

The complex position of mediators stems from the political, cultural and social tensions they live within, and underscores the understanding that mediation is not a neutral practice.

**Mediation creates a special status and agency that enable a challenge to liminal status**

The unique tension described above, between the legal situation of the mediators and their professional role, generates a unique 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 on sexuality and Johannes participated in meetings at the Knesset in the context of his professional role.

Other mediators recounted incidents where they encountered difficulties in translating the words of service receivers, or refused to translate them, because they touched on subjects that are taboo in Eritrean culture, for example descriptions of male rape. In other words, their own ethnic and cultural affiliation to the service receivers interfered with their ability to maintain professional neutrality, to the point that it prevented them from doing their job. In such situations, mediators found themselves conflicted between their professional responsibility to translate and their loyalty to their culture. Helen describes the conflict:

*Wow. The difficulties I… when a man tells you 'I was raped,' this is trouble I don't feel like translating. I say it is difficult for me to translate. So, what do you do? I tell them… If Mabrahtu is around I say 'Mabrahtu, come in, come translate, I can't translate.' It's hard for me to hear.*

The subject of sexuality is taboo 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*, *and that, not because of the words. It's like I was embarrassed to even say the words, and someone came from 'Open Door,' she 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 to me 'No. you have to…'.*

Ultimately, Samhar found a solution. She began translating pamphlets on sexual education, studying the topic independently and adapting it culturally. Her efforts were successful: Not only was the workshop successful, Samhar is scheduled to teach 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, like… it was planned for a month and we finished in four months. And my director and someone from Open Door thought like I should study, I should run these groups. So, I studied for a year, I finished the test, and I'll continue the second year in October.*

Johannes, who has worked for many years as a mediator, studied Israeli politics, participated in the meetings of various organizations and became a significant activist who even 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 patterns of activity demonstrate that, despite the complexities and challenges entailed in their duties as mediators, that very position as mediators can combine with individual personality to enable them to face and challenge their legal liminality.

**Emotional implications of mediation work for mediators**

The duties carried out by mediators entail significant emotional consequences that extend beyond the work itself. Mediators are exposed in their work to the traumatic experiences and testimonies of their clients. Indeed, every one of the mediators interviewed spoke of the emotional effects of mediation and noted that the stories they hear continues to affect them in their personal lives.

Helen spoke of a client who survived trafficking and slavery who had to work in prostitution in order to repay the ransom paid by members of the community. This affected her so deeply that she dreamt that the client was her daughter. The next day she called in sick. 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 succinctly the emotional burden of mediation:

*When you hear sad things, you also take something of it with you…. You take something 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, what he told me.*

Nahum was tortured in the camps in Sinai and found it difficult to discusses his personal experiences:

*Sometimes I can't even continue translating because of really difficult stories, both because it is difficult to hear and also because it sometimes takes me back to Sinai. The doctors also can't always continue the treatment because they also find it hard to hear the patients' stories. There are times that even the doctors would cry.*

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

*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…. And it helps them, it helps them that their mediator went through and that he knows what he feels better than someone else who can't understand, who doesn’t' know how the body feels… sometimes it is so difficult to translate, when it is really difficult, it gets into my head, I take it home, it makes me fall. (Nahum)*

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

*Each treatment I do, I also treat myself… the symptoms of the patients, 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, missing the parents, missing the children if they have them, and like… being a stranger, being far from the place, from your home, it's not easy. These are things that make the situation of most of our patients there terrible, so I like, the patient coming in now, there's another patient after that. Now, 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, who really really came off the streets, they throw, people even arrive after hospitalization, and you see them shaping their lives, standing on their feet, and that, that is something that makes you happy and gives some kind of satisfaction. (Samuel)*

Every one of the mediators claimed that as time passed, and thanks to professional training and psychological guidance at the organizations, they are better able to deal with the difficult testimonies. Other activities that help are spending time with friends, listening to music and watching television, talking to other mediators, and going to church.

**The importance of mediation in a refugee existence**

Mediators noted that they also perform mediation activities outside of formal working hours. For example, they accompany organization staff making house calls, travel to conferences and assist in translation. They also accompany asylum seekers to hospitals, clinics and educational institutions, assisting them with specific translations, bureaucratic and linguistic mediation, and finding their way in public space. Thus, they in fact fill the roles of municipal authorities, non-profit 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 too, not far, I live near Salame [Street]. I walk around, it happens with my children in the playground and it, 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)*

*On Saturday 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 thus, people who need a telephone translation call him:

*In my other job [a position that doesn't entail translation] there are times that 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… not five in the morning, but nine in the evening… sometimes there are days with no calls at all, and those where there are about 8-10 calls.*

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

*Now if I show you Messenger you will see it is full here. 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? Tell me. Lots!! Sent to the phones, to Facebook, especially Facebook. Not everyone has my telephone, on Facebook I already don’t have… So, like they're constantly mailing me, Daniel, translate for us, translate this, translate this, everything! Aside from also translating everything said on television or the newspaper or something like that, for, that has to do with the community, right? So, they see and then they say: help us with this too. So, as much as I can. Look, I'm not saying that I help everyone, but whoever I can, I help.*

All the mediators described filling a role that is more extensive than the formal definition of mediation. In a refugee existence, mediation becomes informal mediation primarily, and it entails a range of practices such as translating conversations and documents, filling out forms and translating relevant information from afar. Informal mediation is a burden for mediators, and usually takes place during their own time, without compensation. This affects their personal lives and places them in a dilemma about prioritizing needs – their own needs or those who seek their assistance. All the same, most feel that they cannot ignore the requests they receive. The act out of sense of duty and an inner drive to help, and out of recognition of the importance of the role they play.

**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 in various spaces: within the community, in the organizations, and as related to policies regarding asylum seekers. The mediators transmit information in Tigrinya to the entire community through social networks such as Facebook and WhatsApp, they participate in activist initiatives such as meetings with members of Knesset and demonstrations. Samuel, for example, established a dedicated Facebook page where he posts a great deal of professional information about medical, legal and bureaucratic rights in Tigrinya. He decided to launch the page after realizing that many members of the community were not familiar with their rights and obligations as employees. Thanks to his command of Hebrew, he is also able to extract information from other websites about rights and publishes it 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 it is, what is the right and what is the obligation of the employer and also the employee… Now, I started this Facebook page, I don't, it doesn't have a lot of followers, but I… Every day, one day every week I dedicate myself, I try to improve the community's knowledge. It's not that I'm a lawyer or … an expert in the field, no. But I, from my experience, I have, I go onto websites, such as 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 succeeds in helping people.*

Many of the mediators recounted the impact they had as mediators during demonstrations or as participants in Knesset Committee discussions:

*I was a lot, 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' be professional support, but their relevance is found at every level: personal level, the client level (asylum seekers), the organizational level, and their ability to influence policy. Despite the double liminality within which they exist and the misconceptions regarding their status, mediators succeed in making a difference, in challenging their liminality and place, and in 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 to deal with their liminal status. Mastery of the asylum seekers' language and sharing their experiences of the refugee journey are the key to their role in negotiating their own civil status and that of their community.

At the same time, these testimonies reveal that mediators exist within a double liminality: they are under pressure and demands from the organizations they work with, as well as and just as importantly, from asylum seekers. This liminality is expressed also at the individual level, because their mediation activities are rooted not just in language and culture, but also in the shared experience of the refugee journey.

**Discussion**

**'**Intercultural mediation' as used in the research literature represents the transition between cultures and emphasizes the back-and-forth movement between two sides (Shemer, 2016). In the world of asylum seekers, intercultural mediation takes place while on the move, a reflection of the refugee experience, marginality and temporariness. Intercultural mediators whose ethno-cultural identity is identical or similar to that of the asylum seekers they provide services toforge an important bond with the service providers, since beyond the linguistic divide, there are a wide range of cultural differences and traumatic refugee experiences that divide them. Employing intercultural mediators reduces the differences between the two sides, improves access to community services and enhances 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 simple linguistic mediation.

This research has shown that intercultural mediators deal with double liminality: personal and professional. Personally, they are part of the asylum seeker community who live with temporary residence status, while professionally, they are an integral part of the non-profit 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 acquired a command of the Hebrew language, which provides them with a measure of control and security in their personal lives and helps 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 literature on language acquisition among migrants and the motivation to learn a foreign language (Dörnyei, 1994, 1998; Gardner & Lambert, 1959; Schuster, 2009). This article elaborates on the notion that language enhances one's sense of belonging and serves as a resource in challenging civil categories. Although mediators exist in a liminal legal status, language creates an imagined sense of belonging. They are motivated to acquire the language autodidactically precisely because it helps them challenge their liminality and acquire social influence.

In a reality where liminal subjects experience marginality, social inferiority, and limited access to their rights, the interviewees link command of Hebrew to exhausting their rights. They believe that those who are not versed in the local language are more vulnerable and open to being taken advantage of. They believe that their command of the language enabled them to acquire knowledge in different fields in the organizations where they work, which in turn enables them to work to realize their rights and rights of those who turn to them for help and advice. In essence, mediators become 'knowledge specialists' and pass that knowledge onwards to members of their community. This reveals the affinity between discourse (language), knowledge, and power, as described by Foucault. In other words, it is a circular process: access to knowledge of the language and of the discourse creates power, and power creates knowledge in turn. Thus, lack of access to language and discourse marginalizes many populations from the circles of power (Foucault, 1979; Zohar, 2013). The cultural understanding of mediators equates control of a language with control of a reservoir of wisdom, because it provides access to a vast cultural and linguistic resources and transforms the mediator into someone with immense power.

As noted, command of additional languages is for mediators a means of social mobility and blurring of social identities and boundaries. It also establishes a social hierarchy between mediators and those who use their services. As far as their clients are concerned, mediators successfully 'crossed' into citizenship. Their work in non-profit organizations is seen as a means of changing their civil and professional status and acquiring cultural and social capital. This is why some of the clients might believe that mediators act out of personal interest and view them as part of the organizations serving government policy, including viewing them as snitches and traitors to their community. The employment of mediators by public governmental institutions further highlights their liminality: They lack legal status on the one hand, and are part of the establishment, on the other.

The interviews reveal that mediators are in liminal space also in terms of their employment status. They are temporary workers in a space of power relations between service providers who are white citizens, and consumers of these services who are stateless strangers. Asylum seekers often view the mediator as 'omnipotent'; someone who can and must solve their problems. Expectations from the mediator are higher than from other staff members in the aid organization. Thus, they sometimes find themselves in situations where they must choose between performing their professional duties without bias and going beyond their neutral professional role in helping the clients who expect them to do so because of their ethnocultural affinity. Such situations mean that the mediator is constantly being tested by the clients: if he is able to help, he is one of their own, and if not, he becomes an extension of the host society, perceived as inadequate (Shemer, 2016) and a magnet for their anger and frustration (Williams, 2005; Zara, 2011).

Analysis of the interviews reveals that these mediators, in their liminal refugee status, play a double role, since they are expected to act as informal mediators on top of their formal mediation duties. Formal mediation is what mediators and translators do when they are employed by non-profits, government institutions and private translation companies. They work in exchange for pay, according to criteria set by their employers, and their duties vary from organization to organization. Some half of the mediators interviewed did not undergo any sort of formal training before beginning their work for the organization, but rather had to rely on the knowledge they accrued from their experience doing informal translation within the community, and professional experience was accumulated through grinding daily work. Mediators and translators also perform their services on a voluntary basis, informally. 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. Their primary motivation is a sense of responsibility and shared destiny with their community. The primary reward is a sense of satisfaction and empowerment, as well as the esteem and respect of the community. Our research shows that both these models – formal mediations and informal mediation – are part of the liminal space occupied by asylum seekers and that the distinction between them tends to blur. Their lives on the margins mean that some of their basic needs are not addressed formally by aid organizations, not to mention by government institutions. The mediators' sense of commitment and responsibility to their community leads them to support their people beyond their professional capacity.

The mediator's role is not merely to be a conduit for information, but rather is transformed into practices and forms of a guide, 'counselor and bringer of hope,' 'bureaucratic mediator,' 'technology mediator,' and 'social and political activist.' Indeed, the mediator hears the asylum seekers' problems, and speaks for them to the establishment. Many are social leaders because of the combination of language, refugee experiences and status.

In fact, mediators deal with an additional layer of liminality stemming from the paradox of being both care givers and care receivers. They are professional care givers with experience accrued through working in their aid organizations, but their very experience dealing with the hardships of asylum seekers can exacerbate their own post-trauma. It is no wonder that there is an ongoing ethical debate in the research literature and among mental health professionals about the suitability of refugees and asylum seekers to work as mediators, because of the potential risk of triggering traumatic responses in them (Miller et al., 2005).

Nonetheless, research on the employment of mediators with experiences of trauma in work with refugees and asylum seekers, found that the advantages outweigh the disadvantages (Miller et al., 2005). Researchers believe that the fact that they have experienced similar trauma and share the same legal status makes it easier to establish trust between the mediators and the receivers of their services. Furthermore, their role in aid organizations provides hope of success for refugees.

Mediators' work is emotionally intense, which has implications for both their personal and professional lives. They develop a range of strategies to protect themselves, including talking with friends, psychological treatment, repression, and going to church. Another strategy is interacting with other mediators at work and sharing their challenges with them.

Research literature posits that the personality of the mediator and his or her professional training contribute to positive growth, professional and personally. The exposure to the intensive treatments given to asylum seekers and refugees by their employers contributes indirectly by provided satisfaction and personal and professional meaning (Splevins et al., 2010). Results of the present research confirm this finding: the mediators' work contributed to their self-esteem, professional empowerment and ability to influence outcomes within the organization.

Command of Hebrew allows the mediators to represent not just themselves, but also the collective and the community withing liminal legal space, and demand recognition of their rights as part of their work for aid organizations. They take part in campaigns, in research and the gathering of information that later serves policy makers. Mediators are key members of the aid organization team by their very function as bridges to the community. They are part of the social process. As social activists and local community leaders they collaborate with other activists in protests – for example, in the general strike of January 2014, or in during the 2017-18 deportations – and in emergencies they help complete requests for asylum independently (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 politics of belonging. During their work for aid organizations, mediators are witness to the power relations and structural inequality in the interactions between the state and their community. As such, their social and political agendas extend beyond their defined roles as neutral mediators.

Proximity to sources of power within the aid organizations helped relieve the uncertainty and fear of the future for some of the mediators. Only two of the mediators claimed that the threat of deportation in 2018 affected them significantly 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.

**Conclusion**

In summary, the present research focuses on the activities of asylum seeker mediators as a means of understanding how they deal with their liminal status and subjective experiences as mediators. This twofold liminality, we suggest, generates a unique complexity that allows mediators to question their situational liminality, deal with their legal liminality, and act as change agents.

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1. Employers of asylum seekers must make monthly deposits into a security fund which replaces payments that the employer would generally pay for pension insurance, other savings accounts, provident funds or for severance pay. 16% is paid by the employer and 20% is deducted from the worker's salary. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)