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The value(s) of volunteering: asylum seekers' trajectories through language work in refugee assistance

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I analyse the narrative positioning in two semi-structured interviews with volunteer interpreters in a counselling centre for refugees run by an NGO in Vienna, complemented by ethnographic descriptions of volunteer work in the counselling centre drawn from long-term participant observation. As a substantial part of the volunteers working at the counselling centre consists of (current and former) clients of the NGO, asylum seekers themselves, 'work' and 'citizenship' are deeply entangled in their positioning. The analyses of how past and future trajectories are co-constructed in the interviews, and of how the participants position themselves in and through the interview narratives, show that linguistic volunteer work becomes a site of investment and speculation on citizenship (conceived both as a moral and a legal 'object'). As the paper demonstrates, volunteer work promises to yield symbolic and social capital – including language – required for success in the 'markets' of citizenship (e.g. in the asylum procedure) and, contingently, later on, in the national labour market.

KEYWORDS

Interpreting; volunteer work; asylum; capital; trajectory; narrative positioning

1. Introduction

In this paper, I present an ethnographic account of volunteer interpreters' trajectories of work in a counselling centre (henceforth CC) run by an NGO that offers legal, social and practical advice to displaced persons living/settling in Vienna, Austria. Interpreting in this CC is mostly done by volunteers, many of whom share a history of recent displacement and the legal status of asylum seeker with the 'clients' of the institution. My aim is to understand how these multilingual workers navigate their specific situation characterised by an insecure stay permit (or *precarious citizenship*, Lori, 2017) and an engagement in unpaid work. Although the work is unpaid, it is not devoid of an economic dimension, but embedded in logics of value creation, investment and return (Taylor, 2015), both on the sides of the volunteers and of the CC.

While the CC benefits from the volunteers' labour power (and invests in it to a certain extent), which is crucial for the functioning of the service offered to its clients, I argue that

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much of the return volunteers expect from their work lies in an uncertain future: As will be shown below, the volunteers' investment in their work at the CC is very much structured by their own asylum procedures where access to a less precarious citizenship status (be it refugee status, subsidiary protection, or humanitarian right to stay) may be granted or refused. This, in turn, is crucial for full access to the national labour market. The value of investing (one's linguistic resources, one's time) in volunteer work has a speculative dimension (Duchêne & Daveluy, 2015) and, therefore, is dependent on the 'market' conditions of the legal procedure, which are not entirely foreseeable. To seek an understanding of how volunteer interpreters at the CC navigate the speculative logics of volunteering, I focus on how their investment in language work – interpreting – is articulated in narratives. Using extracts from ethnographically informed, semi-structured interviews with two volunteer interpreters from the CC, I analyse how they position themselves through the narrative co-construction of past and future life trajectories. The analyses draw on the notion of *metapragmatic* (Spitzmüller, 2013) and *narrative positioning* (Bamberg, 1997) as well as linguistic appropriations of the Bakhtinian (1981) concept of *chronotope* in narrative (Park, 2017; Sonnleitner, 2018). This serves to reconstruct (1) the speculative values the volunteers attribute to their language work under the specific circumstances of precarious citizenship, (2) the projected sites and objects of capital conversion (Bourdieu, 1986) they orient to and (3) the constructions of the language workers' selves emerging along these co-constructed, narrated trajectories. The analysis of the interviews is enriched by and embedded in observations throughout two years of ethnographic fieldwork in and around the CC. This allows me to situate the analysis in the broader framework of how volunteers' trajectories are integrated, bundled and regimented in the institution, and how this might be connected to a larger context of value creation within the Austrian migration regime.

In the following section, I first elaborate on the theoretical concepts of investment and trajectory which guide the analysis of the interview data (Section 2). Drawing on extensive ethnographic fieldwork, Section 3 presents a sketch of the political-economic conditions of volunteering by asylum seekers in Austria and within the particular CC under study. This leads to the analysis of interview data, in Section 4, which focuses on the informants' *retrospective*, *speculative* and *imagined trajectories*. To conclude, in Section 5, I discuss what the analysis tells us about the extent to which, and the reasons why, the volunteers in the CC under investigation navigate and thereby reproduce their subjection to state governance of labour and citizenship.

2. Theoretical underpinnings

Central to the concept of investment is the notion of *capital*: As 'accumulated labour' (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 280), it has neither fixed appearance nor value. Instead, it comes in various degrees and types of materialisation – for example, a network of friends and colleagues which Bourdieu analyses as *social capital* (1986, p. 286); of acquired knowledge of the 'German' language where, in Bourdieu's terms, the speaker *embodies cultural capital* (1986, pp. 282–284); or of a certificate of volunteer work at the CC analysable as an *institutionalised* form of capital (Bourdieu, 1986, pp. 285–286) derived from the work at the CC. The specific value (or even the quality of being a form of capital in the first place) depends on processes of conversion from one form of capital to another, i.e. on how far the

document that certifies volunteer work at the CC is recognised as a token of exchange in another context (here, as we shall see, in the asylum procedure). From this perspective, to investigate the value of a given resource as capital requires thus to ask which objects or practices become (potentially) 'convertible' at which sites and in which processes of exchange ('markets'). Individuals operating within the logics of such markets may anticipate the convertibility of resources at their disposal (not necessarily rationally and consciously) and thereby their socioeconomic value as capital. Capital value, then, is a function of its anticipated *convertibility* under certain market conditions. This requires from the actor a certain familiarity with its dynamics; that is, to '[h]av[e] the feel for the game' (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 80). Such anticipation of capital conversion is referred to by Bourdieu (1998, pp. 76–85) as *investment*.

Investment in a given market is not purely individual, but rather part and parcel of the socioeconomic and political processes in which social inequalities are inscribed and reproduced. People in different social positions and under different conditions have unequal resources to invest and unequal opportunities to participate in practices of investment (Flubacher, Duchêne, & Coray, 2018). This point is particularly salient when we want to consider narrative accounts by the people whose investment we want to study. Flubacher et al. (2018, pp. 4–10) criticise approaches that focus on the subjects' constructions of (language) investment because they fail to account for the socioeconomic and language-mediated inequalities that lie behind and are reproduced in practices of investment. I therefore attempt to conceptualise the narrated trajectory of an investment in relation to the situated political-economic conditions under which it takes place.

First, let us consider *trajectories in narrative* as situated constructions of stretches of biography (Busch, 2017). As shown by Park (2017), mobile workers build interdiscursive connections between the here-and-now and past places along their trajectories in the construction of their 'transnational' subjectivities. In this sense, trajectories are not 'objective facts' and cannot be reduced to traceable movements through time and space. They are rather ideological, metapragmatic objects, and, as such, are the result of 'interdiscursive work' (Park, 2017, p. 36). Trajectories can thus be conceptualised as interpretive devices that subjects deploy to organise time, space and agency in their positioning (or to situate themselves in time, space and agency), a theorisation informed by the concept of *chronotope* (Bakhtin, 1981), the narrative appropriation of time and space, which here figure as more concrete timespaces, "invokable histories," elaborate frames in which time, space, and patterns of agency coincide, create meaning and value, and can be set off against other chronotopes' (Blommaert, 2015, p. 110). That is, trajectories in narrative are co-constructed interconnections between time–space configurations. In order to analyse how personae (i.e. person-types) emerging from these narrative appropriations of time and space relate to constructions of subjectivity in interview narrative, Sonnleitner (2018) proposes to link chronotopes to stance or positioning. This means that speakers establish their positions in the examined interviews by positioning themselves 'in relation to chronotopic versions of the past' (Sonnleitner, 2018, pp. 34–35) and of the future which appear in my data in the form of (short) narratives. Thereby, they align and/or disalign with the personae unfolding in the co-constructed narrative (see also Spitzmüller, 2013). This allows to trace the emergence of participants' subjectivity and agency through an analysis of their positioning on multiple levels of the narrative: on the level of a timespace unit, throughout the narrated trajectory (both on the level of the

storyworld), on the level of the interaction where the narration takes place (the research interview), and with relation to the (more 'macro') circulating discourses and values indexed in the narrative (Bamberg, 1997).

From a political-economic perspective, trajectories are also objects of control, distribution and competition (Heller, 2011, p. 39) within and beyond institutional contexts. For the purpose of this paper, I thus relate the narrative constructions of volunteers' trajectories to the discursive means by which they are regulated, i.e. the ideological and material conditions which enable and constrain the narrators' actions. In line with Butler (1997), I understand the subject's *agency* as a function of the citationality of discourse. The subject needs to 'cite' discourse – in its material or in its ideological dimension – in order to be both intelligible and transgressive with respect to the discursive order. The individual volunteers' agency thus crucially hinges on how they are able to mobilise the ideological and material conditions they find themselves in, in order to make themselves accountable. These act both as a resource *and* as a constraint to individual action. In the case of practices of investment, the effects of the individual's doings are (at least partly) deferred to the future. Though not all self-fashioning narratives are based on an anticipation of market conditions and thus relate to speculative investment, they still may be indicative of political-economic conditions and processes as narrative reconstructions of the subject's agency.

In the analyses below, I engage with three types of narrative trajectories which differ with regards to the temporal perspective they give onto the interviewees' investments in volunteering. I distinguish (1) *retrospective trajectories*, where interviewees make sense of their present through the reconstruction of a past (Park, 2017), (2) *speculative trajectories*, where they make sense of the future in terms of a rationalising logic of investment and return, and (3) *imagined trajectories*, where they make sense of the present through the projection of a currently inaccessible future. All three are narrative co-constructions that happened in research interviews and need to be read in terms of an ethnographic 'epistemology of contact' (Slembrouck, 2005, pp. 628–631), where the researcher's engagement with the researched lifeworld is crucial to the co-production of knowledge.

3. Ethnographic context

In order to better grasp the political-economic dimension of the analyses, I present an overview of the relevant institutional logics and material conditions that regulate volunteer language work of asylum seekers in the CC. The interviews referred to in this paper were conducted as part of a larger ethnographic endeavour, including long-term participation and observation in the CC (April 2016 – September 2018) documented in field notes and reflective writing, collection of texts and other artefacts (mostly visual materials; e.g. drawings or photographs), as well as audio-recorded interviews and conversations with staff members and volunteers. Personal names are replaced with pseudonyms for reasons of data protection.

3.1. Volunteering as an asylum seeker in Austria

Language work within this particular CC (and similarly in other organisations operating in refugee aid in Vienna) comes in various forms and degrees of institutionalisation. The

focus of this paper lies on unpaid forms of labour done by volunteers. A substantial part of these volunteers consists of (current and former) clients of the CC, many of whom are still in an ongoing asylum procedure. Questions of ‘citizenship’ – not to be understood as a bounded category in legal terms, but as an ideological one, with, e.g. legal and moral dimensions, and as a matter of degrees (rather than a question of either/or) (Lori, 2017) – are crucial here. For asylum seekers in Austria, access to the labour market is restricted by law, a legal barrier which does not apply to unpaid work.

As argued by Muehlebach (2012), volunteering goes hand in hand with specific ideological underpinnings, especially of citizenship, such as the promotion of particular forms of the legitimate moral selflessness in a neoliberal state. These become particularly salient where access and belonging to the category of ‘citizen’ cannot be taken for granted. As shown by Yap, Byrne, and Davidson (2010), voluntary engagement by asylum seekers (or migrants in general) is prone to respond to the pressure of having to prove one’s qualities of ‘good citizens’. This can mean to show one’s investment in *learning and practicing German, making friends with ‘Austrians’, gaining work experience in Austria* (see Garrido & Codó, 2017 for comparable observations) – all of which were recurrently named ‘motivations’ by my informants for doing volunteer work. While this is a rather general observation that has validity for various kinds of migration experience (at least) in Europe, this logic appears in a very specific form in the context of asylum procedures in Austria. Besides the evaluation of the applicants’ entitlement to refugee status or subsidiary protection, the caseworker of the *Austrian Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum* (henceforth BFA) evaluates also their eligibility for a so-called humanitarian residence status. This includes an assessment of the applicants’ ‘integration’ in Austria (Lehner, 2018) which has its rationale within the aforementioned investments in linguistic, social and economic capital (see Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum, n.d.). Here volunteer work comes in – as evidence the applicant may offer to prove a sufficient degree of (investment in) ‘integration’.

Thus, volunteer work becomes a liminal site of investment in accessing various degrees of legal and/or moral ‘citizenship’. As an individual investment, volunteer (language) work promises to yield capital – language ‘skills’, social commitment, etc., being indexical in the ascription of the symbolic capital of ‘integration’, and networks formed by NGOs providing volunteers with social capital – required on what could be termed as ‘markets of citizenship’ (most importantly the asylum procedure) and the mainstream labour market (after a positive outcome of the asylum procedure). From the perspective of political economy, volunteering offers an anchorage for discursive means of governing migration at the nexus of (nationalised) citizenship, labour and welfare, as it allows to *subject* those who are in fact *excluded* from the national labour market to processes of regulation and self-regimentation governing the ‘nationalised’ labourforce (Yeung & Flubacher, 2016). Moreover, it shall be taken into account that institutionalised refugee aid in Austria is itself confined to the margins of the social welfare system (based on the so-called *Grundversorgung*, ‘primary care’¹) and lacks durable structures with stable funding.

3.2. Volunteers in the counselling centre

The CC relies on volunteer work especially for interpreting in individual counselling and in workshops, but also for a sub-project where volunteers assist the clients in their search for a flat via online platforms.

The 'recruitment' of volunteers is prevalently initiated by employed staff members in the context of counselling. In fact, many volunteer interpreters serving in the CC came in the role of 'clients' or in support of a client (e.g. as ad-hoc interpreters). There is no formalised recruitment procedure, as this recruitment is instead based on existing or unfolding networks and word of mouth, regulated by an employed staff member appointed for the task, and discussed amongst the counsellors in their weekly staff meetings. Volunteer interpreters are expected to have certain linguistic 'skills' – which includes competences in one of the clients' first languages or *linguas francas*, and in German or English (which are considered to be the two languages every *counsellor* shall be able to work in). Among the counsellors, metalinguistic reflection on the volunteers' competences in clients' first languages or *linguas francas* (e.g. 'Arabic', 'Farsi', 'Somali') is scarce, and consists mostly of problematising geographical variation of these languages (the 'different dialects' of, e.g. Arabic). Concerning their command in German and English, however, metalinguistic reflection is frequent, and more so, these competences are evaluated and re-evaluated in an ad-hoc manner by the counsellors in the weekly staff meetings (from which interpreters are excluded). These specific linguistic requirements are of course selective with respect to the population of asylum seekers in Austria, privileging those who had either prior access to English language education or who were able to acquire German since their arrival in Austria to a level deemed sufficient by the staff. In terms of social class background, this makes it likely that access to volunteer work at the CC reproduces already existing inequalities between possible candidates, as opportunities and resources to invest in acquiring the aforementioned required languages are not equally distributed (see Flubacher et al., 2018).

Mobility between unpaid (volunteer) and paid work (counsellor) *within* the institution is rare. I witnessed one single case of such a trajectory which did not last for long, ending in conflict among staff members. Aspirations of this kind by volunteers are in some instances raised as problematic by the staff, as they are seen as the cause for unfulfillable expectations and thus the basis for a troublesome relationship of dependency between the volunteer and the institution (see below). Mobility to paid work *outside* the institution is instead facilitated and attested in my observations both in terms of concrete individual support, and in a more general, programmatic way. For example, in an in-house training workshop for volunteer interpreters I attended, the speaker included an overview of possibilities for further (formal) qualification in interpreting and sketched ways into paid work.

Lowering expectations is a technique for managing the relationship between volunteers and the institution that works in both directions. Briefing a new volunteer includes explaining that neither compensation in terms of privileged treatment as a client by the CC (even if it is, in fact, conceded) nor job opportunities (usually also de facto excluded, see above) may be expected. But talking about volunteers' work performance (e.g. in staff meetings) also means taking into account their individual needs and not taking their workforce for granted. Moreover, it is not assumed that volunteer work happens out of pure altruism. A commonsensical conviction I encountered on various occasions was that no one would work without the expectation of gaining something in return. Volunteer work is organised in a highly reflective manner and I should note here that great efforts are made by staff to level many of the described asymmetries that derive from their precarious situation as asylum seekers and the reproduction of this situation in work relationships. At the same time, the very practice of appointing asylum seekers as

volunteer interpreters is connected to contingent institutional and supra-institutional structures and power relations that it cannot fully escape. These are, especially, the lack of financial resources accorded to language work, the legal barriers that impede asylum seekers to pursue paid work, and the discourses of willingness and integration (indirectly taken up, too, in the CC under study) targeting newcomers in Austria.

4. Analysis: volunteer interpreters making sense of their trajectories

In this section, extracts from two semi-structured interviews with volunteer interpreters are examined. The interviews were conducted in early 2018, at a time I was myself a volunteer at the CC, with informants Kourosh (in an office at the University of Vienna) and Jamal (in a room at the CC). We had known each other from quite early on in my time at the CC and they knew about me and my research (as I did about some of their issues) from our recurring chats during breaks and at social events, as well as from a more 'official' letter of information I had handed them out when we first met. The interviews were based on a number of guiding questions prepared beforehand on their experiences at and views of the CC as well as on their expectations connected to their volunteer work. Both of them, Jamal and Kourosh, were in their twenties and they had been working as interpreters (of Farsi and Farsi/Dari/Pashto) for the CC for more than a year at the moment of the interview. Their countries of origin were Iran and Afghanistan, and they both lacked the security of a final decision in their asylum procedure. The interviews were conducted in English (Kourosh) and in German and English (Jamal), the languages we would also recur to in our previous encounters. Both explicitly addressed the question of 'language choices' in the interview before I would: Kourosh asked for the interview to be conducted in English. Jamal merely asked me to acquiesce to English as a second option in case he would have trouble expressing himself in German. As I (of course) agreed to these initiatives, I encouraged Jamal (not Kourosh, since he himself was categorical about English) to switch and mix if he wanted to.

While the two participants exhibited differences in their positioning vis-à-vis the contingencies of their situation at that time, it is striking how they converge around discursive references, the sites of capital conversion they orient to, and the depiction of gatekeeping mechanisms and barriers. In what follows, salient aspects of their narrated trajectories will be presented: how they make sense of their gaining access to volunteer work which I will call here *retrospective trajectories*, the return they expect to gain from their work as well as the sites (or 'markets') where the gained 'capital' is to be converted, or *speculative trajectories*, and their constructions of a desirable, but momentarily suspended or inaccessible future, *imagined trajectories*.

4.1. Retrospective trajectories: accessing volunteer work

In the course of the interviews, Jamal and Kourosh align with distinct personae they evoke more or less explicitly. Jamal motivates and rationalises his actions with a (sometimes strategically framed) reference to qualities and practices emblematic of the discourse of 'integration' (Yeung & Flubacher, 2016) prevalent in Austria. He thereby aligns with a subject position of the Austrian migration regime, or rather with the one who knows how to navigate it (that is, fulfilling the 'expectations' of learning German, interacting with locals, being self-sufficient, etc.). Kourosh foregrounds more emphatically an intrinsically motivated

persona of a committed worker. The alignment with these personae, in Jamal's case that of the aspiring and thus compliant worker, in Kourosh's case the autonomous and intrinsically motivated worker, emerges in the way they talk about their contact with the CC and other connected actors.

The moments before and during the first contact can be analysed as a moment where their linguistic repertoires become reformulated as linguistic capital. Both narrate how their linguistic competences were subject to metalinguistic evaluation. Jamal explicitly quotes the voice of an acquaintance who helped him get the job – with her stating 'du hast eine gute Sache du verstehst Englisch' ('you have a good thing you understand English' [author's translation]). Kourosh admits his German was not 'good' at the time and adds that the CC 'really needed someone who could speak perfectly one language | that they understand | and the clients understand' – English in his case – collapsing the narrator's voice with that of the head of staff who voiced the need.

Both explicitly draw on past trajectories of work when explaining their investment in volunteer work. Jamal, for example, tells me about his work as an interpreter for the armed forces in his country of origin and frames this as 'experience', thus relevant for his skills and accumulated capital as a volunteer interpreter. In this way, he is able to deploy a stretch from his biography in the construction of himself as a skilled interpreter. Kourosh grounds his strong affection for his work in his past working life as a teacher, an attachment which he raises to a principle later in the interview: 'in every job it's important to love the job from the bottom of your heart'. Let us consider how, in [Extract 1](#), he describes his first contact with the CC (see Transcription conventions in the [appendix](#); note that the parts referred to in the analysis below are grouped in paragraphs and marked with an arrow →, for the referencing, the parts are numbered).

The short narrative in [Extract 1](#) follows a question by which I, the interviewer, make relevant an act that connects timespaces to a trajectory in the form of a narrative of how he became a volunteer in that particular NGO. He starts with a generalised description of himself invoking a persona, positively aligning with it, if not essentialising it: 'I love working | I cannot help working'. The following narrative builds on a trajectory of five

Extract 1:

-
- JO: can you tell me a bit how you came to < name of the NGO >
 KO: er I love working | I cannot help working
 < laughs >
- (1) → as I told you I started teaching at the age of fifteen | and I always stood on my own feet | my father always loved to spend money for me | but I didn't need his money | I just earned money myself | bought my cars | bought my every things myself
- (2) → when I came to Austria it was like uh seven months | that I I hadn't worked | and I was feeling ill | so I wanted to do something | I went to different places to ask for a job | they said I'm I was not allowed to work | I was only allowed to work at a hundred ten euros monthly [uhu] and nobody would give me that job
- (3) → so er at Donauinselfest < name of a festival in Vienna > two thousand sixteen [mhm] a friend of mine who was in Austria for a longer time | he said I could work voluntarily [uhu] I said | how | he said that I could work voluntarily simply | I could go to one of < names of two NGOs > places
- (2') → at that time I was living in the erm | I guess | no | I was living in < name > camp | I came to this < name of NGO > branch | because I just knew this < name of NGO > branch [uhu] very well
- (4) → I came here | and er Martin < staff-member > was there at that time [ah okay] I said I want to translate here voluntarily | he said wait a moment | I waited | and Sara < head of staff > came out [uhu] and she invited me into her office | and she said it was interesting | I said why | she said | right now we were talking in the team meeting | that we needed desperately someone to er come and | translate for us [uhu] | and you were at that | at the same time sitting outside to come and translate for us [uh < laughs >]
- (5) → so I signed the paper which is there | er | and I started work the next day
-

interconnected timespaces, which are constructed as narrative components with distinct protagonists and a plot, each with internal positioning of the protagonists vis-à-vis each other (on the level of the storyworld; Bamberg, 1997).

He starts by presenting his former self as a person who began to work early and was therefore autonomous. He then introduces his father whose love for spending money for his son somewhat contradicts the picture of the autonomous, early worker. The formulated disalignment with the role provided by the figure of the father in the storyworld, that of the pampered son, produces an alignment with the autonomous and self-sufficient persona on the interactive level of the interview (part 1). The following part (2) starts with his arrival in Austria. In contrast to (part 1), the 'I' is not working, and he expresses a strong bodily articulated stance ('ill') towards these circumstances. He introduces under-specified agents ('they', 'nobody', and a passive construction in 'I was not allowed') that prevent him from fully inhabiting the self-sufficient worker's persona he aligns with. This tension between what is presented as his essential qualities as a subject and his constraining situation is relieved at a turning point (part 3). It is nestled in part (2) both in terms of timespace and narrative linearisation, and precisely specified in terms of time and space. Rendered in reported speech, another protagonist, a friend, introduces him to the possibility of volunteer work. In this timespace, agency is returned to the 'I', as the accessibility to work is restored and seemingly barrier-free (with the use of 'simply'), with a certain range of opportunities ('one of ... places'). Returning to the framing timespace (part 2), the knowledge gained is connected to the subject's already existent knowledge of a relevant NGO, which provides the basis for contacting the CC.

The self-sufficient persona is also evoked in the way he narrates his recruitment into volunteer work: Enacting a dialogue with two staff members of the CC, he narrates the first contact with the CC when he asked to work there as a volunteer. Through the positioning of the protagonists vis-à-vis each other, the moment where his linguistic repertoire becomes a capital granting access to the desired position is rendered as a convergence of interests from the two parties of the labour relationship. This is expressed by the other party (Sara, head of staff at the CC) who tells him that his skills are strongly needed (part 4). The last point in the trajectory is made up of two actions, signing (probably the confidentiality/volunteer agreement) and starting to work (part 5), which build the passage into the present situation.

Throughout the biographical narrative in [Extract 1](#), i.e. on the level of the storyworld, he aligns with a self-sufficient, autonomous persona. This metapragmatic alignment is 'grounded' (Park, 2017, p. 25) in his biography, and coherent along his migration trajectory. The barriers experienced – not being allowed to work – are presented as external. On the level of the interview, this results in an alignment with the persona of an intrinsically motivated worker where the economic dimension is secondary. Investment in volunteer work is presented as an investment in the worker's *self*.

4.2. Speculative trajectories: sites of conversion

In the interviews, I observed orientations to not only past but also future trajectories where the participants speculate about the convertibility (and thus the values) of resources at their command. Asked about how he benefits from his work as a volunteer, Jamal names a number of resources he is able to either access or develop by virtue of his position. He

emphasises the ‘social capital’ (Bourdieu, 1986) provided to him by the NGO, by saying he had met people who would help him with his asylum procedure (I often witnessed how he would sit with one of the counsellors and discuss his case), to improve his German, to be kept busy, and to be kept updated about job opportunities. In other words, he attributes a convertibility to the social relationships he participates in and which thus form a social capital on specific ‘markets’. Besides the idea that he enjoys them in a form of ‘direct consumption’ for his individual well-being (‘being kept busy’ in order to think less about the situation and his former life in his country of origin), which he declares as his initial and primary motivation, these are all related to accessing a moral and/or legal citizenship status (the supposed institutional logics of the asylum procedure, of achieving ‘integration’) and the labour market. Jamal describes the constraints he faces in his current situation – that of a ‘prisoner’

Extract 2 (translation below):

-
- JA: (1) → also natürlich | das ist eine eine positive Punkt für mich | in meinem Interview [mhm]
 (2) → äh dass ich zeigen kann dass i | äh | ich arbeite | ich helfe ein Organisation für geflüchtete Leute | dass ich mich integriere [mhm] das ist sehr wichtig in Interviews | äh | äh dass man zeigen kann dass man äh (zu/so) viele | Freunde hat [okee] Freunde zum Beispiel Österreicher oder Österreicherinnen [mhm] kennen lernen
 (3) → ähm das ist auch wichtig wenn du ehrenamtlich irgendwo arbeitest [mhm] | ähm (()) auch zeigen kann dass | dass ich eine Bestätigung habe dass ich für einem Jahr | oder ein und halb Jahr hier gearbeitet habe [mhm] ja
 JO: (4) → woher weißt du dass das wichtig ist | fragen die danach | oder äh | hast du das gehört
 JA: ich hab das gehört [okee] von den Beamten [mhm] offizielle Beamten | auch von dem Leute | private Leute [mhm] auf dem Straße oder (irgendwo) woanders | das ist sehr wichtig [mhm] ja
 JO: (5) → und ähm fragen sie danach dann im Interview oder
 JA: ja die fragen auch [okee] was du arbeitest | oder was | äh wo verbringst du dein Zeit [mhm] äh | zum Beispiel die türkische Leute sind in eim Grupp [mhm] (()) sie sind | die arbeiten miteinander | und die sprechen | die haben Sitzungen | die sind in einem Grupp | und die Afghanen sind in einem Grupp | keine Integration [mhm] ähm raus von diesem Grupp zu gehen | mit anderen Leuten zu äh arbeiten | und äh deswegen das ist sehr wichtig für die Österreich | dass solche Gruppen äh nicht | die die brauchen nicht solche Gruppen | die wollen dass die Leute äh | die da sind äh | können mit Österreicher | können mit andere Leute äh | arbeiten | wohnen | das ist eine Integration für die Österreicher [mhm] und das ist sehr wichtig von für BFA und äh diesen Beamten [mhm] ja
 (6) → da können wir äh auch spre Sprache verbessern | da können wir besser leben | äh auch besser lernen | über den Kultur in Österreich | über den Religion | über den Frei Freizeit äh sache | über den Allgemein [mhm] mhm]
 (7) → die die können auch also die die Referenten schauen was du für Bestätigungen haben | was hast du ähm ähm gearbeitet | äh ehrenamtlich | wo bist du angemeldet in einem Sportverein | oder in einem Sprachkurs [mhm] ja
 JA: (1) → *well of course | that is a positive point for me | in my interview [uhu]*
 (2) → *er that I can show that I | er | I work | I help an organisation for refugees | that I integrate myself [uhu] | that is very important in interviews | er | er that one can show that one has (too/so) many friends [okay] | friends for example to meet Austrians < masculine > or Austrians < feminine > [uhu]*
 (3) → *erm it is also important when you work somewhere as a volunteer [uhu] | erm (()) can show that | that I have a certificate that I worked here for one year | or one and a half year [uhu] yes*
 JO: (4) → *from where do you know that this is important | do they ask about it | or er | have you heard about it*
 JA: *I have heard it [okay] | from the civil servants [uhu] official civil servants | also from the people | private people [uhu] on the street or (somewhere) somewhere else | this is very important [uhu] yes*
 JO: (5) → *and erm then they ask about it in the interview right*
 JA: *yah they also ask you [okay] what you are working | or what | er where you pass your time [mhm] er | for example the Turkish people are in a group [uhu] | (()) they are | they work with each other | and they talk | they have meetings | they are in a group | and the Afghans are in a group | no integration [uhu] | erm to go out of this group | er work with other people and er therefore it is very important for the Austria < Austrians? > | that such groups er not | they do not need such groups | they want that the people er | who are here er | can with Austrians | can with other people er | work | cohabit | that is an integration for the Austrians [uhu] | and that is also very important for the BFA and er this civil servant [uhu] yes*
 (6) → *we can also improve our language there | we can live better there | er also learn better | about the culture in Austria | about the religion | about the free free time er thing | about the general [uhu uhu]*
 (7) → *they they can also well the the caseworkers look what kind of certificates you have | what you have erm erm worked | er honorarily | where you are enrolled in a sports club | or in a language course [uhu] yes*
-

–, concluding that the way out, to a ‘good life’, would be to receive asylum and to work independently (by which he means working as an entrepreneur/freelancer). When I ask him if this has something to do with his work at the CC, he answers as follows, describing the ‘market’ of citizenship, in [Extract 2](#).

In [Extract 2](#), he replies by saying that his volunteer work is a ‘positive point’, thereby recontextualising it as value in a logic of calculus (part 1). He names the ‘market’ (Bourdieu, 1986) where the value is to be attributed and, ideally, converted: the ‘interview’ – which is the widespread term for the asylum hearing. He then (part 2) enumerates the valued qualities a subject aspiring to acquire the right to abode must present: to be working, to make an effort for integration. This is something one has to ‘show’ to the caseworker; in terms of agency it is clear that this is not conceptualised as an exchange between equals, which betrays the logic of a rational calculation between investment and return invoked before. He adds that the value of volunteer work also receives an institutionalised form (see, also, Bourdieu, 1986, p. 285): the certificate (part 3). I ask him about his source of knowledge and he indicates both an authoritative source from the centre of value creation (the civil servant) and peripheral sources (part 4), evoking the circulation of that knowledge. In the next turn (part 5), I ask him if the caseworkers ask about it (unspecified) in the asylum hearing, to which Jamal replies by indirectly quoting two questions, the first referring again to work, the second, in a parallel construction, to leisure time. What follows rationalises the logic implicated in these questions, by deducing them from an evaluative stance against ethnically segregated groups taken by ‘Austria(ns)’, before he transposes this external stance in a logic of self-improvement or self-regimentation (part 6). Finally, he reaffirms the value of certificates as institutionalised forms of prior trajectories, which are bundled and projected to be convertible in the asylum procedure (part 7). The asylum procedure is thus oriented to as a centre where trajectories of resources and people intersect (or not, Heller, 2011, p. 10), i.e. where capital conversion is supposed to happen, though its success remains uncertain.

4.3. Imagined trajectories

What is particular about what I termed here as an imagined trajectory (see also Steen, 2012) is that this is even more radically conditioned than speculative trajectories which lead to uncertain future events of exchange. It is less an object of calculated speculation (which of course may not be successful as well) than the former. Even if it seems to follow from the constructed subject position, it is in the current conditions that it becomes an unreachable course of action, as the agency of the subject is momentarily suspended. It positions the subject as separable from the constraining environment. Let us consider [Extract 3](#), where I ask Kourosh about his plans or expectations for the (then) year to come.

As a reply to my question, in [Extract 3](#) Kourosh denies the availability of a trajectory as an interpretive device. Being dependent on the (positive) outcome of his asylum procedure (part 1), he positions himself by invoking the picture of ‘dangling in the air’, which constitutes a timespace of insecure temporality and locality, through which a bodily, affective positioning towards this lack of agency is achieved. In a hypothetical manner, he develops an imagined trajectory under favourable conditions which at the moment do not apply (part 2), a sort of alternative chronotope where he inhabits the role of a teacher (working for the Stadtschulrat [‘Schools Council’], a municipal authority

Extract 3:

-
- JO: what do you envision for this year for your work | or what do you expect
- KO: (1) → I can't expect anything [mhm] right now I'm dangling in the air | in the middle of air and earth | because I don't have my positive so far [mhm] I don't know what's going to happen
- (2) → if I had received my positive a year ago | exactly a year ago when I started working at Stadtschulrat | now I would be a teacher | a full time teacher there [yah] with full salary
- (3) → but I'm still there with this voluntary system | erm I can't expect anything for my tomorrow even | without this positive thing [mhm]
- (4) → but er if I get | or when I get my positive | the first thing I'll do is to apply at the at the school for a job [mhm] because it's a great thing | everyday from eight to one [yah] almost a full salary [yah] the evenings are fully free | and I can pass thirty ee tsee | ee cee tees [mhm] and start as an English teacher wi | who earns more [mhm] and that's what I love [mhm mhm] and Stadtschulrat is in in whole Austria | I can travel to other cities to live to | I can move to other cities | and work still in Stadtschulrat | that's a great bonus [yah yah]
- (5) → I love to work in < name of NGO > too | but I don't know if it's possible | if it's | if if | if it's acceptable for < name of NGO > | or they accept my resume or whatever | but my resume is mostly about English teaching [mhm] so that | that's a better opportunity to work at school [mhm mhm | so that is your plan]
- (6) → and working at school looks more secure for me [mhm] so there's job security there [mhm] you're not easily out of your (()) [mhm] but with < name of NGO > for example | when this project is finished | okay goodbye
-

over human resources in public schools). This role, in turn, is connected to the idealised persona of a worker with a full-time job and salary. He contrasts this chronotopical order of values and personhood with that which he – strikingly – calls the ‘voluntary system’ (part 3), wherein he places himself under the given, ‘real’ conditions. Then, he develops this alternative trajectory (part 4), which crucially involves work that yields economic capital and institutionalised cultural capital (‘ee cee tees’ probably referring to ECTS, credit points for university), but also certain freedoms and mobility as well as affective value. He then positively realigns with his role as an interpreter for the NGO (part 5), raising the issue of whether his resume would be ‘acceptable’ to work in exchange for a salary there. This indexes another order of values applying to his worker self in this imagined trajectory. Here, his resume, the institutionalised, entextualised version of his work trajectory, gains importance, which calls into question whether he fits the position. Moreover, in this alternative timespace, what currently is a factor of stability, the work at the NGO, becomes a rather instable one (part 6). With his legal position secured and the labour market accessible, it is the precarious working environment provided by the NGO – the fact that employees’ job security depends on a project-based funding of the CC – which he hesitates to align with.

The introduction of an imagined chronotope produces two trajectories with orders radically opposed in terms of value, which offer him diverging subject positions with a considerable difference in agency: The interpreter in the ‘volunteer system’ who cannot shape his future nor deploy his resources fully as a worker versus the teacher in a regularised employment which allows for optimal conversion of capital, and who enjoys mobility, good salary and free time. The imagined trajectory of the teacher is suspended, as its realisation depends on the outcome of the asylum procedure, difficult to plan, yet still part of the construction of the interviewee’s self and agency.

5. At the margins of ‘work’ and ‘citizenship’

The analyses above show that the interviewed volunteers draw on trajectories co-constructed in narrative as ‘interpretive devices’ (see introduction to this issue) to make sense about their present and future, especially in terms of agency. This includes the

reference (1) to past events and selves in order to legitimise skills or maintain a subject position in adverse circumstances, (2) to anticipated moments of conversion where speculation allows for some form of precarious agency, i.e. trying to play 'the game' (in Bourdieu's terms, 1998) and (3) to the invocation of imagined trajectories, which allow to perform a subject within a suspended – i.e. not applicable under current conditions, yet still effective – order one aspires to. In the third type of trajectory, the subject's agency is imagined as separated from the current, constraining conditions. But to say that this trajectory is 'imagined' does not mean that it only reflects some internal state of mind of the interviewed, this is not simply an 'escape from reality'. Rather than as an individual 'coping strategy', I suggest that this is to be read as indexically linked to the situated political-economic conditions in Austria. In this sense, both the speculative and the imagined trajectories alike show that these volunteers think of themselves as workers and citizens-to-be. This is also revealing as to the orders of social value that are projected to offer available subject positions once the asylum procedure is over (in these cases that of a full-time worker in a public school or an entrepreneur).

The value(s) of volunteer work as constructed in the interviews (leaving aside those more related to self-care, as keeping themselves busy), are by far no single, individual cases. A number of distributors of information for asylum seekers and refugees in Austria (e.g. Fonds Soziales Wien, 2019), as well as the state institution regimenting and evaluating recognised refugees' (performance of) integration (the ÖIF 'Austrian Integration Fund'), ascribe the same benefits – contact with locals and language learning – to volunteer work, as seen in the statement 'Voluntary work in an association or organisation can help you get to know people in Austria. This can be a good way to improve and practice your German skills', from a learning application by the ÖIF, section 'cultural integration' (see Österreichischer Integrationsfonds, 2017). There is a striking convergence in the wording between the various entextualisations of these values. This aspect needs to be explored further, but in connection with the analyses above, we can infer: Asylum seekers who do not yet have, and maybe never will, access to a stabilised legal status in Austria are already inserted into a subjectivating logic that interpellates them (Butler, 1997) as 'citizens-' and workers-to-be (the 'not-yet' part is crucial). This logic draws on discourses of 'integration' (through language, self-responsibilisation, etc.) characteristic of neoliberalising discourses of migration in Europe (Yeung & Flubacher, 2016). It is enforced by its institutionalisation in the asylum procedure and reproduced by surrounding institutions, including those where the volunteering happens.

The institution of the CC assumes an ambivalent role in facilitating and constraining the various trajectories. As shown in the analyses, they are providers of access to different forms of capital, in the forms of networks, certificates, experiences, etc., that may (or may not) be convertible into other forms of capital – symbolic capital on the citizenship market and economic on the labour market. They provide thus a perspective onto the future, a position imbued with recognisable (yet insecure) value on multiple scales (personal well-being, job opportunities, contacts, etc.). But in doing so, they also reproduce the system that instantiates the insecure conditions in the first place, namely the specific workings of the asylum procedure and the related discourses of 'integration' that set and circulate the social value(s) of volunteering. Moreover, the discourses of integration, work and citizenship also reproduce the volunteers' marginality, and the uncertain value(s) of volunteering are in great part dependent on subjection to the values circulated

in these discourses, which also appear in the narratives analysed above: socialising with Austrians, learning German, being economically independent, etc. Volunteers draw on these 'activating' values in their positioning and ground their agency in this positioning, thereby being disciplined (Del Percio, 2016) as 'good citizens', in an act of speculation, while the space for the subject's present and future agency – and the value of any investment – is very much constrained by the asylum procedure. The CC is – to a certain degree and despite the emancipative stance taken – part of this system as it offers to institutionalise the capital gained from investing in volunteer work in the form of certificates. Under the unstable financial conditions of institutionalised refugee aid explicitly alluded to in one interview (see [Extract 3](#) in Section 4.3), interpreting and other language work – which is crucial to many of the services offered – is left to unpaid workers, positions filled prevalently by those who, as asylum seekers, lack access to paid work, and who, in turn, happen to be recruited from the target group of the very same services. This results in an off-loading of parts of the welfare services to those who are also its recipients, in a mode of *governmental precarisation* (Lorey, 2012), i.e. the intertwined working of state governance and self-regimentation by establishing and maintaining a situation of precarity of the subjects. The analysis of the volunteers' narrated trajectories has contributed to making visible how the interviewees invest in the institutionalised logics of citizenship exclusion to which they are subjected. It offers an example of how language and labour become intertwined in the discursive regimentation of displaced peoples' transnational trajectories in present-day Europe.

Note

1. System of social benefits specifically addressing asylum seekers, persons under subsidiary protection and persons who received a negative decision but cannot be expelled (see Fonds Soziales Wien, 2018, May 30). Recognised refugees are entitled to the benefits of the general welfare system.

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Appendix: Transcription conventions

	(rhythmic) boundary/boundary of turn constructional unit
[mhm]	intra-turn activities of the other participant
< ... >	omission
< description >	a comment/description of anonymised information
(())	incomprehensible
(word)	inferred wording
(too/so)	alternative interpretation