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Citizenship as a gift: how Syrian refugees in Belgium make sense of their social rights.

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Abstract

While citizenship scholars have documented the increasing moralisation of immigration policies, relatively few have explored how immigrants themselves make sense of their (partial) membership of the host society. Drawing on semi-structured interviews and participant observation with Syrian refugees, this article documents how they interpret and act upon the partial and limited citizenship status they are given in Belgium. We focus on one dimension of their experiences: their stigmatic dependency upon the Belgian welfare state. While their accounts can be partly understood as reproducing neoliberal discourses, we argue that they are also a strategic reaction against the dependency that is inadvertently created by European welfare states. From our respondents' perspectives, their social rights thus appear not so much as entitlements to be claimed, but as a continuation of the humanitarian logic of the (unreciprocated) gift.

Key words: stigma; welfare; social rights; refugees; morality; gift; humanitarianism.

Introduction

Over the past fifteen years, European welfare states have increasingly moralised the conditions to acquire citizenship (Fassin & Mazouz 2007; Geddes & Scholten 2016; Joppke 2007; Monforte et al 2018; Schinkel & Van Houdt 2010). Tests have been put in place to assess immigrants' knowledge of local customs, their language proficiency, achievements on the labour market and their affective and existential affiliation to the host society (de Wilde 2015; Raco 2009; Van Puymbroeck et al 2014). Their rights to residence, work, education and a wider range of welfare arrangements partly depend upon their compliance with these tests, immigrants are expected to 'earn' their citizenship by behaving and feeling in morally proper ways. In this sense many immigrants are semizens, with their status pending between inclusion as citizens (e.g. native-born nationals), and exclusion as denizens (e.g. undocumented migrants). This development has been commonly understood as a neoliberal citizenship regime imposing two sets of demands on immigrants: cultural assimilation (accepting and adopting the alleged norms and values of the host society) and economic self-reliance (producing their own income rather than receiving social benefits).

But how do immigrants themselves make sense of their status as semizens? Most citizenship scholars have concentrated on either the state and its policies, (Joppke 2007; Schinkel 2010; Schinkel & Van Houdt 2010), or on the more activist immigrants that assert their claims to citizenship (Isin 2008; Rygiel & Nyers 2012). The few studies that have explored the perspectives of more 'ordinary' semizens in the particular context of European states,[i] seem to suggest that they adopt and reproduce the latter's neoliberal discourses. Monique Kremer (2016), for instance, documented how a significant portion of immigrants in the Netherlands, prefer to 'earn' their social rights over time, rather than receive them immediately as an unconditional right. Similarly, Pierre Montforte and his colleagues (2018) have demonstrated how immigrants awaiting the UK 'citizenship test' reproduce distinctions between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' Others. The dominant interpretation, is that immigrants thereby discipline themselves through "techniques of the self" (Foucault 2009) into a discourse of deservingness.

In this article we want to contribute to this line of research by complicating it. Drawing on in-depth interviews with Syrian refugees in Belgium, we argue that immigrants' perspectives should not be reduced too easily to *mere* reproductions of a neoliberal, state-centred discourse. There is an underlying risk in critical interpretations such as these to conceive immigrants' 'bottom-up' perspectives as a contemporary form of 'false consciousness' that primarily serves to discipline them into obedience. While we do not contend the pervasive power of these neoliberal discourses, we think it is crucial to take immigrants' perspectives more seriously. From their point of view, the battle

they are fighting is one of regaining their independence from the state, and restoring their dignity as capable social agents. To them, the social rights provided by the state appear as a 'gift' that cannot be reciprocated. Adopting this people-centred perspective does not mean that we need to relinquish a critical stance towards the state and its policies. It simply means that we need to turn our attention to different aspects of how it regulates its relation with immigrants. European citizenship regimes, that is, do not only provide ever more limited and conditional rights to immigrants: they also, inadvertently, put immigrants into a position of dependency as their practical access to work, housing and social networks remains hampered.

Citizenship as a gift, or: the persistence of humanitarian reason

In studies of humanitarianism, aid is often perceived as a gift that cannot be reciprocated. Doctors, nutritionists and camp managers control the material and legal resources refugees are lacking: they allocate shelter, distribute medicine and food, and can move freely between places. Especially in camps, refugees' dependence on aid providers is further intensified by the fact that they usually have limited access to work, education or health care. As a result, refugees are put in a position from where it is difficult to reciprocate the 'gift' of humanitarian aid by, for instance, contributing to the camp or host society economically, socially or culturally (Fassin 2011; Harrell-Bond 1986, 1999, 2002; Indra 1993; Rozakou 2012, 2016). Instead, they are expected to behave as needy, grateful and obedient victims, rather than agents taking control over their own lives (Agier 2011; Cabot 2013; Malkki 1996; Moulin 2012). In this sense, the relations between providers and recipients of aid have something in common with those between European welfare states and their immigrants: the more powerful actor imposes a series of more or less implicit moral expectations on the less powerful one. Thus aid recipients and immigrants are expected to behave in 'proper' ways, as a result of their position of dependency.

In spite of this shared moral economy, the logics of humanitarianism and neoliberalism diverge on two crucial points. First, humanitarian settings tend to stimulate and prolong dependency, whereas neoliberal citizenship regimes attempt to increase economic self-sufficiency. While refugees of course never lose their capacity to act as resourceful agents (Ek 2009; Sigona 2015), most humanitarian environments have the effect of discouraging them to take control over their own lives. Recipients are expected to behave as 'speechless emissionaries' of their suffering, rather than capable social agents. Champions of neoliberal policies, by contrast, attempt to reduce individuals' dependency on the state and its social benefits through a range of measures rewarding and sanctioning their success on the labour market. Second, humanitarianism tends to feed into segregation, whilst neoliberal citizenship regimes try to enforce cultural assimilation. Humanitarian interventions such as refugee camps are more often than not designed to "contain" displaced persons, separating them spatially, socially and legally from the host society as long and as effectively as possible (Agier 2011; McKonnachie 2016). European welfare states, by contrast, try to assimilate immigrants into an imaginary nation through a shared set of norms and values (Schinkel 2010; Schinkel & Van Houdt 2010). In short while humanitarianism has the tendency to produce dependency and segregation, neoliberalism focuses on generating champions of self-sufficiency and assimilation.

In the few studies that examined immigrants perspectives on their citizenship status, scholars have mainly emphasised how immigrants' discourses of deservingness and 'earning' citizenship seem to reproduce neoliberal discourses of self-sufficiency, assimilation and obedience (Fassin & Mazouz 2007; Kremer 2016; Monforte et al 2018). In this article, we both provide further evidence for this claim, whilst complicating it. Taking immigrants' own accounts seriously, we argue that they cannot be reduced to a slavish reproduction of neoliberal discourses. From their perspective, citizenship appears primarily as a continuation of the humanitarian logic of the (unreciprocated) gift. Their social rights, defined here as the access to welfare arrangements such as social benefits, health care, child care, social housing and general well-being services (Morris 2009; Nash 2010), are experienced as stigmatic forms of support that turn them into unworthy subjects depending on the state. Although the discourses and strategies our respondents use fit within neoliberal discourses, they also indicate that their struggle for agency and independence is rooted in their own expectations of personal reciprocity and informal solidarity, and in the culturally specific repertoires of hospitality and dignity they have at their disposal.

First, our respondents frequently underlined their difficulties with the formalistic nature of social citizenship in Belgium. By applying for asylum in Belgium, Syrian refugees entered a welfare state where most forms of solidarity and help are regulated through a series of fixed criteria and rights, decided upon by politicians and administrators, and executed by a wide range of professional institutions and street-level bureaucrats. Asylum seekers are thus entitled to accommodation in a collective centre or social housing and to professional socio-juridical assistance, whilst recognised refugees are entitled to social benefits, language education and, in most cases, job training and education. This type of indirect, impersonal solidarity is characteristic for most West-European welfare states and the social rights they produce (Albertini & Semprebon 2018; Stjerno 2009). Yet, our respondents frequently emphasised they preferred to rely on informal social networks, both by comparing reliance on the welfare state metaphorically to kinship-based solidarity, and by actively seeking out informal social support as a practical strategy to address their needs, even when they had formal social rights at their disposal. This was particularly evident in their accounts of interactions with social workers – where they expected social assistants to act as friends or friends of friends – and, to a lesser degree, in their accounts of receiving social benefits.

Second, and perhaps more structurally, there is a crucial difference between neoliberal discourses and the practical regulations between the political community and its semizens. In its discourse, European states increasingly emphasise that immigrants need to provide their own income and assimilate to local customs and habits. In practice, immigrants' access to work, education, housing and social life is obstructed by a wider range of implicit barriers (Morris 2010). If that is the case, the social rights immigrants are given, can appear as a gift that cannot be reciprocated. Hence their

discourses emphasising their work ethos and denouncing dependency upon the state are not necessarily or exclusively a product of neoliberal discourse, they are also created by how citizenship regimes practically function.

Through the eyes of our respondents, then, citizenship appears as a continuation of the humanitarian logic of the (unreciprocated) gift. From their perspective, this conception of citizenship serves two purposes. One the one hand, it serves as a discursive strategy to portray themselves as honourable, well-intending individuals, rather than passive victims. And on the other, it serves as a practical strategy to take back agency over their own lives, out of the hands of the hosting and disciplining state. In the remainder of this article, we first describe our data and methods, before substantiating our argument by describing Syrians' discourses on social benefits and professional social assistance, and by subsequently detailing their strategies to undo their dependency upon them.

1. Data and Methods

This article draws upon 26 interviews with 39 respondents who had applied for asylum in Belgium after the summer of 2011. All interviews were conducted between February 2015 and March 2016 by the main author. Respondents were recruited through a variety of channels, and were selected so as to maximize variation in terms of legal position, socioeconomic background, ethnic-religious affiliation and, to a lesser extent, gender.[ii] Most importantly, these interviews were as open as possible: people joined and left throughout the conversations (hence the difference between the number of interviews and the number of respondents), and the main author maintained regular informal contacts with about a dozen of the respondents.

The encounters took place where and when it suited the respondents best, which ranged from the interviewer's home to that of the respondents, reception centres, public coffee and tea houses, parks, university buildings and the offices of civil organizations. After a brief introduction, conversations began with a general sketch of the research, after which respondents were simply asked how things were going at that particular point in time. About one-third of the respondents then immediately engaged in quite elaborate talks and discussions, on whatever topic came up, as well as on issues the interviewer brought up because they had emerged in earlier talks with other respondents.

Respondents who did not spontaneously engage in elaborate discourses were asked to discuss a limited part of their 'life histories', from leaving their homes in Syria up until the here and now (Ghorashi 2008; Hamblin and Al-Sarraf 2010). The issue of welfare dependency resurfaced in the interviews even though the questions were not framed using moral terms such as dignity, worthiness or justice. Instead, respondents were asked how they experienced their residence in Belgium at different points in time, and from which persons or institutions they received support.

Lastly, we want to explain why we have chosen to discuss the two particular social rights of social benefits and professional assistance. There are three reasons for this. First, in contrast with other social rights such as unemployment benefits, pensions or social housing, they are among the few rights that refugees effectively can take up. The Belgian welfare state is a combination of a mainly contributory system of work-based social insurance (which provides 'unemployment benefits') and a non-contributory system of social benefits (or a 'living allowance'). To be entitled to unemployment benefits one has to fulfil the general conditions of eligibility such as waiting periods and minimal contributions, which basically means that refugees can only become eligible through sustained periods of work (Mussche et al. 2014). Arguably the most important social right for recognised refugees are hence social benefits (or a 'living allowance'), which are not work related, and provides them with a minimum wage in a period in which they are unlikely to find a job.

Second, refugees' access to social rights is mediated through formal encounters with professional assistants, most of whom are social workers employed by either local, regional or national government agencies or an NGO. From this perspective, it makes sense to study Syrian refugees' experiences of their social rights by focusing on social benefits and their encounters with professional assistants. Third, these two welfare arrangements were among the most frequent topics to emerge from the interviews. As stated above, these interviews did not explicitly focus on receiving benefits or interactions with social workers, but on Syrians' overall experiences of their lives in Belgium. Most of our respondents expressed their frustrations with being unable to find work. Instead of gaining independence, they felt they were being disciplined into dependency, by taking up social benefits and by obediently following the instructions of professional social assistants.

2. Social rights as gifts

2.1 Social Benefits

Like most Belgian citizens, recognised refugees are entitled to a number of social benefits funded by the Federal government. One of these, the so-called living allowance ('leefloon') consists of 833 euros per month per single person, although this amount is higher if the recipient is the main carer for his or her children, and decreases if (s)he is living together with individuals also receiving benefits, or receiving other types of income. The local social services distributing the allowance repeatedly check whether recipients are effectively entitled to them. If they have other, unreported sources of income, do not search for employment, refuse job openings or fail to learn Dutch, their benefits can be suspended. As in other West-European countries, the general political climate has become increasingly restrictive, with many politicians pleading for a tougher stance on welfare and immigration (Verhoeven & Tonkens 2013; Jorgensen et al 2016; Van Puymbroeck et al 2014). For a considerable number of Syrian refugees, receiving such benefits was experienced as a demeaning, stigmatising experience (Goffman 1973; Rogers-Dillon 1995). In one of our very first interviews, Ahmad, a young Syrian man who interrupted his university studies, expressed his experiences of receiving these benefits in the first few months after being granted refugee status:

> Ahmad: That time I was really feeling a loser. I felt like I didn't have any future. Like I cannot stand up again and build a new future, ever. That that was in my mind. I came to Europe, okay, it ends here, you will take your help, your, money 800 euro from OCMW (The municipal centre for social well-being that provides social benefits), or whatever, and pay your rent, and you sleep and you eat. And that's it, that's the end. Here you will die. And you kill me and you are really killing me if you give me money without nothing. (pause) Yeah, that means an income without heart, without work.
>
> Interviewer: Without putting your soul into it.
>
> Ahmad: Yes, you don't earn that money because it's not coming from heaven. It's money for someone else, and that really shocked me.

According to Khaled, a thirty-two-year-old man who used to own his own small shop, being dependent on social benefits makes some of his compatriots feel de-humanised:

> Most of the Syrian people here, they are not happy because they are taking money from OCMW. A lot of people they thought that it's easy to find work, to be independent, to have some money, to do some work. And now (pause). Sometimes, the people (pause). I was told

> by my friend: I feel like an animal, going to school, just sitting all the day. I should be working (also quoted in Author & Author, forthcoming).

It would be too easy, we think, to dismiss accounts such as these as slavish reproductions of a neoliberal discourse as deservingness. Instead, they seem to express a growing frustration with a different aspects of the Belgian citizenship regime: its dependency-creating effects due to more structural barriers to the labour market, and an indirectly enforced reliance upon social benefits. If state-organised solidarity is perceived as a 'gift', rather than a 'right' that emancipates its rightful owner, then the latter can hardly escape feeling in an inferior position. As Marcel Mauss (2002, 15) noted a long time ago:

> What imposes obligation in the present received and exchanged, is the fact that the thing received is not inactive. Even when it has been abandoned by the giver, it still possesses something of him. Through it the giver has a hold over the beneficiary just as, being its owner, through it he has a hold over the thief.

The most logical response to such a condition would be to reciprocate this gift as soon as possible, to relieve the receiver of both his debt and his morally inferior position (cf. Bourdieu 1977). This was however improbable if not impossible for most respondents in the first few months after being granted protection, as they faced several structural barriers in finding work. While professional degradation affects many refugees in the North (Morris 2010), in Belgium access to the labour market seems particularly difficult, as it has one of the lowest employment rates of immigrants in Europe (OECD/EU 2015; Rea et al 2014). The inability to reciprocate these social benefits as 'gifts' therefore nullified respondents' dignity as moral selves:

> You need to build something for yourself you know. You can have kids and have a family but if you are living on the backs of others, you are nothing. Don't hang on the backs of the people, otherwise you will never stand up on your legs, never (Ahmad).

Some respondents contrasted their dependency on social benefits with the more personal reliance on their parents - or more precisely their fathers – which they considered more 'natural' and more easily extended in time:

> Belgium is not your father, to give you money. Really it's like this… So I'm waiting for a positive decision (on my application for asylum). After I receive a positive decision, I won't sit

> on the government. Belgium is not my father. Belgium, accepted me and protected me, so I have to work here, I have to, start my life here. Maybe I will study for myself, but in another way, I don't study on the government. The government don't pay me for studying, because Belgian people paying for study. So, if you don't have a father here, if someone, a Belgian's father and mother were dead, so he has to, work to study. So why would you come here and make the government pay for your university and for everything you want. Maybe it's because you are cheap, it's because you are cheap (Mohammad, 22-year-old single man).

The anger this last respondent expressed towards those making illegitimate use of social benefits, can be understood, on the one hand, as a speech act legitimising his own position as a refugee, simultaneously distinguishing his identity from illegitimate others (Fassin & Mazouz 2007; Kremer 2016; Monforte et al 2018; Nawyn 2011; Author & Author forthcoming…). To present themselves as 'deserving' subjects who want to work hard rather than take benefits, they strategically distinguish themselves from others. On the other hand, the fact that some respondents[iii] used the analogy of the unconditional dependency upon one's family – particularly upon one's father – seems to indicate that they use a cultural repertoire emphasising the preference of relying on family ties rather than the state for social support. This discursive strategy seems to be corroborated by their strategies to become independent from the Belgian state as quickly as possible – which we will discuss later in this paper.

Ahmad, for instance, told us how he had relied strongly upon distant relatives who had arrived in Belgium before him, which had enabled him to become independent from welfare benefits quicker than most of the refugees he had befriended since his arrival. Like many respondents, he equated self-reliance with his informal social capital:

> You need to take care of yourself. Don't rely on others. But don't look at me, I am strong one, hey! I know a lot of others.

In other cases, these (self-legitimating) boundaries were drawn on a collective level, such as that of Syrian nationality. In that case, the message was simple: others may abuse the system, but *Syrians* do not. As we have detailed elsewhere, this does seem to feed into neoliberal discourses of deservingness, distinguish more legitimate social groups from others (Author & Author). Abdullah, a thirty-two-year-old father, told us at length about households who try to increase their living allowance by pretending to be factually divorced, while in reality they are still living together. It made him sad, he said, though he was quick to emphasise that:

"Syrian people, they don't do it, because they are new here. They don't know these things. But it's some people from Iraq or other people, I don't know but I see it, I hear about it, and I feel sad about it. It's like stealing…. It's not you right to take money from other people. They need it too."

2.2 Socio-legal assistance

In Belgium, asylum seekers and recognised refugees are entitled to professional socio-legal assistance from street-level-bureaucrats (Lipsky 1980), most of whom are social workers. Some are direct representatives of the municipality or the Federal state, others are employed by social organisations. As we noted before, asylum seekers and refugees' access to social rights is usually mediated by such social workers. Crucially, more than half the respondents expressed at least one negative experience with these street-level-bureaucrats. What seemed to frustrate them especially were the bureaucratic, impersonal treatments they received (cf. Herzfeld 1992). Soraya, a thirty-three-year-old mother, recalled the difference between her teacher at school and the assistant and the municipal social services:

> Like the teacher in the school, if they saw me like, a bit tired or something like that, the teacher asked me directly what's up, are you tired? Like, she showed me that she cared about me, she was respecting and so on. So I really liked this teacher. (..) But, with the assistant, really, there was no respect at all.

As their questions were not answered and their grievances not taken seriously, Syrians often felt unable to talk among equals, something they experienced as an insult to their moral selves. Frustrations centred particularly around the hierarchy implied in any client-assistant relationship (Herzfeld 1992; Lipsky 1980). Instead of an impersonal, professionally distant treatment, Syrians expected to be treated as equals vis-à-vis the professionals helping them. Hanya, a twenty-seven year-old single woman, told us about the assistants in the accommodation centre she was staying in:

> They talk too much but they don't listen. The management in the camp is not good. They stay in their building, and they say, here it's normal, your life is normal, why do you ask so much. If we want to see the manager, it's like going to the government in Syria. It's very bad, they don't erm (pause).
>
> Interviewer: they don't listen you mean?
>
> Hanya: Yeah they're just busy go go. And they always, we tried to talk to the manager to open a different building for the children and the families. That building was empty. And they said no. But they are just working here, the manager, she has heating in her building, and she don't have to wear these clothes for three weeks. It's just where she works, she goes home. And they tell us that it's normal here, but it's not normal. It's cold. If we have to go to the toilet, we have to go outside, in the rain, 800 metre, even with children. And at night there's always noise, we can't sleep.

Yasmine, a thirty-two-year-old single woman, also *assumed equality* vis-à-vis her assistants when she talked about her experiences in an accommodation centre:

> So I told him (the assistant) just sit, like friends, on the floor okay, and talk together, and just have, this once, every time with every person, and I am here, if you need me for translate, and he said okay thank you, for telling me this, but he did not do it.

When social assistants were appreciated, however, this also usually had a lot to do with interactional forms and courtesy. To some asylum seekers who had only just arrived in Belgium, this seemed even more important than assistants' ability to effectively help them with their problems and queries (e.g. housing, legal advice, access to medical care, etc). In other words, when assistants moved away from their professional role by acting more informally, they were appreciated most by our respondents. As Abdul, a thirty-four-year-old father of three, told us: "the assistant treated me and my family really good. Even when we left, four days ago, some of the assistants, they were almost crying because we left. They were respectful, they had smiling faces, all the time."
A family that was dispersed over different municipalities compared their assistants:

> Interviewer: And how is the relation with assistants?
> Translator: they say that it's a cold relationship.
> Respondent: Europi! (laughs)
> Translator: They're not too enthusiastic about their work you know, this is for you, this is for me, okay, go, that's it.
> T (translating for another respondent): here, they say the assistant came to the house and visited them. Yeah, it was very good, she asked how are you, what do you want, if you need to something to be fixed let me know.

These examples show that many Syrians feel their social subjectivities are misrecognised or suspended by receiving formalised help. The welfare state's formal solidarity appears as an 'equaliser' erasing nearly all individual qualities and group identities: irrespective of who you are, what your moral qualities are, you are taken to be the same as others when receiving help from the welfare state. Their capacities as individuals, and characteristics as group members of families, ethno-national or religious groups suddenly became irrelevant. Even though receiving benefits and professional help are, of course, more widely experienced as a stigma (Rogers-Dillon 1995), it seems plausible that these stigmatic experiences are intensified when individuals perceive the welfare state

through the perspective of personal reciprocity. Many of our Syrian respondents indeed had high hopes for a more personal kind of solidarity – in line with the unwritten rationale that any help given now, will be returned to the giver in the long run (Mauss 2002). The support they received from professional, salaried social assistants, however, emerged as hard if not impossible to reciprocate, leaving them with the stigma of depending on an organisation, rather network of friends and family.

3. Strategic responses to stigmatic experiences

3.1 Strategic responses to welfare dependency

In line with our argument that welfare dependency creates an asymmetrical power relation between giver and receiver, some of our respondents' actions and reactions can be understood as strategies to subvert or change this power-less, dominated position. Most strikingly, their perspectives on receiving social benefits fed into an 'aspirational' ethic (Raco 2009) commanding them to find work as soon as possible. In their first few months after arrival in Belgium, most Syrians wanted to accept any job they could possibly exert, regardless of the socio-professional status, income, or career opportunities it would give them. The main imperative was to become independent from the benefits they felt they did not deserve – an attitude confirmed by several of the social assistants we interviewed. As Mohammad put it:

> When you start to look for a job of course you will find one. But you're not the president to walk into a high place. You can start from a restaurant, you can start from a supermarket. Of course, if you are a man you can find a job. You can clean bathroom in the train stations. You saw that Turkish man that was cleaning the train station? They clean it every day. Are you better than them? You can make it, you can work too.

Mustafa, a forty-year-old single man, told us that:

> I know my Dutch, is not bad, but it's not perfect. I was a bus driver in Syria, but I have to start a new life here. I won't have a job like my job in Syria, so I will do everything. Heavy work is no problem. It's important that I work.

This desire for *any* kind of income-generating work, confirms earlier research demonstrating that most immigrants favour what Kremer (2016, 408) described as 'earned citizenship'. "Work, above all, is seen as a condition for receiving social security benefit or provisions, because then you have paid tax. You have to 'earn' social citizenship". This is strongly in line with neoliberal discourses on the virtualization or moralization of citizenship, in which social rights are made dependent upon performances on the labour market (Schinkel & Van Houdt 2010; Schinkel 2010). Syrians have probably at least partly adopted this discourse, reproducing it in their encounters with any Belgians. In combination with the structural barriers on the labour market, the urge to become economically independent as quickly as possible, however, led to a problem 3 to 5 years after their arrival. Many had often began working in the lower strata of the labour market (e.g. in the social economy, or following short-term technical training) as soon as they could. After a few years, however, these men

and women found themselves stuck in these lower strata with few if any prospects of climbing higher up the social ladder. This would require further language training so as to be able to follow more specialised university, college or vocational certificates. Since by then they had already been in Belgium for several years - years which they often felt were 'lost' – they unsurprisingly became demotivated and disappointed. In such cases, Syrians' short-term moral strategies to undo their dependency as soon as possible, ultimately left them in a lower labour market position.

3.2 Strategic responses to socio-legal assistance

These experiences fed into a combination of shame and anger, as Syrians were expecting more personal forms of interaction, in which they felt treated as equals. As a result, most seemed reluctant to visit assistants and professional organisations (both civil and state-led) unless they absolutely needed to. A chasm emerged between professional assistants and Syrians: the former felt that they ought to respond only to questions explicitly posed by clients, whereas Syrians had soon taught themselves that professional assistants were salaried bureaucrats that needed to be approached with scepticism. Respondents who had been in Belgium for a longer period (from approximately 6 months onwards) sometimes even overdid the professional, reserved character of their interaction with assistants. Khaled, for instance, described his relation with his social assistant from the OCMW as "good. Or let say it's normal: I have to do this and that, and she asks, I answer, she asks, I answer, nothing more.

Syrians thus consulted local social services to ask for the social benefits they were entitled to, yet they refrained from discussing, for instance, psychosocial problems, housing problems or general legal queries – even though assistants, generally expecting to 'help' clients, were often surprised to learn of these problems only after a few months, usually by accident. Soraya told us of a girl in her reception centre who suffered several times from panic attacks and hyperventilation. After she and her family were given a separate room on the doctor's advice, her parents refused to bring her to a psychologist or therapist, arguing that nothing was 'wrong' with their daughter. According to this respondent, the family experienced this professional help as a humiliating indication that they had failed as parents. Similarly, Hassan was initially given a place in a collective reception centre, but moved out after only a few hours, without awaiting a first 'in-take' conversation with his social assistant to inform him about the application procedure and his rights throughout the process. He learned only afterwards that by permanently leaving the centre on his own accord, he had lost all rights to material or immaterial support for as long as his application was pending. On arrival in Belgium, he did not distinguish between the different government agencies (e.g. those that were

assisting and supporting them, like Fedasil; and those with a policing, disciplinary function, such as the Immigration Office). It seems likely that most Syrians continued to follow a principle that makes sense in a land ruled by a dictatorial regime: only trust those you know personally.

To circumvent their dependency on professional assistants, Syrian refugees engaged in two types of strategies: developing trust relations with others, and engaging in (informal) volunteering work. First, some respondents tried to overcome these unworthy dependencies on professionals by developing informal rapports. Especially the most socially and linguistically skilled of the respondents succeeded in building trust relations with others, largely by convincing others of their trustworthiness. Crucially they were developing reciprocal bonds in which, over time, they were more equal than in clientassistant relationships.

Some respondents, for instance, claimed to be able to convince potential landlords by meeting them in person. Against the background of a very small low-budget rental market, a shortage of social housing, and a certain degree of ethnic prejudice. they relied upon individual social skills to convince potential landlords that they were 'genuine' persons unlike the foreigners landlords seemed to fear:

> I got lucky, and the third one (I contacted) was a nice guy. I think he liked me, and I liked him, so he give me the apartment. First he was saying no, but when I spoke with him, and I went to drink a coffee with him, he said okay. He said you're a nice guy, with your wife and your daughter. And I think maybe it was also because my wife did not wear a hijab, I think.

In a variant on the same trust-building strategy, Syrians relied less on individual capacities, and more on membership of a collective entity such as families, ethnicity or region – a particular form of social capital (Author, forthcoming; Ryan 2011; Williams 2005). Some respondents were able to borrow money from friends, neighbours or colleagues of distant family members. What seemed crucial here, was that the honour of the family would ensure that those lending money or doing someone a favour would be repaid some time in the future. It would therefore not be 'individuals but collectivities that impose[d] obligations of exchange and contract upon each other' (Mauss 2002, p6).

Besides developing necessary social ties to solve their problems, our Syrian respondents also relied upon a second strategy to repair the injuries inflected by their dependency: helping others needier than themselves. They did so by either volunteering in a professional Belgian organisation, or by providing informal help and advice to other (Syrian) refugees or homeless persons. While most respondents had not systematically been involved in such help in their lives before, it now seemed a very logical way of proceeding. Several respondents commented upon their volunteering work as doing something *for someone else.* Youssef, a twenty-two-year-old single man, told us:

> I'm just used to be active all the time, yeah there is no, official work yet so, I'm still young, so I can do something. I also get a living allowance from the OCMW, which is for nothing. So it's a very good idea to help people. We get money from the government, so yeah, we have to, do a part, for someone else.

Again, such reactions can be considered to fulfil a double moral-social function. Firstly, they restored respondents' self-esteem and self-worth by making them feel worthy of receiving assistance (and benefits, as we will see), as they are giving something back. Helping others returns them to normal social intercourse, thereby denying or subverting their position of mere dependency on state institutions. One person, for instance, who was assigned to a reception centre, soon left and went to stay with his brother who had migrated to Belgium before. Crucially, however, he continued to volunteer each week in the reception centre – while his own case was being processed, he was helping out others in a similar socio-legal position. By doing so, he reversed the social role of mere recipient imposed upon him by the provision of assistance, shelter and food (Author 2017).

Secondly, helping others allowed these Syrian men and women to acquire a better, less subordinate social position, i.e. to acquire a certain degree of power over others, precisely by taking responsibility towards them (Bauman 1991). For at least some respondent, helping others was not so much a value in itself, but rather about making themselves less dependent and stronger vis-à-vis others. Ahmad, for instance, told us jokingly of his attempt to reverse roles with his social assistant, as he met her in an expected context:

> And accidently on New Year's Eve I meet with her. It was something nice, I meet my assistant who is searching for job to me and, I was at that time, have some joke with her. I told her okay, you are helping me to find job, and you give me hard job. Okay, today I am here the boss, and you have to work under me, do that and do that and do that (laughs). So it was a little bit funny, so I give her little bit orders (laughs), and I told her after that I give you evaluation, so (laughs).

4. Conclusion and discussion

We have argued that refugees' moral experiences are crucial to understanding how they make sense of and act upon the differential citizenship statuses on offer in the Belgian welfare state. More concretely, we have argued that the practical realisation of the rights granted to Syrian refugees was experienced less as a series of rights evidencing a form of solidarity, but rather as a demeaning state

of dependency. Although these experiences of dependency occurred across variations in age, legal status, previous professions, ethnic-religious affiliation and gender, they came to the fore more strongly under specific conditions, which we can only briefly enumerate below.[iv] First, some of the respondents who experienced this unworthiness particularly intensely, did so during periods of *prolonged dependency*. Respondents who stayed in reception centres for long periods (up to 2.5 years) whilst waiting for a decision upon their application seemed to assess their dependency particularly negatively compared to those who were on a 'track' towards a more clearly delineated future (e.g. by following a language course shortly after arrival, when recognition rates for Syrian asylum seekers were high).

Second, for some respondents, the experience of unworthy dependency was intensified by an *inability to support their nuclear or extended family members*, either by bringing them to a safe place in Europe, or by providing them with remittances. This seemed to be particularly the case with single young men and women whose families were still residing in Syria or its neighbouring countries. In contrast, for older respondents who had been able to bring their nuclear family to Belgium through family reunification, dependency affected their sense of well-being far less, as it had not stopped them from fulfilling a basic responsibility towards their families.

Third, individuals with weaker (informal) social networks were more dependent upon their professional assistants, which increased their frustrations with these assistants - in some cases, this increased objective dependency paradoxically led respondents to rely more intensely on avoidance strategies. Experiences of unworthy dependency emerged particularly strongly with individuals who had few, if any, sustainable, closer social contacts. Some individuals were able to counter this situation over time, using the informal contacts they had more effectively. Paradoxically, these individuals also seemed much more at ease with receiving help from professional assistants. Their Belgian contacts would allow them to ask and probe every now and then for questions regarding their rights, administrative affairs and socio-cultural life in general. As a result, these stronger informal ties helped to reduce the chasm between Syrians and professional assistants.

Fourth, in some cases negative experiences of dependency seemed caused by *assistants' attitudes*. This was especially apparent for refugees living outside the collective reception centres housing most asylum seekers awaiting a final decision. These were mostly reliant on local social services, providing social assistance and benefits to those in need. These services operate under the municipality's politically elected representatives, whilst the discretionary nature of their street-level work means considerable variety in treatment and approach across municipalities (Lipsky 1980) – further exacerbated in the Belgian case because of municipalities' considerable political autonomy. Most importantly for understanding experiences of Syrian refugees, these services fulfil a double function: providing elementary assistance on the one hand, whilst controlling or disciplining individuals

receiving social benefits on the other (e.g. by making sure they search for jobs, or do not have informal material resources). Hence the particular role conceptions of these social assistants influenced some Syrians' experiences of unworthy, stigmatic dependency. Due to the discretionary liberties inherent to street-level assistants' work (Lipsky 1980), some acted more as bureaucratic, controlling and disciplinary agents than others, which at times clashed with some Syrians' apparent expectations of informal, reciprocal solidarity.

As negative experiences of dependency emerged more forcefully with individuals under these four external conditions, we expect the same structural conditions to have a similar impact on respondents of other groups (i.e. not Syrian refugees but other groups of refugees, migrants or Belgians). This seems to resonate with other studies on welfare stigma more generally, across different national contexts. Nevertheless, we do think that there are at least two ways in which specific features of our case of Syrian refugees has fed into our findings.

First, Syrian refugees emigrated from a relatively affluent country with a well-functioning educational system. All respondents had acquired education until the age of 16 at the very least. Drawing on our secondary interviews with street-level workers, volunteers and activists (Author 2016) and survey data in Germany (IAB 2016) this relatively high level of education was the rule, rather than the exception for Syrian refugees. An important consequence hereof is that Syrian refugees, after arrival in Belgium, experienced considerable degradation of socio-economic status (Author & Author, forthcoming).

Second, we think Syrian refugees were in a specific position of semizenship. Other researchers exploring 'bottom-up' perspectives on citizenship have sometimes concentrated on immigrants that were preparing to take 'citizenship tests' (e.g. Monforte et al 2018). While our respondents were equally temporary and partial, they seemed more preoccupied with practical, quick independence from government-organised solidarity, rather than on acquiring full citizenship by demonstrating cultural assimilation and economic success. If they had been preparing themselves for citizenship tests, it would indeed make more sense to interpret their accounts as reproducing the demands imposed by the state. Our respondents, however, seemed to act primarily against a prolonged position of dependency that was created through practical obstructions to access the labour market, find housing and establish a social network. From that perspective, the support provided by social benefits and social assistants appeared as a gift that could not be reciprocated.

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[i] This has been researched more elaborately in the US context (Cebulko 2014; de Genova 2002; Menjivar 2006; Mountz et al 2002), although see Bloch (2002, 2014) and Bloch & McKay (2016) for examples in the UK context.

[ii] They were recruited through three channels: NGOs that were contacted to cooperate with the research; a network of Syrian informants who had resided in Belgium for a longer period of time; and one of the researcher's social network established by working as a volunteer in two local NGOs. Their ethnic backgrounds included Arabs, Kurds and Palestinians born and raised in Syria. Their religious backgrounds included Christians, Sunni Muslims, Shi'a Muslim and Druzes. Their professions included university-educated white-collar workers, housewives, teachers, cooks, manual labourers, lorry drivers, farmers and cooks, although a disproportionately large group consisted of small shop owners and merchants. Most respondents were men (30 out of 39).

[iii] Six out of 39 Syrians used this analogy in one way or another to criticise individual depending on the state for too long.

[iv] For a fuller description, see Author (2016).