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## Ethical brokerage and self-fashioning in Italian immigration bureaucracy

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### Abstract

In increasingly bureaucratised immigration regimes, experts who can assist migrants in their navigation of immigration law are in high demand. This article examines the role of community brokers – migrants who are self-styled immigration advisers – within the Italian immigration regime. Contributing to recent anthropological work which challenges the common characterisation of brokers as immoral or amoral, I show how becoming a migration broker is rooted in ethical projects of self-betterment that enable migrants to challenge their legally and economically marginalised position in Italian society.

### Key words:

Brokers, bureaucracy, Italy, law, migration, social mobility.

Ethnographic studies of law and bureaucracy have long highlighted the unintended consequences, what might be called “side effects” (Ferguson 1990) or “spill overs” (Cabot 2014: 2), produced by legal and bureaucratic processes. Examining encounters within the Italian immigration regime, this article focuses on one particular such “spill over”: the emergence of immigration advisers, or community brokers, who assist migrants in their navigation of immigration law. When dealing with Italian immigration bureaucracy, the assistance of some kind of adviser is essential for even

long-term migrants. Here I examine the manner in which becoming an immigration adviser is a means through which individuals with migrant backgrounds are able to overcome the low-status occupations to which migrants are generally restricted in Italy.

Anthropological work on law and bureaucracy has highlighted the affective potential of legal and bureaucratic processes which can produce uncertainty, indeterminacy, anxiety and hope for those involved within them (Kelly 2006; Navaro-Yashin 2007; Nuijten 2003). In relation to immigration law, scholars have shown the way in which legal processes discipline subjects as “deportable” (De Genova 2002), create deep uncertainty in people’s lives (Gonzales and Chavez 2012), or, paradoxically, produce individuals as cultural insiders (Tuckett 2015). In this article, I show how engagements with immigration law produce possibilities for self-fashioning and social mobility. By focusing on the role of community brokers, I show how styling oneself as an immigration adviser and expert enables these brokers to develop new subjectivities. As I will highlight, those whom I am grouping under this umbrella term – community broker – have various motives for their assistance work, but one shared outcome is the way in which their brokerage activities enable these individuals to fashion themselves in particular ways. These include fulfilling desires to be professional, gaining standing in their community, satisfying charitable impulses and fighting for social justice. Crucially, the role of a community broker offers possibilities for gaining social status that are generally not otherwise available to migrants in Italy.

In the anthropological canon, brokers have been described as “synapses” (Wolf 1956: 1075). They mediate between smaller and larger structures, whether between local and national society (Silverman 1965), voters and politicians (Lazar

2004; Koster 2012) or development programmes and local populations (Lewis and Mosse 2006). They bridge communication between persons, groups, structures and even cultures (Boissevain 1974: 148). Relying on the gap between individuals and the resources they need to access, brokers are often depicted as morally ambiguous figures (James 2011; Lindquist 2015b): self-interested entrepreneurs who manipulate the multiple worlds they occupy for their own profit, ultimately entrenching and reproducing existing inequalities (Blok 1974; Boissevain 1974). Despite increased ease of communication and movement, recent work has shown that the demand for brokerage services has remained high in modern society (Lindquist 2015a). Contemporary migration regimes are areas in which this demand is particularly high.

Whether facilitating migrant mobility, easing communication channels or enabling the production and/or completion of bureaucratic paperwork, brokers are key figures in today's highly bureaucratized global migration regime. Despite the indispensable role migration brokers often play, however, they are frequently condemned by academics, policy makers and development workers (Lindquist, Xiang, and Yeoh 2012). Usually framed as "traffickers" and "smugglers", migration brokers are portrayed as callous and cruel, exploiting migrants and their labour for their own self-interest (Andrijasevic 2010; Kyle and Liang 2001; Salt and Stein 1997). In particular, it is informal brokers rather than formal brokers, in the guise of lawyers or official labour recruitment agencies, who are painted in such negative colours. At best the informal broker is described as "illegal" or "illegitimate", at worst as "criminal" and "immoral", but in both cases her practices, relationships with clients and connections to the "formal" system are often left unexamined (Guevarra 2009; Guevarra 2006; Bakan and Stasiulis 1995). This broad-brush negative stereotype, however, overlooks a key fact: in an era in which migration regimes across the world

are highly regulated and bureaucratized, the expertise of individuals who know how to navigate the “migration industry” (Lindquist 2010) is essential for migrants and migrant employers, as well as sending and receiving states. McKeown argues that the demonisation of migrant brokers is historically connected to liberalism and “the emerging ideal of the ‘free’ migrant as an atomized, self-motivated individual” (2012: 21). Within the historical context of slavery and indentured labour, “brokerage came to be understood as a relic of pre-modern social organization, unsuited to the freedom and transparency of modern markets, personal liberty and the West” (2012: 23). This historical demonisation, he argues, has meant ignoring the essential role brokers play in helping migrants to navigate unfathomable bureaucracy and paperwork, as well as “drawing attention away from working conditions, laws and public attitudes that are equally responsible for migrant suffering” (McKeown 2012: 24).

Some recent ethnographic work on migrant brokers goes far in undoing these stereotypes and highlights how minute practices of brokerage are deeply intertwined with top-down legal and political processes. The flourishing of migration brokers and the demand for their assistance is directly related to the increased bureaucratisation and regularisation of migration (Lindquist 2012: 74; Alpes 2013; Alpes 2017). They cannot, therefore, be simplistically dismissed as “illegitimate” or “illegal”. Rodriguez (2010) and Guevarra’s (2009) respective work on the Filipino state as a labour broker, and Xiang’s work on private migrant recruitment agents in China (2012), highlight the manner in, and extent to which, states rely upon and facilitate brokerage practices. As well as both sending and receiving states, brokers, migrants and their social networks are all involved in brokerage systems (see also Spener 2009: 95). Further disrupting the stereotype of the broker as necessarily predatory is ethnographic work which shows how brokers and migrants are often fluid rather than distinct categories.

In their article, Chee et al. (2012) challenge the stereotype of the marriage broker as an unscrupulous businessman by showing that it is often Vietnamese brides themselves who act as matchmakers between women and Malaysian men. Becoming a marriage broker offers opportunities for newly married wives to build social and economic capital (Chee et al 2012: 95, 112). In Molland's work on sex trafficking in Thailand (2012), meanwhile, the blurred boundaries between broker and migrant are again evident. He shows that while anti-trafficking programmes promote social networks as a means to create "safe" migration, it is within social networks that practices of coercion and deception take place, as the friends and kin of "victims" – who are possibly "trafficking victims" themselves – become complicit in the "victims'" trafficking. Finally, Lindquist's work on *petugas lapangan* (PL), who work as field agents in labour migration brokerage in Indonesia, also disrupts the dichotomies of "victims" and "perpetrators" which frame debates around transnational migration (2012: 75). In his account, brokers were migrants themselves in the past, and some become migrants again in the future (see also Fernandez 2013). In fact, in Lindquist's case study, as in all of the above examples, it is the brokers' shared experiences with their prospective clients and their ability to gain trust and credibility which ensure their success. Successful brokerage, therefore, relies upon relationships of trust and friendship which may be instrumental but are not necessarily lopsided (Lindquist 2015b: 171; Kyle and Liang 2001; Spener 2009; Alpes 2017).

Accordingly, migration brokers are essential for migrants' successful navigation of immigration regimes as well as the functioning of the system itself. Their practices highlight the inseparability of the formal and the informal, the legal and the illegal, and between altruistic and profit-oriented networks (Lindquist, Xiang, and Yeoh 2012: 17) . While existing work focuses on migration brokers who facilitate

mobility transnationally, often in the guise of some kind of recruitment agency, the brokers that feature in this article specialise in assisting migrants with the unwieldy immigration bureaucracy in the “host” setting. Migrants’ dealings with documentation regimes begin rather than end with the crossing of borders. In the Italian setting, as elsewhere, immigration regimes are structured to prolong migrants’ temporary and precarious status, which means that those subject to them are continually required to deal with the cumbersome and highly complex documentation regime. Community brokers play a key role in this process.

Classical anthropological analyses of brokers have tended to prioritise either a political economy analysis or a methodological individualist approach (James 2011; Lindquist 2015b). In the former the structural role of the broker as filling a gap between state and society is emphasised, while in the latter it is the broker’s position as a cunning and creative cultural figure. In what follows I provide a synthesis of these approaches by contributing to and building upon recent work which highlights the socially embedded role of the broker and challenges the notion that they are amoral or immoral (James 2011; Lindquist, Xiang, and Yeoh 2012; Lindquist 2015b). Focusing on four community brokers who acted as volunteers in a migration advice centre in a city in the province of Emilia Romagna in the North of Italy<sup>1</sup>, I show how brokers’ activities are ethically motivated, both in terms of a dissatisfaction with the exploitation of their own labour as well as a desire for self-improvement. By contextualising the migrant brokers’ activities within the Italian political, legal and economic setting, I show how becoming a migration broker is rooted in personal projects of social mobility within a context in which migrants are legally and economically marginalised. This article is based on 19 months’ fieldwork conducted across various sites within the city’s immigration bureaucracy nexus, including the

aforementioned advice centre, where I also acted as a volunteer alongside the community brokers. As a volunteer at the center I spent most of my time on the reception counter, but I also spent long periods of time with advisers at their desks in the back room participating in longer consultations. Much of my daily fieldwork was conducted in the space of the centre and other institutional settings, but over time I also developed close relationships with staff members, volunteers, and some clients, taking my research into more intimate and social spaces.

### Italy and the documentation regime

In order to explore the role of the migration advice broker, there are two points that need to be addressed in relation to the Italian setting. Firstly, migrants in Italian society generally have a very low social and economic status. Brokerage activities, I suggest, are a means for some individuals to attempt to overcome the marginalised position migrants generally occupy. And secondly, Italian immigration bureaucracy, which I call the documentation regime, is characterised by extreme ambiguity, changing rules and discretionary decision-making, which make the services of advisers essential for migrants when navigating the regime.

While Italy made a rather late entry as a “destination” country for migrants, with substantial numbers arriving only in the 1990s, in the last fifteen years among its European neighbours its migratory inflow is second only to Spain (Fullin and Reyneri 2011: 118). Without a strong colonial history to shape migration patterns, Italy’s migrant population is highly diverse. Up until the 1990s the majority of arrivals came from North Africa, while in more recent years flows from Eastern European countries



have been the largest in number. According to official statistics, in 2009 the five largest nationality groups were Romanians, Albanians, Moroccans, Chinese and Ukrainians. Despite the heterogeneity of their backgrounds, precarious and discriminatory legal, economic and political circumstances unify the experiences of migrants in Italy. In line with other Southern European countries, migrants are restricted to the lowest status and poorest paid jobs. Male migrants fill unskilled and semi-skilled manual labour shortages, working in construction, agriculture and manufacture industries. Female migrants overwhelmingly work as domestic labourers in private homes as either live-in housekeepers or carers for the elderly, and often a mixture of the two. Research has shown that, in spite of any educational qualifications they may hold, migrants are unable to move out of these low status and poorly paid work sectors and are almost entirely excluded from non-manual jobs (Fullin and Reyneri 2011: 143). This reflects the structure of the Italian labour market, in which there are large labour shortages for jobs that native Italians will not do (Fullin and Reyneri 2011: 144) but a shortage of higher status professional and managerial jobs (Fullin and Reyneri 2011: 121). This mixture has resulted in high numbers of youth unemployment among Italians, as this increasingly educated group will not fill manual labour shortages yet are unable to secure higher status positions. While young Italians are able to live with their parents and hope for improved job opportunities to arise, migrants are usually forced to accept and remain in these low status manual jobs.<sup>2</sup> As I outline below, immigration law, which ties legal status to employment, effectively traps migrants in these positions. These dynamics explain why migrant unemployment remains low despite overall high unemployment in Italy (Fullin and Reyneri 2011). For the community brokers discussed here, becoming an immigration consultant is a means through to which to carve out a different employment trajectory.

For example, translation of documents, interpreting at offices or filling out basic applications was a means through which Medhi,<sup>3</sup> a Moroccan community broker who features throughout this article, was able to eke out a basic living for himself and avoid employment as a fruit picker or other similarly poorly paid wage labour.

Immigration law is intrinsic to migrants' restriction to low status and low paid work sectors. Legal status is contingent on presenting a regular work contract and permits must be renewed every two years, thus ensuring that migrants stay in these poorly paid and low status jobs or risk losing legal status. The long-term permit and citizenship offer possibilities for secure legal status but both are notoriously difficult to obtain and it is not uncommon for long-term migrants or even those born in the country to lose legal status. During the course of my fieldwork I met several young adults who had arrived to Italy as infants but at the age of 18 had fallen into "illegality" as they were no longer able to renew their permits as dependants of their parents. Without being in full time education or holding a job contract, these young people who had grown up in the country had lost their right to live there. Calavita has described this as the "institutionalization of illegality", whereby legal status is precarious and "doled out in small increments" making "stints of illegality" inevitable (Calavita 2005: 45). This institutionalisation of illegality and precarity highlights the role of immigration law in sustaining migrants' vulnerability and tractability as workers (De Genova 2002: 439). As in other contexts, therefore, Italian immigration laws greatly contribute to the overall marginal and subordinate position that migrants occupy in Italian society.

As well as the top down policies, the everyday workings of the immigration bureaucracy also work to produce uncertainty and indeterminacy in the lives of migrants and elevate the perceived need and desire for advice services. Firstly, Italian

immigration policies are set at the national level but their implementation varies across both space and time, making the immigration system confusing and unpredictable to navigate. While technically the law does not change in different geographic areas, in reality its practice varies according to the city's *Questura* (Immigration Office). For example, while the *Questura* of one city judges that spouses of long-term permit holders are eligible to apply for this much-coveted document upon their immediate arrival to Italy, a neighbouring city *Questura* deems that all applicants must demonstrate proof of at least five years' domicile in order to be eligible for the same permit, whether or not their spouse holds one. These small but important details mean that it is essential to receive well-informed advice when preparing and submitting applications.

Secondly, Italian immigration policies are easily manipulated. This is relevant to the minutiae of applications as well as to entire policies. For example, self-certified declarations of domicile may be falsified if for some reason applicants are unable to state where they really reside (this commonly occurs in situations of overcrowded accommodation), while in the case of manipulation of entire policies, the 2009 amnesty for undocumented domestic workers provides a good example. This amnesty allowed undocumented domestic workers to regularise their status with their employer which, given the high number of Italian households who employ migrant domestic workers, was not controversial among the public. In practice, however, the law allowed any undocumented migrant who was able to find or "pay" an employer to regularise their status. This led to sisters "employing" their undocumented brothers as "cleaners" in order to help them obtain permits and individuals charging a fee to undocumented migrants in order to act as their domestic work "employer". The requirements for the application were minimal and, provided the paperwork was in

order, applications were processed by state institutions in spite of their obvious fallaciousness. In order to successfully take advantage of such policies, however, applicants required advice, assistance and sometimes contacts in order to complete the relevant paperwork. In relation to the law's easy manipulation, the third characteristic of the Italian documentation regime, which generates the need and desire for expertise and advice, is the understanding that provided one has access to the correct resources and assistance, anything can be achieved. This notion that, in the words of one interlocutor, "the impossible is possible", feeds the demand for expertise and advice. Thirdly, and finally, the vast amount of paperwork documenting the minute details of applicants' lives, which is required for any application, intimidates most individuals into seeking out assistance. Most – if not all – of this paperwork can be completed and prepared by the applicants themselves. The highly technocratic language of Italian bureaucracy, however, means that even literate and educated migrants seek the help of some kind of immigration expert.

#### The advice scene

Reflecting the necessity of assistance when navigating the documentation regime, there was a host of immigration advice outfits across the city where I conducted fieldwork. These varied from costly lawyers situated in smart chambers to Pakistani-run internet cafés where, for 10 euros, a permit renewal application could be completed on the spot. The services they offered included general information about the requisites needed in order to complete applications and form-filling services. Different organisations attracted different clients. HomeHelp, for example, was a co-operative that specialised in domestic work contracts for private employers. An ever

growing elderly population and limited state provisions for care of the elderly mean that employment of cheap live-in carers who usually also act as cleaners is very common. While officially HomeHelp does not provide immigration-advice related services, given the dominance of female migrants in the domestic work sector, as well as the contingency of work on legal status, specialising in work contracts *and* permit renewal was a smart business move for the cooperative. The clientele of HomeHelp, therefore, largely consisted of female domestic workers and their Italian employers. In contrast, the internet cafes that operated as immigration form-filling businesses on the side were used exclusively by migrants. The on-the-spot service that such establishments offered was particularly popular if an individual's permit was close to expiry and there was no time to wait for an appointment elsewhere. It is not necessary to complete any kind of training or to hold qualifications in order to give immigration advice or to complete applications. As a result, the growing number of organisations that offer assistance in relation to immigration advice is highly variable in the quality of advice and services offered.

The most frequented advice organisation in the city was a trade union affiliated migrant centre where I volunteered. Its main functions were to act as a drop-in advice clinic on issues relating to immigration law and to complete application forms on behalf of clients free of charge. These included applications for permit renewal, family reunification and citizenship. Its popularity was due to its long opening hours, central location and free services. Its services were free because the advice centre is a *patronato*. The term *patronati* refers to intermediary institutions attached to trade unions in which workers can receive free advice, assistance, protection, and representation (Agnoletto 2012: 13). Their role is to protect and advocate for welfare users and ensure that the welfare system is functioning correctly.

Although they are not part of the state infrastructure, the state does pay the *patronato* for each assistance file opened (Agnoletto 2012: 13). In general, however, clients were unaware that the advice centre was part of the trade union and the vast majority who frequented the centre were not trade union members.

Adding to its popularity the centre also had an arrangement with the local *Questura* whereby once a week Alberto, a senior staff member, paid a visit to find out information on particular cases or to negotiate with the officials on behalf of individual clients with difficult cases. The possibility of accessing information from the otherwise impenetrable *Questura* greatly increased the centre's client base as in general other advice organisations did not have such an arrangement. A similar arrangement did exist with the rival trade union's migrant advice centre, but the rival centre's shorter opening hours meant the centre where I volunteered dominated the scene.

The centre's main client base were migrants themselves needing advice on their or their family members' applications. It was not uncommon, however, for Italian employers to accompany their migrant employees (usually those in domestic work) to the centre. Lawyers and other professionals working in the immigration advice sphere would also occasionally visit the centre looking for advice on how to advise their fee-paying clients. The presence of this type of client incited derision from those behind the counter and confirmed their opinion that the services of lawyers were often unnecessary.

Staff members at the centre were generally individuals who had previously been employed elsewhere within the trade union and subsequently started work at the migrant advice centre. Two of the seven employees were Italian citizens with migrant backgrounds, while the remaining five were native Italians. The two with migrant

backgrounds had previously worked in factories where they had become trade union representatives and were later employed by the trade union. These individuals spoke about their roles sardonically. They implied that their employment was a strategic decision by the trade union to recruit other migrant workers as union members, who were increasingly filling many work sectors in which the trade union had traditionally held a strong presence. These two individuals worked between the advice centre and the central trade union offices. Volunteers were key to the functioning of the centre, in particular its reception counter. They tended to be either Italian students completing work experience or migrants. The community brokers who feature in this article all acted as volunteers. As I will explore below, some migrant volunteers became resentful about their role as they felt that they did the same work as employees but did not receive remuneration and were treated disdainfully by some staff members. Implied in their resentment was a sense that they were treated badly because of their migrant status despite providing essential work of interpreting and translation.

### Community brokers

Early in my fieldwork I conducted participant observation at the *Questura*, joining the large numbers of people who arrived there early in the morning in order to get in line for the ticket allocation for application submission, permit collection or the fruitless attempt to access information regarding on-going applications. After several days of observation I began to recognise the faces of certain individuals who were regularly present and whom I also came across at the advice centre and other sites within the documentation regime. Dressed smartly and holding briefcases, these were self-styled immigration “experts” who acted as documentation brokers within their communities.

They possessed good Italian and understood the basics about immigration law. In general their clients were members of their own community with less cultural capital and weaker language skills. When I began fieldwork at the advice centre I learnt more about these self-styled brokers in the local context, several of whom volunteered there.

The services that these brokers provided were similar to those offered by the migrant advice centre and other organisations, but also extended beyond what was available in more formalised outlets. Mustapha and Naveed were two smartly dressed volunteers from Morocco and Pakistan respectively. At the centre, volunteers exclusively worked on the reception counter. Mustapha, however, held an almost permanent position at one of the desks in the back of the office where he would make phone calls and receive people who asked for him. His clientele were exclusively Arabic speaking and he would complete application forms for permit renewal, family reunification and other applications on their behalf. He also offered more illicit services, such as helping clients to procure a *contratto di soggiorno* (work contract for migrants) in order to renew a permit. During the process of permit renewal it is common practice for individuals to procure “false” work contracts. In these cases one individual would act as the “employer” for another. Whether or not one pays for this service depends on the relationship between the purported “employer” and “employee”. Individuals such as Mustapha act as a broker when the “employee” does not personally know somebody who would be able to act as their “employer”. In such cases there would certainly be a financial transaction of which the broker would take a cut (Tuckett 2015). While completing application forms for individuals without an appointment, providing information on immigration law and offering general assistance with translation were acceptable tasks for volunteers at the centre,



brokering work contracts in exchange for financial remuneration was not (a point I return to below).

Unlike Mustapha, Naveed usually worked on the reception counter, alongside the other volunteers, giving out information regarding requisites for applications, booking appointments and checking the status of on-going applications online. He helped clients from all nationalities but was well known to those from the Pakistani community who would ask for him by name or as the “ragazzo Pakistano [Pakistani guy]” when they attended the centre. He also took a particular interest in citizenship applications and assisted a senior staff member in her completion and submission of clients’ applications. Naveed told me that he had once been fairly affluent in Italy, but 18 months ago the metalwork factory where he worked had laid off many of its staff and he had since struggled to find another job. He was living off the money he received through his semi-redundancy (*cassa integrazione*), as well as doing some translation work for the *Tribunale* (courthouse), and spent most days at the advice centre. His current quality of life, he told me, was “not good”. Reduced to semi-redundancy pay, he was now sharing a bedroom, while previously he had rented a private room in a shared apartment. The fact he was receiving semi-redundancy confirmed his story of earlier relative affluence, since such a benefit is fairly uncommon among migrants who are usually on more precarious work contracts with fewer benefits (Pastore and Villosio 2011: 14). As well as volunteering at the advice centre, Naveed also attended courses at the *Centro del Impiego* (job centre), reflecting his active desire to improve his employment credentials. Similar to Mustapha, it was later discovered that Naveed also completed permit renewal and other applications for a fee. Unlike Mustapha, however, Naveed did not use the centre and its services as an outpost for his own immigration business or to recruit clients. Instead in his spare

time he offered form-filling services mainly to members of the Pakistani community who did not want to wait for an appointment at the centre or, for some other reason, found it more convenient to pay Naveed ten euros for an on-the-spot permit renewal application.

Once it was discovered that Naveed and Mustapha were exchanging advice on immigration related matters for financial remuneration, both were asked to leave the centre. Since the centre in its official role as a *patronato* already received money from the state for the completion of applications, any kind of payment for services was totally forbidden. When clients did want to make individual payments to the adviser that helped them – which they often did due to a mixture of gratitude and an idea that it would help their application – they were told that they could make a donation to the trade union. Given this, the private payments Mustapha received for completing applications, clearly contravened his role as a volunteer. He was using the centre as an outpost for his own immigration business and charging clients for services that should have been free.

Naveed's case, however, is more complex and raises issues of who is expected to volunteer and who should be paid. He frequently hinted that he felt exploited in his role as a volunteer, essentially doing unpaid work while others were remunerated. On one occasion, he told me, "staff members are so rude to volunteers but there is no difference between what they [staff members] do, and what I do." In the same conversation he insinuated that he had hoped to be employed at the centre but had since given up on that idea. While staff members interpreted his behaviour at the centre as underhand, Naveed seemed to have concluded that, since he could not find remunerative work at the centre, he would productively use his time as a volunteer to acquire knowledge that could then be employed elsewhere. He did not charge people

at the centre itself, but was prepared to charge people for services outside of it, reasoning that had he not done so they would have paid someone else. More broadly, he saw his actions as justified in a milieu in which everybody seemed to be making money.

Similarly fed up with feeling unappreciated was Medhi, another Moroccan volunteer who was in his early fifties. Medhi, a university graduate, lived a somewhat nomadic lifestyle. He had lived in France not long before I met him in Italy and described himself as a “citizen of the world”. He had an eccentric personality, at times becoming furious with clients if he felt they were rude while other times being gentle and affectionate. He was politically minded with an empathetic sensibility and a strong sense of social responsibility. For example, when the new head of the centre attempted to restrict its services such as free consultation with the lawyers to trade union members only, Medhi passionately resisted. He repeatedly exclaimed to me that, “we need to help people, Anna. We are here to help.” He was highly disapproving of Mustapha and others like him. In fact, it was pressure from Medhi that pushed the centre’s head to eventually expel Mustapha. He frequently brought clients whom he identified as particularly vulnerable, and who otherwise might have remained under the radar, to the attention of Alberto. This was so in the case of Stephanie, a Nigerian woman, whose child had been taken away by social services, or Sami, a Bangladeshi man, struggling with bureaucratic arrangements after his baby was stillborn.

During my fieldwork period, Medhi was a regular presence at the centre, except for a period of several weeks when he was employed by HomeHelp. Shortly after his employment at the organisation, however, Medhi resumed his voluntary work at the centre, saying that he had resigned. He explained that he did not want to

be part of an organisation that charged for services that people could receive for free at the trade union-run advice centre. His decision had economic consequences, reducing him to the slim pickings he gained from an informal certificate translation service and summer work as a fruit picker.

Throughout my fieldwork period (2009-2011), Medhi stuck to his principles in spite of his financial difficulties. He never charged for the advice services he provided, other than for the translations of certificates. However, when I met him on returning to my fieldsite in November 2012, he had distanced himself from the centre and was operating an informal immigration advice business himself. I learned of Medhi's new venture when I and our fellow volunteer Chiara ran into him in the city centre. He was accompanied by a tall, dishevelled-looking Moroccan man. As we walked together, Medhi explained that he had been helping his companion, who was walking a couple of metres behind us. "*Poverino* [poor thing] he has lost all his documents," he explained. Medhi then proceeded to tell us how the man had paid him 150 euros for three days of help with replacing his permit, identity card and the other lost documents. "We've been to the *Carabinieri* [military police], *Comune* [municipality], *Questura*, all over. He pays me 50 euros a day – and it has taken three days to sort everything out." Once we arrived in the centre of town, Medhi insisted on buying us coffees (in the past it would have been me or Chiara who paid) and went inside to order while Chiara and I sat down at an outside table. As we drank our coffees the conversation turned to the advice centre. He told us:

I never go there anymore. I am fed up with her [Maria – the new head of the centre]. She keeps calling me, asking me to go back there to act as an interpreter but I won't – she can learn Arabic herself. Comasco [the centre's lawyer] is just as bad, he calls me in to

translate, charges the client 500 euros and what do I get? *Grazie!* [Thank you]. Well I'm not called *Signore Grazie* [Mr Thank You].

On our way home, I discussed his comments with Chiara, an Eritrean who had migrated to Italy when she was 13 years old. She was shocked that Medhi, previously so opposed to charging people for assistance, was now doing so. "He has become like everybody else," Chiara said. "He is just exploiting other Moroccans who can't speak Italian. He is only providing a translation service. He's hardly an expert." In response I suggested that Medhi was only filling a gap that someone else might have done in his absence, and pointed to his financial need. Chiara found this rationale morally reprehensible. "If he needs money, he should go and work in a factory like everybody else [other migrants]. It is not an excuse!" In her eyes, community brokers who profited from navigating the complicated and time-consuming documentation regime were ultimately complicit in perpetuating migrants' structural marginalisation.

It was certainly the case that Medhi's decision to charge for interpreting was at odds with his previously espoused attitude. But something else was at play: the importance and due recognition of, and value attributed to, relevant skills. His rant about the new head of the centre and the lawyer Comasco highlight his resentment about providing work voluntarily for which others were paid. Besides, Medhi was not exactly contradicting his previous beliefs. The service he was now providing – accompanying a migrant from place to place and translating for him while helping to navigate the bureaucracy – was *not* available free at the centre, or anywhere else.

Medhi's statement that he was not "*Signore Grazie!*" echoes arguments made in relation to peer-educator programme in South Africa (James 2002; McNeill 2011). Those running HIV peer-educator schemes imagine the educators – a type of broker – to be inspired by community-minded sentiments. In practice, however, in a context of

high unemployment, becoming a peer educator provides an opportunity for upward class mobility and other career options (James 2002; McNeill 2011: 150-151). These cases highlight the way in which motivations to volunteer or to peer educate must be contextualised. The Italian migrant-advisers I worked with, in a similar vein, were seeking to improve their career opportunities, status and material conditions in a context in which migrants are generally restricted to the lowliest work sectors. The fact that they charge for services is not evidence of amoral behaviour, but rather an ethically informed critique of their own labour exploitation.

#### Self-fashioning through brokerage

Chiara's criticism of the activities of migrant-advisers gives the impression that Mustapha, Naveed and Medhi were making profit at the expense of their clients. In some ways her position is reminiscent of Marxist analysts who understand brokers as amoral individualists who exploit the gap between the poor and the resources to which they need access for their own personal gain (James 2011: 320). In reality, however, the brokers' clients, who were generally employed full-time with fairly secure incomes, were materially better off than the brokers themselves. While the clients' salaries were low in comparison to national salaries – given the poorly paid jobs to which migrants are restricted in Italy – in comparison to the community brokers, who were not in formal employment, the clients were relatively financially secure. In fact these brokers, like many others in the Italian setting (both migrants and non-migrants), were effectively employed in the informal labour market, which also put their legal status at risk (Reyneri 1998). While some individuals choose to work

“off the books” (sometimes entirely but frequently partially) in efforts to reduce money owed in taxes, for migrants informal work carries potential risks since evidence of employment and salary are necessary for permit renewal. Those who do work informally, therefore, must produce false documents relating to work and salary in order to renew their permits. Mehdi, for example, was in a difficult situation when he needed to renew his permit during my fieldwork period. He had come to Italy as the “husband” of a Moroccan woman already resident in Italy, who he described as a “dear friend”. When this woman passed away Mehdi needed to renew his permit on the basis of work rather than family, meaning he needed to provide a contract and salary. As he did not have either of these, a friend from the trade union helped him by “employing” him as a domestic worker. These brokers were not, therefore, callous and greedy individuals motivated exclusively by financial gain. Rather they too were in insecure positions and providing immigration services acted as a way of resisting or avoiding the otherwise low-status work to which migrants are restricted, while also eking out a rather meagre and precarious existence.

Despite her criticisms, Chiara too was carving out a higher status identity for herself as an immigration-expert. While her comments form part of her own ethical project of fighting for migrants’ rights through solidarity, they do not take into account the inequality within the hierarchy of brokerage in which she too was involved. Having lived in Italy for decades and holding Italian citizenship thanks to her Italian-Eritrean paternal grandfather, her situation was rather different to that of Mehdi. Indeed, as will be further explored below, her fluent Italian, high-status job, secure legal status and good connections meant it was significantly easier for her to be uncompromisingly motivated in terms of the public good. Furthermore, while she strongly criticised those who profited from the documentation regime, she was

engaged in processes of self-fashioning through her role as an immigration expert in a manner not totally different from the others.

Chiara's personal trajectory is unlike the other three community brokers discussed here. She migrated to Italy from Eritrea when she was 13 years old accompanied by her older brother and father, whose own father was an Italian national. She was schooled in Italy, growing up in the country in the 1980s at a time when there were very few migrants or non-white people in the country. She "feels" neither Italian nor Eritrean, while also identifying as both. Her younger brother, who migrated to Italy many years later frequently teased her for the way she spoke Tigrinya, which had become a foreign tongue to her after many years rarely speaking the language. Yet, she also wrestled with her Italian identity which was in large part due to the racialised discrimination that she has experienced throughout her life in access to work, housing and everyday social encounters (Tuckett 2016).

Chiara moved to the city where I met her in her 20s, and first worked as a dishwasher in restaurant kitchens. Some years after her arrival in the city she came across the newly opened advice centre which, at the time, was a much smaller establishment run by the man who founded it and a small team of volunteers. She soon became a member of this first set of volunteers who, like her, held strong political views and were deeply motivated to improve migrants' rights in Italy. She has continued to volunteer at the centre in some capacity ever since. Her occupational status has somewhat improved since her dishwashing days and by the time of my fieldwork she was employed by the *Comune* (municipality). Her employment trajectory contrasts with that of most migrants, having given her opportunities to work beyond the usual job sectors to which migrants are restricted. She explained that her employment at the *Comune* owed much to her knowledge about and use of positive



discrimination policies, which ensure that a certain quota of public servants are registered as disabled. Chiara has a registered disability which qualified her to be employed in such a quota. Such permanent public service jobs are highly coveted in Italy and like other public servants, Chiara benefitted from the job security, good salary and flexible hours that the position provides. Ultimately, however, she found her work boring and unsatisfying and spent much of her time dedicated to what she calls her “*casi sociali*” (social cases). Over the years spent as a public servant and volunteer at the centre, Chiara has cultivated a huge network of contacts in various offices whom she calls on when assisting her “*casi sociali*”. She has contacts at the *Questura*, *Prefettura* (the prefecture, where some applications relating to immigration are dealt with), the *Comune*, trade union and the centre-left political party *Partito Democratico*. Her flirtatious and charismatic personality, sense of humour and sharp intelligence make her contacts amenable to her various requests for favours and assistance.

Chiara came across many of her *casi sociali* when volunteering at the centre, but she also assisted her neighbours and others she encountered in her day-to-day life. Her background made her in demand with the Eritrean community among whom she was known as an immigration expert. But, like Medhi, she was determined not to prioritise her co-nationals over others, and I assisted her in helping countless people from various backgrounds throughout my fieldwork. Depending upon the specificities of a particular client’s problem, after listening to their account she would make a series of phone calls to her various contacts to see if she could somehow solve the issue. At other times she would visit the local *Questura* in person, bringing trays of *pasticcini* (pastries) in order “to sweeten them up”, she would say, while winking conspiratorially. While at the *Questura* she would visit several of the people she knew

to find out information about a particular case or to ask them to reconsider a decision. Her network of contacts was so wide that other staff members at the centre often called on her to help them with their own clients.

Although Chiara was certainly motivated by her strong sense of social justice and desire to make the world a better place, she also visibly thrived in her role as charismatic broker in which she skilfully drew favours and promises from contacts in order to help her clients. In this sense, her role was not so different from the behaviour of those whom she condemned. While she would never accept any financial reward for the work she did – even being bought a coffee made her feel compromised – the nature of the shifting, indeterminate and unjust documentation regime enabled her to carve out a particular role for herself which gave her meaning, satisfaction and high social standing. Additionally, while Chiara's uncompromising critique of the others is partly due to her own experience of suffering in the past, ultimately she had come to hold secure and prestigious employment of a kind that Mustapha, Naveed and Mehdi could only have dreamt about.

In their differing ways, then, for each of these community brokers becoming an immigration-expert acted as a means through which they could create possibilities that were generally not possible for migrants in Italy. Mustapha was able to become a smartly dressed businessman and a point of reference among the Arabic speaking community. Having been unsuccessful in securing a job at the centre, Naveed used his time there to nonetheless learn the intricacies of Italian immigration law in order to develop his own mini-business during his period of unemployment. Medhi, who struggled to hold down a normal work schedule was able to make ends meet through offering individuals who needed assistance in their basic navigation of bureaucracy. And Chiara was able to tolerate her boring job and fulfil her political desire to

campaign for migrants' rights by dedicating much of her time to her *casi sociali*. While they differed in their knowledge and experience of immigration law, by being able to learn the basics of immigration bureaucracy, these individuals were able to carve out particular roles for themselves. In contrast to the usual accounts of immigration law and the manner in which it works to create vulnerable and deportable subjectivities, here immigration law has a different role. The shifting and opaque nature of the immigration bureaucracy acted as a means through which more experienced migrants could fashion themselves as professional and authoritative experts – a role which, as a migrant in Italy, was otherwise almost impossible to develop.

Chiara may be correct in her assertion that Medhi and others like him were ultimately profiting from the Kafkaesque documentation regime that created the necessity of an “expert’s” assistance. But they were also challenging the conditions which migrants endure in the Italian context and were using their knowledge of the immigration bureaucracy as a way in which to re-fashion themselves and resist marginalisation. If immigration bureaucracies function as mechanisms to ensure migrants’ continual marginalised and insecure position in society (Calavita 2005; De Genova 2002), then these brokers were turning the mechanism on its head, using immigration bureaucracy as a tool with which to overcome such marginalisation and create alternative life opportunities.

Conclusion

In increasingly bureaucratised immigration regimes migration brokers, who are experts in “the politics of micro-documentation” (Lindquist 2012: 88), are in high demand. In Italy, where becoming and staying a “documented” migrant involves the production of paper trails across state institutions, private companies, employers, trade unions and landlords, individuals and organisations which offer assistance are indispensable for migrants’ successful navigation of the immigration bureaucracy. In this article I have presented four community brokers who fill the gap produced by the immigration regime’s simultaneous creation of uncertainty and possibility. These brokers play key roles in both assisting migrants in their navigation of the regime as well as enabling the system to function, supporting the classical anthropological finding that “the formal order is always parasitic on informal processes” (Scott 1998: 310).

Exploring these four community brokers’ trajectories, I have shown that their brokerage practices go beyond filling a gap in the market. Whether motivated by the desire to gain prestige or to fight for social justice, brokers’ activities are imbued with meaning and the pursuit of ethical value. These observations firmly dispel the common characterisation of brokers – and in particular migration brokers – as corrupt or immoral. As Chiara’s strong opinions highlight, and in line with anthropological work on brokerage, however, such community brokers are morally ambiguous. They help migrants navigate unfathomable bureaucracy, but at the same time enable the exclusionary and Kafkaesque immigration bureaucracy to function. They gain some prestige and social mobility through their fellow migrants’ need of assistance, but are also often in more materially insecure positions than their clients.

While the anthropological record has tended to define brokers as either exploitative profiteers or creative hustlers, Deborah James argues that we should

instead understand the broker as both product and producer of the society in which she or he emerges (James 2011: 319). This assessment rings true here. As migrants, community brokers emerge from the marginalised political and economic contexts in which they are situated and are motivated by the desire for social mobility. By acting as brokers they are producing a critique of their own labour exploitation as well as carving out alternative possibilities for themselves. In this case, therefore, brokerage practices should be understood as ethically imbued acts in which knowledge of immigration law acts a means through which individuals can engage in projects of social mobility.

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<sup>1</sup> The name of the city is not disclosed in order to protect research participants' anonymity.

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that high levels of unemployment, as well as the implementation of austerity measures, are pushing many young Italians to leave the country and become migrants themselves.

<sup>3</sup> Names of individuals and organisations have been changed in order to protect anonymity

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