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GENERAL ARTICLES

Novices in bureaucratic regimes Learning to be a claimant in the United Kingdom

Michelle Obeid

Abstract: This article tracks the learning experiences of a refugee mother in negotiating her housing rights during her first months of settlement in the United Kingdom. New migrants often experience bureaucracy as “novices” in unfamiliar legal and bureaucratic regimes. By contrast to common depictions of bureaucracies as predominant sites of disenchantment and frustration, I attend ethnographically to the ways in which novice claimants come to trust and value bureaucratic encounters as productive spaces that reveal to them the vocabulary of legitimacy as they learn to inhabit official categories and forge bureaucratic personhoods. I suggest an understanding of migrants’ previous knowledge of non-Western bureaucratic regimes shapes their experiences of ambiguity in bureaucracy.

Keywords: bureaucracy, encounter, housing, learning, refugees, social bonds, social exclusion, stress

Widad¹ had just returned to her parents’ flat after a long assessment with her housing officer at the local council in London. “The same questions every time!” she complained. “These interviews bring you *stress* [using the English term].” A Palestinian from Gaza, Widad was granted Refugee Status in 2010, when she sought asylum with her four children (ages 4, 7, 10, and 12). The clashes that erupted in 2008 between the main Palestinian factions, Fatah and Hamas, threatened their safety. Militants broke in and looted their house, and Widad’s husband’s political affiliations in a now Hamas-dominant climate seemed to put the family at risk. En-

couraged and guided by family members who had preceded her and attained various kinds of legal status in the United Kingdom, Widad applied for asylum during a visit to London.

Not long after her asylum case was successful, Widad found herself navigating a bureaucratic labyrinth. She had to deal with interviews, letters, forms, and phone calls relating to her rights to welfare in the United Kingdom. The terms and procedures seemed alien to her, especially as a beginner to the English language. As she recounted the details of her assessment with exasperation, she reflected on what practices of British bureaucracy say about the British:



The British are straight (*dughry*)! [The official] may feel for you, and there is a lot of respect, but the rules stay the same. You want to live in their country, you have to play by their rules. But I feel like a novice (*mubtadi'ah*) in this system. You have to learn everything from the beginning! The repetition, the waiting . . . it brings *stress*.

This article is concerned with how new arrivals experience bureaucratic encounters as “novices” in a new bureaucratic regime. The simultaneous admiration and frustration that Widad expresses about bureaucracy is not uncommon. As a wealth of scholarly work has argued, bureaucratic practices are affectively charged (Navaro-Yashin 2007): they can be empathetic and efficient (James and Killick 2012), sites of disturbance (Stewart 2007), and shock (Ahmed 2004; Wilson 2017). “Organized encounters” between claimants and officials are fraught with tensions that are often generated by a “paradox”: the promise and potential of the encounter in effecting change, on the one hand, and its unpredictability and unknown potential, on the other (Wilson 2017: 607). This is what makes them sites of ambiguity. Ambiguity, however, is not without interest, as it “invites us to consider what gets lost in translation and to discover what other possibilities are let loose in those moments of miscommunication and reinterpretation” (Best 2012: 101), when plurality of meaning is heightened. It is through errors and blunders that the mysterious workings of bureaucracies are often unearthed (Tuckett 2015). Bureaucratic encounters, therefore, are generative grounds for understanding the ways social categories and inequalities are negotiated and disputed in the context of social services (Silver 2010). It is on these very grounds that claimants learn to perform expected bureaucratic identities (Hacking 2004; Humphris 2017). But how do claimants come to learn, and therefore know, what constitutes a legitimate claim to rights and entitlements?

In this article, I draw on my research with new arrivals in London as a means of exploring how migrants come to inhabit bureaucratic cat-

egories. My focus is on the interactions within bureaucratic encounters that, apart from “revealing subtle negotiations of power” (Bear and Mathur 2015: 19), dialogically work to outline the parameters of legitimacy. In her work on organized encounters, Helen Wilson (2017) stresses their unpredictable nature. While I subscribe to the uncertainty inherent in bureaucratic encounters, here I shift the focus to the predictable in order to explore the ways repetition and iteration shape how clients respond and act in anticipation of official questions and expectations. My argument is that the predictability of the encounter helps claimants sense the legitimate as they test its boundaries. This exercise may well have its frustrating moments, but it also allows room for creativity and humor in the presentation and negotiation of oneself and one’s case.

To show the detailed workings of this process, I narrow my focus in this investigation to the encounters between one refugee—Widad—and officials in her earlier phases of emplacement in the United Kingdom. I trace the ways Widad acquired the knowledge necessary to negotiate her housing rights in London. Empirically, a sustained engagement with this single case, over time and in different encounters, offers a deep understanding of how a learning curve occurs. This is in a context where longstanding language, expectations, and imaginations of categories of claimants are already established. Migrants in the United Kingdom, especially asylum seekers and refugees, continue to endure a “hostile political environment where they are variously characterized as an economic and welfare threat and are even included within security and terrorist legislation and language” (Mulvey 2010: 456). The microanalysis of these learning processes offers an analytical grasp on how new migrants make themselves legible and recognizable to state officials. The extent to which learning experiences are shaped by migrants’ knowledge of previous legal and bureaucratic regimes is key to this understanding.

Of particular importance to the discussion is Widad’s appropriation of the vocabulary of

mental well-being introduced to her in these encounters. Soon enough, Widad observed her complaints about being “stressed” had some currency, though not in all contexts. Through iteration, she learns to differentiate the “universals” (Malkki 2007) put to work in the care of asylum seekers and refugees in the United Kingdom. The encounters documented here reveal the centrality and value of “social bonds” as a means for the inclusion and integration of refugees. Home Office policy reports emphasize the importance of social bonds as “connections within communities defined by ethnic, national or religious identities, [which] are seen to be crucial for feelings of inclusion” (Ager and Strang 2004). Widad’s identification of “stress due to social exclusion,” as a legitimate discourse of well-being that aids her negotiations for housing rights, emerged in the space of organized encounters through her repetitive conversations with officials. The ethnographic approach used in this inquiry allows us to capture the moments and intensities in which such identification occurs within and outside of the context of these encounters. This article is based on 12 months of ethnographic fieldwork with Widad’s family in London in 2010, and regular visits since then. Over the course of that year, I accompanied Widad to government offices and acted as her voluntary translator.

Housing and social exclusion

In a “state-driven discourse of multiculturalism” (Zetter et al. 2005: 171), the principle of “integration” has been central to the British government’s approaches to community cohesion and the resettlement of migrants and refugees (HO 2005). Although integration is a vague term that has proved to be a “contested terrain” (Phillips 2006: 540), there is general recognition in both government and voluntary sector organizations that housing determines access to education, employment, and health care and is considered to enhance social cohesion and the development of communities. It is thus crucial to the

settlement and quality of life of new migrants. Yet, academic and policy reports on asylum seekers and refugees suggest, despite government immigration policies on integration, poor housing has created experiences of social exclusion (Spicer 2008). In processes that blur the boundaries between state, market, and third sector (Forbess and James 2014; Koch 2018), social housing organization, like other welfare provision, has increasingly been outsourced. Housing associations and private landlords manage a large proportion of houses occupied by low-income tenants. The realities of housing markets in desirable and expensive areas mean new migrants often end up in deprived estates in areas with poor housing conditions (Phillips 2006). In such areas, schools tend to lack the ability to deal with displaced children and language barriers challenge the experience of settling (Sales 2002).

With a legally recognized status, refugees are entitled to the same welfare services enjoyed by UK citizens, including the right to housing. Council housing operates on a points-based system that usually involves long waiting lists. Although councils have different rules, priority is given to applicants threatened with homelessness or to those living in overcrowded conditions. Being homeless does not guarantee housing rights, however. As the charity Shelter (2018) explains on its website, applicants must “be legally homeless; meet immigration and residence conditions; have a priority need; be homeless through no fault of [their] own and usually have a local connection with the area.” Once an applicant qualifies for a permanent tenancy, the council is obliged to find a suitable temporary housing until a permanent accommodation is available. Applicants are entitled to choose the areas they wish to reside in, though this depends on availability. Turning down temporary housing because of location may jeopardize their chances.

As a single mother of four children,² Widad was given immediate priority when she filed an application for emergency housing in a council in Central London, based on her current

cramped living conditions.³ Widad had been staying with her family in a three-bedroom flat that hosted her parents, two other brothers (one married with children), and a sister. Her brother provided her with an official letter stating he was no longer able to accommodate her family. After inspection, her case was deemed one involving a plausible threat of homelessness. Given the difficulties of finding properties in this Central London borough, the council very quickly offered her appropriate temporary housing, a three-bedroom flat, in another borough entirely. The flat was in a social housing estate in East London that hosted some three thousand residents, most of whom were of Turkish and Caribbean backgrounds. Shops nearby were owned by Turkish speakers, and the local medical center offered only Turkish interpretation services. The language barrier exaggerated the cultural differences between her and her neighbors and reinforced sentiments of isolation and vulnerability. Despite her sociable personality, Widad was unable to make any friends in the neighborhood. Within the first month of her dwelling, there was a murder on the estate, and she felt intimidated when the police knocked on her door to question her and other neighbors. Threatened by her surroundings, she tightened her parental supervision and controlled her children's mobility. When she forbade them to play on the streets of the estate, they responded with anger and frustration (see Spicer 2008). Typical of many asylum seekers and refugees in the United Kingdom who are "parachuted" into new areas, with little preparation beforehand" (Phillips 2006: 546), Widad's family found themselves in an isolated and excluded situation.

At school, Widad's children struggled with the English language and were discouraged by their inability to communicate their aptitude to their teachers and classmates. Her youngest daughter soon began to wake up with stomach cramps and refused to go to school. It was in the initial meetings with the school and the general practitioner that Widad began to appreciate the extent to which "stress" was recognized and

taken seriously in the United Kingdom; while expressions like *daght* (pressure) are used in Arabic vernacular, there is no equivalent to "stress" as a recognized psychosomatic condition. The children's psychosomatic reactions to change were frequently explained away as "stress" that was "expected," "normal," and "sure to go away with time." Widad soon started using this term in her Arabic parlance to explain the insomniac attacks and loss of appetite she was experiencing, despite her apparent composure: "I stay up until the morning tossing and turning in bed, my thoughts entangled . . . It must be all the stress and exhaustion (*al-stress wa al-irhaq*)."

Although her parents tried their best not to make Widad feel alone, the trip from their location to her house took about an hour and a half, which was not feasible for regular visits. After a few weeks, she decided she would try to persuade her housing adviser of the urgency of her situation, based on the absence of social bonds in her area and her "local connection" to the Central London borough that hosted her family, as well as a notable constituency of Arabic speakers. In what follows, I explore Widad's encounters with officials in order to draw out how she learned to translate and structure her claim about social exclusion into appropriate and familiar policy language.

The dual nature of bureaucracy

Everyday encounters with bureaucratic systems and their material cultures, especially in cross-cultural settings, have been known to elicit fear and panic (Aretxaga 2003; Navaro-Yashin 2007) and humiliation and entrapment (Jansen 2009) in those affected. The tedious repetition, the waiting, and the constant demands of certification that Widad experienced had their own "affective energies" (Navarro-Yashin 2007: 81). The anxiety and fear of losing her entitlements counteracted the dullness of bureaucratic measures. She referred to these processes as the "torture (*azab*) of bureaucracy." Yet, Widad's dealings taught her it is precisely the meticu-

lousness and rigidity of these procedures that ensured the sustainability of a fair system that treated citizens equally (Du Gay 2000; Heyman 2004).

Almost three months into her residence in London, Widad still had to face an excruciating amount of paperwork that determined her embeddedness in the system. Social security in England is fragmented and “labyrinthine,” requiring navigation of a variety of institutions with different rules and procedures (Forbes and James 2014: 74). Neither she nor I could keep up with the forms coming from the disconnected welfare offices. As soon as we had filled in a form for the child benefit office, we would receive a package with more forms from the tax credit office, often asking for the same information. For any clarification, we would wait on the phone for 45 minutes to reach a government agent. The logic of verification that set out the terms of engagement between the client and the bureaucrat bewildered both of us. For example, once I got hold of an agent, I would explain the purpose of my call and that I was interpreting for my friend. Despite this, the agent would ask to speak to Widad and still list a few questions in English, most of which, at least at the beginning of her move, she did not understand, though she eventually learned to anticipate them: first and last name, date of birth, address, National Insurance number, and a security question.

Widad was learning to engage with a new system that operated along very different lines than the ones she knew. As a general principle of bureaucratic governance, “reiterative authority” has always been part of government routines in her hometown Gaza in different historical moments (Feldman 2008a). Back home, however, bureaucracies operated on personalistic and clientelistic principles (Gellner and Waterbury 1977; Gilsenan 1977). Personal networks facilitated transactions and mediated the impersonal nature of the state through the deployment of idioms such as “the family,” among others (Alexander 2002; Joseph 1999). In this sense, Widad’s inability to personalize relationships in some of her bureaucratic encounters revealed a rigid

side to the British system that frustrated (“tortured”) her at first. The impression of the “rigid/impersonal/professional” bureaucrat, however, did not necessarily characterize the agents she was dealing with. For example, her housing officer was empathetic and supportive, not unlike other empathetic relationships described in the welfare literature (Hoag 2011; James and Killick 2012).⁴ But it was the unbendability of rules, in contrast with her experience in the Arab world, that established her understanding and imaginations of bureaucracy in the United Kingdom. Particular moments of crisis, such as the following encounter in hospital, revealed to her the “workings of the British system.” It also brought home the extent to which she was isolated from her social network.

Widad’s son complained his swollen arm hurt after he had fallen in a football game at school. When he began to cry with pain, Widad decided to take him to hospital, which was a short bus ride away from her flat. Her parents would need at least a couple hours to reach her. Under pressure, she left the two youngest children on their own, thinking her son’s case would be treated as an emergency and that she would return soon. Widad and her son had been at the hospital for more than three hours when her brother and I found them still waiting in the Accident and Emergency department, Widad’s face flushed with anger. In her broken English, she had tried to explain to the nurse that her two youngest children were at home by themselves and that she could not wait any longer. The nurse apparently reprimanded her for leaving two small children on their own, a legal offense in the United Kingdom, and advised her to go back and stay with them until they had adult company. She could then return to the end of the queue. Frustrated by the nurse’s lack of empathy and offended by her implications about her parenting, Widad protested that even in the Arab world the hospitals were more efficient. “Is this how London will be? We left our life to come to a better place and a child’s arm is broken and we have to wait four hours?!” Widad then burst into tears.

Within 20 minutes, the doctor saw her son and determined there was no serious problem with his arm. Relieved, Widad ruffled her son's hair and laughed at the whole situation. Still, she felt sore about her inability to move the nurse emotionally. Her brother reminded her of the ethos of equality in this system: attention is given first to those in need rather than people of rank or connections. Her brother's words presaged the views she would eventually come to hold about British bureaucracy. While clientelistic relations are functional in the sense that they enable a subject to bypass what might normally be a prolonged and frustrating procedure, these relations are exclusive and render citizens' access to state services uneven, if not uncertain. Despite the "torture" they inflict, bureaucratic procedures came to symbolize effective state-citizenship relations driven by what Widad considered a British essence that extended from people to the state: patience and discipline. She came to see discipline (*nizam*) in Britain as the antithesis of chaos (*fawda*) in Arab governments that encourage corruption and discriminate against their subjects. These sentiments resemble expressions of valorization of the rule of law as a sign of a "globally 'modern' society" in other ethnographic settings (Newendorp 2011: 96). That same evening, Widad agreed with her brother. "Here [in Britain], you can't call your cousin or uncle to pull strings and get things done for you. Everyone is under the law. Your religion and color don't matter." Moreover, she endorsed approaches that based themselves on filtering the "deserving" from the "undeserving" (Sales 2002). "The system here is fair. It will drive you crazy first, but you know you will be treated justly eventually. If they don't do this, imagine how many people will take advantage and suck their resources." Widad bought into the discourse of "the trickster" (Ahmed 2004), as well as the "rationality" and "fairness" of "good bureaucracy," and accepted that tolerating its procedures is a means to proving the authenticity of one's claims.

This and other encounters were instructive about the "nature" of the British and their state,

as well as the correct way of being a subject. To make claims on the state, she had to prove her deservedness while exercising patience. Despite her actual, everyday experience of the disparateness and disconnectedness of this system, Widad perceived the bureaucratic apparatus to be a unified entity joint together by civil servants dispersed around various administrative bodies. This is perhaps reinforced by the similarity and repetition in the procedures, materiality, and routines of the different agencies and agents with whom she was dealing (Gupta 2005). Through this lens of unity—and in the attempt to prove her deservingness—she set out to persuade any official that she thought represented this system of the authenticity of her housing case, regardless of whether they were directly involved in decision-making related to housing. But how to articulate what she believed was a rightful and honest request into bureaucratic discourse? The discussion of the following encounters demonstrates how Widad learned the parameters of claim-making.

Tense encounters

The experience of stress, anxiety, and depression among refugees is an internationally acknowledged issue (Ager 1993; Malkki 1996), as it is an officially recognized problem in the United Kingdom. For example, an earlier Home Office study established, for refugees of different communities, "the effects of war and persecution were compounded by social and cultural isolation, unemployment and language difficulties. Stress was aggravated by delays in processing applications, the threat of deportation and by separation from families" (Sales 2002: 466).⁵ In this sense, Widad's claims about the ramifications of her social exclusion were not unfamiliar to officialdom. Official knowledge, however, continues to operate in a climate of suspicion and hostility toward the figure of the over-demanding refugee. In the following interaction, this tension emerges in the encounter between Widad and a health and safety officer who was

inspecting her living conditions in relation to the required standards.⁶ The hospital incident discussed earlier brought home Widad's isolation and the extent to which this was causing her and her family "stress," a matter she was keen to convey to the officials she was dealing with.

Widad received a call from her housing officer informing her she should be expecting a visitor. She understood the landlady, from whom the council was renting and with whom she had only spoken over the phone, was coming to inspect her flat for the first time. The mixed aroma of brewed coffee and bleach filled the air. Her visitor arrived with a male companion, and they introduced themselves as Jenny and Iqbal. I quickly realized Widad had misunderstood the purpose of the visit. Widad warmly welcomed her guests and took Jenny by surprise when she gave her a peck on the cheek, only to realize through my translation that she was not her landlady. Slightly embarrassed, but maintaining a cheerful and hospitable tone, Widad offered the visitors coffee as an attempt to personalize the encounter. But Jenny declined politely and gave a clear impression that she was ready to start the inspection. Laughing at this blunder later and at the discomfort the kiss caused, Widad recalled that "the British," unlike Arabs, "don't mix the social with the professional!" With a checklist at hand, Jenny launched into questions about the alarm and the carbon monoxide detector as she and her colleague went around each room. The four of us stood in the corridor when she asked if Widad had any additional needs. Knowing the inspectors' role was a technical one, Widad still chose to raise the challenges that were causing her stress. I was translating both ways and indicate in the text my personal interventions.⁷

Widad started by asking for extra armchairs, framing her request with the discourse of "stress" caused by the conditions of the estate. "The estate has no gardens or parks and the children feel *stressed*. They can't really play outside. When we all sit down at night, we are on top of each other." But before I finished translating,

Jenny abruptly and firmly replied, "We are only required to give one seat per person, and you have a three-seat sofa and two armchairs. If you need more, then it is up to you as a tenant to buy the extras." Widad could sense this was non-negotiable, so she conceded, perhaps wanting to concentrate on the more pressing question. She continued that although the flat was comfortable, the area was too far from where her family lived. As decisively as her first reply, and almost in a rehearsed fashion, Jenny said, "Everyone wants to be in Central London, and there are no spaces there. The council is obliged to find appropriate flats for people, but we cannot guarantee placing them in areas of preference." Widad already knew this but pushed on her point, trying to explain it wasn't so much the area or the distance but rather the feeling of exclusion in the area and the inability of her children to communicate with other children on the estate. Jenny suggested Widad go to community centers where she could meet people. But, again, Widad evidenced her effort by listing the school events she had attended and the children's center she had registered in, hoping to meet other mothers, to no avail. In an attempt to nail down the point about language and exclusion, she continued, "I don't mind if *after* two years the council moves me here. If I could speak English and knew my way around, I wouldn't mind being far from my family. But now is the time that I need support."

Jenny then addressed me: "Well, she could go to the local mosque and find Arab speakers there. She just has to find the community." Slightly provoked by what I felt was a micro-aggression in her suggestion, I found myself replying before translating to Widad. "I don't think this is an appropriate suggestion! You are assuming that there are Arabic speakers in the mosque, which is not necessarily the case. She is not asking to be introduced to *Muslims* who go to mosques but to *Arabic speakers*." Defensively, Jenny continued, "If I were moving to a new country, I would go to church and find people of my community there." Again, I argued before translating to Widad, "It is not something that

women do, going to the mosque to ‘find people.’ I’m not sure that is appropriate.” At this point, Iqbal, with the authority of being a Muslim himself, confirmed my point that “going to church for Christians is not the same as going to the mosque for Muslims.”

Upon translation, Widad calmly asked me to make sure to convey she does not need to be around Muslims. What she needed was to be able to communicate with the people around her. “Here, I feel under a lot of stress. I am by myself. I don’t feel safe. I cannot be outside the house after dark. There was a murder on the estate, and it scared us. If something happens, I have no one to resort to. The children feel *depressed* [in English] because they have no one to speak to and we are confined indoors. I need my family around me.” Through me, Widad invoked the incident at the hospital when she found herself alone and endangered her younger children by leaving them in the flat by themselves. Interestingly here, Widad used this example instrumentally, after she had learned that leaving children unaccompanied is an offense in England. Outside the encounter, Widad compared UK parenting practices to those back home, where children as young as three would be sent to the grocery shop across the road on their own, or where a 10-year-old would “raise younger siblings.” But her views on the scope of Arab children’s responsibility had to be restrained, given her acquired knowledge of the consequences. As Rachel Humphris argues, welfare encounters “provide occasions for the interference in mothers’ intimate lives to become sites for bordering due to their precarious migrant status and designation as ‘vulnerable’” (2017: 1194). Instead, her potential legal offense was used as an example of how her circumstances victimized her. At this point, Jenny sheepishly explained she was just trying to help. Her tone mellowed, and she began to show more sympathy and understanding about the difficulties Widad was expressing. She even promised to report Widad’s situation to the council and to make recommendations for a more appropriate housing in which she could be closer to her community.⁸

In this encounter, the ambiguities and misunderstandings at play, despite their discomfort, are generative. This is partly in terms of “the novice’s” gradual appreciation of how to position herself in certain bureaucratic spaces and partly in the negotiation that occurs in aligning the incongruent perspectives of the claimant and the bureaucrat. Widad sought to prove to Jenny that her demands were legitimate by evidencing her efforts to “integrate”—whether by actively “looking for a community” or by showing her willingness to be in whichever area the council chooses, once she has gained language skills—and by recognizing when to concede in her negotiation. For example, she knew better to drop her request for furniture upon a reasonable answer that disassociated her children’s “stress” from the interior conditions of the house.

The tension in my own exchange with Jenny opens up analysis of how we might capture multiple meanings and intentions and “what slips out or is mistranslated” (Best 2012: 86) in bureaucratic encounters; here, I ought to draw attention to the role of the anthropologist as translator and mediator. In this exchange, Jenny invokes a widespread sentiment that Muslim migrants are unable (or even refuse) to integrate in multicultural Britain. It is also an image conjured up in Home Office statements. Irene Gedalof analyzes the ethicized and radicalized image of “the migrant woman” as a problem of a particular kind. She is a problem defined by her linguistic isolation and limited awareness of cultural difference and by her entanglement in the “backward practices” of arranged marriage and gender subordination (2007: 90). Moreover, Jenny’s retort that Widad should just “find the community” beckons Insa Koch’s argument about the “moral economy of blame” in Britain’s housing sector, which she argues contrasts with a “politics of welfare’ [that ought to] place at its core a logic of collective solutions and a moral economy of redistribution” (2018: 223). Perhaps my intervention created an affective moment that changed the dynamic of the interaction, for affect “captures a way of acting on other actions [or actors] due to its inherently reflexive quality

... that makes it particularly useful for documenting how subjects are mutually constituted” (Richard and Rudnyckyj 2009: 60). My tone and implicit accusation of racism, coupled with Iqbal’s position in the conversation, “affected” this exchange and recalibrated the balance of power. At least Jenny felt compelled to soften her position and take on board Widad’s story.

The tension in this example elaborates how different subjects can affect the bureaucratic encounter in different ways. While the anthropologist is in a position to challenge bureaucratic discourses, Widad, as a refugee claimant, gains legitimacy through submitting herself to these discourses and inhabiting categories. She was able to frame her claim about the emotional and mental repercussions of social exclusion in a way that chimed with official knowledge. Widad presented her predicament through a “victim trope,” once she demonstrated she had tried everything expected of her to accommodate to her new housing situation. As Lauren Silver contends, public service systems “are more likely to empathize with victims of circumstances as opposed to victims of one’s own actions” (2010: 292). The fact that an official like Jenny, who appeared remarkably adamant at first, could accept and even endorse Widad’s narrative armed her with a sense of righteousness and consolidated the legitimacy of her claim.

Kinds of stress

In his influential essay on the discourse of stress, Allan Young argues “theoretical knowledge and social relations that produce facts about stress simultaneously produce evidence that conventional (Western) beliefs about the social order are accurate descriptions of the universal social condition of human kind” (1980: 136). His point is that both Western vernacular and expert (scientific) views on stress naturalize it to an extent that renders social context and unequal social relations that reproduce the discourse irrelevant, and hence unexamined. In the context of refugee regimes and humanitarianism, a uni-

versalizing framework flattens refugee conditions as it depoliticizes and dehistoricizes them (Malkki 1996; Ticktin 2006). Along the same lines in a different ethnographic example, Erica James argues bureaucratization alienates the experience from the subject as it is transformed into a “trauma portfolio—the aggregate of documentation and verification which ‘recognises’ or transubstantiates individuals ... into ‘victims’” (2004: 131). But, some of these universal categories become “instruments” for refugees who then use them to press their own claims (Feldman 2008b: 500). Through her bureaucratic encounters, Widad was learning to do just that, to produce a discourse—as recognized and valuable representations of knowledge—that was resonant vernacularly and bureaucratically. James’s idea of “the portfolio” is relevant for understanding Widad’s case as she engaged in compiling verifications that made her a recognized claimant through different bureaucrats.

In the following, Widad continues to construct her case based on “stress due to social exclusion.” By now, she had been learning through her encounters that (a) only certain kinds of stress are recognized in official claims and (b) that her claim needed to be discursively organized into a coherent narrative. How the narrative gels together was equally important. For example, another Palestinian woman, also holding a refugee status, tried to persuade her housing officer she needed new accommodation. She argued she was “depressed” because she was living with her parents at the age of 30 and wished to be independent. On that basis, she wanted separate accommodation. Recounting the story to Widad and me, she laughed at the reaction of the officer: “You are depressed? Welcome to London. Everyone is depressed!” In other words, while her condition might be recognized, her narrative is not persuasive. Two weeks after the health and safety checks, Widad was summoned for a mental health assessment, this time at the office of the council. A friendly mental health officer, Anthony, brought with him a form that seemed to revolve around three categories: “mental health,” “social health,” and

“accessibility in the accommodation.” Looking at his forms, he began with the now familiar and predictable list of background questions, which prompted a “Here we go again!” from Widad, who continued to answer them without translation, after sarcastically telling me she had already “memorized that lesson.”

Despite the order of the form, Widad took control of her own priorities. Once Anthony finished writing down the background details, she impatiently launched into the stressful problem of her location. Her aim was to appeal emotionally to the officer, as she had done with Jenny, and asked me half-jokingly to make sure to “wail” (*nadb*) in my translation, in other words, to convey the emotionality of her plight. This time, Widad came armed with a new detail, which she was certain would strengthen her argument about the challenges of living in East London. “It is a dangerous place,” she said. “On our way back home last week, we found a fox! This cannot be a good place for children.” Although I had explained to Widad when she initially expressed her shock at the sight of the animal that it is very common to see foxes in London and that they are not seen as wild beasts in this country, she insisted this made her case strong, perhaps even more so than the murder example. But Anthony laughed at this and said that in West Africa, where he came from, foxes are considered good luck. Widad found this news strange (*gharib*) and tactically returned to what she now knew was a recognized and acceptable narrative. She described the pressures she and the children had been facing, the lack of support at schools, and her children’s psychosomatic symptoms, and she recounted the examples of the murder and the hospital incident, all of which she reiterated were causing the family stress.

After Widad’s elaboration on her children’s coping difficulties, Anthony got to the question “Do you have mental health problems?” to which Widad replied, “No, just stress because of the situation” she had just described. Unlike Jenny in the earlier example, Anthony showed sympathy to Widad’s claims of hard-

ship. But his job was to organize her narrative into the medium of the form, a task that will always reduce the complexity of the narrative itself (Silver 2010). Anthony read out his version saying, “No, just stress because of parenting.” When I translated to Widad, she asked me to correct him. It was not “parenting” per se that was stressful, she clarified, but rather parenting away from her social network. Here, as in the hospital, Widad rejected the implication that her stress might in some way affect her parenting skills and instead made sure to emphasize the kind of stress that was condoned, one that is caused by lack of social bonds. Agreeably, Anthony changed his notes and repeated to us everything he had written down, the information now organized under the headings of the form. Anthony concluded Widad was “feeling stress as a result of her displacement and social exclusion, and hence her social health was suffering.” We conceded to his summary, and the interview ended with him promising to convey Widad’s “stress” to her housing officer.

Bureaucratic forms, as documents, play a role in the construction of subjects, not least in “accounting for the criteria for bureaucratic determinations of what sort of person or thing fits within them” (Hull 2012: 259). Widad’s aim was to be recognized as a deserving claimant who was struggling with a legitimate kind of stress that resulted from social exclusion. The repetition of a coherent narrative to various state representatives was instrumental, for endorsement by different bureaucrats “adds to the “value” of the portfolio relative to those of other sufferers” (James 2004: 132). Widad hoped this would eventually confirm her honesty and affirm the authenticity of her case.

Conclusion

The case discussed in this article evokes what we may think of as an irreconcilable contradiction: that people might invest their time and effort in “playing the system” while simultaneously learning to trust it. Deana Jovanović, however,

argues the focus on ambivalence in studying contradictions, “has a potential to repoliticize power relations and to embed contradictions in actual contexts, where the simple choice of ‘either’/‘or’ is a very rare instance” (2016: 4). Far from being uniquely “disenchanted iron cages of modernity,” this article has demonstrated a productive face of bureaucracy by exploring how bureaucratic encounters, often through their ambivalence, act as learning spaces for new migrants. The ethnographic case presented here serves as an invitation to pry open ambivalence and to unearth the various conditions of possibility across (and within) diverse bureaucratic regimes that present themselves as coherent, transparent, and legible.

My guiding question was how new arrivals perceive, experience, and learn about new bureaucratic regimes. Accessing resources and claiming rights and entitlements require a performance of a particular personhood in order to demonstrate legitimacy and deservingness, especially in social and political climates that are suspicious of refugees and asylum seekers. Ethnographic attention to dynamics within organized encounters allows us to capture how legitimacy is established dialogically by observing discursive presentations of oneself and, sometimes, the instrumentalism at work in the images, tropes, and vocabulary deployed by claimants who seek to inhabit official categories and be recognized. These are not to be taken for granted, for being a citizen is a learning process.

New migrants have diverse backgrounds that shape their experiences of emplacement. But what the ethnographic case discussed here condenses is the common feeling of being a novice who, as Widad expressed, needs to gradually “learn everything from the beginning.” I suggest investigating knowledges of previous bureaucratic regimes and how they mediate experiences in new ones enriches our understanding of the positionality of the novice and advances our appreciation of how different subjects come to perceive bureaucracy in its different iterations. This understanding unfolds through an analysis of several encounters over time and

demonstrates how protocols and practices are probed in different cultural contexts—in this case, the Arab world and the United Kingdom. The repetitive nature of verification in bureaucratic encounters makes them predictable and allows the novice to anticipate demands and to organize their narrative and demeanor in persuasive ways that conform to their bureaucratic positionalities. Equally, like all encounters, bureaucratic ones constitute an element of unpredictability. But, it is in these ambiguous moments—through miscommunication, mistakes, and blunders—that learning also occurs.

In that same year, Widad’s request to be relocated to Central London was approved, and she was offered a flat only a few streets away from her parents. Within weeks, she found that her and her children’s lives improved considerably as they settled in this new area. Widad connected her success to the honesty and legitimacy of her claim. She maintained the British state believed her because she was truthful, confirming her idea that patience and order are rewarded in British society. While the outcome of her negotiations highlight the place of “mental health”—expressed as “stress”—and “social bonds and inclusion” as tenets of “integration” in the resettlement of refugees in the United Kingdom, they sit uneasily with the realities of British immigration policies. The outsourcing of social welfare and the marketization of social housing under neoliberal governments, coupled with a hostile environment toward asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants, interrogate government strategies for inclusion and integration.

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Notes

1. All names in this article are pseudonyms.
2. Widad initially sought asylum as a single mother with her children. She then applied for her husband to join her through a family reunion application.
3. Single, particularly male, applicants struggle to be given priority and often join a long queue of homelessness until accommodation is available.
4. A focus on bureaucrats themselves, an important growing area in the study of bureaucracy, was outside the scope of my research. I am thus unable to establish the extent of the maneuver and "discretion" they exercised in their respective agencies as "street level bureaucrats" (Lipsky 1980).
5. Sales (2002) cites a Home Office study (Carey-Wood et al. 1995) in which two-thirds of the 263 refugees interviewed in the United Kingdom experienced stress, anxiety, and depression.
6. Under the Housing Act (2004), the Housing Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS) was established for the evaluation of potential risks to hazards in homes.
7. Space restrictions do not permit a discussion of the overlapping and multiple roles and identities of the anthropologist in a context such as this research. This section, however, touches on the tensions that emerged from my interlaced position of informal translator, advocate, and ethnographer.
8. At the time of this encounter, we did not think this was in the remit of health and safety inspectors. But the HHSRS document says that although it is not concerned with "matters of quality, comfort and convenience," such matters could be considered if they "have an impact on a person's physical or mental health or safety" (ODPM 2006: 7).

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