

### Privileged Precarities: An Organizational Ethnography of Early Career Workers at the United Nations

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Linda M. Mülli  
*Privileged  
Precarities*

An Organizational  
Ethnography  
of Early Career  
Workers at the  
United Nations



## Privileged Precarities

Work and Everyday Life

Ethnographic Studies on Work Cultures

Series of the Commission "Working Cultures" in the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Volkskunde (German Society for European Ethnology and Folklore)

Edited by Irene Götz, Gertraud Koch, Klaus Schönberger and Manfred Seifert

Volume 19

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Linda M. Mülli

# Privileged Precarities

An Organizational Ethnography  
of Early Career Workers at the United Nations

Campus Verlag  
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*For P.A.*





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When we reject the single story, when we realize that there is never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise.

*(Adichie 2009)*

Above all, I think of anthropology as a study of human diversity—trying to describe the latter accurately, and to understand it as a whole and in its parts, not focusing too narrowly or prematurely on what is closest at hand, at home, or dominant.

*(Hannerz 2016, 6)*

Ethnography can be said to have two lives. A first life consists of fieldwork. Its defining character is participant observation during long periods of time—being there and living among. A second life entails writing. It corresponds to the analysis of the empirical material and its elaboration into a theoretical framework that give birth to a document—a book, an article, or a film. [...] But then the situation changes when works are published. They escape their creators. They are shared with a public. Their afterlife begins.

*(Fassin 2017, 314–15; 318)*



# Prologue: Entering the Field of Research as an Intern-ethnographer

July 15, 2014. It is a Tuesday morning shortly before 8.30 a.m. in Vienna, Austria. I am on my way to work. The subway, line U1, takes me to the Vienna-based UN organization where I was hired as an intern for three months. Subway passengers are listening to music, reading a book or simply staring into the void blankly, apparently fighting the morning tiredness. I look around, noticing that I already have developed a trained gaze to recognize “UN people” in their pre-working attitude among the few locals who supposedly are on their way to the nearby shopping center. I become aware of the one or other UN newbie proudly wearing the UN badge—also to be referred as temporary grounds pass—protected by a transparent plastic holder on a neon-blue braided nylon cord around their neck. Some days, I spot a few tourists curiously gazing out of the windows or an agitated class of chattering school children from Austria or nearby countries.

Coming from the city center, Stephansplatz, the subway takes the bridge over the Danube river. It stops at Donauinsel. I glimpse out of the filthy subway window to enjoy the view of the tranquil river in the morning atmosphere. The subway continues its way towards the second part of the bridge, and loudspeakers announce the next station, “Kaisermühlen-Vienna International Center.” In general, those passengers who have been traveling in the rear part of the train take the back exit of the subway station. It leads to the neighborhood called Kaisermühlen, which used to be a small village before it was swallowed up by the city of Vienna. From the subway cars at the front, women and men in business attire hurriedly disembark. They head to the entrance of the Vienna International Center (VIC). This building complex, located in the extraterritorial trans-Danube area of the Austrian capital, houses the principal office of the United Nations. Some of the passengers descend the stairs in small groups, having a little chat. They could be work colleagues; others might be part of a diplomatic delegation on their way to one of the many multilateral conference meetings. Most, however, rush down the staircase of the subway station’s exit over to the entrance of the VIC building. While descending the stairs, the UN officials remove their staff identity card from their pockets and handbags. They get

ready to pass the entrance gate. It seems that this discreet action of taking out the grounds pass before even leaving the metro station initiates the work day. It expresses the need to avoid wasting time on entering in order to quickly pass through the left-hand door of the portal at the main VIC entrance Gate 1 that is reserved for UN staff, consultants, diplomats and assigned visitors such as members of diplomatic delegations.

At the gate in the entrance hall, they swipe swiftly over the identification device with the badge that identifies them as UN staff. The automatic doors open quickly and smoothly every time an official passes the gate. Simultaneously, their image (a passport photograph that was taken on their first working day) appears on a screen above everyone's head and is thus visible for a short moment to the half-queuing, half-bustling crowd. The photograph of the employee who is about to enter allows the UN security officer surveilling the scene to verify the entrant's identity better—and reveals to those waiting behind how much someone can change over the months or years; how quickly people transform their look (or not at all). After this effortless security check, the international civil servants cross the plaza between the gate and the massive grey building whose architecture combines concrete elements with large window facades that were the aesthetic preference in the early 1970s. Finally, each staff member heads towards the four different entry doors of the VIC building. The identification badge issued by the UN Pass Office is mandatory to wear for everyone walking inside the UN compound. It is a compulsory object in the everyday life of a UN worker since, at least in certain UN bodies, it is required for the daily routine of clocking in and off at the end of the working day. Thus, after having passed Gate 1 and entered the building, it is another gentle touch with the identification badge on the small machines located at walls in different spots of the building that immediately start counting the staff member's working hours. After clocking in, the arriving officials turn towards the elevators that will take them up to their offices. The timekeeping machines serve as governmental instruments of surveillance and control. Yet, these details would only become familiar to me after signing my second contract as a UN intern in October of the same year. This would give me the opportunity to collect even more observations and to deepen my understanding of the everyday life in and around the UN head-office in Vienna—and beyond. Daily, when attending meetings, interacting with senior colleagues and junior fellows, as well as participating and simultaneously observing processes of project-based work, I gradually gained a greater understanding of the mechanisms within a particular unit and the institution for which I worked. In a small notebook that very soon became a field diary, I collected knowledge about the organizational structure, different protagonists and business procedures to better understand the professional environ-



ment of the UN entity I was working in and its complex entanglements. In parallel to my work notes, I wrote numerous observations, trying to sort my emotions, understand my feelings and reactions, which ranged from admiration combined with enthusiasm to skepticism mixed with frustration toward my new workplace.

Meanwhile, and while queuing in the long line at Gate 1, I can only observe these scenes from a distance and imagine how effortless it must feel to access the VIC within only a few minutes. There are days I have mixed feelings; my initial enthusiasm to work for the UN is troubled by incomprehension and impatience. My frustration for that matter would only increase over the coming months. I had already learned that at the second entrance, located on the right-hand side of the portal, things take more time. By arriving before the rush hour at around 9.00 a.m., I try to avoid long periods of queuing that, on busy days, stretch to thirty minutes and more—so it has become a joke among the interns to ask who had waited for the longest. Waiting in the line of visitors and other non-accredited persons who have to pass the high-security zone at Gate 1 before being allowed to enter UN ground feels like a mundane daily routine. The security procedure the other interns and I have to undergo before starting our working day becomes a ritualized act. This ritualized everyday practice will eventually enhance our metamorphosis from civilians, still enrolled or recently graduated university students and early career professionals, into interns at one of the many UN organizations. The daily routine also enables me to develop a distant, but strong gaze on the scenes at Gate 1. The observations kindle my awareness that feeling part of the “UN family” might be almost elusive. In contrast, to those with grounds passes, the daily, inescapable, pre-work body-scan reminds me that my belonging to the organization is, as an intern, more uncertain. It is a moment where many of my fellow interns and I are indirectly coerced to show a bit of humility and gratitude.

Less visible at that moment, but no less critical, was the message conveyed through the unpaid internship contract and the frequently precarious living conditions created as a result. During these three months of my internship, the unpaid work was merely a minor issue in my case since I had been able to put some money aside during a previous paid job. Likewise, for many of my intern colleagues paid work elsewhere was the way to finance unpaid work for the UN. Against this background, I remember that, on November 19, 2014, after finishing a day’s work while I was on my second UN internship in Vienna, I attended a public talk by a German sociologist organized by the *Arbeiterkammer* (Vienna Labor Chamber). At the cocktail reception that followed, I met a colleague who I knew from the VIC. She was working as a waitress serving wine to the audience who seemed very thirsty. Only in this very moment, it came to my attention that she, after having finished her working

hours as an unpaid intern at the VIC, put in a second shift as a paid waitress to make a living. When I raised this issue with her, she told me that it was only due to this job that she could afford the living expenses. Additionally, it would guarantee the work and resident permit that she, as a non-EU/EFTA citizen, had as a student of the University of Vienna. Others, however, were luckier and received a living expenses stipend for the duration of the internship, which allowed them to live in Vienna and work for free. There are also interns, usually in their mid-twenties when applying for an internship, who depended on parents for financial support. A colleague even took out a loan to finance her unpaid internship, which created further financial dependencies and pressure.

Besides these financial challenges, I learned in my daily conversations with my peers about the absurdities and contradictory mechanisms in the UN working world. It includes, in the case of unpaid interns, the volatility of contractually fixed eight working hours. Some interns, being unable to complete their tasks during the week, would continue working on weekends. They learned very quickly about the importance of respecting hierarchy. Because of the prestige the non-UN world associates with an UN internship, another intern did not dare speak up for his right to reasonable working hours. On September 5, 2014, when preparing our farewell party, he told me about his frustration. Having almost finished this internship at the UN, which is an organization striving for industrial development around the globe, as well as one that should provide relevant work experience after completing undergraduate studies prior to Masters courses, he described the predominating work climate in his unit as one of fear and compliance, “Even the consultants were afraid of our supervisor.” He added contritely, “I only saw my supervisor two or three times during the internship—and always when having a break at the coffee bar. Very unfortunate.” Yet, he knew from a more experienced colleague, who has been a consultant for many years, about the essential rules, stating that “it’s not your achievements [that] count, but what you represent and how you are perceived. If you take a nap, close your office door, and be cautious in whose company you are in.” My friend feared for his recommendation letter, although it was the only laurels he could expect as an unpaid intern, “My supervisor said, ‘I think you’re enjoying your internship too much; your work is not good enough.’” These experiences and observations would be confirmed when talking to the representative of the Fair Internship Initiative (FII) in Geneva almost five years later in May 2019. “Many interns save money or simply try to lower their expenses to the minimum,” the FII spokesperson said. Having worked as an unpaid intern in international institutions himself, he knows, “People have their strategies, you know, they do babysit or walk instead of taking the tram.” He continued that there would be a group on social media called Free Intern

Food Group where interns announce free croissants in this room or free cake in that room, “This is how people eat breakfast to save money.” In Vienna, during the short period of three to six months, interns have to submit to the unavoidable routine procedure at Gate 1—that is, the daily, inescapable, pre-work body-scan combined with the acceptance of the sometimes unfair treatment by their supervisors. Interns who do a weekend shift at the office are aware of the perpetually present, but never expressed pressure as during these months they have to give everything for the job and perform in a way that might possibly enable them to be offered a consultancy. And, as this book outlines, the distinguishing line between the “right” and the “wrong” performance can be both slim and hazy.

Still staying in line for the right-hand entrance at Gate 1, my feelings oscillate. I am motivated to work on my assigned project, yet, I am haunted by the feeling that I remain an outsider. Eventually, this feeling and self-perception as an outsider would help me conduct ethnographic research. Interns must take another entrance—for those not officially counted as UN staff. The daily check at Gate 1 is a practice generating hierarchies. Respecting the safety rules at UN headquarters by queuing on the right-hand side of Gate 1 turns into a metaphor for the state of waitthood of those hoping for a UN career. Some interns wonder, “How is it possible to get from this line to the other?” Are there really some secret ingredients for a successful UN career as suggested in the job advertisements published by the UN on social media? Meanwhile, the line is moving. Not sideways, but at least forward. Some of those waiting are listening to music, chatting and gossiping, or are just blankly staring into space (probably wishing they could have slept a little bit longer). Apart from interns, I can spot country officials, NGO workers and researchers signing up for a conference held by a UN organization headquartered at the VIC and who apparently weren’t lucky enough to have someone pick up the temporary grounds passes for them, as well as secondary school students and tourists. Of course, interns do not take precedence nor are allowed to queue in a separate line that would enable them to access the building more quickly.

I take the few steps up towards the right entrance at Gate 1. I pass a UN security officer in their light-blue UN uniform. The female or male UN security officers usually stand with their backs against the wall of Gate 1 guarding the entrance while observing the queuing people with a half-concentrated, half-grim facial expression. If a face is familiar, we greet each other. It is true that, over time, faces become familiar; interns daily passing the same procedure and security officers greet each other. But usually, there is no time for a short chat as the line has to move on. I arrive at the foyer where the security zone begins. In the entrance area, a barrier tape guides the waiting crowd to form a line that slowly moves towards the body scanner. In

my opinion, it looks more like a labyrinth than an organized queue. Again, some forward-looking individuals get prepared for what is about to come. So do I. As if I were at the security check at an airport, I have to take off my coat, sometimes my shoes or a scarf I use to be protected against the air-conditioned cold inside the VIC building, and the machines scan everything I have in my backpack. “Do you always carry so much stuff?” the guard asks me, joking. Mostly, the security officials are friendly, and they try to talk to the passing individuals quickly. On the one hand I understand, I think it must be truly boring to stay here and watch us take off our coats, reminding us that we have to put the trays, which transport our belongings through the X-ray machine, back to speed up the process. On the other hand, I finally want to get to the office. There is a lot of work waiting for me.

When passing the security zone that separates the public space of the city of Vienna from the international UN space of the VIC, I often thought about whether tourists and other visitors also perceive this process as a confirmation of the UN’s status as a powerful and perhaps even elitist organization. I thus started to observe not only the international staff heading to their offices, but also my fellow interns, and compared the different manners of entering the VIC to those of visitors, tourists, or young students. It seemed to me that some fellow interns shared my mixed feelings about the contradicting mechanisms of the working world we encountered. Many remained—or at least presented themselves as—highly enthusiastic when talking about the possibility of gaining work experience. They demonstrated an unfettered admiration for the UN and the “good work” they would be able to deliver. As newcomers, these interns resembled the tourists marveling at the space they would encounter behind the high fence of the VIC. I—who, as an anthropologist is used to being the observer—felt remarkably observed, if not policed. Being body-scanned every single day before starting my work reminded me that I did not belong to the organization at all. Consequently, I felt like an outsider, too. (Eventually, this feeling and self-perception as an outsider would help me to conduct ethnographic research). After the security check, I finally get closer to my office. After a gentle touch with the white identification badge—it differs from those of the staff entering on the left side of Gate 1—the electronic gate opens, I step out into the plaza area, and my workday is about to begin. There is only the elevator ride left to go. People step into the cabin densely packed with colleagues while the elevator goes floor by floor up the building. Sometimes, people in the elevator greet each other with a quick nod or address familiar faces with a short “Hi, how are you?” Mostly this is not meant as a question but rather expresses formal politeness. When they finally reach the right floor, the UN white-collar staff and the interns walk in the direction of their office to start their working day.

From the perspective of the interns, queuing in line is both a promise and a stigma. On the one hand, it is possible to physically access the UN premises. On the other, it feels like a stigma to stand in line each day in order to do a job for which you are not paid a dime. And it creates an enormous pressure to perform in a manner that will eventually enable one to enter the left portal at Gate 1 one day.



# 1 Introduction

Large corporations are often formidable and mysterious to people outside them, like giants that populate the earth but can only be seen through their shadows. [...] Corporations are often equally mysterious to the people inside, whose views can be limited and parochial because they rarely get a sense of the whole.

(Moss Kanter 1993, 4)

Large organizations and corporations use their historically built magnificence and reputation to maintain attractiveness on the one hand and intangibility on the other. This observation still holds true, particularly for international organizations (IOs) such as the United Nations (UN) comprising of a dense network of sub-organizations, special agencies, and funds. This present work focuses on this large international body and, in particular, on UN workers<sup>1</sup> who are still at an early stage of their potential UN career. With a look behind the scenes, this book aims to enhance the understanding of the dynamics and work culture(s) of the rather closed-off world of the UN and the practices of people working there.

## 1.1 Point of Departure and Research Aim

In 2020, the year I submitted the doctoral dissertation on which this book is based, the UN celebrated its 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary.<sup>2</sup> According to its Charter of 1945, the main purpose of the UN is “to maintain international peace and security” (UN GA 1945, 3). To quote from the organizational website<sup>3</sup> established for the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the UN, the following words are used to paraphrase the organization’s *raison d’être*:

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<sup>1</sup> For terminology, see Chapter 2.4.

<sup>2</sup> Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the 75<sup>th</sup> session of the UN General Assembly primarily took place in a virtual format.

<sup>3</sup> For reader-friendliness, the title is mentioned directly, whereas the URL is only given in the references. If there is no date mentioned, I quote the date I accessed the websites. Usually, these websites are periodically updated.

The work of the United Nations reaches every corner of the globe. Although best known for peacekeeping, peacebuilding, conflict prevention and humanitarian assistance, there are many other ways the United Nations and its System (specialized agencies, funds and programmes) affect our lives and make the world a better place. (UN 2015a, *History of the UN*)

In the present day, the UN and the respective actors within advocate for achieving the goal of global peace and security to which UN member states agreed in 1945. Thus, the objective of the UN seems to be defined by clear words: to “make the world a better place.” To achieve the above-mentioned goals, there are experts needed. The channels and entry paths through which early career workers<sup>4</sup> enter and cope with the UN as an employing institution and working environment are the main concern of this book. A growing number of younger<sup>5</sup> employees are, according to my experience, trained in historically recent and supposedly specialized degree or certificate programs such as peace and conflict studies, global health studies or nonproliferation studies. This type of formation is supposed to lead to a specific field of employment. However, today, there is still a vast number of university graduates who have a more general background. According to Eurostat, more than “one third of tertiary education students in the EU in 2016 were studying social sciences, journalism, information, business, administration or law” (Eurostat 2019, *Your Key to European Statistics*). Applying this statistic to my field of research means that, besides those university graduates who went through a specialized curriculum preparing them for the field of humanitarian aid and international development cooperation, the UN also has a strong appeal for many early career professionals who have a background

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4 I use the terms early career workers and early career professionals interchangeably to refer to persons who are still at the beginning of their UN working life. With the exception of the senior and more experienced UN staff with whom I conducted expert interviews, my informants have, at the time of the interview, around two to five years of working experience in the UN system and are between 26 and 39 years old. Some entered the UN right after graduation, others had previous work experience in other fields or with other employers. In turn, emic terms such as UN staff categories are marked using italics when first mentioned (e.g. the category *entry-level professionals* refers to persons with a minimum of two to five years of working experience; this category is, as I will outline later, divided into two levels of seniority: *P2* and *P3*).

5 It goes without saying that “young” is a blurry category. As I will explain later, I allude to the organizational definition of young; this category is applied to persons until they are in their early thirties. This, of course, raises a series of questions regarding being young as a lifestyle. In order to distance myself from the emic definition of young, I refer to the informants in this study as “younger.”



in law, political science, international relations, business administration, economics and other fields with wide scopes of focus.

Being interested in sustainable development and various forms of international development cooperation (IDC), admiring the UN's ideological appeal for peace and equality, and aiming to work with colleagues coming from across the world are attracting factors for younger professionals interested in an *international* working atmosphere where people (at least indirectly) contribute to "bettering the world." It is therefore hardly surprising that, in the present day, the UN has a strong appeal for early career workers who aim to pursue a career in the professional field of international development cooperation. As staff of the UN Secretariat, *international civil servants* (this is what UN personnel are called officially) shall administratively support the UN and its member states to "achieve international cooperation in solving international problems of an economic, social, cultural, or humanitarian character, and in promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion [...]" (UN GA 1945, 3), as it was phrased in the UN Charter. The administrative officers shall follow "the highest standards of efficiency, competence, and integrity" (*ibid.*, 18).

The appeal of this important work in IDC to follow the highest standards possible is molded, in part, by the many imaginations of the UN circulating for decades. It is transported by movies and books, testimonials of former UN staff praising or accusing the UN. It is addressed in the context of exhibitions<sup>6</sup>, in educational institutions, at career fairs, and more. It is also influenced by discourses and practices shaped by the organization itself. In a recruiting initiative, for example, the UN Secretariat, which could be described as the political and administrative centerpiece of the UN, is looking for "talented, highly qualified professionals to start a career as an international civil servant with the United Nations Secretariat" (UN Careers 2020c, *Where we are*). By addressing them as "talented" and "highly qualified," the organization labels the targeted early career professionals as "young talents."<sup>7</sup> (As I will show in this book, the perception of belonging to a bureaucratic elite is eventually embodied by the UN workforce.) From an external point of view and, in particular, compared to the vast majority of citizens in the

6 In April 2015, the art project *UN.KNOWN SPACES*, applying Foucault's concept of *heterotopia* (Foucault and Miskowiec 1986) to the UN, was exhibited in Vienna.

7 The global call for the recruitment of "young leaders," "young potentials" or "young talents" can be found in management discourses beyond the UN context.

UN member states, international civil servants can be described as a group of *privileged* professionals. This category finds evidence in the fact that these professionals are highly trained and thus recruited for high wages to work at the UN. Other than being well-situated, many UN workers express feeling “privileged” to work at the UN. This self-ascription goes along with a claim of moral superiority that is common in the field of IDC and NGO work (Lashaw, Vannier, and Sampson 2017).

This book is the result of the research project titled *Rituals in an International Work Environment. An Anthropological Research Study on Cross-cultural Relations and Interactions in United Nations-Affiliated Organizations in Geneva and Vienna*. It focuses on the work and lifeworlds of the UN context. Taking the United Nations Headquarter Duty Stations (hereinafter referred to as UN HQ duty stations) in Geneva and Vienna as points of departure, I analyze the intertwined professional and personal backgrounds of international civil servants with a transnational mobility approach. This, as I will outline in the following, means applying a fourfold theoretical perspective including organizational anthropology and the anthropology of work, as well as approaches of biography and mobility studies.

The aim of this work is to provide an actor-centered, concrete and relational perspective. Precisely, this ethnography follows the perspectives of professionals who, at the moment of the interview, are at an early stage of their potential career in the UN context. The multi-method research aims to analyze biographies and careers of international civil servants working in the main offices of the UN in Geneva and Vienna. By applying different analytical lenses on the gathered material, this book offers biographical insights into UN workers’ lives. It contributes to the understanding of highly qualified and highly mobile professionals. Moreover, it provides insights into the globalized work and lifeworlds of transnational elites—that is, groups of privileged professionals in the context of the UN. Thus, in a first step, this study inquires into the specific working conditions of young UN workers, a more neutral term that includes all contractual statuses. It analyzes the characteristics of this work system, which seems quite inaccessible, at least to outsiders. I would like to exemplify how this separation is perceived and therefore constructed by professionals working in UN agencies with a short excerpt from my field diary:

Arriving in one of the UN organizations headquartered in Vienna felt “like a cultural shock,” remembers a workshop participant when talking about their everyday work experience in the United Nations. Another confesses that, despite being Austrian,

her feeling of belonging to the UN community is much stronger than that felt in relation to “the world outside.”<sup>8</sup>

These observations I had written down in my field diary after participating in a two-day workshop on intercultural communication and understanding, to which I shall return later for a closer analysis. The passage is an example of how UN professionals verbalize the different dynamics between their working environment and the society perceived as the “outside world.” By doing so, they contribute to the drawing of the borderline between the lifeworld in the UN context and beyond. Therefore, the cultural practices and narratives in the UN context belong to a “third space” (Bhaba 1994; Rutherford and Bhaba 1990). The process of identification also happens with and through the intervention of the otherness—or “the world outside,” as phrased by the workshop participant.

To add a second layer, this study will also examine the international frame within which international civil servants work, operate and live. It analyzes the dynamics and the impact of the everyday working culture of the UN on personal encounters and social orders. I endorse the following definition: Cultural anthropology affirms the semiotic nature of culture (Geertz 1973, 5).<sup>9</sup> Cultures, as Homi K. Bhabha (1990, 210) phrased it, “are symbol-forming and subject-constituting, interpellative practices.” I also embrace the understanding of culture as an “organization of diversity” (Hannerz 2016, 143) affirming that “people as actors and networks of actors [...] invent culture, practice it, experiment with it, reflect on it, remember it (or store it in some other way), and pass it on” (ibid. 2016, 144).

I have termed this everyday working culture consisting of formal and informal elements *ritualized cross-cultural relations and interactions*. These ritualized encounters and habitualized practices impact not only the working culture in the field of international development cooperation and humanitarian aid, in general, but the corporate culture of the UN, in particular. The notion of ritualized cross-cultural relations and interactions also draws attention to the identity of UN workers. I claim that this identity is particularly influenced and formed at the early stage of their UN career. Hence, the

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8 Fieldnote, Vienna (July 2015).

9 Geertz (1973, 5) sketches his idea of “culture as text” (Schneider 1987) with the following words: “Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in *webs of significance* he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning” (emphasis added).

specific working culture of the UN is understood in close connection to cultural practice which, in this study, is termed *habitus of transnational life and work*. By means of a modified version of Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) habitus-field theory, I analyze this specific habitus that, by the same token, appears in the context of biographies and careers of UN employees and their social surrounding.

## 1.2 Early Career Workers at the UN: Critical Perspectives on Work and International Organizations, Biographies and Mobility

The UN has been an object of research since its foundation in 1945. From the very beginning, the main disciplines involved in the organization, its functioning and impact were the areas of law, political science and international relation studies. However, these disciplines are merely interested in the meticulous description of the organization by publishing encyclopedias (T. G. Weiss and Daws 2018), and providing a platform for "UN voices" (T. G. Weiss et al. 2005). In contrast to the field of cultural anthropology/European ethnology<sup>10</sup>—sister disciplines, which traditionally apply an inductive approach to deconstruct and therefore understand lifeworld phenomena with all entanglements and references to other phenomena and discourses (Lindner 2003)—political scientists utilize a rather deductive research approach, and, in consequence, tend to understand the UN as a rather self-contained system. As a cultural anthropologist, I challenge these scholars from neighboring disciplines to take a more in-depth and everyday approach.<sup>11</sup> By analyzing what influence the present *regime of work* entangled with *regimes of*

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10 European ethnology is part of the ethno-disciplines, Brigitta Schmidt-Lauber clarifies, and the scholars identifying with this discipline "study everyday life (especially in Europe) in the past and present and the emergence of contemporary phenomena from an actor-centered perspective" (Schmidt-Lauber 2012, 560). Being aware of the historically grown and geographical distinction, in the following, I will solely use the broader term cultural anthropology or simply anthropology.

11 I refer selectively to literature from these neighboring disciplines, as I believe that it is pertinent to seek cooperation beyond disciplinary boundaries. This endeavor is, for multiple reasons, not always easy to achieve, as has also been noted by other cultural anthropologists (Bendix, Bizer, and Noyes 2017).

*mobility* (Glick-Schiller and Salazar 2013) has in the specific context of the UN, I underline the entangled discourses in and about the organization.

I will now take a look at the relevant literature on the UN, and similar fields such as NGOs, the EU, and more. I will refer to studies mostly written by cultural anthropologists, with the exception of some sociological research. There exists a rich corpus of ethnographic research on UN entities and internal policy making in the UN arena, consisting of cultural anthropological volumes on the World Trade Organization (WTO) (Abélès 2017; 2011a), the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) (Fresia 2014; 2012; 2009), the UN Human Rights Committee (OHCHR) (Halme-Tuomisaari 2017), in general, and, in particular, the Human Rights Council (J. K. Cowan and Billaud 2017; 2015). Other studies focus on the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (Hafstein 2018), the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) (Bendix 2013; 2012; Groth 2012; 2011), the World Bank (Mosse 2011b) or the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) (Müller 2013b; 2011). The interest in the UN stems mostly from the communities and topics in which these anthropologists investigated, for instance, indigenous rights, refugees and displaced people, intangible heritage and intangible knowledge, to mention just a few. The titles of the edited volumes reveal the kaleidoscopic approaches ethnographers use to explore the complex organization. The titles allude to the dazzling facade for one thing, and, on for another, suggest that processes at UN entities are nebulous to outsiders. While the title *Palaces of Hope* (Niezen and Sapijnoli 2017) alludes to the moral claims of what the editors call “global” organizations, an edited volume on policy-making in what the editor refers to as “multilateral” organizations is called *The Gloss of Harmony* (Müller 2013b). The different terminology refers to the manifold aspects scholars encounter when studying the UN and comparable global “arenas” (Brumann 2012). Still others summarize their work under the title *Bureaucratization of Utopia* (Billaud and Cowan 2020), echoing thoughts regarding bureaucratic apparatuses that challenged thinkers throughout the past century until today. Additional to these studies on policy-making at the UN, innovative approaches in the field of anthropology of policies (Shore, Wright, and Però 2011) are insightful to understanding processes at the UN. Moreover, ethnographies of comparable fields such as the European Union (EU) help to understand the UN as an international body. This includes edited volumes on multilateral negotiations in the EU context (Thedvall 2012; Bellier and Wilson 2000). It is enriched by research on EU civil servants (Shore 2007) and on the formation of the “EU

class” which is characterized by a particular habitus (Lewicki 2017; 2016). It is also worth looking at studies done at educational institutions related to the EU, such as the *Collège d'Europe* (Poehls 2015).

Existing research recognizes the critical role played by employees at the UN and beyond. Different research approaches and perspectives on work complement each other. There is the focus on mobility that comes with working at a global organization. Scholars apply concepts such as cosmopolitanism to grasp the UN workers’ “cosmopolitan universes” (Nowicka 2006), their “cosmopolitan identities” (Nowicka and Kaweh 2009) or to study how they become “elite cosmopolitans” (Jansson 2016; 2015). There is also an increasing interest in professionals in international development, everyday (work) practices and the possible impact on individual life trajectories. Anthropologists and sociologists conduct research on the broad field of what has been labeled Aidland (Apthorpe 2011)<sup>12</sup>, including the international cooperation and development work done in (international) NGOs. There is the focus on aid workers’ fascination with this type of work and the resulting paradoxes showing in their (work) lives (Roth 2015b; 2015a). Other wide-ranging volumes gather anthropological perspectives on the everyday work of development workers (Fechter 2014; Mosse 2011a), while single articles evaluate, for instance, the humanitarian imperative of aid work (Fechter 2016) and the impact of remote work in humanitarian aid (Fradejas-García 2019; Fisher 2017). Others examined NGOs as lifeworlds operating along the lines of transnational development orders and project logics (Kalfelis 2020).

The theoretical concepts and methodological debates anchoring the analysis of ethnographic work at the UN are comparable to other areas, be it contexts of humanitarian aid or development. Some studies tackle issues related to access to the field and discuss what it means to engage in participant observation at multilateral negotiations (McNeill and Lera St. Clair 2011) or to mingle among diplomatic delegates and interns (Halme-Tuomisaari 2018). Other methodological concerns focus on what it means to examine, for instance, the WTO as a *para-site* (Deeb and Marcus 2011). A rich volume offering a wide array of case studies on what the editors label *The Cultures of Doing Good* (Lashaw, Vannier, and Sampson 2017) enhances the analysis and understanding of what is labeled as emotional work (Hochschild 2003) in the UN context. This is productive because it offers inspiring thoughts on

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12 Now widely articulated, the notion of Aidland was coined by Raymond Apthorpe and presented at conferences at British universities (Harrison 2013, 263).

anthropologists' engagement in studying NGOs and the resulting emotional entanglements with which academics and NGO workers are confronted, yet also addresses the organizational entanglement and conflicts of interests between donors and receivers in the field of humanitarianism and international development cooperation (Sampson 2017). This means, for instance, reflecting upon issues that are linked with the very nature of engaged ethnographic research. Cultural anthropologists are well-trained in sensitively navigating between multiple roles in the field (Schuller 2017), the blurring boundaries between different actors (e.g., IO/NGO and nation states, stakeholders, donors, and more) (Lewis 2017) and ethical concerns while maintaining their independent perspective as critical social scientists (Bornstein 2017).

While a number of studies have investigated the diplomatic decision-making processes in various UN bodies, there is little data published on the bureaucratic side of the UN specifically focusing on the perspectives of international civil servants, let alone focusing on the insecure employment of persons at an early stage of their career. Moreover, there has been no detailed investigation of everyday work at the UN HQ duty stations Geneva and Vienna nor on what could be framed as the UN lifeworld. A systematic understanding of how job instability at the UN molds individual life stories is still lacking. Up to now, far too few ethnographers have conducted participant observation over a longer time frame; comparable studies to this book are solely based on interviews and questionnaires (Roth 2015b; Nowicka 2006) or approached the institutions from outside (Lewicki 2017).

The above-mentioned trajectories of research have been and will continue to be productive. The approach presented in this book overlaps with them significantly, but its point of entry, and its mode of analysis are distinct. What this book offers is an insight into the UN from an insider perspective while embracing a collaborative research approach (Konrad 2012), and acknowledging the para-ethnographic knowledge of fieldwork interlocutors (Holmes and Marcus 2012; 2008; 2005a). Having worked as an intern at two Vienna based UN organizations for thirteen months, I was not only able to gain a deep understanding of everyday work rituals and habitualized practices, but I also accompanied some of my informants over a long period of time and, by doing so, gained insights into their life situation at a selective moment in their biographies (Picard 2014; Bourdieu 2004). This study examines the changing working world, using the UN as an example.

Hence, this study builds upon a wide range of cultural anthropological literature, and critical social studies addressing work(ers) in a globalized world

(Sennett 2008; Beck 2000; Moss Kanter 1993; Boltanski 1990) and complex organizations (Garsten and Nyqvist 2013; Gellner and Hirsch 2001).<sup>13</sup> It particularly focuses on the impact produced by the epochal transformations of capitalism starting in the last third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The phenomenon is of a global nature and has been interchangeably labeled as the *New Spirit of Capitalism* (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007), the new economy/new capitalism (Sennett 2006; 1998), cognitive capitalism (Moulier Boutang 2012; Lorey and Neundlinger 2012a), or post-Fordism (Götz 2013b; Gorz 1982), to mention a few. The new economic regime influences different domains; it affects individual lives and has a broader impact on society. The effects on a socio-political level have recently been scrutinized by contemporary critical thinkers (from Arjun Appadurai and Zygmunt Bauman, Nancy Fraser and Eva Illouz to Bruno Latour and more) in a volume titled *The Great Regression* (Geiselberger 2017). The pieces by these authors inspired the present book on a broader scale.

While the title of the aforementioned edited volume might be intended as a warning, the aim of the present book is twofold. Indeed, it seeks to address the phenomenon of the increasing flexibility at work and in people's lives (Seifert, Götz, and Huber 2007) and sees this as a consequence of an increasing demand for mobility (Götz et al. 2010). It tackles the dissolving of boundaries between work and non-work areas (in German, *Entgrenzung*), the general liquidization of life (Z. Bauman 2000), mechanisms of subjectivation and new forms of personhood (Bröckling 2016; Moldaschl and Voss 2003; Rose 1998) that come along with the commodification of emotions and feelings (Koch and Everke Buchanan 2013; Hochschild 2003) as well as with the cognitive and aesthetic practices in everyday work (Sutter and Flor 2017). It acknowledges different forms of precarity among a growing number of (professional) groups, which has repeatedly been addressed by cultural anthropologists (Groth, May, and Müske 2020; Sutter 2013; Götz and Lemberger 2009b).

This book attempts to be accessible for readers beyond academia. It therefore attaches great importance to readability. This is why each chapter is introduced by an ethnographic vignette. Just like the prologue, the vignettes aim to enhance the reader's memory. Despite the importance of writing and reading in cultural anthropology, little attention has been paid to ethno-

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13 This section is a first *tour d'horizon* presenting a variety of possible research perspectives on IO in general and the UN in particular. Aiming to bridge the still existing gap, I will address more relevant studies in the chapters to follow.



graphic vignettes as an academic genre, which will be addressed in the next section.

### 1.3 From Description to Interpretation and Analysis: On Writing Ethnographies and the Purpose and Potential of Ethnographic Vignettes

Humboldt created poetic vignettes when he wrote of strange insects that “poured their red phosphoric light on the herb-covered ground, which glowed with living fire as if the starry canopy of heaven had sunk upon the turf”. This was a scientific book unembarrassed by lyricism.

*(A. Wulf 2015, 305)*

In the field of cultural anthropology, it is common to combine different writing styles when presenting ethnographic data. Therefore, in this book, each chapter is introduced by an ethnographic vignette. In what follows, I will briefly elaborate on the significance of these text passages, which are grounded in and composited by data collected at different moments of the research process. They are a successful strategy for conveying atmospheres and transporting the ethnographer’s thoughts and emotions. I will address the significance of this writing technique in ethnographic writing in general and what particular function these more literary text passages have in this work.

The research process of composing an ethnographic text is closely linked with different writing practices that vary in form and genre. The writing process also differs depending on the specific circumstances of the research. During participant observation, ethnographers write down their observations and possibly even theoretical links in their notebooks, on a piece of paper or—as I often did—on a cell phone or directly on the personal laptop. Due to a hectic environment and the limited time resources available to describe the observed situation properly, observations are usually noted as keywords, brief statements, or sketches. I will address this issue later in this book.<sup>14</sup> In a second step, these notes are re-written into a comprehensive field

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<sup>14</sup> See my reflections and remarks on the process of participant observation and fieldnote writing in the methodological chapter.

note containing detailed and elaborated descriptions, which include texture, minutiae, sensations, and colors. They are enriched with primary analytical associations and the application of theories, and are complemented with self-reflective notes. In their field diaries, anthropologists also note their personal feelings, insecurities and maybe even judgmental thoughts, as was first evidenced in the posthumous publication of the diary of Bronislaw Malinowski (1989), who is considered an ancestral figure in anthropology. The subsequent call not only for critical engagement with the analysis of field diaries but also for a critical reflection on the representation of ethnographic data (Geertz 1973; Clifford and Marcus 1986) are well established research practices in areas of study which traditionally practice ethnographic field work. In the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, anthropologists started to stage their ethnographic data and to write *thick descriptions* (Geertz 1973).

In the field of cultural anthropology, the qualitative ethnographic writing method in the form of *ethnographic vignettes*, also referred to as *ethnographic highlights* or *ethnographic portraits*, is frequently used. In the light of this, it has to be mentioned that, especially in recent decades, the attribute ethnographic has been used in an almost inflationary way in the area of management and organizational studies, from which critical cultural analysis studies done in the field of cultural anthropology—the present study included—distance themselves.<sup>15</sup> Anthropologist Barbara Tedlock observed this already two decades ago. She noted that countless studies across disciplines and languages “have been encoded as ‘ethnographic’” (Tedlock 2000, 459), yet often lack critical ethnographic research methods and writing tools.

Etymologically, the word vignette derives from the diminutive form of *vigne*, the French word for vine. Vignette thus means small vine. This type of border ornament was frequently used in portrait paintings of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Likewise, the title page of a book or the beginning or end of a chapter was adorned with ornamental pictorial representations. The analogy of these paintings to the text passages that constitute ethnographic vignettes results in their vivid and brisk writing style. The impressionistic text passages are characterized by a particular linguistic picture that reminds one of a novel. Figurative language is key to ethnographic vignettes.

In ethnographies such as the present one, these text passages function to thematize a specific situational quality encountered in the field of research:

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<sup>15</sup> Management scholar Michael Humphrey, for example, remembers how he was influenced by the writing of anthropologists (Humphreys and Watson 2009, 44).

situations, interactions, processes and procedures, feelings or simply places, persons, animals, or objects, for example. In short, the ethnographic vignette is a condensation of relevant statements about the field and composed using empirical material. Written from the perspective of the ethnographer, ethnographic vignettes “figure as either polished fieldnotes or introspective storytelling about fieldwork. They are often written to distill and more intuitively grasp the big themes in an ethnographic project” (Bönisch-Brednich 2016, 199). Moreover, written at the beginning of an article or when figuring as an introduction to a book chapter, ethnographic vignettes serve as the “guiding story” (ibid.) for developing central arguments presented in the analytical parts of an academic text. The empirical material is usually condensed into a scene or plot and usually foregoes excursions, time jumps or explanations. This is why ethnographic vignettes have also been labeled as “prototypical descriptions” (Huber 2012, 11). The visual vocabulary in ethnographic vignettes is close to the literary genre of creative non-fiction, which uses storytelling techniques to write about actual events while presenting the most accurate descriptions possible. The difference, however, is that the writing of ethnographic vignettes is usually based on (repetitive or particular) observations that have been collected during the long-term research process. Thus, even if the reader might interpret the descriptive scene-setting passages as a snapshot, ethnographic vignettes presuppose observations and an analytical view over a long period of time. Hence, ethnographic vignettes are mainly informed by passages of field diaries written by the ethnographer, their notes taken after interviews, and even sometimes enriched by memories by evoking empathy and emotion. I endorse the statement that “the ethnographer as author and storyteller is very much at the heart of crafting the act of storytelling” (Bönisch-Brednich 2018, 8). As a result, telling stories “demands a visible author [...] who acknowledges that she/he is also a gatherer, a constructor, an analyzer and a baker of stories” (ibid. 2018, 24).

What is the potential of ethnographic vignettes? Being mainly visual and descriptive (and decidedly not analytical or deconstructing), these text passages evoke meaning through imagination rather than convincing the reader with a deep analysis that is connected to the scientific discourse. They add color to the writing and create reading memories. Since ethnographic vignettes can be composed of quasi-fictional text compositions or elements, this writing strategy allows us to present data on situations or persons in an anonymized (and still comparative) form (cf. Knöhr 2018, 42). By aggregating data that the writing ethnographer considers relevant for the ethnogra-

phy, they leave traces that will lead and accompany the reader to the more analytical text passages. The threads spun in the ethnographic vignette are then taken up again in other parts of the ethnography and linked to analysis. This conversely means to not blindly reproduce personal narratives nor individual testimonials but to retain the necessary “degree of distance from the narrative material we collect, analyze and produce” (P. Atkinson and Delamont 2006, 169).

In this book, ethnographic vignettes have a particular purpose. They are based on roughly 250 pages of hand-written and digital fieldnotes collected during the initial period of participant observations at the VIC and other field visits to Geneva, Turin or to career fairs. This also includes notes written after interviews, especially conversations my informants and I had before and after the interviews.<sup>16</sup> On the one hand, I include these descriptive text passages to open the reader’s eyes to certain aspects. The ethnographic vignettes provide a deep insight into specific patterns and assemblages encountered in the field of research in order to address routines and practices, to describe atmospheres in the places of recruitment and transit as well as to visualize the encounters with informants and other agents in the field. On the other hand, ethnographic vignettes support and contextualize the analytical chapters. The readers will be able to find thematic emphases that are important for the analytical analysis. Since the ethnographic vignettes have an intermediary function, they are a bit longer than common vignette descriptions comprising of a few sentences and orient themselves towards longer descriptions that are becoming more and more popular (e. g. Harper 2000).

The prologue is the first ethnographic vignette. It describes the often lengthy path interns take to enter the UN. It shows how my view oscillated between the intern-self and the ethnographer-self. The main venue for this first ethnographic scene is Vienna. In the second vignette, I address my attempt to find the tourist gaze and describe how the UN in Geneva presents itself to a public audience. Located in Geneva, this vignette introduces the chapter about the UN as an ethnographic field site. The third ethnographic vignette tells about the relationship between the ethnographer and the informants, and how they negotiated their (narrative) positions. It uses a fieldwork anecdote in Turin to introduce the methodological reflections. The fourth ethnographic vignette introduces the ethnographic chapter on ritualized actions, habitualized practices and social orders in everyday work situations. The

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<sup>16</sup> Only isolated passages are based on interview transcripts.

vignette describes the situation in a workshop held in Vienna which promised the attendees tools to improve their “intercultural communication.” The fifth vignette follows younger professionals participating in an introductory workshop at the UN staff development center in Turin. It introduces the chapter addressing the UN’s corporate identity and the corporate subject *homo UN*—and the informants’ narrative responses. The sixth vignette uses the example of informant Ana and describes her path from intern to UN professional by exemplifying precarious employment contracts and moments of hope. This ethnographic vignette introduces the last chapter containing a synthesis of the phenomenon of privileged and precarious work and living conditions at the UN. Subsequent to the conclusion to this book, the epilogue based on the follow up emails sent to the informants in late 2019 and early 2020 creates an outlook and describes where the interviewees stand at the time of the completion of writing this book. Whereas two thirds of my informants still work for the UN or similar organizational contexts, the other third of the professionals interviewed for this study work in other sectors or are currently unemployed and looking for a job.

In the following section, I will briefly introduce the content discussed in each chapter by providing a short overview of the central aspects.

## 1.4 Overview of the Chapters

The ethnographic vignette in the prologue makes my field access a subject of discussion. The writing is based on my research diary that I started to write when working as an intern in two different UN organizations headquartered in Vienna. My observations collected in 2014 and 2015, when I passed daily the highly controlled gate in order to get to the office that I shared with other interns, enabled me to gain a profound insight into the UN work and lifeworlds as it is lived in this particular reality of UN HQ duty stations. The latter clearly differs from the world experienced in the so-called field offices of the UN to which I will refer mostly when citing other scholars’ ethnographic insights. The slow-moving activity of passing Gate 1 in order to start work (sometimes, when an organization is holding a large conference, interns have to stand in line for more than an hour) allowed me to observe the scenes described above and reflect upon them. During these viscous moments of queuing up, observing visitors or chatting with my fellow interns, I

started asking questions that eventually resulted in the research done for my dissertation project. My aim is to provide an alternative visiting tour for the readers of this ethnography and, by doing so, to shed light behind the UN facade. I seek to illuminate the work and lifeworlds of UN employees, while particularly focusing on early career professionals.

After outlining the state of the art, I suggest combining the scientific approaches to flexible employment situations as found in the UN (and other large organizations) with questions that are related to (social) mobility and migration. This is exactly what I aim to do in this book as a consequence of my observations collected in the first weeks at the VIC; a time I identified in retrospect as my entry into the field of research. Early on, I suspected the entanglement of *regimes of work* with *regimes of mobility* (Glick-Schiller and Salazar 2013) and the tremendous impact thereof on the lives of UN workers at an early stage of their potential UN career. The survey of the existing literature in organizational anthropology and biography studies, combined with some central aspects tackled by mobility studies, was provided to glean insights into the UN as a place of work. Hence, this study acknowledges that the UN is embedded in the contemporary working world and shaped by the *New Spirit of Capitalism* (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007). After this introduction, the organization of this book proceeds as follows.

Chapter 2 allows a first inspection of the UN as a global organization, highlighting the historically built reputation and entanglement of the two UN HQ duty stations in Geneva and Vienna in order to explain the UN's ongoing attractiveness as an employing body and its importance for the two cities. This chapter continues with an insight into the so-called *UN Staff System* by focusing on its workforce and different staff categories, based on a hierarchical, historical, and now almost outdated division of labor. It sketches the wider context of working and living conditions of early career UN professionals by describing these workers' entry options. Finally, Chapter 2 offers a more detailed conceptual account of the UN as a field of research. The research sites I visited for this study (Geneva, Vienna, Turin and several career fairs) are many; hence this is a multi-sited research study (Marcus 1995). Another layer is added to the design of this research and the nature of the ethnographic field by the following aspect: Although visits of the multiple sites of research were limited and I interviewed early career UN workers at a given moment in their biography, I suggest to address the UN as a global assemblage (A. Ong and Collier 2005).

Chapter 3 develops the methodological framework used for this study. By examining interviews through the lens of narrative analysis combined with a collaborative approach, it is possible to ask how differences of status between the researcher and interviewees or, on the flipside, their similarities, influence the researcher's immersion in her field of research, the research questions she poses and the challenges encountered when interviewing (early career) UN workers in order to gain a deeper understanding of the quality of the ethnographic data and, on a broader scale, the UN as a research setting. This third chapter pays special attention to the negotiation of narrative positions of what I conceive as *self-aware informants* and their motives for participating in this study.

Chapter 4 begins with a brief survey of the literature on ritual behavior and social orders and then continues with the in-depth empirical analysis of everyday encounters at the two HQ duty stations. It proceeds to discuss routinized moments and habitualized actions of the everyday UN working culture I observed during my stay in the field or was told about by my informants. This includes, first, self-initialized moments of *rites of passage* (van Gennep 1960) such as "getting a professional-ish haircut" as one of my informants phrased it. It means, second, examining job interviews as a moment of transition where specific habitualized practices are learned and organizational power is experienced. Third, it addresses boundaries and belonging marked by objects such as, for instance, the employees' identification badge. Fourth, it focuses on how power and rank manifest in meetings. Fifth, it ends by analyzing ritualized gatherings in the spare time, precisely, when UN workers (re)negotiate rank and hierarchy during lunch breaks. In this chapter, I focus both on moments of the *formal* organizational culture exercising power on employees, and, on the flipside, moments of individual agency contributing to what is conceived as the *informal* staff culture.

Chapter 5 traces the origins and evolution of the creation of the contemporary (employee-)self. This chapter explores how the formal organizational culture influences the professional identity and the narrative habitus of UN workers. By describing the ideal corporate subject *homo UN*, which again molds the narrative habitus of UN professionals, this chapter underscores moments of the informants' (narrative) agency. The latter manifests itself, for instance, in counter-narratives that clearly contrast with what could be seen as the desired or accepted narrative reproducing the UN jargon. By applying the analytical framework proposed in Chapter 3, Chapter 5 pays careful attention to how my informants capitalize resources and dispositions in or-

der to align *their* story with the narrative of the UN. This chapter also shows that being available and *creating uniqueness*, coupled with the performance of what I call a *balanced modesty*, are two strategies used to fit in and successfully pursue a UN career. For my informants, the consequences are two-fold: They have to be able to adopt the desired narrative towards the outside and perform specific narrative patterns in a job interview. On the flipside, it means aligning the organizational narrative with the personal one.

Chapter 6 widens the horizon towards the effects of the aforementioned dynamics. It begins by stepping back to situate the preceding cases in the broader context of precarity in contemporary societies. By engaging with literature on the forms of cognitive capitalism (Moulier Boutang 2012; Lorey and Neundlinger 2012a) and focusing on the importance of aesthetic practices based on cognitive and emotional resources of people, this synthesis uses the case of early career workers at the UN, who face job insecurities to address the normalization of precarity beyond professional sectors. It considers anew the different pathways towards precarity in a prestigious organization. It addresses how this particular prestigious organization capitalizes on the UN workers' fascination and emotional entanglement with their work and the organization for which they are working. Mechanisms of flexibility, ideas of social advancement, structural benefits for a part of the workforce, and affective practices peppered with ideas of moral superiority contribute to different layers of *privileged precarities* in the UN context. I argue that the UN is an exemplar for the contemporary processes of precarity always affecting new professional groups.

The book concludes by bringing together the implications of this analysis, including a more detailed exposition of precarity entangled with and enhanced by imaginations of structural benefits and moral privilege.



# The Futile Search for the Tourist Gaze

November 30, 2017. From the Geneva central railway station Cornavin, I take the tram towards Appia that will bring me to the UN district. It is where the Palais des Nations—or, as it is simply called, Palais—and many other UN buildings are located. It is about half past nine in the morning. I recognize UN workers by their badges.

Among all these people heading to different destinations, I almost feel a bit out of place remembering the time when I worked as an intern at the VIC. Back then I had a clear role on one of the many stages that make up the UN arena. I remember observing the tourists visiting the UN site in Vienna: Equipped with cameras, they were always excited about what they might discover behind the massive fence. After passing the impressively designed choreography of entering, a specially trained UN guide directed the visitors to the central square of the VIC building, called Rotunda. In the center of the square, a fountain encircled by the flags of all UN member states serves as a landmark. It is supposed that the flags arranged in a circle around the fountain serve as a symbolic reminder of the UN member states standing together for a more harmonious world. On some days, the flags are dancing in the wind, a pretty scene for a photo. The visitors would cluster in front of the fountain, smiling for the camera, while the guide would take a picture.

Now in Geneva, while looking out of the tram's window into the half-cloudy sky, I leave my memories behind to mentally repeat today's mission to myself. I will try to become an onlooker who is only allowed to catch a minimal glance behind the UN facade. After entering the field of research as an intern, I want to use this ethnographic method of alienation. I aim to take a step back from all the knowledge on the UN that I collected during my internships in Vienna, and try to become a tourist-ethnographer who visits the Palais. I want to use the tourist gaze to understand how the UN in Geneva presents itself to the public. For that purpose, I will attend a guided tour to the Palais des Nations. The tram stops at the station Nations, I get off and cross the large square with the enormous monument called Broken Chair that is placed among several water fountains. A demolished chair leg of the ten-meter-high, reddish monument raises awareness for the harm caused by land mines. Time

and again, demonstrations for more human rights and other causes are held in this square. The square called Place des Nations is, however, only one representation of the “international Geneva”—a term referring to the many international institutions, NGOs, think tanks and other actors in the field of humanitarianism, peace promotion, as well as economic cooperation and development, in the city of Geneva. The most popular physical representation of the international Geneva is undoubtedly the Palais des Nations. It houses, amongst other organizations, the representative office of the UN in Geneva, called United Nations Office at Geneva (UNOG). Also, this building, with its long history, is a symbol for the UN Headquarter Duty Station in Geneva.

I let my gaze wander and catch a glimpse of a side wing of the Palais. It is sealed off by thick metal bars and security personnel and is half-covered by flags lining the path to the impressive building. Again, this avenue of flags is a highly symbolic image. It seems as if the flags representing the UN’s member states proudly stand in a guard of honor in front of the Palais. It is a popular photo motif for tourists who smile towards the camera with the fluttering flags of the UN member states behind their backs. And there is another eye catcher; the gate is decorated with a 60-meter long fresco devoted to peace. A white dove is the main motive of this mural created by a Swiss artist. The art seems to have the task of distracting from the grey of the concrete wall and making it look more inviting. Nonetheless, the decorated concrete wall does not seem appealing to the non-UN world. The message of the fence seems to be pretty clear; this entrance is not meant for ordinary visitors, for tourists. Unsurprisingly, the guards send visitors from this gate to another entrance, called Pregny Gate. To get there, I walk up the Avenue de la Paix, passing the museum of the Red Cross on my left and taking the entrance to the right towards the main gates.

Only a few minutes later I walk towards the Pregny Gate. It is a massive gate, again made of concrete. Written in black, capital block letters fixed to the wall next to the entrance, it says “Nations Unies” and “United Nations”—in Geneva, the UN is bilingual—and, between the writings, the UN emblem is emblazoned. The right part of the gate is reserved for cars; large white arrows painted on the asphalt signal the entry and exit for vehicles. The pedestrian entrance is located on the left-hand side, and it almost seems to be a little hidden. Queue tapes are guiding the new arrivals to the security checkpoint that is guarded by UN security personnel in their typical UN-blue uniform. The queue tapes discipline the waiting people; they show the newly arrived how to get into the queue and separate the accredited from visitors without registration—like me. I wait there, together with a group of university students dressed casually but smartly. I sense that they are excited. However, they also

seem very eager to maintain their composure by hiding their excitement. I have the impression that they try to appear unimpressed by the major multi-lateral organization they are about to visit.

The procedure at the security checkpoint at Pregny Gate takes its usual course. I wait for the person before me to correctly place all their belongings into the tray on the conveyor that transports the carrier through the X-ray scanning machine. A security person checks a screen to ensure that visitors do not carry forbidden items into the UN compound. I know that the security measures in the UN context have become important in recent years, partially because the organization has been a target of armed attacks in the past. While taking off my backpack, I answer the security guard's routinized question, "No, I do not carry a laptop or other prohibited items." After the security check, all visitors need to register. This means showing their passport or ID card to the security personnel. A guard takes a quick photograph with a small desktop camera which is then printed on the visitor's grounds pass together with the current date and a digital code. (I noted a difference when a staff member invited me to the compound for our interview. Then their name was printed on my day grounds pass, too, since the UN staff are responsible for keeping their invitees from accessing areas that are not open to the public.) I take the stairs to the lower level to pay the entry fee and cross the parking area towards the visitors' center at Door 39, just as the lady selling me the entry ticket had told me to do. There, the 45- to 60-minute guided tour will start. On the map printed in the brochure called *A Practical Guide to the Palais des Nations*, which I luckily had downloaded to my cell phone before the tour, it says that this entrance belongs to building E.

In the entry hall, a UN-trained guide, who like those in Vienna is proficient in several languages, receives the group of visitors. The guide might be in his early thirties—the goatee beard makes him look older than he probably is—and dressed in a simple black suit with a light-blue shirt and a black tie. On the collar of his blazer, he has pinned a UN button. As an introductory remark, the guide announces that he will show us the UN compound with a focus on the art featured here, "I can show you only a small insight; the whole collection contains more than 2,000 pieces." This is how he dampens possibly exaggerated expectations right from the beginning, I think, while emphasizing the extraordinary character of the art collection and its owner at the same time. The visitor tour in Geneva follows a specific logic of showing a remarkable number of traditional and modern pieces of art donated to the UN by member states. The art shown during the guided tour serves a higher purpose. I recall what I have read on the website of the UNOG before my field visit, "Within the United Nations, art does not exist only for its aesthetic values. It also serves one of the Organization's major goals, the promotion of the unity of humankind in all its cultural diversity."

The guide's statement makes me also think of a conversation with a friend, who had worked as a UN guide at the VIC. He told me that guides are trained to explain the UN in a general way while underscoring the importance of the organization, and that they must point to the most important agencies headquartered at the specific site—without going into much detail. I recall that we recognized the fact that, indeed, the guides are information intermediaries. Yet, we agreed, the purpose of visitor tours at the UN is not only informative—such as tours in buildings of comparable contexts. The guides have a specific role in generating trust and acceptance among the visitors. This, however, is a more challenging endeavor.

“Let's first learn some general information about UN,” says the guide and invites the group to watch a movie. Using his arm he points invitingly to a few rows of chairs in the corner of the hall. The movie corner is just next to the Book and Souvenir Shop—which is more of a gift shop selling different trinkets, souvenirs as well as books covering UN-related topics. In the UN-made video, a representative of each UN body located in Geneva explains for what aim their particular UN body was founded, what mandate the organization has and why it is essential to continue this work. While the movie is playing, I observe the other members of the group. The guide had asked us from which country we—the participants' in the today's group—were from: there is a group of Chinese tourists and an Indian couple. Our group also features a young Hungarian woman very much concerned with showing off her expensive handbag, two rather quiet Germans—maybe father and son—, a Brazilian woman who is very keen to show that she lives in Geneva and who is accompanied by an elderly, always very amazed, lady—probably her mother. After the movie, the actual tour inside the Palais begins. However, before we—the group, the guide and I, the tourist-ethnographer—start our way to discover selected parts of the Palais, thus only getting a limited impression of the building, the guide warns the group to stay together. “You don't want to get lost, do you?” he asks half-jokingly. His English has a French accent. “No, we won't,” the group—including myself—assures him collectively. The message of the guide's rhetorical question is obvious. The purpose of the guided tour and its choreography is to provide visitors with selected insights. Over the course of approximately one hour, they get a glance behind the scenes. However, for visitors, it is strictly prohibited to move independently within the UN compound. Since visitors have no access to the office area within the building and the international civil servants working within, the UN remains, in fact, an unknown entity. As a consequence, the reverence for this international organization grows exactly because one is denied a proper look behind the scenes. Eventually, the visitors seem to forget that the UN—and all the art hanging on the walls—is financed by their countries and, in its ultimate logic, through taxes.

The group proceeds through some of the many corridors and hallways covered in white marble, passing a series of silkscreen prints representing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. I take another picture. On the right to free movement it says, “1. Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state,” and “2. Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country.” Next to the words, a stick figure is depicted half-holding a balloon, half-flying in the air. Then, the guide takes the group to a large organigram of the United Nations System hanging on the wall. “It’s very complex,” he comments and draws the group’s attention to the principle organs of the UN. They are listed on the left-hand part of the organigram. He quickly explains the most important UN bodies and their functions. On the other side of the corridor are portrait photographs of the former, all-male Directors-General of the UNOG. (Only in 2019, the UNOG would have its first female DG). And there are large panels briefly explaining what could be described as “hard facts” about the organization in Russian, Spanish, English, French, Arabic and Chinese—the official UN languages. The next stop of the tour is the currently empty meeting room Salle XVII which has recently been renovated thanks to a donation by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and, for that reason, renamed La Salle des Emirats. The guide explains the meaning of the so-far most expensive meeting room in the Palais, “The newest meeting room was a gift from the UAE. It represents the desert.” I take a picture. Indeed, I nod internally, the interior design of this room imitates dunes; the floor and walls are yellowish-golden. All this creates a warm, almost cozy atmosphere. The coziness is contrasted by futuristic furniture. The white shiny desks, where country delegates would usually sit, are arranged in circles and remind me more of the interior of a spacecraft in old science-fiction movies than a campfire in the desert. Also, the ceiling makes me think of the roof of a spacecraft. Apparently, it is precisely this mix between a mirage and the newest technology that the UAE wants to represent.

While imagining a meeting in this setting, I hear how the guide quickly names the most important UN organizations headquartered in Geneva. Then he points to the interpreters’ booths and explains that what is said in the meetings is simultaneously translated into the UN languages. Again, I do not learn anything new, I think, a bit disappointed, while typing notes into my cell phone. Intentionally, I left my notebook at home so I would not get too much attention, or, even worse, that my camouflage as a tourist-ethnographer would eventually fail. However, I notice that the others in my group seem to be very impressed with the fact that, in this context, the votes of the delegates are translated simultaneously. From there, the guide maneuvers to another innocent topic, “How many official UN languages are there?” Collectively, the participants count the six UN languages. Then, the group continues

to walk along the hallway; the walls are decorated with large paintings and other pieces of art addressing human rights topics. Almost every two meters there is such a gift by a member state representing its commitment to the cause. Actually, this art tour, which on the internet promises visitors a visit to the “unique art collection” of the UNOG, is proceeding too fast; visitors have no time to get a closer look at the pieces of art without losing the group, of course. The art tour including conference rooms and meeting halls aims to impress the visitors, and I sense that quantity seems to be more important than quality. The next stop is at a magnificent Chinese tapestry hanging on the wall. The textile artwork shows a religious shrine. That makes me conclude that the guide thought of the Chinese tourists of our group when explaining the meaning of this hand-knotted tapestry. I assume that guides have a certain leeway to expand on one piece of art or focus more on another, depending on which country the tourists come from. We are still in the building E but close to the corridor that will bring us to the building A; the part of the Palais des Nations that was originally built for the League of Nations before all the expansions and restorations.

“Why these multiple contributions?” the guide asks another rhetorical question. He explains that member states were asked to help to keep the building in shape. “That is why in the WHO building we can find a large painting sponsored by Brazil.” Now he is addressing the Brazilian ladies. They look amazed, apparently not aware that there are no public tours at the WHO building. The group also learns that there is a Japanese water garden in the WHO compound. The guide goes on to talk about the Palais and that Finland once donated a marble floor the group will come by later on the tour. “In one of the meeting rooms, there is also a very famous ceiling representing the ocean floor.” With this description, he is taking the group to the next station. After passing several art pieces sponsored by numerous other member states, the group continues to this specially announced conference room. The guide takes everyone up to a balcony, which allows a direct view into the *Salle des droits de l’homme et de l’alliance des civilisations* (Human Rights and Alliance of Civilizations Room). After everyone has entered the visitors’ balcony, we sit on the cozy chairs made of champagne-colored fur-fabric that remind me of those that still can be found in old cinema theaters. From this vantage point, the group can look down into the meeting room where the Human Rights Council is just about to hold a meeting. Now, I think hopefully, the guide will tell us something related to the ongoing conference. However, he does not address the negotiations taking place below us but tries to direct our attention to the ceiling. He explains that the sculptural installation imitates stalactites in all colors hanging from the ceiling and that the artist used pigments from all over the world. I learn that this room is famous for this

ceiling created by a Spanish artist. Some of our group want to take pictures of the ceiling. The guide quickly interferes and explains that it is strictly forbidden to photograph the ceiling, as well as the diplomats and country delegates of the working group below us.

Instead of watching the ceiling, I prefer to make use of this occasion to look down and observe what is going on in the meeting below me. It seems to me that I am the only one that is more interested in what is happening in the meeting of the Human Rights Council—maybe also because having attended similar meetings on other issues, I can imagine how arduous the negotiations must be and how eloquently the delegates mold their language in order to reach a common ground all member states are willing to agree upon. The guide does not address the negotiation process within the UN—maybe he does not even know anything about it—and continues talking about the ceiling. Since no one tries to lure him out of his reserve, he uninhibitedly presents the slick narration to us.

The tour continues, and we finally arrive in the old part of the Palais. Visitors are allowed to walk along the marble floor in the *Salle des pas perdus* that, as the guide had already told us, was once sponsored by Finland. From this corridor, I can get a glance at the extensive gardens of the Ariana Park. The guide directs the general attention to a famous piece of art in the middle of the garden. The sculpture called *Celestial Sphere* was once dedicated to Woodrow Wilson. Everyone takes a picture out of the window, even though the sculpture is too far away. The clouds have almost gone and the garden is illuminated, even optically warmed up, by light rays of sunlight. At least, I think, it is a nice photograph, and it will serve to remind me later of the slight feeling of frustration that accompanies me during this tour. I am here to get a glimpse behind the thick walls of the Palais and have the impression that I am constantly failing. While the other tourists take a picture in front of the large windows with the park in the background, I observe a group of artists who arrange colorful sand on the floor. The forms remind me of Mayan iconography. Again, the guide does not tell us anything about this ongoing art project. (Usually, I know from the VIC, such installations are made in the context of specific conferences). Besides the artists, the corridors are almost entirely empty. Only once in a while, there is a UN staff member bustling by. This tour focuses on art pieces and the most spectacular meeting rooms where diplomatic delegates work. I suspect that this gives tourists the impression that the UN is based solely on diplomatic negotiations, which the group mostly ignored when admiring the ceiling. The work of the UN staff who implement the resolutions adopted by the diplomats remains in the background.

Speaking of the lengthy bureaucratic history of the organization that reaches back to the League of Nations, the group then passes the bronze portal showing

Adam and Eve. France donated this portal to the League of Nations, and today it serves as a reminder of the legacy of the UN's predecessor organization, the guide explains. At this point, he also briefly mentions the historical circumstances that led to the foundation of the UN after World War II. Our final stop is the Assembly Hall. It is empty, too. "This is the largest room in the Palais," the guide solemnly announces. He explains that the main meeting hall is famous for its golden emblem of peace hanging on the light, wooden wall, showing the globe from a northern perspective, and decorated with olive leaves. The atmosphere here is official, and there is much light. For my fellow tourists, the golden UN emblem attached to the wall is a beautiful background for a final picture. They stand in the corridor and smile for the camera. Some even step up to the podium, pretending to hold a speech. I am surprised that the guide tolerates this behavior; he must be used to it. After this last "tourist attraction" the tour ends, and the guide takes the group back to the entry hall at Door 39. He finally invites the group to purchase a souvenir or a unique UN postage stamp. I see how many of the tour members curiously walk towards the souvenir shop. Others sit down, looking for some rest after the one-hour walking tour in the Palais' corridors. For me, it is enough. It is shortly before noon. While slowly walking out of the UN compound observing some tourists taking a last picture in front of the Palais des Nations, I recall again how differently visitors were introduced to the UN site in Vienna. And I remember their excitement when they stepped into the UN compound. Also, the participants of the art tour I just attended seemed quite satisfied. And myself? I tried to find the "tourist gaze". But I failed. Leaving the exit at Pregny Gate behind me, I conclude that, for me, who already knows so much about the UN—and its moments of friction—and who is interested in the working culture there, such a tour has to be unsatisfying.

Back on the streets of Geneva, I walk down the Avenue de la Paix, crossing the Place des Nations. I feel that showing pieces of art—which would be meaningful if explained in the right context—is the most comfortable and allegedly neutral way to give visitors an insight into the UN world. While crossing a Permanent Mission guarded by security personnel holding machine guns, I think that it would be more important to point to ongoing negotiations or hot issues on the world's multi-lateral agenda. I know that such a tour would be less "neutral." Luckily my personal tour is not yet finished, I think while waiting for the bus that will take me to the World Health Organization. There, I will visit a friend who is working as an intern and who has promised to show me around.



## 2 Assembling the Field: Insights into two UN Headquarters Duty Stations and the UN Staff System

Precision, speed, unambiguity, knowledge of files, continuity, discretion, unity, strict subordination, reduction of friction and of material and personal costs—these are raised to the optimum point in the strictly bureaucratic administration.

*(Weber 1946, 214)*

The United Nations needs to be nimble, efficient, and effective. It must focus more on delivery and less on process; more on people and less on bureaucracy.

*(UN SG António Guterres, UN 2016, Remarks to the GA)*

According to Rolf Lindner (2003, 187), a well-known mediator between the German and Anglo-Saxon ethnographic tradition, approaching a research topic in a comprehensive manner means trying to do justice to its complexity, which is articulated in a vast variety of references and entanglements. This, Lindner continues, is the least the research subjects can expect from us, the researchers. Responding to those research ethics and following the many references this approach entails, this chapter provides a concise overview of the field of research and thus specific insights into the UN system. However, it is not intended to present a comprehensive account of the entire UN and the specific mandates of its many sub-organizations, agencies and institutions as it has been done elsewhere (T. G. Weiss and Daws 2018; Unser 2004). The meticulous descriptions in the just-mentioned publications attempt to do justice to the UN's organizational chart, the General Assembly's resolutions, and similar aspects (and are thus thoroughly informative). In contrast to these representatives of the disciplines of international studies and political science, I examine the UN as an "ideal-typic" site that is closely embedded in and entangled with global, (post) modern and related discourses, reflexive practices, (knowledge) technologies, and regimes. By doing so, I consider the geographical places where the ethnographic field research was conducted to be multiple sites. They are conceived as what other anthropologists have framed as "global assem-

blages,” which are defined as “ensembles of heterogeneous elements” (Collier and Ong 2005, 4–5).<sup>1</sup>

This chapter on the field of research offers a glimpse behind the walls of the UN sites at Geneva and Vienna, the two UN HQ duty stations<sup>2</sup> in Europe, where this research was conducted. Striving for completeness, I will also introduce the complementary field site I was able to visit, the United Nations System Staff College (UNSSC) in Turin. The descriptions follow the ethnographic writing tradition and combine factual knowledge with first-hand insights into the ethnographic material. Moreover, this chapter aims to illuminate specific moments or turning points of the organizational history related to the genesis and development of the UN staff system in general, and the expansion of the personnel management, recruiting tools and practices addressing highly skilled professionals in particular. Apart from its informative, historical and contextual objective, this chapter also serves to elaborate on the multi-sited or assemblage character of this study. It follows the assumption that the ethnographic field is always a constructed domain (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992), selected, and therefore influenced, by the ethnographer (Kaschuba 2012, 199) and co-constructed by the fieldwork interlocutors (Holmes and Marcus 2005a; 2012).

The chapter proceeds as follows: In the first section, I elaborate on what I refer to using the metaphor of “assembling” the field of research—that is, the different domains of this study where regimes of work and regimes of mobility materialize in the biographies of UN workers. The lives of UN professionals were described as transnational and cosmopolitan (Nowicka 2006). Yet, following Bourdieu (1990), I understand biographies not as linearities but as a chain of punctual and concentrated moments in someone’s life. Therefore, the study focuses on biographical moments and places, and can be considered as “multi-sited” (Marcus 1995). This research assembles heterogeneous elements connected to the biographies of my informants that are condensed in what has been framed as global assemblages (A. Ong and Collier 2005).

In the second and third section, I explain why this research focuses on UN HQ duty stations, and not on the significantly different work and life

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1 The methodological shift from “field” to “assemblage” and its impact on Cultural Anthropology/European Ethnology has been described elsewhere (Hess and Schwertl 2013).

2 The term UN headquarters duty station seems to be a rather overly formal expression. As outlined below, it is important to differentiate these sites from the official UN headquarters (in New York) and the so-called field duty stations.

circumstances to the so-called field offices. Assuming that what we know about a certain research object or subject is always coproduced by the field itself, I combine historical facts concerning the UN, and the heritage of its predecessor institution, the League of Nations, with the creation and the representation of space and atmospheres in the UN context. Aware of the pitfalls of presenting research sites as containers (Hess 2009), as pointed out by a colleague from critical migration studies, I use this approach of “UN sites” by focusing on representations of center and periphery: Discursively constructed “centers” (Geneva and Vienna) exist in relation to the imagined “periphery” (Nairobi or Turin). Nonetheless, these sites also represent concrete places where my informants live(d) and work(ed): The UN consists of different organs in different places; it takes up numerous spaces and is multi-site and multi-situated by its very nature. The analytical endeavor of tracing the historical creation of the UN and the specific atmospheres and imaginations that come along with it illustrates a particular understanding of history containing a narrative dimension. This assumption enables me to combine the historical dimension with narratives.

The focus of the fourth section lies on the UN staff system and possible career entry options for early career professionals. In order to understand the working conditions in the UN, it is crucial to explain the historically burgeoning structure of the UN staff system that, at least on paper, is characterized by fixed hierarchies and a clear responsibility assignment matrix. I will elaborate on the different responsibilities of the administrative workers and the professional and managerial staff and show how, in the course of changing work, the areas of responsibility and accountability increasingly overlap and dissolve.

Thus, in what follows hereinafter, I aim to share first insights into the sights where I encountered UN workers, before elaborating on how they understand, make sense of and cope with their specific working and living context, which is the overall goal of this book. I use the loose-knit conceptual framework of global assemblages (A. Ong and Collier 2005) to provide the reader with a concise introduction to the research object: the UN. It illustrates how the field is constructed through historical events and narrations, imaginations and projections, city brandings and (geo)political interests, and how I approach the UN as an ethnographer.

## 2.1 Disparate Domains – A Multi-sited Research Study on Early Career UN Workers

This research was conducted at different sites: places and spaces. Between summer 2014 and 2019, I gathered ethnographic data on the “international Geneva” and the “international Vienna”—two sites, where the majority of the data corpus was collected. I also documented a short field visit at the training center for UN staff in Turin (UNSSC) and several daily field trips to career fairs in the field of international cooperation. The field is *multi-sited* since it builds on the core idea “to follow” (Marcus 1995), articulated in George E. Marcus’ article published more than two decades ago. However, this study does not only include multiple geographical places. It also applies multiple sights (Welz 1998) and focuses on historically and biographically produced perspectives, atmospheres and narrations. By elaborating on these issues, I seek not only to define how the field of research is constituted but I aim to explain how its many layers have unfolded over the period of my research.

The well-known article written by Marcus is concerned with a methodological shift in anthropology: the idea of “following” offered a new agenda on ethnographic research and is connected to other tropes and discourses around “the field.” The anthropologist specialized in studying elites (persons with a considerable amount of prestige and power) calls, together with like-minded scholars, for more collaborative<sup>3</sup> research approaches (Holmes and Marcus 2005a). He argues that ethnographic field research that has been historically conceptualized as limited to a single site<sup>4</sup> advanced to be multi-sited (and multi-temporal) in order to meet the requirements needed to holistically understand the transforming (capitalist) world system (Wallerstein 1991). Marcus (1995, 105) writes,

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3 See my methodological reflections on the para-ethnographic knowledge of fieldwork interlocutors (Chapter 3).

4 Still today, Bronislaw Malinowski’s piece *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (Malinowski 1972 [1922]) is a crucial reference with which ethnographic research critically engages. Current ethnographic approaches beyond the “conventional Malinowskian aesthetics (intensive participant observation in communities of usually subaltern subjects)” (Marcus 2008, 53) focus on more collaborative forms of anthropological inquiry.

Multi-sited research is designed around chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of locations in which the ethnographer establishes some form of literal, physical presence, with an explicit, posited logic of association or connection among sites that in fact defines the argument of the ethnography.

Marcus thus recommends to follow people as well as things—from commodities along their production chains to intellectual property, ideas, discourses and metaphors, plots and stories, biographies and conflicts, and migration networks, all with the final aim of using the understanding of what happens at one site as “off stage’ knowledge” (Marcus 1995, 106) and being able to compare and thus better understand a certain context or research setting. In recent years, numerous anthologies and articles (Alice Elliot, Norum, and Salazar 2017; Coleman and von Hellermann 2011; Coleman and Collins 2006b), multi-event research (Aguilar Delgado and Barin Cruz 2014) and researching beyond the analog world (Wittel 2000) continue to address multi-sited research in relation to spatial distance.

A comprehensive literary corpus of anthropological mobility studies shows that global phenomena are condensed in certain moments and situations (e.g. Glick-Schiller and Salazar 2013; A. Ong 2013; Anthony Elliot and Urry 2010). In parallel, anthropologists continue to search for ontological frameworks to describe how to accurately grasp global phenomena and seek to reconstitute the category of the field. Global phenomena are articulated in specific moments and situations. Based on this assumption and inspired by the ontological framework of *assemblage* theorized by two thinkers (Deleuze and Guattari 1987), the anthropologists Aihwa Ong and Stephen J. Collier conceived “global assemblages” as sites where (global) “anthropological problems” are (re)formed (Collier and Ong 2005, 4, 6–7; Rabinow 2005). Being subject to technological and political intervention as well as to ethical reflection, global assemblages are domains or areas where forms of individual and collective existence are negotiated or even at stake—and therefore problematized by critical social research (Collier and Ong 2005, 4). The authors reiterate that the product of the global forms interacting at various levels “might be called the *actual* global, or the global in the space of assemblage” (Collier and Ong 2005, 12, italics in original). The latter is not theorized as a locality; the authors rather define it as

the product of multiple determinations that are not reducible to a single logic. The temporality of an assemblage is emergent. It does not always involve new forms, but forms that are shifting, in formation, or at stake. As a composite concept, the term “*global assemblage*” suggests inherent tensions: global implies broadly encompassing,

seamless, and mobile; assemblage implies heterogeneous, contingent, unstable, partial, and situated. (Collier and Ong 2005, 12, emphasis in original)

The scope of study of the concept is broad. Using global assemblages as an ontological framework allows us to go beyond the “McDonaldization of fieldwork” (Coleman and Collins 2006a, 3), which has been deplored by some anthropologists, and to do justice to what is commonly framed as “the global” and its cultural dimensions (Appadurai 1996, see also Sassen 2007). In the present study, this approach enables us to grasp a momentum of disparate domains; to show how the field is co-produced by different, yet interconnected global phenomena and in different places and across multiple scales.<sup>5</sup> This concept goes back to the notion of field as one of its founders, the psychologist Kurt Lewin, defined it: a notion of field consisting of different dynamics, defined as vectors, that take effect in a multi-spatial matrix. The conceptualization of global assemblages, however, enables us to conceptualize an even more dynamic field. Therefore, I understand the field not only as constructed but above all as *situational*. Moreover, my approach to *assembling* the disparate field of research is constituted against the background as well as in close connection with the field concept of the UN, as I will elaborate in subsequent sections.

After introducing the ontological approach to this study, I aim to briefly address another element that leads to this global assemblage that is based on interviews and participant observation conducted in Geneva, Vienna, Turin and at career fairs: serendipity—the accidental discovery of something useful, but which was not deliberately sought—is connected to the very dynamics of ethnographic field research.<sup>6</sup> According to Lindner (2003, 186), the researchers who dedicate their time to a specific research topic, a particular object or subject should strive for “living” the latter for a limited period of time. The researcher, this author continues, should open up all their senses in order to see, hear, smell, taste, feel comprehensively and, by doing so, follow different trails and trace down a variety of sources. Why so? Because only then the ethnographer will encounter the object in the most random places, thanks to an important element for ethnographic field research: serendipity. Serendipity is connected to the genuinely anthropological approach to life-world phenomena; that is, the interest in the everyday or the “devotion to

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5 The concept of assemblage, being even more organic, also takes up the original idea of field shaped by vectorial forces (Lewin 1952).

6 The concept of serendipity is detailed discussed in sociology of science and knowledge (Merton and Barber 2004).

the insignificant” (Lindner 2011; see also 2012). The ethnographers immerse themselves in a subject and follow the patterns of serendipity which thereby deploy an epistemic force (Martinez 2018; Hazan and Hertzog 2012). Ethnographers at an early stage of their academic career wrote about the positive value of serendipity (Rivoal and Salazar 2013). There is, however, a second side of the coin: a self-declared “academic-to-(may)be” discusses the challenging moments these unintentional and unanticipated findings may cause during field research—and how feelings of discomfort may be productive for anthropological endeavor (Giabiconi 2013).

Anthropologists often randomly enter places where they encounter and observe situations and circumstances that raise questions, and call for further investigation. Some even exemplify this by analyzing their own research trajectory (Hannerz 2006). In a similar vein, serendipity played a crucial role in the beginning and during the execution of the present research study. Elsewhere, I reflect on the effect of serendipity and how the initial curiosity of my intern-self turned into an academic-to-be formulating my sincere research interest and academic drive in a research project, and how this process influences not only the position in the academic world but more importantly the position vis-à-vis the informants (Müllli 2017c, 41–42). In this research, it led to a constant process of oscillation between the intern-self and the researcher-self (*ibid.*, 43; see also Chapter 3).

## 2.2 Historic Entanglements and Administrative Continuations: The Legacy of the League of Nations and the Beginnings of the United Nations

The historical perspective in this chapter does not only serve to inform about the genesis of the UN. History and stories are presented in view of their historical depth in order to address the following questions: How did the ideas and imaginations connected to the UN, in general, and Geneva and Vienna, in particular, arise? How do these ideas contribute to the fact that these places of work are so desirable, at least from the perspective of many agents in the field including my informants and beyond? The briefly discussed historical perspective on the organization and the duty stations where I conducted research is another domain that enables us to grasp the UN as a global assemblage.

There are historical entanglements and continuities that must be addressed in order to grasp the enduring charisma and reputation of the UN. Historians agree that the UN should not be understood simply as a replacement or successor institution of the League of Nations (also to be referred to as the League or LoN). Both organizations are the product of broader internationalisms materializing and operating across time and space (Jackson and O'Malley 2018a). The call for establishing a permanent international body can be traced back to the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. It was the brainchild of Immanuel Kant, who was the first to sketch the idea of perpetual peace in his philosophical oeuvre *Zum ewigen Frieden. Ein philosophischer Entwurf*, originally published in 1795 (Picard 2012, 412). At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the idea for a world organization unifying nations and guaranteeing global peace was promoted again.<sup>7</sup> The legacy of the League of Nations does not go back to the U.S. President Woodrow Wilson alone, as often claimed.<sup>8</sup> However, what is now referred to as the “Wilsonian Moment” (Manela 2007) is still fundamental for the imaginations of the UN today. It was Wilson who, in his memorable address to Congress on January 8, 1918, expressly called for the establishment of such a global organization. Aiming for enduring global peace, he proposed his Fourteen Points. The last point of this famous speech declared, “A general association of nations must be formed under specific covenants for the purpose of affording mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity to great and small states alike” (Wilson 1918). Following Wilson’s call that led to the official establishment of the League by the entry into force of the Treaty of Versailles on January 10, 1920, the international organization was created as an association of equal members.<sup>9</sup> However, since the most influential founding states (the Great Powers) were empires, the power between the member states of the LoN was not balanced. Consequently, the historian Susan Pedersen remarks, the tensions between juxtaposed interests—imperial authority versus national claims—were woven into the institutional structure and thus strained the League dur-

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7 Newly analyzed interviews with contemporary witnesses convey the idealism that the League unleashed (J. K. Cowan 2020).

8 A multi-local perspective on the history of this international body challenges the linear narration still entrenched by many IR scholars (Jackson and O'Malley 2018b).

9 In parallel, other international bodies and institutions were founded under the Treaty of Versailles, e.g. the International Court of Justice in The Hague and the predecessor organization of the International Labor Organization (ILO) first in London and then in Geneva (cf. Pallas 2001, 9–12). Moreover, many international bodies were established in the interwar period, many of them in the city of Geneva (Herren 2005, 344).



ing the whole time of its existence (Pedersen 2016, 116–17). And although the founding initiative for the LoN was launched and promoted by the U.S. President, the country never did join the world organization due to internal opposition and the consequence that the treaty was never adopted by the U.S. Instead, the U.S. kept an observatory status in this global union.

From 1920 to 1936, the League was headquartered at the *Palais Wilson*, the building of the former *Hôtel National* at the shore of Lake Geneva and was then renamed in honor of the U.S. president (cf. Pallas 2001, 16–28). Today, this palais serves as the headquarters of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). Then the League of Nations had its headquarters in the *Palais des Nations* (the Palais), a building complex established for that very purpose (I will describe this in more detail in the following section). Over the course of World War II, the LoN lost its reason to exist because it had failed in its main purpose—the prevention of any future world war—and was officially dissolved on April 18, 1946. De facto, due to World War II (and, people might be tempted to add, after failing to prevent the war in the first place), the arena of multi-lateral diplomacy was first unable to act and then collapsed, whereupon the majority of officials left their workplace in Geneva after the last assembly of the League of Nations in December 1939 (Pallas 2001, 117). After World War II, so the genuine story, the idea of creating a new institution emerged: the United Nations, “the first genuinely global institution” (Graeber 2010, 88).

The name United Nations was first used in the Declaration by United Nations on the January 1, 1942 at a meeting of several governments to continue the war against the Axis Powers.<sup>10</sup> The political scientist, Dan Plesch, notes that soon after the establishment of this union created by the Allies in order to win World War II, it became apparent that in the United States “government officials and private citizens [...] considered it both desirable and likely that the wartime United Nations would merge into the post-war organization” (Plesch 2010, 164). As a post-war organization it was intended to secure peace. Before the official end of World War II, delegates of 50 countries met at the San Francisco opera house for the United Nations Conference on International Organization (UNCIO) on April 25, 1945. The outcome of this founding conference of what is now officially called the United Nations Organization was accepted by all participating countries on June 25, 1945 and immediately signed on the

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10 On more details regarding the preceding negotiations on the trans-Atlantic (military) mission between the United Kingdom and the United States, which soon became a broader and “global” endeavor against the Axis Powers, see Plesch (2010, 31–57).

following day. The founding charter came into effect on October 24 of the same year. As another political scientist puts it, the UN “contained the genealogical imprint of its predecessor, but also attempted to correct the flaws of the League laid bare by the legitimacy contests it experienced over the two decades prior” (Cottrell 2016, 66). As history has shown, the establishment of UN organizations has, especially during the period of the Cold War, always happened in a “sensitive intertwining of science and diplomacy” (Rentetzi 2017, 40). Also, this study assumes that the UN is permanently influenced and entangled with discourses and narratives, policies and regimes that can be found beyond its organizational borders.

Ever since it was drawn up in the aftermath of World War II, the Charter of the United Nations aimed to advocate for uniformity on a global scale among its current 193 member states. As coined in the organization’s own words, a joint response to current global issues dates back to the founding charter:

Due to the powers vested in its Charter and its unique international character, the United Nations can take action on the issues confronting humanity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, such as peace and security, climate change, sustainable development, human rights, disarmament, terrorism, humanitarian and health emergencies, gender equality, governance, food production, and more. (UN 2019, *Overview*)

The founding principle acts as the guideline for the overall mission and the corresponding work of the organization which continues today. However, the critique remains that, in the founding hours of the UN, “rather than seriously consider replacement, states and other actors [saught] to buttress major global institutions further by adding regional and informal arrangements that reinforce the status quo even when change might be necessary” (Cottrell 2016, 10). In the post-war world, members, especially the United States, were engaged in a series of economic initiatives, as well as conferences on the topics of food and agriculture, and concerned with reconstruction, finance and trade issues and worldwide “security” (cf. Plesch 2010, 186–87). Against this background it is not surprising that the structures of this new international administration were inspired by the United States’ standards of governmental institutions.<sup>11</sup> As formulated by the anthropologist David Graeber (2015, 13):

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11 The dominance of the technocratic practices and the hegemony of the U.S. in the first decades after the foundation of the UN were investigated using the history of the World Health Organization (WHO) and of malaria eradication (cf. Cueto, Brown, and Fee 2019, 86–114).

the very first thing the United States did, on officially taking over the reins from Great Britain after World War II, was to set up the world's first genuinely planetary bureaucratic institutions in the United Nations and the Bretton Woods institutions—the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and GATT, later to become the WTO. [...] The Americans attempted to administer everything and everyone.

The administrative model created at that time is linked to a particular understanding of bureaucratic mechanisms, practices and hierarchical order. As I will outline in the section on the *UN staff system* (Chapter 2.4), this becomes visible in the separation of tasks and responsibilities reflected in the staff hierarchy.

Today, the supranational body of the UN symbolizes a global forum where sovereign states gather annually at the General Assembly (GA), but also in the Security Council (UNSC), the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), and other committees and bodies. In the GA each of the nation states has equal representation, whereas, for instance, the UNSC has its five permanent members exercising veto power (China, France, the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom, and the United States), that are joined by ten non-permanent members elected for a period of two years by the GA. According to its own account, the overall goal of the UN is to serve as a platform for dialogue at the supranational level, namely by hosting conferences and negotiations through which “governments [...] find areas of agreement and solve problems together” (UN 2019, *Overview*). Graeber argues that the UN “never had more than moral authority” (Graeber 2010, 88). While I disagree with his simple judgment, it is true that the UN has, since its foundation and especially in recent decades, been questioned and criticized. As a sociologist who interviewed aid workers working for INGOs and IOs on different continents found,

The transformations of Aidland are shaping the conditions of people working in aid. This includes a growing importance of humanitarian relief (even though the majority of aid is still allocated to development), reforms of the UN system and bilateral organizations, and the increasing role of faith-based and other non-governmental organizations. Combined, these changes have resulted in more short-term, project-based positions in crisis regions. This emphasis on emergence and exception brings about more insecurity for those working in aid and may reduce opportunities for engaging with inequality among national and international staff, aidworkers and other beneficiaries. (Roth 2015b, 42–43)

Thus, there has been a shift in the work of humanitarianism and IDC in recent decades. As of the time of writing, the UN is still undergoing a manage-

rial reform process announced by the UN Secretary General (SG) António Guterres when he took the oath of office. Apparently, he envisions “a new management paradigm” for development, peace and security and a UN “that empowers managers and staff, simplifies processes, increases accountability and transparency and improves on the delivery of our mandates” (UN 2020, *Management*). It is needless to say that, with regard to working conditions, this language directly points to what has been described as the *entrepreneurial self*: “The entrepreneurial self is a subject in the gerundive—not something that exists but something that ought to be brought into existence” (Bröckling 2016, 20). This is, at least for external, contracted staff, already the reality as I will show later when I discuss the specific reforms in hiring and financing practices. There is, in turn, also a clear demand for reforms coming from UN workers. As I will address in Chapter 5, the working situations and living conditions of UN workers can be understood as an assemblage of *privileged precarities*. In fall 2019, UN staff in Geneva protested against their contractual situations. In parallel, UN consultants and especially UN interns are lobbying for better contractual conditions. The quote from the Secretary General exemplifies the wish to become “less bureaucratic,” although this concept remains vague.

This brief *tour d’horizon* of the history of the UN has illustrated that this organization, although based on a vision and ideal of a world community that is more than two hundred years old, is constantly changing: the organization, as well as its subsidiary bodies, is permanently being reformed, extended and reorganized—that is, re-assembled. As a closer historical look at two of my research sites, the headquarters offices in Geneva and Vienna, will show, local authorities had to constantly confirm these sites and will probably have to do so in the future.

### 2.3 Where Bureaucratic Threads Converge: Constructions of Atmosphere and Space at Two UN Headquarter Duty Stations in Europe

A main reason why this research was exclusively conducted in the context of so-called United Nations Headquarter Duty Stations (in this study referred to UN HQ duty stations) is because they are relevant working sites: accord-

ing to official numbers, almost one-third of UN employees work either in the UN headquarters or in one of the UN HQ stations (UN Careers 2018, *Who we are*). A second reason is, as I will show later in this book, the emic perspective that co-constructs the different sites, which comprises of (prestigious) *centers* contrasted by (less attractive) *peripheries*. Along these spatial alignments, the working careers of my fieldwork interlocutors evolve. Biographical vanishing lines are produced and reproduced by ideas and representations of centers and peripheries. Against this background it is clear that ethnographic sites are coproduced by biographical narrations. This is why this ethnography *follows* these lines and assembles them in a collage. It arranges insights into the UN as a working and living world by following the biographical perspective of my informants.

There are four permanently established UN HQ duty stations: the UN headquarters in New York, established in a building complex at the Hudson river that was completed and inaugurated in 1952, together with the UN HQ duty stations in Geneva (1966), Vienna (1979), and Nairobi (1996); this is the chronological order of their establishment. These four cities host the headquarters of myriads of UN entities: organizations, specialized agencies, programs and funds of the vast UN system. In addition, there are other larger cities hosting particular UN agencies, such as the United Nations System Staff College (UNSSC) in Turin or the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) in Rome, as well as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank Group (WBG) based in Washington, D.C. It is in the four UN HQ duty stations, however, where the official organs of the UN have taken up permanent residence and regularly meet (e.g. UN Security Council in New York or the United Nations Human Rights Committee in Geneva). It is where diplomats defend their countries interests' in a global "arena" (Brumann 2012) unfolding between different UN organizations and their mandates. In his multi-lateral ethnography done in the context of negotiations on cultural heritage that particularly involves the Paris-based United Nations Educational and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the social anthropologist Christoph Brumann uses this metaphor of an arena to illustrate "its [the arena's] connotations of publicness and competition" (ibid. 2012, 6). Accordingly, such global arenas produce an environment experienced as "as a familiar playing field with agreed-upon rules, governed by standard spatial arrangements in the meeting room; detailed procedural routines, and set expectations of diplomatic rhetoric and etiquette" (ibid.). The headquarters of the many UN agencies

are also the place where international officials lead and manage projects, and raise funds for their implementation.

However, not only diplomats and other players such as representatives of civil society, but also the UN officials participate in policymaking processes mainly orchestrated in the headquarters. Thereby, they use particular communicative practices and strategies, as an ethnography of negotiations on cultural property at the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) shows (Groth 2012). As Marion Fresia, a social anthropologist, has shown with her research on global refugee norms negotiated in the context of the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), UN personnel co-negotiate and co-produce specific norms and truths in multilateral forums. Fresia's observations of everyday working practices in international organizations confirm what had already been highlighted by the political scientists Michael Barnett and Martha Finnemore (2004), namely "that the expertise held by international organizations [...] provides them with the legitimacy to define the nature of the problems for which they propose solutions [...]" (Fresia 2014, 519).<sup>12</sup> Fresia—herself once involved in the drafting of an UNHCR policy when employed as an UNHCR education expert (*ibid.*, 516)—describes how UN staff are involved in policy-making processes beyond the first draft of a particular policy or resolution at the UN level. She reports that "[t]he legal experts and the Head of the UNHCR's Child Unit regularly intervened in the negotiations to defend what they considered as being 'their text,' and countered attempts by state representatives to amend it or to reduce its constraining dimensions" (*ibid.*, 524).<sup>13</sup>

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12 This insight is not new and has already been highlighted by Weber almost a century ago: "Die bürokratische [sic] Verwaltung bedeutet: Herrschaft kraft *Wissen*: dies ist ihr spezifisch rationaler Grundcharakter. Über die durch das *Fachwissen* bedingte gewaltige Machtstellung hinaus hat die Bürokratie [...] die Tendenz, ihre Macht noch weiter zu steigern durch das Dienstwissen: die durch Dienstverkehr erworbenen oder 'aktenkundigen' Tatsachenkenntnisse" (Weber 2013, 465–66, emphasis in original). The original quote in German shall be provided as well due to the pitfalls of original translation cf. (R. M. Weiss 1983). I would translate it as follows, "Bureaucratic administration means: rule by virtue of *knowledge*: this is its specifically rational basic character. In addition to the enormous power of *expert* knowledge, the bureaucracy [...] has the tendency to increase its power even more by means of service knowledge: the knowledge of facts acquired or 'on record' through official business."

13 I can confirm these mechanisms from my own participant observations at the VIC. Due to confidentiality agreements, I will, however, not be able to share more insights on this issue.

International civil servants, and other UN workers, are part of the bureaucratic process to put the UN policies into practice and engage with the counterparties of UN member states. Informant Carlo (Dec 28, 2017)<sup>14</sup>, a former intern at the Geneva Office and current Junior Professional Officer (JPO) engaged in project work in the industrial development sector, observes,

when I did the internship, I was working in Geneva, which is the headquarter. [...] And my work, it involved a lot of, you know, monitoring and evaluation, writing proposals, writing like, we call it technical notes, but in fact these are reports, you know, you need to write a report on the status of the country, the economic status.

Before elaborating more on the specific aspects of different work practices (e.g. project-based working), and ethnographically examining the dynamics and effects of what has been called “total bureaucratization” (Graeber 2015, 18), I highlight the fact that working rhythms and practices differ from one sub-organization of the UN to the other. The decisive factors are the organization’s specific mandate and the position of the person. With the notion of “total bureaucratization” Graeber describes the liberalization process starting in the last third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that marked a cultural transformation whereby bureaucratic techniques and administrative practices “developed in financial and corporate circles came to invade the rest of society—education, science, government—and eventually, to pervade almost every aspect of everyday life” (Graeber 2015, 21).<sup>15</sup> This transformation is most visible in “a peculiar idiom that first emerged in such circles, full of bright, empty terms like vision, quality, stakeholder, leadership, excellence, innovation, strategic goals or best practices” (Graeber 2015, 21). As visible in the quote above, the idiom—and thus the corresponding practices—can also be found in the UN context, be it in the headquarters or the field office of a specific organization.

The testimony of this informant contains another interesting aspect. What was remarkable in the conversation is that, in general, the workplaces in “the field” and “at the headquarters” are *experienced* and *narrated* with varying intensity. This aspect, together with the perspective on *mobility regimes* and the obvious, specific living conditions addressed by several studies

14 I asked all informants to choose a pseudonym (see Annex). The date of the interview is mentioned in brackets.

15 One of the many effects of mushrooming bureaucracy on work is what Graeber denounces as “bullshit” jobs (Graeber 2019).

mentioned above, significantly contributed to the fact that this ethnographic research exclusively focuses on UN HQ duty stations.

The quote of the above-mentioned informant also focuses on the characteristics of the duty stations. Carlo is one of three persons I interviewed who, at the time of the interview, was working in a regional duty station located on the African continent but had previously worked in one of the two UN sites where this research was conducted.<sup>16</sup> He draws a comparison between the different work realities that can be found in the headquarters duty station in Switzerland versus that in Kenya,

It's like a bit making a sum of apples and pears, eh? (Laughing) I mean it's two different, completely, two different things. [...] If you are in a headquarter, you're gonna do headquarters work. Okay. Which is (eh), sometimes, I think, due to my personal experience, it was much more administrative. Okay, so you were seeing records, analyzing some data, you had to really take care of all these data, attending to meetings. While, well, you are on the field, you can monitor, I mean the great thing of the field is that you can do monitoring an evaluation, you can *talk* to the beneficiaries. I mean, this is *essential*. I mean, you can go to the beneficiaries, you can talk to them, [...] you can *see* it with your [own] eyes, you can *touch* the projects [with your hand], you can see if the project is doing well, is doing okay, or it's awesome. If there is the need for, I don't know, an expansion, a second phase of a project or, [...] what are the development priorities of the beneficiaries and of the country.

In this interview passage, the informant reflects upon his current duties and daily work at the UN HQ duty station in Nairobi versus the daily working practices in Geneva quoted above. His everyday work still includes many forms of “monitoring” but is supposed to be closer to what he refers to as “the field.” What might be true with regard to the geographical distance, is maybe less true with regard to the life realities encountered there. However, this should not be further investigated at this point.

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<sup>16</sup> I met the second informant, who told me that he worked in Southeast Africa, during a workshop at the UNSSC in Turin. This could be described as a narrative, impromptu interview, as this person just offered information during our joint lunch and dinner, and he was not recorded. Instead, I wrote a memory protocol after our conversation (cf. field diary, Sept 26, 2017). A third informant, a senior manager, I talked to on the phone (cf. field diary, Nov 17, 2015). These conversations helped me to contrast my research on the headquarter duty stations with the realities in the field.



The informant uses the well-known idiom “comparing apples to oranges” (or pears, as in the quote)<sup>17</sup> to describe how fundamentally different he experienced the work environments and dynamics encountered in Geneva versus Nairobi. According to his experience, the work reality in the only headquarters duty station of the UN located in what was once labeled as “the Global South”<sup>18</sup> is more tangible. Whereas “headquarters work” is described as “more administrative” and thus refers to the possible feeling of alienation, it seems more likely that the everyday work in the field context involves direct engagement with the beneficiaries, although it is still about monitoring. The informant stresses the words audibly when mentioning the importance of “talk[ing] to the beneficiaries,” “see[ing] it with your [own] eyes” and “touch[ing] the projects [with your hand],” and thus checking the project progress and the development priorities in the specific region. As illustrated with this single quote, the geographical location of the UN HQ duty stations has a clear impact on the working (and living) conditions, and the narrated imaginations thereof. Therefore, this study does not focus on the differing working and living conditions between “field offices” and “headquarters” as it has been done elsewhere (Fradejas-García and Mülli 2019), but rather looks into differences and similarities between the UN sites in Geneva and Vienna. As will be shown later (Chapters 5 and 6), the *regimes of (im)mobility* in the two European cities, one belonging to the EFTA and the other to the EU, become comparable.

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17 Here the informant, who said that he speaks a little German, possibly wants to allude to the mother tongue of the interviewer. Generally, variations like this are typical for international English spoken among UN workers who are mostly non-native English speakers. See also my reflections on language as a skill (Chapter 5.3.1).

18 The term Global South replaced the label Third World which followed a Northern and thus neo-colonial perspective to denote “inferior” or “less developed” world regions that do not necessarily belong to the geographical area of the southern hemisphere. The label broadly refers to the regions of Africa, Asia, Latin America and Oceania. Following a post-colonial perspective, a critical engagement with this kind of labeling is essential, especially because “[l]abels are by no means neutral; they embody concrete relationships of power and influence the categories with which we think and act” (Escobar 1995, 109) and ultimately reinforce geopolitical power relations (cf. Dados and Connell 2012). Additionally, the term was and is still used by policy-makers in the UN context, for instance in the form of so-called south-south cooperation (Dirlik 2007). Today, the UN classifies countries according to their economic situation into three categories: developed economies, economies in transition and developing economies. Regular updates of the statistical data are provided in The World Economic Situation and Prospects (WESP) report.

The perception of the notably different (work) realities between the “field” and the “headquarters” is shared by other researchers. In his article on humanitarianism and international development in Southern Africa, Robert K. Hitchcock, who had worked in this context as an anthropological expert, states that there is “the existence of an imbalance of influence within the organizations between headquarters and the field” (Hitchcock 2017, 191). When working closer to the “national ground,” as he puts it, UN officials have to cooperate more closely with local governments because “it is up to the ruling government to make the decision to either close the doors for the organization or to leave them open” (*ibid.*).<sup>19</sup>

Thus, working in a UN HQ duty station in Europe—that is, one of the bureaucratic centers of the UN in Europe, where initiatives are taken, projects planned and monitored—is a very particular space and differs from the work realities in “the field.” In the UN jargon, “field offices” refer to initiatives located in the member states. Even though it would be too simple to follow this perspective since projects are always monitored from different ends, it is accurate to say that the UN, just like the majority of institutionalized bodies of this size, works along the logics established within the economic world system (Wallerstein 2011) of it being divided into centers and peripheries. This becomes evident when considering the UN as a field of power, which “should be thought of more as a kind of ‘meta-field’ with a number of emergent and specific properties” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 18). As a colleague and I reasoned elsewhere when we compared field offices with UN HQ duty stations:

Viewed as a field of power (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) the UN has inevitably reproduced, along with other cross-border institutions and globe-spanning corporations these unequal relations in its interventions (Glick-Schiller 2015), along with the development categories as “First and Third World, North and South, center and periphery” (Escobar 2012). (Fradejas-García and Mülli 2019, 908)

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19 Apparently, race, gender and other social markers still play a crucial role in development work. During an informal talk with a senior UN official about her work in a so-called country duty station, I learned that she (a white European woman) purposely hired a BPoC who, as she explained, “looked physically more ‘alike’ the local community” and who would, therefore, due of his physique and gender be more accepted by the local community (Field diary, Nov 17, 2015). At this point it would be appropriate and instructive to apply a post-colonial analysis. However, due to a lack of resources, this is not possible for the time being.

The above-mentioned quotes illustrate that UN HQ duty stations are envisioned as places where the threads of the world-spanning web come together; it is where information is collected and projects are monitored. They are envisioned as centers of power, which is also due to the fact that the majority of international civil servants and high-ranking professionals are based there (on the meaning of centralization cf. Weber 2013, 459). This impression can be substantiated by figures. For instance, almost half of *professional staff* (P staff)<sup>20</sup> working in UN entities in Geneva can be considered mid-level or senior-level professionals.<sup>21</sup>

This brings me to another aspect with regard to the central sites for this research: the focus on UN HQ duty stations in Europe. The importance of the geographical location is primarily linked to the fact that the migration regime of Switzerland and Europe, respectively, is applied. Furthermore, both cities, Geneva and Vienna, create their image around being “international,” as I will discuss below. In order to enter the boundaries of my field of research, I will introduce the sites that I consulted to collect ethnographic data, with a strong focus on the UN sites in Geneva and Vienna where thousands of UN workers live. I will elaborate on some historical aspects of the buildings and explain how the establishment of these sites, especially in the case of the cities of Geneva and Vienna, contributed to their reputation. The juxtapositioning of the two UN HQ duty stations in Europe illustrates, on the one hand, the similarities in terms of the historical development, the desired political and economic attraction that comes along with hosting international organizations, and the return-service (in the form of certain benefits and “privileges”) that the hosting cities are offering the international organizations. On the other hand, thanks to these detailed descriptions, the differences of the two sites become visible through a first look at my ethnographic data. Considered as context information, these descriptions will help the reader (who might not be familiar with the UN environment and these specific sites) to imagine the particular atmosphere that can be found in UN headquarters.

At first glance, this atmosphere can be described as a mix of spatial and emotional detachment—or perhaps an elitist environment—created by the architectural and topographic order. When looking behind the UN fences, which is the main purpose of this book, the shiny facades turn into com-

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20 On the categorization of the UN staff system, see Chapter 2.4.

21 This is based on the *UN System HR Statistics Report* presenting the staff composition by the end of 2018 (CEB/2019/HLCM/HR/17, 7).

plex surfaces that sometimes start cracking and hence make frictions visible. As I will elaborate later in the ethnographic chapters, the notion of friction does not solely address interruptions and discontinuities. Friction is also “a reminder of the importance of interaction in defining movement, cultural form, and agency” (Tsing 2005, 6). Thereby, it is pertinent to address the UN as a domain in its full complexity, containing contradictions, intersections and continuations.

Following the cultural analysis approach (in German, *Kulturanalyse*) (Lindner 2003), which goes back to the hermeneutic understanding of the theorist Roland Barthes (1985), human beings are understood as cultural actors engaging and creating their everyday life in and with their environment; they act and interact, they receive, interpret and communicate. Against this background, I consider the special characteristics of the workplaces as one important element for how employees move within this space consisting of different dimensions, and how they interpret their environment at different scales. Hence, the following sections are understood as a description of the field of research, containing phenomenological spatial descriptions addressing both the history and current circumstances of the “international” sphere in Geneva, Vienna and Turin, where my informants work(ed) or attended workshops. Whereas the *UN-space* (I build on the theoretical approach chosen by cultural anthropologist Paweł M. Lewicki (2017) who wrote an ethnography on the Euro class and the EU-space echoing Levebre’s spatial theory) in Vienna is, at least from a topographic and architectural perspective, limited to one fenced-off UN compound and one large building complex called VIC, the situation in Geneva, is, in terms of space, fundamentally different. In Geneva, larger UN entities have their own, security-guarded buildings spread across a particular area of the city. Even for accredited UN staff, it is not so easy to move between or even access the different buildings. The Palais des Nations is the most famous, and at least in a limited sense, publicly accessible building of the Genevan UN site (see the second ethnographic vignette). In Turin, a field site that I visited for three days<sup>22</sup> (see the third ethnographic vignette), the UN compound consists of several smaller buildings, but all are gated and shut away behind a high and guarded fence. In this sense, it is comparable to Vienna.

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22 From Sep 26–28, 2017.

### 2.3.1 Where the Peacocks Live? The Palais des Nations and the International Geneva

“It is difficult to imagine the Ariana Park without its peacocks,” it says on the website of the UN Office at Geneva. The curious reader scrolling through the UN website learns that this is due to the will of the former owner of the land, Gustave Revilliod.<sup>23</sup> Revilliod is supposed to have stipulated that peacocks should be kept in the park when he bequeathed a substantial part of his properties to the city of Geneva in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. This, however, is not historically factual. It seems that the legends around the UN peacocks rather serve to enhance the exclusive image of the UN site at Geneva—and for that reason alone they need to be examined more closely.

The investigations into the land ownership of Gustave Revilliod by the art historian Véronique Palfi might provide some indices. Gustave Revilliod’s former properties known as *à Varembe* and *Ariana* today form part of the Genevan neighborhood *Petit-Saconnex-Nord*. It is the part of the city where the majority of the UN buildings are located today.<sup>24</sup> Palfi found a historical source, namely the review *Le jardinier suisse* from October 1873, where “swans and a rich collection of Asian birds” (Palfi 2018, 52, my translation) nesting in the park are described. Apparently Gustave Revilliod kept birds on this land, using them as protagonists for his park “destiné à devenir semblable à un de ces beaux parcs des princes romains qui font l’orgueil de la Ville de Rome et le charme de ceux qui les visitent.”<sup>25</sup> In his well-known and publicly accessible testament, however, Gustave Revilliod was more concerned about the replacement of dying trees: “[...] et que les arbres qui viendront à mourir seulement soient remplacés par des arbres de même espèce;

<sup>23</sup> Gustave Revilliod (1817–1890) was a wealthy Genevan and a member of the *Grand Conseil* of Geneva. The passionate traveler, art collector and philanthropist (*mécène*) founded—in honor of his mother—the *Musée Ariana* to exhibit his collections (paintings, sculptures, pottery, etc.) (cf. Eggimann Gerber 2010). After his death in 1890, Gustave Revilliod donated most of his properties, including the museum and the *Parc de l’Ariana*, to the city of Geneva (Buysens, Naef Galuba, and Roth-Lochner 2018, 23). Today, the museum is dedicated to pottery and glass ceramics.

<sup>24</sup> A close-up of the Genevan neighborhoods can be found on a map published by the City of Geneva in 2005 (OCSTAT – DCMO 2005, *Genève*).

<sup>25</sup> On Dec 23, 1980, the city council of Geneva discussed the acceptance of Revilliod’s bequest to the city in an extraordinary session. The quote is to be translated as: “destined to become similar to one of those beautiful parks of the Roman princes that are the pride of the City of Rome and the charm of those who visit them” (Conseil Municipal de la Ville de Genève 1890, 362). This source also applies to the subsequent quote.

les mouvements de terrain ne seront point changes.”<sup>26</sup> Thus, whether or not it was truly Gustave Revilliod’s last will to keep peacocks in the garden landscape that he once carefully designed, cannot be determined here.

From a cultural-anthropological point of view, which is also interested in the effectual forces of images, atmospheres and aesthetics, it is, however, an interesting aspect that peacocks continue to fit with the image of the Palais des Nations, a building complex in the art-deco style. The Genevan peacocks also appear in a recently published novel, where they serve as a metaphor for a protagonist’s feelings towards what she perceives as the UN life. The harmony, “the radiant royal blue” is confusing, as we learn from the first-person narrator, while the other protagonist answers: “These animals have understood much better than we do that beauty only intimidates or bores us. We achieve validity through contradiction. Not by dissent, but by paradox” (Bossong 2019, 13, my translation). Apparently, the peacocks’ presence co-produces the atmosphere of the Palais in particular and the UN in general. When focusing on aesthetics and reflecting on the atmospheres, ethnographers can grasp and make perceptible multiple meanings which are by no means arbitrary but concretely connected to things, people and their life modes (cf. Egger 2015, 159). On the basis of the deliberations of the philosopher Gernot Böhme, who has comprehensively wrestled with the topics of sensual experiences of space(s) and the aesthetics of the everyday (Böhme 2017), and other scholars, the cultural anthropologist, Simone Egger, stresses that ethnographic research, ethnographic writing and ethnographic storytelling always consist of the empathetic absorbing, recording and reporting of atmospheres by the researcher (Egger 2015, 159). Accordingly, ethnographers always weave aesthetic aspects into their texts when portraying places or people, describing scenes and situations.

Thus, whereas the birds of Revilliod definitively passed away many decades ago, a couple of peafowl donated as diplomatic gifts by some UN member states to the UNOG populate the park area still today. As the content on the UN website suggests, the birds drawing attention to themselves with their splendid array of colored feathers, and epitomizing since time immemorial not only grandeur, elegance and prestige but also protection and watchfulness, seem to serve the UN as “animal ambassadors”.<sup>27</sup> Pictures of

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26 Ibid., to be translated as: “[...] and that only those trees that will die are replaced by trees of the same species; there will be no change in land movement.”

27 A journalist once described them as diplomatic birds (TdG, Danzer 2014, *L’oiseau diplomatique*).

the birds are used as illustrations in several brochures.<sup>28</sup> Lucky visitors—according to official numbers, more than 6,000 people visit the Palais every year (UNOG 2018, 6)—can spot the birds strutting over the meticulously cut lawn. Yet, even when hiding in the bushes, the colorful birds seem to retain their fascination and might contribute to the sentiment of respect many non-UN visitors express, for instance at the Open Day. On Saturday October 7, 2017, the UN in Geneva opened the doors of the Palais des Nations for the last time before the extensive renovation work of the building started.<sup>29</sup> The pins handed out to the visitors that day feature a light blue script saying *Nations Unies Genève* and the year 2017 printed in red on white background. The script is supplemented by the symbolic illustration of bluish peacock feathers.<sup>30</sup> On the Open Day visitors, who smartened themselves up in elegant dress to visit the UN site, walked through the corridors of the Palais as if it was a museum.<sup>31</sup> Visitors admired the art collection described above in the ethnographic vignette and lived moments of relaxed fun when giving a fake speech from a podium placed in the front of the building. Most of them seemed to be impressed, and gazed in awe across the old building and the lake of Geneva while ambling through the park.<sup>32</sup>

Opening up the park areas (as was done in October 2017) was clearly in the spirit of the Genevan philanthropist. Revilliod had decreed that his legacy was meant for the city of Geneva and its inhabitants. However, it is needless to say that his will was ignored almost a century ago when, after much debate (Le Temps, N. N. 1928, *Le Palais*), the delegates of the City of Geneva unanimously decided to cede a significant part of the area to the

28 Cf. the brochure “Les salles de conference” (UNOG 2019, *The Conference Rooms*).

29 The Swiss daily *Tribune de Genève* suggested this day as “un événement à ne pas rater” (an event not to be missed) to its readers (TdG, Jourdan, 2017, *Dernière visite*).

30 Cf. field visit of UN Open Day on Oct 7, 2017.

31 I observed similar dynamics when attending the Open Day at the VIC on a Friday afternoon. The fieldnote (Aug 15, 2014) reads, “VIC Open Day: We [my sister and I] went on a guided tour and I was impressed with how many visitors came to the VIC today. You are shown the Nobel Prize [former IAEA DG Mohamed] El-Baradei and the IAEA staff received [later I would learn that these are just copies; the originals are safely stored in the IAEA archives]. Then it goes to the Rotunda where you are shown a piece of moon rock. It seemed that most of the visitors couldn’t help but be amazed. They took copious photos. The architecture surely had an impact, too. Now and then an important-looking guard or someone from the staff bustled past [...]. Surprisingly, visitors were not interested in the information stands; they were standing in line as told and waited for their turn of the guided tour.”

32 Field diary, Oct 7, 2017.

League of Nations in exchange for other territories (for detailed information on that matter cf. Pallas 2001, 87). The local politicians debated on the future of “*Genève internationale*” and were aware of the enormous impact that this investment would bring to the city (Le Temps, N. N. 1928, *Le Palais*).<sup>33</sup> When concluding his newspaper article, the journalist in question praised the visionary decision taken by the city council and proclaimed exultingly: “Par son vote unanime, le Conseil municipal n’a pas seulement reconnu les grands avantages offerts à notre population par la solution proposée, il a marqué la haute sympathie de Genève pour l’œuvre magnifique de paix qui s’accomplit sur son territoire” (ibid.).<sup>34</sup> By accepting the ambitious project, the article suggests, the members of the Genevan city council contributed to what is known as the international Geneva until today.<sup>35</sup> For the host country, Switzerland, the international city has always been of geo-political importance. The federalist country became a member of the League of Nations in 1920. Yet, it was only in 2002 that the country joined the UN after a referendum approved by Swiss voters.<sup>36</sup> Thereby, history has shown, Switzerland was not only internationally entangled “*despite* neutrality [but also] *through* neutrality” (Speich Chassé 2012, 226, my translation, emphasis in original).

In 1929, just after the agreement between the two parties, namely the city of Geneva and the League, which included a substantial exchange of territory, the construction work started (cf. Pallas 2001, 83–87; 94–116). From 1920 to 1936, the organization established in the aftermath of World War I was accommodated in a former hotel complex at the shore of Lake Geneva. In honor of the U.S. president, the building was renamed *Palais Wilson*. Finally, the League received a new and representative headquarters, on a hill and with a grand view over the lake. The Palais is situated approximately two-kilometers’ walking distance from Palais Wilson. The long lobbying work and decision-making procedure prior to the construction work had

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33 The article states that a representative reminded the city council of the economic importance of the internationally oriented players in Geneva.

34 To be translated as: “By its unanimous vote, the City Council not only recognized the great advantages offered to our population by the proposed solution, it also marked Geneva’s high sympathy for the magnificent work of peace being carried out on its territory.”

35 On the meaning of *international Geneva* see Meyer (2013) and my remarks below.

36 Earlier attempts to join the UN failed; as in 1986 when Swiss voters voted against the pro-UN referendum (for the detailed history of these events, see Moos 2001).



involved numerous men, albeit no women<sup>37</sup>—entrepreneurs, intellectuals, diplomats, and other country representatives who played an important role in the creation of the “international Geneva” since they were involved in the political dimensions of the decision-making process, as well as a special committee of European architects assembled to decide on the architectural competition (Pallas 2001, 29–119).<sup>38</sup> The Palais was never officially inaugurated; the days in September 1935 that had been marked its for inauguration passed while the construction work carried on. By February 1936, the majority of the staff of the LoN had moved from the Palais Wilson to the Palais des Nations and the *Salle des Assemblées*; the main hall, today famous for its large golden UN emblem, was only used after September 1937 (Pallas 2001, 95). The newly constructed building complex was only used for a couple of years until 1946, when the League was dissolved. After World War II, the assets of the recently dissolved League were transferred to the newly founded United Nations headquartered in New York. On August 1, 1946, the buildings of the Palais des Nations became property of the UN and the so-called European Office of the United Nations was established in Geneva, which became the new workplace for an estimated 200 international civil servants (cf. Pallas 2001, 118). In 1966, it became an official UN headquarters duty station and is now called the United Nations Office at Geneva (UNOG).<sup>39</sup>

What is the composition of the UN workforce today and what does this mean for Geneva presenting itself as “international”? These questions will be tackled in the coming sections in order to provide a broader view on what, at the beginning of the last century, has been labeled as international Geneva. As illustrated in the ethnographic sketch introducing this chapter, what could be described as the “UN neighborhood” of Geneva is located around the Place des Nations. This area is accessible within a few minutes from the

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37 Pallas refers to a grandniece of Gustave Revilliod, Hélène de Mandrot, who aimed to actively be involved in the decision-making process (Pallas 2001, 86–87).

38 Amongst others, a New York-born Swiss, William E. Rappard (1883–1958), played an important role in bringing the League of Nations to Geneva in the first place. Later on, the political scientist became the co-director of the *Institut Universitaire de Hautes Études Internationales* founded in Geneva in 1927, today called The Graduate Institute (cf. Picard 2012, 413; Pallas 2001, 13). This institution is still regarded as a training ground for future UN employees.

39 After a large-scale renovation program and enlargement in the second part of the last century (cf. Pallas 2001, 119–361), the building complex will be renovated and enlarged according to the Strategic Heritage Plan for the Palais des Nations. The aim is to foster the strategic importance of Geneva. The construction work is expected to be finished by 2023.

central railway station. Adjacent to the Palais are the headquarters of organizations, programs, and funds dedicated to humanitarianism, development, and peace. Some organizations and specialized agencies are at a close distance. For example, the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) are a two-minute walk away at the edges of the Place des Nations.<sup>40</sup> As already mentioned, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) is headquartered at the Palais Wilson. Other UN entities are further away. Upon entering, a bus takes people, within a few minutes, from *Avenue de la Paix* and the *Place des Nations* uphill on the *Avenue Appia* to the top of a small hill, first reaching the International Labor Organization (ILO) on the left-hand side of the street and then, a few steps further, the World Health Organization (WHO). In general, the whole neighborhood is formed by related international organizations, NGOs, embassies, and similar entities forming the international Geneva.

A glance at the statistics shows that, in recent decades, the numbers of international civil servants working not only in the Palais des Nations but also the UN organizations headquartered in nearby building complexes has risen dramatically. According to official numbers presented in an internal report regarding the personnel statistics (CEB/2018/HLCM/HR/10, 176–177), 10,464 permanent UN staff holding appointments for a period of one year or more were working in Geneva at the end of the year 2017 (CEB/2019/HLCM/HR/17). These personnel were employed in numerous entities: specialized agencies, programs, funds, research institutes, offices and intergovernmental organizations, within the fields of human rights, labor, health, intellectual property, disarmament and more. According to the latest report of the UNOG, 3,090 people were working for the UN Secretariat in Geneva alone (UNOG, *Report 2018*, 6). On average, the female permanent staff was 46 years old, the male permanent staff was, according to the same report, 48 years old (*ibid.*). The report proudly continues, “the percentage of female staff at the P1 to P4 levels was 49 percent in 2018, nearing parity” (*ibid.*, 8). Notably, (mostly younger) non-permanent staff such as individual contractors (in everyday language referred to as consultants) and interns are not included in these numbers.<sup>41</sup>

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40 For further descriptions of the history of these buildings see the book written by a historically interested journalist (Kuntz 2017).

41 I explain these categories later in more detail (Chapter 2.4).

The demographic statistics of the city of Geneva report a continuing growth in people working in international organizations and the related multilateral-diplomatic sector since 2012. In 2017, for instance, statistics from the Geneva Canton reported 25,278 employees of international organizations and related sectors (République et Canton de Genève 2017, *Informations Statistiques N°21*). Almost half of the permanent staff were domiciled in Geneva, whereas nearly 40 percent lived in nearby French villages, and the rest had their residences in other Swiss cantons. Over the course of the second part of this study, the number of UN workers continued to grow further; to be precise, it rose by 2.7 percent between 2017 and 2018 to 25,972, and it is predicted to keep increasing in the future (République et Canton de Genève 2018, *Informations Statistiques N°19*).

UN workers, together with others employed in the sector of international organizations, international NGOs, think tanks, embassies and research centers, belong to what has been labeled as *international Geneva*. As indicated above, this notion appeared in the inter-war period of 20<sup>th</sup> century to point to the glorious past (and thus future) of the city of Geneva becoming a host city of the League of Nations.<sup>42</sup> Since the 1960s, as the historian Gregory Meyer writes, the notion has designated “l’ensemble des institutions internationales à Genève, leurs activités et les grandes conférences” (G. Meyer 2013, 68).<sup>43</sup> However, it is since the 1980s, at the latest since the 1990s, that both the city and the canton of Geneva have been using the label to underline Geneva’s function as a host city to the international community (ibid.). Today, authorities and politicians at all levels, from the local to the national level, use this label to emphasize the desired cosmopolitan image of the region.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, it appears in press articles, reports and statistics on the economic importance of the Geneva area. Today this international esprit is still used for the city branding and, amongst other factors, is fundamental for the ongoing fascination with the UN world, which, at least in Geneva, can be described as part of the city. However, as an enclave, it is still hard to access for outsiders. Likewise, the issue of access to the UN context in Vienna is similar, yet

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42 Meyer points to the writings of the essayist Robert de Traz (1884–1951) that are crucial for this narrative.

43 To be translated as, “all the international institutions in Geneva, their activities and major conferences.”

44 There has been, for instance, a whole booklet dedicated to “Genève internationale” published by the Socialist party of Geneva in December 2018 (Parti socialiste Ville de Genève 2018, *Causes Communes*).

different with regard to the topographic conditions of the site. This has historic reasons. As I will elaborate in the following section addressing the second research site, the UN headquarters main station in Vienna (VIC) seems to be almost unattainable from the outside perspective.

### 2.3.2 Trans-Danube: A Short Historical Digression on the UN City in Vienna and its Remoteness

The geographic location of the Vienna International Center (VIC), which belongs to the modern residential and office park area called *UNO-City* in German, can be explained with a brief historical perspective. I am convinced that this initial description, which can be seen in combination with the prologue of this book, will also enable the reader to comprehend how the UN site is perceived from an outside, “non-UN” perspective and, in reverse perspective, what it means for those working there. As I previously detailed the contexts of the Palais des Nations, a deeper insight into the VIC context and the atmospheres produced will enable one to comprehend the meaning of the UN context as an integrated, yet simultaneously remote, area of the Austrian capital.

In the late 1970s, the building complex was established as another UN permanent or main location, following the UN official headquarters in New York and the UN main base in Geneva. Planning for this building, however, began in the early 1960s, just a few years after the first international organization and UN agency, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), was established in Vienna. In the emerging Cold War situation, this UN agency was, in its own words, “set up as the world’s ‘Atoms for Peace’ organization within the UN family” (IAEA 2018, *History*). Its main objective is the application of nuclear techniques for civil purposes.<sup>45</sup> Accordingly, in the third and latest amendment of the IAEA statutes, it reads, “The Agency shall seek to accelerate and enlarge the contribution of atomic energy to peace, health and prosperity throughout the world” (UN GA 1989 (1956), *IAEA Statute*). Moreover, the IAEA is responsible for nuclear safety and security as well as the compliance (safeguarding and verification) of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) which includes the safeguarding

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<sup>45</sup> The initiative for the foundation of the IAEA is attributed to the speech “Atoms for Peace” held by the U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower in the UN General Assembly of 1953.

and the verification of nuclear materials. Thereby, safeguards were crucial for the establishing and repositioning of the IAEA (Rentetzi 2017). According to its own anniversary edition published in the late 1990s, the IAEA has been headquartered in the *Grand Hotel* in the first district of Vienna since its foundation in 1957 (Fischer 1997).<sup>46</sup> Yet, the rapidly growing organization—here we find parallels to the history and the establishment of the international Geneva—soon needed a larger and more representative building. There were even rumors saying that the IAEA was actually toying with the idea to move its headquarters to another city. The special agency called United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) became the second important organization headquartered in Vienna. It was founded after the GA passed a resolution to establish this organization, whose focus is on industrial development, as an autonomous body in November 1966 (UN GA 1966, A/RES/2212(XXI)). Since 1967, UNIDO was headquartered in a house complex in the first district of Vienna. Yet soon, this organization also needed more space.

The final selection of Vienna and thus the establishment of another UN headquarters office in Europe must be interpreted in the context of major historical events. In a nutshell, after World War II and one decade of Allied occupation, Austrian authorities insisted on making Vienna an open and internationally oriented city that would present Austria as a neutral and sovereign state (see, for example, Bischof and Karlhofer 2013, 13–14).<sup>47</sup> By doing so, they could also connect with Vienna's reputation as a historically significant congress city of international standing, namely when hosting the Congress of Vienna (from winter 1814 to summer 1815). The Austrian government paid for the construction of the UN building that has been rented to the UN for the subsequent 99 years at a symbolic rate of one Austrian Schilling per year.<sup>48</sup> This was the beginning of the “international” Vienna,

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46 In general, there is little scientific knowledge about the micro-history of the establishment of the VIC. Especially in the case of the IAEA, research has been largely left to former employees practicing as in-house historians, as deplored by a historian elsewhere (Rentetzi 2017, 40).

47 Austria had been a member of the League of Nations since 1920, yet then disappeared as a country due to its union (in German, “Anschluss”) with the Third Reich in 1938. In 1955, after lengthy political wrangling, it became an official UN member state (cf. Gehler 2005, 1–2: 146–53).

48 For the sake of completeness, it should be mentioned that, in its time, the League of Nations had paid for the construction of the Palais des Nations. Switzerland, however, contributed repeatedly to the financing of renovation work.

and the corresponding city branding.<sup>49</sup> Also, Austrian authorities offered attractive and advantageous conditions to the UN and its staff.<sup>50</sup> This is still a customary practice in order to attract international organizations to a particular city. As a result, the latter can economically benefit from the expenses spent by the international organizations on administrative spending and the purchase of office supplies and equipment, as well as from the spending by UN staff, conference delegates and those accompanying them. The beneficial treatment entails, for instance, tax breaks for UN staff. Additionally, there is a supermarket that sells tax-free luxury products from around the world. The VIC Commissary, colloquially referred to as Commy, is especially popular for hard liquor, perfumes and tobacco goods.<sup>51</sup> It is run on a non-profit basis by the IAEA, which employs about half of the international civil servants in Vienna. During my fieldwork at the VIC, I observed that the Commy is imagined as an almost mysterious place by interns and individual contractors (also referred to as consultants). As they do not belong to the official UN staff body, they are not allowed to shop there to purchase the special, mostly expensive goods from the high-quality segment produced overseas; the wide range of products spans from wine and liquors to large pieces of Argentinian meat, French goats cheese and Swiss chocolates to luxury beauty products and perfumes. Only full UN staff members and diplomatic staff have access to this small supermarket that is hidden in the basement of the VIC, and therefore is only accessible via an elevator and, on the top of that, strictly guarded by a UN security person.

Notably, *privileges* are negotiated here. On the one hand, the existence of this special supermarket that is reminiscent of a delicatessen and colonial goods store marks the difference between the “internationals” of the diplomatic Vienna—persons working in the multi-lateral and diplomatic context, which includes primarily UN organizations and embassies as well also other international organizations—and “ordinary” people working and living in the city of Vienna. On the other hand, the issue of access to the VIC supermarket marks the difference between official UN employees (so-called staff members) and persons working in the UN who are not considered part of

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49 Today, the “international Vienna” is important for the city’s branding, together with “the typical Viennese”, “Jewish Vienna” and “Gay & Lesbian Vienna” (Vienna 2019, *The Virtual Vienna*).

50 See also Chapter 6.

51 In Geneva, a similar store is located in the Palais. It is restricted to UN Office representatives and diplomatic delegates to purchase (almost) duty-free goods for personal use.

the UN staff system (consultants and interns). There are, however, constant attempts to bypass this barrier and to extend this privilege to those without access. UN employees and diplomatic delegates who agree to buy orders for colleagues and friends without access to this special supermarket can be found again and again. The circumstances negotiating and defining the privileged positions of international civil servants towards nationals as well as towards non-UN workers will be addressed in more detail in Chapter 6.

Finally, after more than one decade of planning, an architectural competition, and a subsequent political skirmish<sup>52</sup>, the VIC was inaugurated in the summer of 1979 and became the third United Nations Headquarters Duty Station. Back then, the large Y-shaped office towers at *Wagramer Strasse* were still located in the outer districts of Vienna, sometimes called the trans-Danube area. As a matter of fact, the VIC was rather remote from Vienna itself. Thus, the site selection for the VIC, which was built on the site of a former garbage dump, can be interpreted either as a strategy to keep the place remote and exclusive or, on the contrary, as a way of neighborhood development in order to settle the territory of the current 22<sup>nd</sup> city district of Vienna. Today, the building complex of the VIC hosts organizations engaged in developing and implementing policies for nuclear safety and security issues as well as socio-economic and development needs; along with the IAEA and UNIDO, it hosts the United Nations Office at Vienna (UNOV), performing representation and liaison functions with the diplomatic counterparts, NGOs and intergovernmental organizations, the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC), as well as minor organizations employing fewer people, such as the Preparatory Commission for the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO PrepCom), the United Nations Office for Outer Space Affairs (UNOOSA) and others such as small country offices of UNHCR, IOM, UNEP. Even if the neighborhood next to the VIC, the former village called *Kaisermühlen*, is now fully developed and, as consequence, the VIC is integrated into the city, the remote character remains. The VIC can still be seen as an isolated and somehow exclusive place—and not only because it has its own zip code and stamps.

The scene described in the vignette at the beginning of this book (international civil servants rushing from the metro station to work, and interns having to queue on the other side) has already introduced some of the dy-

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<sup>52</sup> For a deeper analysis, refer to historical research (Rathkolb 2011, 208–9; Röhrlich 2009, 276–85; Gehler 2005, 1–2:463–64, 995–99).

namics at the second main base of the UN in Europe where research was conducted. In 2017, roughly 4,000 UN staff worked at the several UN agencies and organizations headquartered there (UN System 2017, *HR by Organization & Duty Stations*).<sup>53</sup> Additionally, diplomats and other delegates from UN member states, sometimes accompanied and observed by NGO representatives and academic delegates, meet at the VIC for multilateral negotiations. There are also visitors such as student groups and tourists, who come for a glance behind the fenced-off “world” of the VIC, which many locals still perceive as a remote sphere. In fact, it is a place where most Viennese would possibly only pass by when sitting in the metro line U1 but have never set one foot in it. As one of my informants, who had come to a city in the Austrian Alps as an exchange student during her undergraduate studies and then stayed in another province in Austria for an MA program, recalls: she was not the only one in that smaller Austrian city who didn’t know about the UN headquarters in Vienna and learned about it only by coincidence.<sup>54</sup> This informant, let’s call her Vanessa (May 2, 2016), told me that one might know UNICEF or other famous UN organizations, but not the ones headquartered in Vienna such as UNIDO, where she did her first unpaid internship. “People don’t know about the UN,” I paraphrased her statement in my ad hoc protocol during the interview since she refused to be audio-recorded. She added that “you need to know somebody inside.”

How can the UN site in Vienna be described? As in Geneva, topographic characteristics and the architecture of the VIC have a symbolic meaning; the orchestration and enactment of the building and the objects placed in entry halls, corridors, offices and other rooms dictate how human beings move in this space. Even if this study does not focus primarily on atmospheres, theories of space help to understand the dynamics within the UN buildings as a workspace since they affect how people move around in that space and how their behavior is influenced by the spatial environment.

Above, I have mentioned how cultural anthropologists (e.g. Egger 2015) understand the meaning of atmosphere, which echoes Böhme’s understanding of “aesthetic work”. Böhme (2017, 75) states,

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53 As will be explained in more detail later in this chapter, the UN’s statistics only count “official” UN staff, who are divided into administrative workers (*General Service and Related Categories*) and project and senior managers (*Professional and Higher Categories*).

The number of consultants, individual contractors, and interns remains unknown from these statistics.

54 Ad hoc notes, interview with Vanessa. This source also serves for the subsequent sentences.



Architecture in particular produces atmospheres in everything it creates. [...] [A]rchitecture is aesthetic work inasmuch as rooms and space are always created with a specific quality of mood and thence as atmospheres. Buildings, interior rooms, squares, shopping centers, airports, and urban spaces such as cultural landscapes can be elevating, oppressive, light, cold, comfortable, solemn, and objective; they can radiate a repelling or an inviting, an authoritative, or a familiar atmosphere. The visitor and user, the customer and the patient are all touched or moved by these atmospheres.

Accordingly, the architecture of the VIC building influences how people approach and enter the UN compound, how they move around inside, how they get into contact with each other, and how they *feel* during their work day. According to Böhme, the theory of aesthetic work has to be understood as “the production of atmospheres” and, he adds, “it is a theory of perception in the full sense of the term, in which perception is understood as the experience of the presence of persons, objects and environments” (ibid. 2017, 14).

As described in the prologue, depending on a person’s status, they take different entrances at Gate 1 of the VIC. There is one entry for authorized UN staff and diplomats, and another for “outsiders,” who have to wait in line to pass the security procedures and enter the international ground of the VIC. Among the latter are not only visitors but also non-UN staff such as interns, who temporarily work for a UN organization headquartered at the VIC, gathering their first international work experience. This is not a distinctive characteristic since it has become the custom among large multinational companies and international organizations to limit access to their campuses, buildings or floors, thus controlling who is able to physically access these spaces.

Whoever steps into the UN compound in Vienna and is able to get a closer look at the office spaces, however, might be disappointed, at least for the first moment. Vanessa recalls her feelings after the job interview for an internship, “I decided not to accept [the unpaid internship].” She told me that nothing had impressed her. “The building was so poor,” she remembered, comparing the VIC built in the 1970s with her workplace in a private firm. The latter was housed in a modern building, and she had her own office. Vanessa told me that she had come to the conclusion that the UN must not be special, “If you just walk around [the VIC], there’s nothing there!” What made her change her mind, she told me in the interview, was the imaginations and potential possibilities someone else projected on the UN. “But then I talked to a friend who said that this [internship] was a great oppor-

tunity and that I should at least go there to see how it is.” In retrospect, she would come to appreciate her friend’s intervention, because “[in the UN] it’s about the people and the projects,” she emphasizes. In the end she accepted the unpaid internship and “was really happy” since “it was really interesting.” She finally admits, “I liked it and it was an opportunity. It was like a dream job.” These quotes illustrate that the UN, as a possible employer, is still mysterious and therefore almost unreachable to many individuals in the non-UN world. What Vanessa told me underlines the importance of architecture and atmosphere but also of networks and insider knowledge—and how all these factors combined become effectual in terms of inclusion and exclusion; issues that will be addressed later in this book (Chapters 4 and 5).

### 2.3.3 Further Sites of Research: The UN Campus for Staff Development in Turin and Career Fairs

When it comes to preparation for the specific UN work environment, the staff training center of the UN, called United Nations System Staff College (UNSSC), in Turin plays a crucial role. This field research covered three days of participant observation and recorded interviews. Likewise, I completed several field visits at career fairs—which will be described later in more detail (Chapter 5.4). Although side stages, these sites are meaningful for imaginations and narrations of careers and biographies of early career UN workers.

Like the other sites, the UNSSC is not easy to physically access. This is illustrated by a short quote from my fieldwork diary.<sup>55</sup> It reads,

The UN training compound is located next to a highway in the outskirts of the city. Since I came here by train, I also planned to use public transport in Turin. (A challenge when one aims to leave the central area of the city, as I learned today.) From the city center where I stayed at a hotel, I took a bus and then started walking through the neighborhood in the direction of the UN compound. According to my mobile app it was only a fifteen-minute walk. While walking, I double-checked my route with a few pedestrians. But nobody I asked the way had ever heard of the UN compound, let alone of the UN staff college or the training center of the ILO. My destination is clearly not meant to be reached by walking, I thought while hurrying through a park next to a river. Nothing but trees and squirrels in this foggy morning. I was already late and the jogger whom I met could not help me either. Finally, I found high walls made of concrete. This was when I knew that I found the compound and walked along the walls until I got to the entrance. I showed my identity

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<sup>55</sup> Field diary, Sept 26, 2017.

card, got registered and received a map of the compound. I was finally in and headed to the UNSSC building where I scheduled interviews with senior staff.

The main objective of the UN organization for staff development, also known as the Staff College, is to create a cohesive system-wide corporate culture (see also Chapter 5 and the previous ethnographic vignette). It was established on the 1<sup>st</sup> of January, 2002, after the UN General Assembly had approved the UNSSC's statute in the previous year. With a second campus in Bonn, Germany, the main base of the UNSSC is located in Turin, Italy, on a former exhibition site.<sup>56</sup> There is also the UNSSC's virtual campus, where UN staff are able to access a large range of e-learning courses.

The UN's staff training center was established to unify knowledge procedures, training processes and management practices in the areas of economic and social development as well as peace and security. In the UNSSC's statutes (UN GA 2001, A/RES/55/278, 2), which were approved by the 55<sup>th</sup> session of the GA in 2001, it reads,

The Staff College shall serve as a distinct system-wide knowledge-management and learning institution, with a view to fostering a cohesive management culture across the United Nations system. It shall provide strategic leadership and management development for international civil servants with a view to strengthening collaboration within the system in areas of common organizational responsibility; increasing operational effectiveness; enhancing cooperation with States Members and observers of the United Nations, the specialized agencies, regional organizations, non-governmental organizations and civil society; and developing a more cohesive system-wide management culture.

However, it was not an easy start. As the UNSSC director (Sept 27, 2017) puts it,

I think the staff college was [...] underutilized. And I am not saying that it is still fully utilized. But at that time [it was] maybe much less utilized because of a number of reasons. And the main reason behind it is that the UN, as a system, is very segmented. [...] So this institute which actually has a mandate to provide inter-agency training, (um), somehow had to compete with the training institutes of different parts of the system. The UNDP has its own, UNICEF has its own, and so forth. [...] That was one reason. And the other reason, you know, we sit pretty much on the periphery of UN; we are not in New York, we are not in Geneva, we are not in Vienna, we are not even in Rome. We are in Turin. And people are always very surprised to know that there are actually three UN agencies in Turin. You see? (Laughing)

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<sup>56</sup> Interview with UNSSC director (Sept 27, 2017).

The role of the Staff College is to provide “inter-agency training” and thereby bridge the difference from one UN agency to another. What happened, however, is that it had to “compete” with the trainings offered by each sub-organization exclusively for its own staff. Also, according to this quote, the dichotomy of center versus periphery seems to be playing a crucial role, “we sit pretty much on the periphery of the UN”, the UNSSC director says laughing. Nevertheless, the UNSSC plays a crucial role in the staff agenda of unifying the working culture at the UN and approach work, leadership and other concepts unanimously. Later, in Chapter 5, I will address this aspect in more details.

In the sections above, I have described the sites I visited as a field worker. In summary there are some parallels and differences which contribute to the aspect of the UN being a special place to work. The Palais des Nations, which could be described as an exclusive enclave located on a hill above Lake Geneva, together with the other UN buildings constituting the international Geneva, is integrated into a part of the city which is well connected by public transport. It is in this area where pedestrians also come across many embassies and other international organizations such as the Red Cross. The Palais is, however, difficult to see from the outside, whereas from the inside, one gets a splendid view over the lake. The UN City in Vienna, by contrast, is more remote. Not even the most curious of tourists would encounter the VIC by chance. Also, the complex building is difficult to access. And once entered, people unfamiliar with the labyrinth consisting of many floors, corridors and shortcuts between different parts of the building can get lost easily. From the VIC one has a splendid view of *Kaiserwasser*, a side branch of the old Danube river. Adding to this, the UNSSC is in a remote location in Turin. The staff training center can best be accessed by car via the highway leaving the city. Once inside, the extensive facilities invite visitors, UN staff and country officials coming to the training center, to linger and walk on the small paths connecting one building to another.

## 2.4 Staff Hierarchies – Insights into the UN Staff System

In order to complement this ethnographic tour through the topographic composition and architectural features of the sites where I conducted field research, a section addressing the staff structure of the UN is needed. In the

previous sections, I described how UN workers physically move around the UN sites; in this section, I will elaborate on the staff structure and show how employees are (not) supposed to move within the hierarchical staff matrix. To this end, I will address the historical development of the UN staff system, and explain the division of tasks between staff assigned as project workers and those staff declared to be administrative workers. Then I will proceed to the description of people working in the UN who are considered *non-staff personnel*.

#### 2.4.1 “One of the most diverse workforces in the world”<sup>57</sup> – On the Trope of the International

In this section I will address the terminology that is used when referring to persons working in the UN context. I am interested in the different terminology and justify why, in this study, I prefer to use the more neutral and, as I believe, more inclusive term *UN workers*. As stressed elsewhere, this term includes “all those working in the UN context regardless of the varying modes of employment contracts” (Fradejas-García and Mülli 2019, 907). I will then briefly address the composition of the UN workforce and how it is imagined as a staff body.

In the emic perspective, the UN workforce is commonly referred to as *UN staff* or *international civil servants*. The *Staff Regulations and Rules of the United Nations* (UN 2018, ST/SGB/2018/1, 9) define,

“Staff” shall refer to all the staff members of the Secretariat, within the meaning of Article 97 of the Charter of the United Nations, whose employment and contractual relationship are defined by a letter of appointment subject to regulations promulgated by the General Assembly pursuant to Article 101, paragraph 1, of the Charter.<sup>58</sup>

According to Weber (2013, 459–60), civil servants (Weber uses the term *Einzelbeamte*) can be characterized as follows: They are recruited on the basis of specific skills or qualifications that are verified via some sort of a test or examination. When on the job, they have specific tasks and responsibilities for which they can be held accountable. Once employed through an employment contract, they get a fixed salary. Also, they belong to a particular office

<sup>57</sup> Mentioned in the 2018 UN Geneva Annual Report (UNOG, *Report 2018*, 72).

<sup>58</sup> On Article 101 of the UN charter see the introduction.

and staff hierarchy, and would move up the career ladder according to their experience and performance.

The official term for UN workers is joined by another: From the outside perspective, UN workers are often designated as bureaucrats. This tends to be a more ideological approach even if we know that bureaucratic techniques and administrative procedures are as present in corporations as in governmental organizations and are the product of a “cultural transformation” (Graeber 2015, 21) that started in the last third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For decades, ideas about private-sector management and forms of administration have circulated among different forms of organization, and the issue of how a supranational organization like the UN is imbued with management ideas that can be found in large corporations is precisely one of the starting points and interests of this book. With regard to the terminology and the public imaginations attached to the denomination, Graeber (2015, 13–14) noted,

The impression that the word “bureaucrat” should be treated as a synonym for ‘civil servant’ can be traced back to the New Deal in the thirties, which was also the moment when bureaucratic structures and techniques first became dramatically visible in many ordinary people’s lives. [...] [T]he word “bureaucrat” came to attach itself almost exclusively to civil servants [...].

Whereas civil servants are working for the government, international civil servants are employed in a supra-national context. This observation is a historical constant also with regard to the UN. Recent studies by historians (Jackson and O’Malley 2018b; Pedersen 2018) as well as from the fields of political science and international relations (Cottrell 2016) agree that certain structures of the UN were inherited from the League of Nations—and thus can be traced back to the first third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Likewise, the UN staff system and the composition of staff was rooted in the organizational logistics already established in its predecessor organization—a decision that became crucial for the “international” nature of the organization and its employees. In the light of this, it is interesting to mention that the first organizational sketch of the LoN foresaw a division of the secretariat along national lines. Yet this organizational sketch was quickly discarded, as the historian Susan Pedersen (2018, ix–x) highlights,

The institution would be organized by function, and not by nation, with Secretariat sections supporting each area of work—legal, political, disarmament, press, mandates, health, economics, and others—entrusted to the League by the Covenant. Those sections would be staffed, moreover, not by civil servants seconded from

national bureaucracies but by a genuinely international office owing loyalty to the League alone.

The international nature of the newly founded LoN was therefore not only reflected in its activities. Above all, the “international” was defined by the composition of the League’s workforce. It was intended and expected that persons working for the LoN would completely disentangle themselves from their national identities to work only for the supranational interest.

Today, the UN—acknowledged as an international body that is legally established and recognized by governments—continues to reiterate its “international” nature through the international composition of its workforce. In the annual report (UNOG, *Report 2018*, 72) published by the UN Office at Geneva, it reads that the UN

has one of the most diverse workforces in the world. Over 3,000 UN Secretariat staff in Geneva, from a wide range of professional backgrounds and with 171 nationalities, provide essential support to the international community every day.

This vision is also echoed in the interview with some of my informants. I will cite senior professional Malaika (Sept 27, 2017):

I think that’s also (..) (um) I mean I work also in leadership development for the UN system, so I think one of the, (um), maybe *big* take-homes is to, yeah I think the big goal is to work more as one, both in terms of thought leadership but also in the practical execution of the UN mandate. (Um) (..) I think it’s fairly well-described what an international civil servant is, I mean in terms of, (um), the *identity* you should take on, which is more, (um), that you *loosen* your national identity and become more internationally (smiling) incline[d] therefore also impartial, therefore also having the *good* of the organization but of course the good of the beneficiaries in mind. And I think that’s particularly important because we have a lot of colleagues, especially in the higher levels, who move out of government into the UN and then move back again. So sometimes, of course, identities are a little bit blurred (laughs). You know, where your loyalties lie.

According to the then Director General of UNOG, Michael Møller, the reference to the hereditary material in the title of the 2018 report titled *Our DNA* is understood as a metaphor “for the fundamental qualities that define something” (UNOG, *Report 2018*, 5)<sup>59</sup> and reiterates the purpose of the UN, “It is in our DNA to continue evolving and adapting to a rapidly changing world in order to promote peace, rights and well-being for all humanity.” The title of this report is interesting in the sense that, in using the

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<sup>59</sup> This source also applies to the next quote.

metaphorical reference, the report reiterates the narrative that the “international” has been “inscribed” into the organizational heritage. Moreover, the narrative trope of the international inscribed in the UN that would lead to “the most diverse workforce” (ibid.) is also used repetitively when introducing other UN sites.<sup>60</sup>

Another important rhetoric image is that of the UN being conceived of as a “family” (UN 2021, *UN Family of Organizations*). This can again be shown by a quote of the above-mentioned report, “These are qualities found in the DNA of UN Geneva; they are also entwined in the make-up of the global United Nations family” (UNOG, *Report 2018*). In this study, I will repeatedly come back to these two metaphors in order to double-check whether the staff composition at the two UN sites I did research is as “international” as described and what the metaphor of the family is all about. Yet, questions remain regarding the diversity of the UN staff and whether someone’s nationality as a social marker is or is not just simply an innocuous criterion, similar to the dynamics that were described among future international civil servants of the EU at the *Collège d’Europe* (Poehls 2015).

The duties of the UN staff are set at the international level. In the above-mentioned quote from the 2018 UNOG report, it is stated that the UN workforces “provide essential support to the international community everyday” (UNOG, *Report 2018*). This is again defined in the *HR Handbook* of the UN. Article I of the this handbook stipulates that “staff members are international civil servants. Their responsibilities as staff members are not national but exclusively international” (UN 2018, ST/SGB/2018/1, 10). In other words, they are not allowed to work in the interest of a UN member state. The “international” as a dimension also plays an important role in the recruitment process and whether someone working for the UN is supposed to move across the organizational lines, national borders and duty stations or not.

A further differentiation is made when it comes to mobility. Mobility policies and deployment locations depend on the mandate of a certain UN body. Whereas some UN bodies dedicated to humanitarian and environmental issues, such as UNICEF, UNDP, UNHCR and the WHO, send more staff to duty stations around the world, other UN bodies dedicated to nuclear safety and security as well as intellectual property, such as the IAEA

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<sup>60</sup> Science has contributed to the idea of UN workers and other privileged individuals being labeled cosmopolitan. Yet, there are also calls for a definition of cosmopolitan socialities beyond Western hegemony (J. C. Ong 2017; Calhoun 2002).



and WIPO, keep more staff in headquarter offices (CEB/2013/HLCM/HR/2). A further difference includes the risk-taking of staff employed in the field versus those working in certain field duty stations (see also Roth 2015b, 63). The booklet called *A Guide to Mobility and Hardship Scheme and Related Arrangements* describes the varying degrees of hardship, considering local conditions of safety and security, health care, climate, housing, and the level of conveniences of life (ICSC 2020a, *A Guide*). It is issued by the International Civil Service Commission (ICSC) which regularly assesses and re-classifies UN duty stations across the globe; these are categorized into one of the six categories. A so-called hardship allowance compensates the difficulty of working and living conditions the international civil servants encounter in a given place. The category H covers headquarters and similarly designated locations. However, UN staff working in H areas are not eligible for the allowance. This changes with the other categories. The scale A to E assesses the “hardship” in the field, with A being the least and E the most difficult location. As of this writing, all of the duty stations in Somalia and the Republic of South Sudan are marked with E, whereas places such as Lima, Kigali or Skopje are marked with an A (ICSC 2020b, CIRC/HC/25). This attempt to unify the working conditions for employees assigned in *the professional and higher category* of staff clearly neglects the precarious work situations of consultants and locally recruited personnel. They have no access to hardship allowances whatsoever, which creates unequal relationships between the locally recruited and internationally recruited workforce; this again has to be understood as a principle of differentiation in the Bourdieusian sense (Fradejas-García and Mülli 2019, 908). Moreover, it is evident that this scale contributes to the attractiveness of certain duty stations and the promise of adventure for others.

Overall, the terminology that is used in the UN context is quite complex and not always consistently used. Thus, when referring to staff, I will use the emic terms. When referring to both, staff and non-staff professionals, however, I suggest the more neutral and simultaneously open term *UN workers* and discard the symbolically charged designation international civil servant or even the word bureaucrat. The following two subsections address the division of labor within the organization and the division between “official” staff members and “unofficial” UN workers, external contractors who are grouped under the term *non-staff personnel*. Additionally, I will describe the three entry options into the UN the majority of my informants followed.

### 2.4.1.1 *G staff and P staff: International Civil Servants and the Division of Labor*

The workforce hierarchy is almost as complex as the UN system itself, which comprises of numerous sub-organizations, agencies and funds.<sup>61</sup> Because bureaucratic processes differ in the individual sub-organizations, it has not yet been possible to establish a comprehensive workforce system (Müllli 2020, 49–55). It is therefore not surprising that there are differences and exceptions in employment practice: a fact that has been repeatedly underlined by my informants echoing their experiences.<sup>62</sup>

The official<sup>63</sup> workforce of the UN, employees fully belonging to the UN system, consists of different categories of staff, commonly known as *staff categories* in UN jargon. Each category is further subdivided into different groups which reflect the specific requirements for the position on the one hand and the corresponding level of responsibilities on the other. What this means for the staff composition and my research will be outlined hereinafter. In a limited insight into the UN staffing structure, I will provide the necessary information which is crucial for the argument of this research. Overall, it can be said that the division into different categories reflects the degree of responsibility, remuneration and position in the employee hierarchy.

According to the international organization's official website called UN Careers, which provides information on occupational careers within the UN system,

[t]he United Nations workforce is made up of different categories of staff: Within each category there are different levels, which reflect increasing levels of responsibilities and requirements. [...] [Y]ou progress in a category through merit and qualifications. There are, however, restrictions on movement between the different categories. (UN Careers 2019a, *Staff Categories*)

This information is directed towards current and future employees, clearly defining the parameters for a potential promotion through “merit and qualifications” (ibid.) and, at the same time, explaining the limited possibilities for movement within the staffing structure. (The idea of meritocracy is reflected in the narrations of my interviewees and will be addressed in more

<sup>61</sup> This section takes up some aspects published elsewhere (Müllli 2017a, 195–98).

<sup>62</sup> Interviews with Emmanuel Snow (April 27, 2016) and James Mantha (July 13, 2016).

<sup>63</sup> As I will outline in the subsequent subsection, there are also many UN workers—amongst others, external contractors and interns—who do not belong to the group of UN staff. They are called *non-staff personnel*.

detail in Chapter 5). Belonging to the permanent<sup>64</sup> UN workforce, and being assigned one of these categories, means enjoying several privileges. This includes access to the UN social security system (pension fund, sick leave, parental leave), receiving financial support for spouses and children, and also benefitting from tax exemption as well as being guaranteed “immunity” (residence status without visa requirements).<sup>65</sup>

The five categories consist of (1) *Professional and higher categories* including project managers (so-called *P staff*) and directors (so-called *D staff*). These persons perform management leading tasks and are recruited at an international level. Often, these positions contain a mandatory rotation policy which dictates that staff move between headquarters, duty stations and non-headquarters duty stations. Additionally, candidates need an advanced university degree (such as an MA degree). This is the group to which most of my informants belong. This is why it is interesting to know that, additionally, this category is subdivided<sup>66</sup> into a) *Entry level professionals*. For these positions work experience of a minimum of two years (P-2) and five years (P-3) is required; b) *Mid-level professionals*. Candidates for these positions need a required work experience of at least seven years (P-4) and ten years (P-5); c) *Senior level professionals*. Persons appointed to these positions need to have work experience of a minimum of fifteen years (P-6/D-1); if they have more experience they might be appointed to a P-7/D-2 position.

Their work is, at least in theory, accompanied by another large group of workers that are listed in the (2) *General Service and related categories* (so-called *G staff*). Additionally, there are another three categories called (3) *National Professional Officers* who, like those belonging to the *professional and higher categories* mentioned above, perform tasks at the professional level. The most significant difference to the first category mentioned is that these persons are locally recruited (which means that there is no international recruitment competition) and work in non-headquarters duty stations only. The group of staff which is recruited internationally to serve in so-called field missions belong to category (4) *Field Service*. A minimum of a high school diploma and sometimes an additional technical or vocational certificate is needed since these persons provide, above all, administrative work, technical services or are responsible for logistics. Category (5) *Senior Appointments* is

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64 See difference to the following section on non-permanent staff.

65 See detailed information on that matter in Chapter 6.

66 It is evident that the other categories also are subdivided. Since they are not the focus of this research, I will not present any more details at this point.

reserved for the highest positions in the UN and its sub-organizations (i. e. the Secretary-General or a Deputy Secretary-General) to which a candidate is appointed by the organization's legislative organs (GA) or the Chief Administrative Officer (Secretary-General).

This list of different recruitment mechanisms and work locations makes it clear why this research focuses on those who belong to *professional and higher categories* and particularly on *entry-level professionals*. Several characteristics make these job categories interesting for this study: first, for these positions, candidates are recruited (and not, as it is often the case in higher positions, politically appointed) from a worldwide pool of candidates. This explains the idea of meritocracy (“[Y]ou progress in a category through merit and qualifications” (UN Careers 2019a, *Staff categories*)). Additionally, there are more P staff working in headquarter offices than G staff (CEB/2013/HLCM/HR/2, 1).

Secondly, these entry-level positions require an advanced university degree and a minimum of two and a maximum of five years of relevant work experience.<sup>67</sup> Therefore, my informants belong to the group of the *highly skilled* (see further explanations in chapter 5.2.1). This means that these people went through a long university education and are aware of the fact that their education is one criterion for gaining access to these positions. (It is therefore not surprising that, as I will show later in Chapters 5 and 6, these individuals continue to show a certain readiness for life-long learning and training.)

Moreover, as I have described elsewhere (Müllli 2017a, 196), the profile of candidates for entry-level positions should, according to the UN's career portal, respond to the fact that “[w]ork in the professional category generally demands a high degree of analytical and communication skills, substantive expertise and/or managerial leadership ability.”<sup>68</sup> According to this definition, daily work tasks comprise of problem analysis and evaluation as well as “decision-making involving discretionary choices between alternative courses of action.” Since, by job description, they must aim to constantly improve their skills and level of knowledge “through other training, self-study, or practical experience”, the highly skilled individuals employed in the *professional and higher categories* are typical knowledge workers belonging to a *knowledge society* (Beck 2000; Koch and Warneken 2012). The definition

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<sup>67</sup> UN career aspirants with no or little work experience apply via a competitive recruitment examination, as outlined below.

<sup>68</sup> UN Careers 2019a, *Staff categories*. This also applies to the subsequent quote in this paragraph.

found in the description of *professional positions* implies not only a subtle demand and pressure for constant self-optimization but also implicates that employees in the UN system regularly complete basic and advanced training. Moreover, some of my informants are enrolled in postgraduate programs in addition to work or are even working on a doctoral thesis. Hence, especially among early career professionals, there is ongoing competition that becomes even more critical in the face of fixed-term contracts of employment, due to the strict adherence to personnel rotation.

Yet even if *P staff* are, in particular, responsible for project and management work, in other words, their daily tasks comprise of classical “knowledge work” (*Wissensarbeit*) (Koch and Warneken 2012), it is obvious that nowadays administrative and digital work carried out by clerks has also got to be classified as knowledge work. In this context, one of my expert interviewees and a senior staff member, Fernanda (Sept 13, 2017) says, “So I am a professional, I have secretaries, in plural.” Laughing, she adds, “Lots of administrative assistants.” Then she explains,

And then I’m, as a professional, I’m going to deal only with the, you know, what would be considered to the content and the very technical part and I will get someone else to do the letters or to organize the text or to edit or to whatever. Lots of stuff that (..) I don’t see the future in all, I mean (..) I resent the fact that I still have to [deal] with this today and (um) at the end of the day (..) The professionals don’t have some of the skills that [are] needed (um) in an international organization. And they, for years, they have counted on the administrative stuff that don’t exist anymore (laughs).

This was also stressed by Marion Fresia: the division of labor among project managers (*professional staff*) and administrative assistants (*general staff*) can be and actually is constantly re-negotiated in daily work activities (Fresia 2009, 169).<sup>69</sup> The boundaries between specific tasks and responsibilities become blurry, also due to the job rotation policy, which for *professional staff* leads to compulsory job rotation.<sup>70</sup> As a consequence, administrative assistants, who are not affected by the job rotation policy and usually keep their positions for several years or even for decades, are more familiar with bureau-

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69 The division of labor also leads to a different appreciation of the work. However, the activities of secretaries and librarians in particular are historically significant. Recent research has paid more attention to these activities (Enloe 2000, 4–5).

70 The last reform of the UN staff mobility policy (*staff selection and managed mobility framework*) was implemented in 2016, based on the GA’s adoption of the redefined mobility framework (A/RES/68/265) in April 2014.

cratic operations of a specific UN organization. This means that the administrative assistants often undertake their supervisors' tasks and are actively involved in project management.<sup>71</sup> The latter, *professional staff*, usually take a while to become familiar with the characteristics and processes in their new employer organization, the UN. Furthermore, it should be noted that, due to the job rotation policy and the limited term employment contracts, *professional staff* are continuously concerned with the continuation of their career after the expiration of an appointment; in UN terms called "separation from service." According to a mid-career professional, with whom I talked about this issue, he, as a project manager, needed the first two years of his seven-year contract for familiarization, so "Now I am really productive for three years—before looking for the next job."<sup>72</sup>

In general, it should be noted that the UN work categories are based on a clear, gender-specific, idea of division of labor, with male directors and managers leading projects and female clerks carrying out the administrative tasks associated with this project work. Although there are more men than women employed in the UN worldwide (and thus the majority of employees at most career levels are still men), there is a strong tendency towards hiring male project managers and female administrative assistants. This trend has been reinforced by gender-biased recruitment procedures and the challenge of dual careers.<sup>73</sup> Recently, however, the UN has started to strive for gender balance at all levels of its staff by implementing a new recruitment process. This includes the requirement that for each position at least one candidate has to be female, as described by informant Montse (Dec 12, 2016). (What this means for the recruitment rhetoric will be addressed in Chapter 5). I have observed this in my field research. However, my personal findings can also be supported by statistics (CEB/2019/HLCM/HR/17).

In a nutshell, it has been shown that the categories vary in the process of recruitment (*internationally* vs. *locally* recruited), in the required relevant work experience, as well as the required level of education and skills (tertiary education vs. high school certificate)—and consequently in hierarchy. At least in theory, the categories also include specific tasks and responsibilities (project management vs. administrative tasks). The representative quote by Fernanda shows, however, that these categories have to be continually ques-

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71 Interview with Kolibri (May 23, 2016).

72 Fieldnote, Informal talk (April 29, 2014).

73 The unfavorable conditions of a UN career for women has also been stated elsewhere (Fast and Jansson 2019, 92–94).

tioned, especially because the tasks and forms of work have changed over time (since the establishment of the UN staff system).

As mentioned, in headquarters many workers are so-called P staff and work in higher managerial functions. With regard to age, an internal report by the UN published in 2014 stated, “In 2010, only 26 per cent of the United Nations organizations’ professional staff were young (<40 years) against 38 percent older (>50 years)” (JIU 2014b, JIU/NOTE/2014/1, iii). This fact is interesting for the present study focusing on early career professionals working in Geneva and Vienna because whoever is walking around those UN sites will meet a lot of people who are younger than 40 years old. How are these workers represented in the UN staff system? To answer this question, a brief account is needed that will link to the next section.

As the quote in the above-mentioned report of the UN Joint Inspection Unit (JIU)<sup>74</sup> suggests, long-standing employees cannot be ignored in the considerations of this study on people who are at an early stage of their UN career. On the contrary, they have been proven to be part of the dynamic described here. The internal report from 2014 (JIU/NOTE/2014/1) shows that 20 % of UN employees who should have retired continued to work directly, while 70 % were re-employed at a later date after reaching retirement age. This clearly shows that older UN employees are able to successfully activate their *social capital* in the Bourdieu sense (Bourdieu 1986b). This is because much knowledge would be lost through their departure, (i. e. there is a lack of “knowledge transfer and management,” as the report says). Therefore, the JIU report concludes that employment after retirement age (60 to 65 years, depending on the organization) “has an adverse impact on workforce rejuvenation and career development of staff at organizations where the age structure is old and there is a need for fresh talent” (JIU/NOTE/2014/1, iii). Yet, the practice of retaining experienced employees is often a simpler solution than finding new employees in a lengthy and laborious application process. Finally, the mostly younger employees gratefully jump into the unavoidable gaps. They get hired in the category of *non-staff personnel*, as is called in UN language. And even if the JIU report specifically focused on the hiring practices in the field offices/non-headquarters duty-stations (JIU/REP/3014/8: 1), it points to the fact that many non-staff personnel are working in headquarter offices, too, despite the fact that in headquarters most people are

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74 The JIU was established in 1976 for internal evaluations (UN GA 1976a, A/RES 31/192, 163–165).

working in higher-level positions. This group of “young” non-staff personnel will be addressed in the next section.

#### 2.4.1.2 (*Young*) *Non-staff Personnel in the UN System*

The section above, where I presented the close-knit matrix of the UN staff hierarchy system, might suggest that whoever is working for the UN is doing so under well-defined and structured working conditions. What is true for a person contracted in the *staff categories* does not necessarily hold true for everyone working in the UN system. In 2014, the JIU writes,

Overall, a significant number of personnel of United Nations system organizations (around 45 per cent of the total workforce) are working under non-staff contracts. Many of them are working for extended periods under a de facto employment relationship, like staff. (JIU 2014a, JIU/REP/2014/8, iii)

Even if the level of non-staff varies from one organization to another, this internal report states, the number of so-called *non-staff personnel* reaches high levels especially in large program- and project-oriented organizations (ibid.). Since “[t]here is no effective definition of the term ‘non-staff’” (ibid.: 4), the report suggests a definition that follows an inverse exclusion and considers as non-staff “all other persons” engaged to provide services to the UN whose employment and contractual relationships are not defined in Art. 101, paragraph 1 of the UN charter (UN GA 1945). The JIU report critically points to the unresolved problem<sup>75</sup> which is core to this study—the flexibility of work and recognition of the mechanisms behind this flexibility:

This is due to the relative flexibility and lower cost implications of non-staff contracts compared with staff contracts. As a result, a new category of personnel is being created as a significant part of the total workforce, performing all kinds of functions, including administrative, managerial, technical and particularly project-related work. (JIU 2014a, JIU/REP/2014/8, iii)

Changed financing strategies<sup>76</sup>, work processes, and the goal of learning more from private-sector structures and mechanisms—one might think of public-private partnerships (PPP)—lead to working and living conditions

<sup>75</sup> It reads, “There is no business model and strategy for the use of non-staff personnel” (JIU/REP/2014/8, 13).

<sup>76</sup> The political equality all UN member states enjoy in the context of the GA became negotiable through new modes of financing projects—that is the “donor-driven approach”. Therefore anthropologists grasp the UN as a “broker” that works as an inter-



that must be interpreted as precarious in comparison to full-time and long-term staff. This holds true especially for employees at the beginning of their potential UN career (see Chapter 6). It is therefore not surprising that, in recent decades, the number of non-staff personnel working for the UN has been rising. It should be mentioned that the “younger” employees belonging to the category of non-staff personnel in the UN are not included in the JIU statistics quoted above, nor are they included elsewhere. In other words: not only are their employment relationships extremely volatile, but so are they. According to a self-organized survey of external contractors in Geneva in autumn 2018, 38 percent of them are between 20 and 30 years old, 67 percent are women and half of the respondents have neither a European nor a Swiss passport.<sup>77</sup> (These characteristics become relevant for the considerations on the contemporary precarious regime presented later in this study.) Even if they are working over substantial periods of time and under similar conditions to various staff (they use, for instance, an official organizational email address), external contractors have no access to the UN social system (neither to the UN pension fund nor to the health insurance fund, and they do not receive parental leave, and sometimes not even holiday or sick pay<sup>78</sup>). The social security provided by the UN becomes essential for many people, who, in principle, fall out of the social systems of their countries of origin as a result of their work at the UN. (In the synthesis, Chapter 6, I will address the mechanisms of self-exploitation and narrations in more detail.) In terms of terminology it should be added that these *individual contractors* are colloquially<sup>79</sup> referred to as *UN consultants*—even though the UN system acknowledges their difference by definition (UN Secretariat 2013, ST/AI/2013/4, 1–2). The term consultant, however, is often misleading—especially when used to describe early career workers. This term seems to be accurate for experienced staff who, according to the above-mentioned report of the JIU, are able to share expertise based on many years of knowledge acquisition. Yet it is not appropriate for someone with only a couple of years’ work experience. For that reason, I will use the term *UN workers* when addressing

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mediator between those member states who have to be developed and those who are outside this category (Müller 2013a, 11).

77 Informal document. The survey was conducted in autumn 2018 in response to the introduction of the automatic exchange of financial account information (AEOI), i. e. the official taxation of wages of external contractors. The activist-motivated group wanted to use these and other actions to draw attention to their situation (see also Chapter 6).

78 Fieldnote, Talk with Vanessa (Feb 28, 2019).

79 In the interview quotes, the term consultant is mostly used.

all those working for the UN and use the emic term *P staff* when only referring to those who are, by definition of the UN Charter (UN GA 1945), included in the official UN workforce. Yet, what are the entry options for early career UN workers? How did my informants get their jobs? This will be addressed in the next section.

#### 2.4.2 Entry Options for Early Career UN Workers

As already mentioned above, this study takes a closer look at career options for individuals employed in the *professional and higher categories*, also known as *professional staff* or just *P staff*. The majority (17 out of 20) of the younger informants were hired in so-called *entry-level professionals* (P1 to P3). These positions require an advanced university degree and a minimum of two to five years of relevant work experience.

My informants faced different career options: UN career aspirants with no or little work experience have the possibility to apply via a competitive recruitment examination called *Young Professional Programme (YPP)*. This recruitment examination, comprising a written exam and a personal interview, takes place once a year and addresses “talented, highly qualified professionals” (UN Careers 2020d, *Young Professional Programme*). The written exam recruits new employees below the age of 32 for positions in specific job areas labeled “economic affairs” or “information systems and technology.” These positions are opened in accordance with organizational need. Also, this recruitment process is mindful of geographical representation: The continuously adapted list of *un- and under-represented countries* highlights the imbalance of geographical representation among the UN workforce.

The YPP examination is a fierce competition among applicants across the globe.<sup>80</sup> Yet, only a low number of applicants actually pass the two-stage examination procedure that includes a four-hour long exam consisting of a short questions and an essay, followed by a personal interview (UN Careers 2020d, *Young Professional Programme*).<sup>81</sup> However, passing the examination process does not guarantee a position in a UN-affiliated organization. A rule stipulates that the names of the successful candidates will remain on a so-

80 Some sources speak of an average of 40,000 applicants who take the YPP exam every year (Humanrightcareers 2017, *UN Entry-Level Hiring Programmes*).

81 In the YPP examination cycle of 2015, for example, only 104 candidates successfully passed the exam (UN Careers 2016d).

called reserve list for two years. If the “reserve” candidates are not offered a position within this period of time but still seek to pursue a UN career, they are obliged to take the YPP exam again, regardless of their successful result previously. An informant, let’s call her Ana (Mar 2, 2017), passed the YPP exam in her job family (“social affairs”).<sup>82</sup> At the time of the interview, Ana still worked as an external contractor and was waiting for her first placement.

A second option for junior professionals with little work experience is to be hired as *Junior Professional Officers (JPO)*. A small number of governments or partner countries of UN-affiliated bodies sponsor these positions. Applicants with the respective nationality (some countries, such as the Netherlands and, more recently, Switzerland, offer positions to people of an underrepresented country in order to meet a quota) are offered employment contracts from one to two years. Again, there is only a low number of such positions available, and they are limited to a short length of time. Several of my informants hold a JPO position (Arnold, Carlo, Justice, Marie, and Viviane).

The most important entry-level career opportunity is what I have termed the *third career path* (Müllli 2017a, 199). This entry path is individual, self-initiated and self-made, and consists of a long and sometimes precarious period of unpaid or low-paid internships<sup>83</sup> followed by a short-term contract as a UN consultant (see the examples of Emmanuel Snow, Jordan, James Mantha, and others). Alternatively, young UN workers are employed as so-called UN Volunteers (UNV).<sup>84</sup> Eventually, some of the external contractors are offered positions in the *professional and higher categories*. Yet, not only young UN workers enter by external contracts, as the interviews with senior staff confirmed.

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82 See also the ethnographic vignette addressing Ana’s story.

83 At least in Geneva, some UN entities have begun to pay their interns stipends in recent years. This is also thanks to the interns’ tireless lobbying efforts for their cause. Local newspapers regularly take up the issue (SWI, Orsini 2021, *Surviving as a UN intern in Geneva*). In the fall of 2020, the voters of the Canton of Geneva approved a minimum wage of CHF 23/hour. This was probably also under the impression of the precarious conditions that came to light in the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, since they work for an international organization, UN interns do not benefit from this change in local legislation.

84 UNV is an intermediary organization bringing together volunteers with a specific professional qualification and projects in multi-lateral cooperation. This program was established in 1970. Since 1996, UNV has had its main base in the former capital of West Germany, Bonn, and has been administered by UNDP. In 2000, for example, there were 2,000 volunteers from 157 nations working in 140 countries (Unser 2004, 70–71).

When I interviewed a director in her Geneva office about her way into the UN, senior professional Fernanda answered,

Well, my/ I got into the UN ten years ago, it was 2006. And (..) as a consultant actually first, and this was because I was/ this is a specialized agency, as you know. So, yeah, it was kind of a/ the job opportunity, or the position came in the middle of interactions with an [organization], you know, projects that we implemented. So, of course, people knew me already and they offered me, as I said, a position as a consultant, which was not a position in the UN, it was temporary, (um), for two years. And in the middle of this period, of these two years, there was a position that was announced in [organization]. And actually, I think it was one of the few positions that I could apply for, because it was something in the interface of [innovation and international relations, LM], I would say. And that was/ had been my life before, you know? [...] I applied for this position and in the middle of this temp[orary] contract I got in as a staff member. And in [UN organization] I worked always with international cooperation and technical cooperation with countries. And (um) I had a period of four years in an external office in [country], so I was six years here and then four years in [country] and then *back* to headquarters where I'm now for one year and a half.

Fernanda tells me how she made use of her being “known” in the organization when she was first offered a two-year contract as an external contractor. As an established professional she took the risk and then successfully applied for the open position; otherwise she probably would have returned to her former position in her home country.

Another informant, Jordan (May 21, 2016), remembers the time when they were moving through various positions (intern, consultant and eventually a P2 position) as being “quite stressful.”<sup>85</sup> Yet they also describe the intense lifestyle the contractual situation provoked,

That was a really stressful time, to be honest. Because I knew, I was very happy to have/ get a consultancy because I know that it is not a normal thing, like, not every intern can get that. So it was really valuable, I appreciated it. But (..) at the same time, (um) (thinking) it was stressful. It was many hours, and I feel that consultants *work* not only to learn and enjoy it but also to get renewed. No? It was like *work* and then you make sure you get renewed, so you can stay three months, three more months in Vienna. So at the same time I *loved* my life in Vienna and I noticed that with my friend who has like short-term contracts that we were really like, “Whoa, this is a great place!” because we knew that we were gonna leave, you know, we were either staying or leaving. So we really [have] lived it, so it was a really intense year.

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85 Some informants do not want to be affiliated with any gender. Therefore, I use gender-neutral pronouns.

As mentioned, not all interns get hired as external contractors (consultants). However, before being assigned a *P position*, junior professionals undergo a long, lean period consisting of insecurity and flexibility, combined with intense feelings that are reflected in this quote by the fast way of telling that was then interrupted by a long pause when Jordan was pondering the insecure time between the internship and a staff position.

In general, as I will explain later in this book, external contracts are seen as a temporary solution, both for the organization and the employees.<sup>86</sup> With regard to this career path, I quote the sociologist Richard Sennett: “in the flexible regime, the difficulties crystallize in a particular act, the act of risk-taking” (Sennett 1998, 75). In other words, only career aspirants who can financially afford an unpaid or low-paid internship and are therefore also able to emotionally take the risk of working as consultants on a short-term basis are able to pursue this alternative and self-initiated career entry. To be precise, the “third career path” best illustrates the flexible work regimes of the *new economy* (Sennett 2006). At least in the last few decades this flexible work regime has also become increasingly notable in the context of the UN employing body.<sup>87</sup> Against this background, it has to be mentioned that UN consultancies, i. e. positions often serving as an interim appointment in junior professionals’ careers, are actually recognized as experienced experts—defined as “recognized authorit[ies] or specialist[s] in a specific field, engaged by the Organization in an advisory or consultative capacity” (UN Careers 2017, *Consultants*)<sup>88</sup>—in order to perform short-term project work.

## 2.5 The UN as a Global Assemblage

This chapter showed how the field of research is assembled; how it forms a global assemblage. This means that the present study provides the insight

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86 This point will be further developed in Chapter 6. See also interviews with Kalhuit (Aug 17, 2017), who likes consultancy because it provides the possibility to work remotely, or with Arnold (epilogue).

87 During my fieldwork, I learned that the massive contracting of consultants is a recent development of the last two to three decades. I assume this phenomenon has to be understood in relation to management theories which became popular in the 1980s.

88 Similar observations can be made for staff members employed as so-called individual contractors.

into a dynamic process, and it examines the working and living world of the UN by following the perspectives of UN workers: my informants.

I focused on the methodological field construction and illustrated that I conceive the field of research as a construct, which is undergoing constant shifting and change, influenced by global events, discourses, and narratives coming from different ends. In this way I pursue a dynamic perspective on the field, imagining it as a dynamic matrix or assemblage and therefore not mainly linear (as historians understand it) or central (as political scientists do). However, the historical contingency and complex multi-dimensionality helped me grasp the reasons for the UN's reputation and attractiveness as an employer.

I highlighted aspects as well as processes of the historic development of the UN system and illuminated bureaucratic particularities in order to understand the specific work circumstances UN employees still work in today. Historically, the organization has always been in a state of flux; there has been (and still is) a constant shift in focus. The UN always reflects the result of current global political power relations. During the Cold War, for example, there was a certain substantive focus (nuclear energy, later humanitarian aid). UN organizations also moved across spatial and political borders. There was a time, when the geopolitical map was different from today, when the city of Vienna seemed like the last stop before the Iron Curtain—at least from a Western perspective. The case of Nairobi, as addressed by one of my informants shows that there exists a narrative of this UN duty station still being imagined as a peripheral place.

From an ethnographic perspective and when applying narrative analysis, however, this spatial construct is very informative. The construction of the UN as a site (in the ethnographic sense) is narratively produced. Thus, this process or assemblage is closely connected with the construction of “sublime” centers and “distant” peripheries from an emic perspective. This illustrates that certain narratives and atmospheres of exclusiveness (architecture, pieces of art, peacocks) as well as spatiality (“apples and pears”) are co-constructed by the field—including my informants. To be precise, the field sites that correspond to concrete geographical places where work careers and biographies are shaped, are co-produced by the fieldwork interlocutors.

Therefore, I addressed the meaning of atmosphere and space in the UN HQ duty stations in Geneva and Vienna in more detail. The Palais des Nations, the main and most impressive building of the UN HQ duty station in Geneva, can be described as an exclusive enclave on Lake Geneva. It is the

building that is most representative of what has been labeled as the “international Geneva”. The equivalent “international” space in Vienna, the UN HQ duty station called the Vienna International Center (VIC), which was once built in a remote place, is still difficult to access. The meaning of atmospheres and the hierarchization of space exemplified the two reasons why these locations are attractive places to work, and why, as I will show in the course of this study, some early career workers are ready to endure even precarious working and living conditions.

Also, I briefly introduced two other research sites: The Palais and the VIC are contrasted with places where (future) early career professionals only spend short amounts of time, namely the UNSSC and, in less detail, career fairs. Nevertheless, as I will show in the continuation of this book, these places are significant for the careers of UN workers—and the creation of the ideal international civil servant. In a last step, I described the complex UN staff system and demonstrated the hurdles that exist from an early career perspective. This will be crucial for understanding the following chapters and why the narrative of meritocracy in the UN is so present and effective.





# On Interview Atmospheres and Linear Stories

I am in Turin at the United Nations System Staff College (UNSSC) to attend a training session for Junior Professional Officers and a workshop provided by the training center of the ILO. Also, I plan to conduct interviews with some of the UN officials working there. On September 26, 2017, when attending the first workshop, I presented myself and my interest at the beginning of the course. Then, I just sat there, between the workshop participants, and observed. The workshop is organized as a “learning forum” on the topic of innovation in public investment and employment programs. Most of the workshop participants work for governmental institutions in different African countries. Having received little information beforehand, I now realize that the workshop was dedicated to government employees. Among the government officials, there are a few international civil servants working for UN bodies. One of them, a former JPO, who was sent to a Latin American country to work in a UN organization dedicated to development and who currently works as P staff for another UN organization on the African continent, approaches me during lunchtime. I am happy to have company during lunch and to be able to receive information. This person in turn, I understand quickly, is glad to have someone he can talk to about his personal situation. He is keen to present stories which exemplify his success (“I do either championship like a JPO, or nothing, no shitty jobs”), yet his comments are also loaded with quite a bit of cynicism and frustration. This informant, let’s call him Daniel, gives me a lot of detailed information regarding his personal and professional life, yet, only discloses his first name to me. He is very aware of the fact that, as he tells me, I, the ethnographer researching the UN, was close enough to understand his position, his impressions and feelings—and yet, too distant to use this knowledge against him.

He shows a detached stance when describing how the UN and its employment structure is changing. He compares working for the UN to flying a plane. “Several decades ago flying was for the elite. So was working for the UN. Then it became accessible to the wider public,” Daniel says referring to his own generation. “And now, due to the financial pressure, the UN is more and more market-oriented.” He goes on by

explaining his analysis to me. “Currently,” he muses while we are sitting at a table in the garden of the cafeteria, “We are on the threshold from the second to the third phase.” Daniel tells me that he is a trained economist, “I also wanted to do a Ph.D., but I decided not to. It is too precarious, too useless.” Clearly, I think, he tries to mark his position as someone with an academic affiliation. I understand that he presents himself as an expert encountering a researcher trying to understand the dynamics of lives such as his. He questions my research approach, “Why do you research in headquarters? There you will not find the typical UN people. You’d better talk to a few people here and then go to the field and spend one year in the field!” He insists that the people I am interviewing “are not real UN people, you know, those with the chic handbags; they are just doing it for lifestyle. I’ve seen them only in New York, never in the field.”

He tells me that he was appointed as a JPO at the age of 27. “I was quite young and I guess, they did not quite believe in me, but they gave me a position.” He was sent to a Latin American country. “[Country], at the time, was already a lost place. I started to ask for relocation already after half a year. I wasted my time there, it was boring and dangerous, too,” Daniel remembers. At some point he marks himself as an insider by explaining, “It’s like in the book ‘Backstabbing for Beginners’, you know it?” When I admit I do not, he just replies, “Well, it seems that you do not properly investigate for your Ph.D.” This is one manner of negotiating our positions, I think quietly. He explains what he meant with this reference to a bestseller written by a former UN worker and whistleblower, “As a JPO you don’t have any time to see how it is, it starts right from the beginning. In the field, they say, in the first year as a JPO you are working your ass off, then you want to change everything, in the third year you are looking for a next job.” According to him, JPO positions “are not sustainable, because next year you have to look for another position.” (Indeed, some donor countries urge their JPOs to raise money to fund the continuation of their position.) After the end of the JPO contract, Daniel goes on telling me, he joined another UN organization in a country in Southeast Africa. “I have these five-year contracts, well, you sign annual contracts but you know that it will go on because of the five-year bud-

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<sup>1</sup> The novel with the sensational title *Backstabbing for Beginners: My Crash Course in International Diplomacy* was written by a former UN worker (Soussan 2008). The testimonial addresses the corruption scandals around the Oil-For-Food Program initiated by Kofi Annan. In 2018 the book was made into a movie under the same title. Another ‘bestseller’ that I was regularly recommended to read when I mentioned my research was written by three former UN workers. Reflecting their cynicism, it carries the title *Emergency Sex (and other Desperate Measures). True Stories from a War Zone* (Cain, Postlewait, and Tomson 2006). It goes without saying that the contents are oriented towards the sensationalist desires of an imaginary readership and are therefore lacking in rich content.

get of the project.” On his long and complicated journey in the development sector, from several cities in Europe to duty stations in Latin America and Africa, Daniel wants to return to Geneva where he previously worked for a UN organization for a short period of time. Now, that he joined this organization headquartered in Geneva, he is able to “apply from within. This is much easier.” Changing the topic, Daniel goes on to tell me about “a friend, a biologist in her thirties. She did badly paid jobs, consultancies. Now she is visiting a therapist. She’s really bad.” He pauses and confesses, “It did happen to me in a similar way when finishing the JPO. It was hard to get another job.” This, I quickly calculate, was almost nine years ago. He explains why he is thinking so much about the future. After his JPO he was unemployed, and “ended up on a couch of a friend. I don’t want this to have repeated.” Referring to his current employee card, he says, “This badge is the first one where the photograph shows me in a suit. I wanted to be professional from the very beginning.” Before, he says, he was not planning his career at the UN, and it ended badly, in unemployment. This time, Daniel says resolutely, he wants to be prepared.

After the workshop, all participants entered a bus that took them from the UNSSC campus back to the city center. I am allowed to join them. My newly found informant sits next to me; we arrange a time for dinner to continue the conversation.

In the evening, sitting in a pizzeria in Turin, I listen again to Daniel’s stories. It is a monologue that I can barely interrupt with a question or a critical comment. I doubt whether the situation was really one-dimensional to this extent or whether it was the pure frustration speaking out of my fieldwork interlocutor’s mouth. However, I have no chance to double-check it. Neither is it that important. For me as an ethnographer, the fact that someone approached me in that way, loading me with his personal history without revealing details of his identity, is more pivotal. It is another moment that shows the competitive character of the UN world of work. Daniel is quite frank and tells me that he gives me this information because I have empathy for his situation; that I know the context but could never use this information to gossip among colleagues. He also tells me his ultimate dream for retirement: buying a house in the Swiss mountains, even though Switzerland is, according to him, “the most boring country in the world and Geneva is actually really boring.” He imagines spending his retired life in the mountains—skiing in winter and mountain biking in summer. However, Daniel would never tell all this to his colleagues, “This dream [retirement, LM] is threatening my colleagues. It’s like being a punk and then saying that you want to have a nuclear family. These ‘tolerant’ people are very intolerant; the progressives don’t like when you are not progressive.” I figure that Daniel is visibly frustrated with his life situation. Telling me more de-

tails about his personal life and how he feels about it, it almost seems to me that this man lives in a gilded cage. When we say goodbye, he says, “So, I hope you now have enough material.”

During only two days, I received almost more data than I could process at the analytical and emotional level. The fieldnotes<sup>2</sup> I typed into my laptop late at night in the hotel speak volumes. I was especially overwhelmed by the urge of this one fieldwork interlocutor to tell me his story. This episode shows that doing an ethnography among peers—being a young professional of equal academic qualification and similar professional experience—is a challenging endeavor. There were many more moments in my research when I felt that my informants were, in a way I could not understand at the beginning, competing with me. The fact that I had spent many months at the VIC, that I observed and was told what other interns felt when trying to get a contract as consultants and eventually more permanent positions as P staff gave me empathy for their situations. While looking for moments of friction, as this is what cultural anthropologists are interested in, I was told stories of pure success and professional competitiveness. “Everything was just aligning,” a fieldwork interlocutor told me. I was impressed. And intimidated. Others explained to me the relevance of my interview and congratulated me for my interview skills after I had switched off the audio recorder. After the first round of interviews, I asked myself, What else could I add to their statements? Why am I doing this research at all, if my informants have a well-formulated and eloquently presented answer to any of the questions I pose? What do I as the researcher have to say? I, the cultural anthropologist who tried to find her position as an early career researcher in the academic field? Then, I learned, even if I had a trust-based relationship with many of my informants, it was, for many of them, not possible to share their insecurities, frustrations and doubts. Or, at least, they would not phrase them explicitly. I understood that me being in a particular position, yet in the academic field and not the UN, could make these parallels useful. Pierre Bourdieu was one of the first who tried to understand what he coined *homo academicus*. The academic world was a field to which he officially belonged. Nevertheless, he could not identify with this academic figure. Being confronted with these types of informants and ethnographic data is quite typical for a field of research that is commonly imagined as elitist. Many scholars in cultural anthropology and neighboring disciplines have already reflected on that fact. Narrative analysis is particularly helpful, I learned, to tackle this type of data. So, after the first moments of intimidation, I started to understand the dynamics of the narrative behavior I encountered in the interviews.

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<sup>2</sup> The descriptions above are based on my fieldnotes written on Sept 26 and 27, 2017, in Turin.

### 3 Studying Self-aware Informants: Methodological Considerations on Research with Early Career UN Workers

In learning about others through active participation in their lives and activities, the fieldworker cannot and should not attempt to be a fly on the wall.

*(Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011, 4)*

I suppose in many instances research among elites forces us to make a research object out of ourselves and to observe how we enter these research fields, how we relate and accommodate ourselves to them, how we irritate the norms, and what accounts and what ethnographical knowledge these situations produce.

*(Lewicki 2017, 19)*

In this chapter, I reflect on the methodological approach chosen for my study. As the earlier parts of this book have demonstrated, the UN as a field of research in general and the two UN HQ duty stations as a physical space in particular are difficult to access. The ethnographic vignettes have further illustrated that it is hermetically controlled who, under what circumstances, gets access to the UN setting. Therefore, as I will outline in the following pages, I chose a specific methodological approach to realize this ethnographic research project. The aim of this chapter<sup>1</sup> is to describe the epistemological trajectories that have influenced the research process, making them productive for the ethnographic analysis. It reveals the dynamics that became visible through the ethnographically conducted research and the epistemologies lying underneath. In other words, the methodological considerations presented here are to be understood in the light of the fieldwork encounters and the ethnographer's engagement in the field. Mainly when engaging with informants, the interrelated mechanisms of power and competition became apparent and tangible. Various moments of positionalities of the ethnographer on the one hand and the positionalities

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<sup>1</sup> See also my thoughts presented elsewhere (Müllli 2018; 2017c).

of my fieldwork interlocutors<sup>2</sup> on the other are made visible. At the heart of the methodological considerations are a series of questions: What constitutes the process of positionalities in the field of research? What mechanisms and interrelations of power and competition unfolded over the research process? And at what moments did the power gradient materialize and thus become apparent? This chapter also tackles the question: How do these circumstances affect the researcher's interaction with her "self-aware" informants who display their confident personalities as much as their reflexivity and vice versa?

The methodological issues tackled in the following sections appeared over, and are therefore directly related to, the temporal course of the research process. Aiming to better contextualize the methodological considerations in every section, I will return briefly to the research course and the technical or "craftsperson's" side of conducting ethnographic field research. I will illustrate how the research started and then unfolded over time. Hence, the methodological considerations presented hereinafter chronologically follow the research progress. Consequently, in the present text, the former are embedded in the description of the latter. Oscillating between ethnographic impressions by describing fieldwork encounters as well as positionalities of both the researcher and the researched, the epistemological meaning thereof is revealing precisely because any "field research unfolds in interaction; its medium of knowledge is subjectivity, through which we gain access to everyday life and the experience of other people" (Eisch-Angus 2017, 8, my translation).

By analyzing the interactions between the researched and the researcher, I ultimately seek to point out specific characteristics of the UN as a work and lifeworld. Consequently, the here-discussed moments of multiple ambivalences become not only fruitful specifically with regard to methodological considerations. They also introduce aspects that are fundamental for this study in general. These insights will be useful in the continuation of this ethnography when it comes to questions of power, agency, and personhood in particular (as discussed in the subsequent chapters).

I consider three aspects of this research to be of value for methodological considerations. First, I will address general aspects in research settings that are difficult to (physically) access. These methodological considerations

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<sup>2</sup>I use the term fieldwork interlocutor interchangeably with the terms informant and interviewee.

are addressed with the description of the participant and interactive observation done in the first research phase. I will briefly explain how I experienced the work and lifeworld of the UN site in Vienna when working as an UN intern for approximately thirteen months. I will address how this contributed to the research questions tackled in this study. In the second section, I will elaborate on a meta-level how the field entry meant adopting an “inner” and “outer” perspective simultaneously. I will address the oscillation between what I call the “intern self” and the “ethnographer self” (see also Mülli 2017c). I will couple this aspect with considerations on fieldwork encounters in general and my and others’ positionalities. In the third section, I will proceed with what I consider the second phase of my research. I will first elaborate on what I understand as studying across. I will describe the interview sample, the place where the interviews were conducted and finally, what theories were used for the analysis. Second, I will discuss the impact of status differences on the research process by analyzing the dynamics during the recorded semi-structured interviews. I will address how my informants—twenty early career workers and five senior staff—negotiated narrative positions. Hence, the following considerations are devoted to the ethical attitude of this research, which was fundamental to the analysis of the collected data material. To this end, I will elaborate on what I have termed *self-aware interviewees*. I will show what importance I attributed to the para-ethnographic statements of my informants in the process of data analysis (see also Mülli 2018). The chapter closes with a conclusion that sums up the methodological considerations on the research on and with early career UN workers.

### 3.1 Along the Vertical or the Horizontal Axis? Immersion in the Everyday Working Life at the UN

Several decades ago, in her famous article “Up the Anthropologist” published in a volume dedicated to *Reinventing Anthropology*, Laura Nader advocated the importance of opening up new fields of research when investigating post-industrial societies. Nader stressed that cultural and social anthropologists “have specialized in understanding *whole* cultures in a cross-cultural context. We should, for example, be at home in studying the law firm as a secret soci-

ety, in finding and analyzing the networks of power [...].”<sup>3</sup> The scholar emphasized that anthropological studies on non-Western societies, which she termed “the cultures of the world” (Nader 1969, 303), should be complemented by ethnographies on what we frame as post-industrial cultures of the Western hemisphere. It was “at the heights of the Vietnam War, civil rights, and environmental rights moments,” as she remembered years later (Nader 2014, viii), when she underlined the importance of this rather innovative anthropological endeavor called *researching up*<sup>4</sup> by stressing its “democratic relevance” (Nader 1969, 293). By showing her appreciation for post-colonial critique, Nader (1969, 302) wrote, “We anthropologists have studied the cultures of the world only to find in the end that ours is one of the most bizarre of all cultures and one, by virtue of its world influence for ‘bad’ or ‘good,’ in urgent need to study.”

Against this background, I understand the democratic relevance of studying the UN as an attempt to understand the interdependent processes materializing and operating *within* the UN as an organization and workplace: modes of inclusion and exclusion, forms of (im)mobility, power structures and power relations, mechanisms of governmentalization, and ethical matters molding ways of action. Additionally, I also seek to understand how these processes function *beyond* the UN. I thereby use this example of a hard to reach area to understand how power, influence, and decision-making are exercised. I argue that following these logics, understanding the allegedly powerful and privileged in an organization that builds on a historically grown aura of elevation, as shown in the previous chapter, eventually would help to enhance the situation of the powerless or less privileged within settings of power. When applying ethnographic research methods, the researcher is able to capture perspectives that may not be apparent at first sight. This is especially crucial for the understanding of mechanisms within the UN.

Since Nader’s plea to take a “vertical slice” (Nader 1980) in order to focus on what might appear as “secret” communities, many anthropologists (e.g. Hertz 2014; Aguiar and Schneider 2012; Hannerz 2006) followed her lead and started to conduct studies on difficult to access social groups (milieus), corporations, and bureaucratic organizations. As elaborated in my earlier overview of methodological approaches, Nader’s call has led to a diverse array

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3 This approach found successors in the neighboring disciplines, such as political science (Richards 1996).

4 Since I understand the terms studying up and researching up as synonyms, they are used interchangeably.



of approaches in the discipline. It inspired research on venerable and influential institutions and opened up new topical subfields of anthropology and areas of study, such as the anthropology of (international) organizations (e.g. Garsten and Nyqvist 2013), the anthropology of labor in large corporations (e.g. Götz 2013b), of policies (e.g. Shore, Wright, and Però 2011; Wright and Reinhold 2011) and of elite cultures (Aguar and Schneider 2012; Shore and Nugent 2002). Therefore, anthropologists have striven for new forms of collaboration with such institutions and its agents (Holmes and Marcus 2012; 2005a; 2008), as addressed later in this chapter. Yet, recent studies still describe the UN as a secret and quasi-mysterious place of power. They exemplify the productivity of ethnographic research on the organization and its sub-bodies. Cultural anthropologists were interested in policy-making processes related to intangible heritage (Hafstein 2018), the use of language and negotiation practices (Groth 2012) and policy-making (Müller 2013b), for example. It is a setting where mostly diplomats and fellow country representatives, as well as affiliates of the civil society are involved. Anthropologists also researched the UN's "bureaucratic" areas (Abélès 2011b; Badaró 2011; Deeb and Marcus 2011). In the introduction to a collaborative study about the Geneva-based World Trade Organization (WTO) for example, the anthropologist and editor of the book *Des anthropologues à l'OMS* points to the anthropologists' recent interest in the "nouveaux lieux de pouvoir" (Abélès 2011b, 19). Supranational organs and international organizations are these "new places of power" where, as Abélès argues, anthropologists observe the practical and symbolic effects of scale-up efforts and processes of deterritorialization (ibid.). In order to tackle these processes, Abélès further stresses the importance of qualitative research methods, such as participatory observation. Indeed, an ethnographic approach performed over a considerable period of time and applied in the process of analysis offers valuable insights into an area of research that traditionally has been investigated by other disciplines such as political science, law, and international studies.

It is, however, not always thoroughly addressed how "study up" research unfolds, and which parameters decide if its outcome was successful and what constituted the upness or power in such a space. In her preminent text, Nader identified several "obstacles and objections" that she problematized as "access, attitudes, ethics, and methodology" (Nader 1969, 301–2). The repeatedly faced challenges in researching "up" settings became subject to methodological reflections and scientific discussions. Consequently, potential challenges, obstacles and research barriers inspire(d) anthropologists to

enter spaces that appear to be “upper” to us. The issue of access to a physical space, however, is not the most interesting question. The anthropologist Ellen Hertz, one of Nader’s former students, points to the importance of asking what is really meant by “up” in each research, since “‘up’ is not a place but a position, and ‘slicing vertically’ [(Nader 1980)] means studying the relations between positions by asking how some people’s actions asymmetrically affect other people’s lives” (Hertz 2014, 64). Ultimately, these aspects are linked to responsibility and control. Yet, as I have already problematized elsewhere (Müllli 2018) and will outline in the next subsection, the possible ways to study the work and lifeworlds of international organizations are not equally accessible and realizable to all ethnographers. I argue that when addressing the meaning of “upness” or “acrossness” in these settings, one has to address the issue of (physical) access to a site. Were the researchers invited to the UN space? Were they part of a (prestigious) research project? Are they established researchers or at the beginning of their career? Depending on the answers, the attributes up or across develop different dynamics as well as altering the questions of ethics and attitudes and the access to be taken, as I will describe in the next subsection.

These questions related to social positionality are, as I argue with reference to Bourdieu, precisely important because the chosen modes of access and methodology depend on the researchers’ academic status and career stage. Bourdieu writes that the exercise of *participant objectivation* entails the self-reflection by the ethnographer, seen as the social agent producing scientific knowledge while holding a specific position in the academic setting:

What needs to be objectivized, then, is not the anthropologist performing the anthropological analysis of a foreign world but the social world that has made both the anthropologist and the conscious or unconscious anthropology that she (or he) engages in her anthropological practice—not only her social origins, her position and trajectory in social space, her social and religious memberships and beliefs, gender, age, nationality, etc., but also, and most importantly, her particular position within the microcosm of anthropologists. (Bourdieu 2003, 283)

In response to this point, the varying possibilities of access to a powerful organization have to be considered. Moreover, the Australian sociologist Karl Maton stresses that the moment of *epistemic reflexivity* allows the deconstruction of power relations in both the field of research and the academic world itself: “For whatever the habituses of actors or organization of the field, reflexivity is always conducted from a social position. Even if actors share the same habitus and occupy a level playing field, there remains the tendency to

regress: Analysis of the effects of social position is always conducted from a social position” (Maton 2003, 60). Ultimately, this means analyzing the phenomenological concept of *doxa* as Bourdieu conceived it—that is, the unquestioned circumstances of social structure and power that people accept and thus reproduce in everyday life. This, in turn, means understanding its implications for the research process and its implications for the scientific analysis.

I argue that despite all the research experiences collected in studies where the relationship between the researcher and the field of research seems to be less of an issue, anthropologists at an early stage of their academic career are still confronted with considerable challenges when conducting qualitative research in large corporations and international organizations. This is due to the simple fact that physical access to these sites might be restricted, as in the case of the UN. Additionally, actors in these powerful institutions are difficult to approach due to their many responsibilities, tight work schedules and their awareness of differences in status. For the (younger) anthropologist, it is thus challenging to get into contact on a more personal level of conversation and exchange. Furthermore, informants from this professional background are also considerably aware of the potential (mis)use of personal information. All these factors significantly affect the field entry and approach of informants as well as the data to be collected (see Mülli 2018, 96).

### 3.1.1 Studying Upper While Working as an Intern: The Participant and Interactive Observation

Spatiality and the surveilled separation of space matter in the UN. The spatial order also matters in the present study that aims to overcome the distinction *inside* versus *outside* the UN. Here, I refer to what I have already addressed in the previous chapter, namely that my informants use the same conceptual logic of space. They say “inside” when referring to the UN context and “outside” when talking about everything not belonging to the area of an international organization (see Mülli 2017a, 194).<sup>5</sup> As already mentioned, a diary entry captured this imagined (and actual) dichotomy of spatial tension: A participant of a staff development workshop described the feeling of entering one of the UN organizations in Vienna as a “cultural shock.” Despite

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<sup>5</sup> See also the spatial separations between center and periphery as elaborated in the previous parts of this book (Chapter 2).

being Austrian, another participant confessed, she felt more connected to the UN community than to “the world outside.”<sup>6</sup> This again shows the emic position of an imagined separation of the UN and the non-UN space that is permanently re-narrated, as I will elaborate further in Chapter 5. Evidently, the discursive fragmentation also represents the real spatial separation of the UN system from the outside world and, in consequence, points to the importance of taking an ethnographic look *inside* a large international organization. Thus, how should the readers imagine the researcher’s path into her field? Was it a linear process? No, is the short answer. In order to explain the research process and the corresponding, changing positionalities in more detail, I have to expand upon my answer in more detail.

Unlike Hertz, who was “appointed as a Swiss governmental ‘advisor’” (Hertz 2014, 70) to participate in a meeting series at the ILO, or Abélès and his fellow researchers, who were invited to conduct research on the WTO by its then managing director general (DG) Pascal Lamy (2011, 11), I did not follow a *top-down* research approach supported by a leading figure at the top of the organizational hierarchy. More precisely, I did not approach my area of investigation by accompanying a government representative or with the help of a senior UN official serving as a *gatekeeper*. By contrast, I followed a *bottom-up* strategy pinched with moments of serendipity (e.g. Rivoal and Salazar 2013) which anthropologists typically take to access well-protected and fenced-off international bodies such as the UN (Halme-Tuomisaari 2018; J. Cowan and Billaud 2017) or the EU (Shore 2007, 180). By doing so, they challenge the “fuzzy and contingent borders of inclusion and exclusion” (Halme-Tuomisaari 2018, 464).

After writing my MA thesis, a time when I deepened my academic knowledge and personal sensibility for labor, work processes and forms of cooperation (Müllli 2014, unpublished), I decided to apply for an internship at one of the Vienna-based UN organizations. I did so out of curiosity, looking for a potential workplace after graduation. As I will show later, it is common for recent university graduates to apply for a UN internship. Later they (as they have to) develop a narrative stressing that they have always wanted to (and continue to) pursue what is imagined as the UN career path (see Chapter 5). Sometime at the beginning of 2014, I filled in the online form and uploaded it to the UN’s HR website and was called for a three-month unpaid internship in a Vienna-based UN organization starting in June 2014. Dur-

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<sup>6</sup> See footnote 8, p. 25. This also applies to the quote in the preceding sentence.

ing the internship at the VIC, my scientific interest in the situation of early career professionals in the UN context arose—and has grown steadily. Thus, what began with curiosity (and in a moment of serendipity) has gradually developed into a research trajectory. Following on from my first internship, I completed a second internship lasting ten-months (from fall 2014 to summer 2015) in another Vienna-based UN agency. Thus, after collecting initial insights into the habitual and work world of the UN site in Vienna, I continued the overt observation over an extended period. Being on-site and cooperating with colleagues and direct supervisors, whom I had orally informed about my academic interest long before it was clear that I could actually realize a research project, enabled me to collect ethnographic data through participatory and interactive observation (Schmidt-Lauber 2012; Tedlock 1991, see also Moeran 2017; 2009). To be on-site for such a long period of time also enabled me to gain a broader and more comprehensive understanding of the everyday practices and interactions from a headquarters' perspective. Moreover, as discussed later (Chapter 4), during the internships I could participate in everyday work situations, and I was starting to understand certain dynamics, being far away from getting the whole picture, of course.

As I describe elsewhere, I found myself in a work context full of contradictions: I was part of a large group of individuals who are commonly considered “younger”<sup>7</sup> (say, in their mid-twenties to mid-thirties) and “highly skilled” (say, with academic formation and MA or BA degrees). Like my peers, I was, in the beginning, genuinely impressed and amazed by the fact of being employed by this prestigious international organization and working with colleagues from all over the world. The minor but relevant detail that most of the interns were (and still are) not paid, which for many of them meant working under highly precarious living conditions, seemed, at least in the eyes of many of my colleagues, to be a fair deal. In my perspective as an anthropologist, this precarious position of UN workers at the beginning of their working lives, however, was highly disturbing and provoked a series of questions. Nonetheless, I was part of the UN system's hierarchy. I worked in a team, belonged to a unit, a branch, a department and was therefore part of a particular UN sub-organization of the larger entity referred to as the UN

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7 Note that there are specific imaginations, lifestyles, and subjectivities attached to this category: Are people young because they belong to a certain generation, or, rather, is their way of living the determining factor for the ascription of this category. How this is connected to employment situations will be addressed in Chapter 6 (see also Saleminck, Bregnbæk, and Hirsland 2018).

system. During the first internship, I joined my unit, which at that moment was working on the feasibility study of an international cooperation project implemented in South American UN member states, whereas in the second internship I was involved in information management. In the function as an intern at the VIC, I attended meetings and official events but I was also engaged in more informal situations like lunch and coffee breaks. I participated in diverse leisure activities such as joint excursions to the vicinity of Vienna and parties at my colleagues' homes. In both contexts, I collected valuable insights into the lives, self-images and imaginaries of early career UN professionals. These insights and insider knowledge enabled me to ask the right questions when designing the research project, in which I aimed to continue my data collection with audio-recorded semi-structured interviews and more observations at career fairs and the UN staff college.

Halme-Tuomisaari, who conducted participant observation during three sessions of the UN Human Rights Committee at Palais Wilson in Geneva, showed how crucial it was for her research to be on-site, just because "inside the UN apparatus, access never becomes something that one simply has, but rather remains elusive and volatile, subject to negotiation, temporal restriction and surprise" (Halme-Tuomisaari 2018, 464). However, she admits to having preferred a more hidden approach than being a conspicuous ethnographer. What she describes as "methodologically blonde" reflects a typical studying-up research attitude where the ethnographer who portrays herself as an outsider tries, by any means, to become an insider. When working among colleagues, however, this approach was not sufficient nor sustainable. Sooner or later, colleagues decode the mimicry. Consequently, I had to get *closer* in order to be able to observe and understand key aspects of everyday life in a UN HQ duty station. In this context, the ethnographic endeavor is conceptualized as *immersion*:

The ethnographer seeks a deeper *immersion* in others' worlds in order to grasp what they experience as meaningful and important. With immersion, the field researcher sees from the inside how people lead their lives, how they carry out their daily rounds of activities and what they find meaningful and how they do so. In this way, immersion gives the fieldworker access to the fluidity of others' lives and enhances his [sic] sensitivity to interaction and process. [...] Immersion in ethnographic research, then, involves being both with other people to see how they respond to events as they happen and experiencing for oneself these events and the circumstances that give rise to them. (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011, 3, emphasis in original)

Thus, also based on my understanding of a collaborative research attempt, I opted for an immersion into the everyday life at the VIC in order to get to know one UN site profoundly. Meeting some of my future informants in this context seemed to be the best approach to challenge the well-protected barriers of the UN. I had transformed from a researcher who was studying up the UN to someone who was studying across colleagues with similar *cultural capital* (Bourdieu 1986b). I was sharing, at least to a certain extent, the everyday life with my informants. This included moments of excitement as well as frustrations; I noted these impressions in my field diary.

Traditionally, ethnographers wrote down their observations in field diaries. Depending on the setting, however, it nowadays seems more appropriate to type one's observations into a smartphone or another digital device. (I illustrated this in the previous ethnographic vignettes.) Especially in the elusive and hard-to-access context where I did field research, ad hoc notes on my smartphone helped me to thoroughly write down my memory protocol at the end of the day. When visiting a career fair or the UNSSC, for example, I had the time and energy to write long memory protocols. It is evident, that, when working and researching at the same time, I only noted incidents that, in that very moment, seemed meaningful to me, especially as I was not yet sure how the research project would appear toward its close. I also noted down my feelings and how I reacted to my work environment. From this standpoint, it can be stated that

fieldnotes inscribe the sometimes inchoate understandings and insights the fieldworker acquires by intimately immersing herself in another world, by observing in the midst of mundane activities and jarring crisis, and by directly running up against the contingencies and constraints of the everyday life of other people. (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011, 14).

At the end, my field diary, being a combination of physical notebooks and a digital document, had grown to a digital document of roughly 250 pages. My field diaries contain numerous notes, observations, and information. These fieldnotes are crucial to this study since “overall, the field diary [...] serves as a medium for the perception of the field of research, the dialogue within it and its cultural-analytical interpretation” (Eisch-Angus 2017, 8, my translation).

When carrying out fieldwork in a sensitive environment such as the UN, where competition is high and people are carefully guarding their personal information, it is crucial to get the research subjects' permission to carry out fieldwork among them. That is why, in the many informal conversations I

had during the time of my internships at the VIC, I always informed my interlocutor(s) of my being a (soon-to-be or part-time) researcher. In certain situations, however, I felt that the line between overt and covert observation was fragile. Even though I had declared my scientific interest, I felt that some of my colleagues forgot this over time. Hence, what are the consequences for analysis? Being aware of the sensitivity of the observations collected during the participant observation, my fieldnotes serve as illustrations and as a basis for the ethnographic vignettes exclusively written from the researcher's perspective (see Chapter 1, on ethnographic vignettes). Even though, at the time of my applications, the UN could have been a potential workplace-to-be and I could have used my field diary as a basis for an auto-ethnographic approach, I opted for narrative interviews in order to understand how early career UN workers make sense of the UN work and lifeworlds (Handler 2019; Lewicki 2017). During the analysis of the interviews, I continually referred to my fieldnotes. This triangulation served to contextualize what my informants stated in the extensive narrative interviews.

Additionally, I visited other sites where, as stated in the previous chapter, the multi-sited field of research continuously unfolded. This included the field trip to the Staff College of the UN (UNSSC) and to career fairs; sites that intermittently become punctually important for the biographies of my informants. Finally, even during the writing process, I actively followed what happened in the field of research and collected documents. This practice of everyday data collecting is "squirrel-like" (Löfgren 2015). Whereas squirrels are said to messily collect (and forget) food, everyday data collecting in anthropology means a continual search for ethnographic data completing the sample, providing explanations, inspirations and food for thought; in short, a collage of material revolving around the research subject that is constantly organized on "different kinds of stashes" (Löfgren 2015, 33). Thus, before I started reaching out to my informants to ask them to participate in the recorded interviews, my data set already contained a large data corpus: fieldnotes, observations and self-reflections, and pictures I took or was given by other UN workers, as well as publicly available UN documents. These documents (seen as *actants* in the sense of Bruno Latour) were either published by a UN body or adopted by forums such the General Assembly. The documents retrieved from the organizational website decisively shape the conditions of power. They also document the negotiation as well as decision-making processes. As I will discuss later in this chapter, the multi-layered relationships of power were also negotiated in the interviews I conducted.



In closing, doing an internship and communicating my research interest openly with my colleagues enabled me to keep an honest relationship with them. This was especially important because I was interested in biographical stories as these, according to my hypothesis, include both personal and professional aspects. Since ethnographic research builds upon “insiderness” and creating bonds, trust was one key element for my research. I did not have to pretend to be someone else because, as I will indicate later, the topic of me being a cultural anthropologist was naturally addressed among early career workers—interns and consultants—in the many small talk situations outside the work context, from the after-work drink at the UN bar next to the VIC cafeteria on Fridays, to dinners with several work colleagues or parties at someone’s home. When meeting someone for the first time, I observed, it is common to ask at which department they worked, in what role, for how long and what would come next. Many times, questions about a person’s professional background or professional identity were asked even before inquiring what their name was or where they came from. It was, therefore, only natural that my opposites soon noted that I had a particular interest when sharing my views and observations with them in everyday encounters and conversations. In order to gain this level of trust and immerse myself in the UN as deeply as possible, I felt it was essential to stay on-site over a long period of time. Sharing my spare time with other young UN workers helped me to create a broad and trust-based net of contacts of future interviewees. Furthermore, the fact that I gained a deep insight into my field of research enabled me to question and classify the self-confident statements of some of my informants as “self-aware”—as I will elaborate later in this chapter. In sum, I use(d) the participant observations and my own experiences as an instrument in the data collection process; when approaching potential informants. This is to be seen in light of the fact that knowing each other is a basic ingredient to building trust, which is needed to create bonds with informants during the interview and “let them speak” (Schmidt-Lauber 2007). Ultimately, this is needed to understand and critically evaluate the information received, and to decode self-awareness as part of a narrative habitus in the UN context.

### 3.2 Oscillating between the Working Intern Self and the Observing Ethnographer Self: On Fieldwork Encounters and Positionality

The descriptions above showed how I started participant observation at the VIC and how the first phase of my research project unfolded. Inevitably, I had to play a double role: from the UN perspective, I was considered a young professional. I was part of the staff and motivated to contribute to the organization's work productively. Also, I was also a young academic aiming to research the work conditions in a prestigious institution. I was undergoing a two-fold rite of passage: as an intern, as described in the prologue and in Chapter 4, and as a fieldwork researcher (e.g. Tedlock 1991, 70–71) and young academic (Giabiconi 2013, 201–2; Marcus 1986). Thus, in my everyday working life at the VIC, I both worked for the project and was a researcher collecting ethnographic observations. Like the social anthropologist Marion Fresia, who prior to her academic career had worked as a JPO at the UNHCR, I was, on the one hand, part of the staff and involved in daily project work activities (Fresia 2014, 516–17). On the other hand, I gradually became more and more of a researcher doing ethnographic fieldwork, writing down my observations and reflections in my field diary.

The course and content of my fieldnotes clearly show how I was immersed in the UN more and more with every day I spent on-site. They also show, however, moments when I was reluctant to engage in certain conversations (see Scott et al. 2012). There were areas I could not reach as an intern as my employee badge revealed my identity (see Chapter 4.2.3). It marked me as someone who was not employed as a permanent staff member and thus stopped me from accessing certain meetings, offices or even parts of the VIC building and prevented me from interacting in a manner of mutual trust with certain representatives of the highest personnel hierarchy. In the hierarchical UN context, the marker of being an intern does not only provoke questions when one appears in places one is not supposed to be, it can also lead to problems and to closed doors. In this context, I also want to address the issue of how we as researchers engage in encounters with our research subjects and possibly influence the field data (cf. e.g. Weeks 2006, 1). This concerns particularly how we show deep empathy to strengthen bonds with our informants or, on the contrary, are *othered* by the field as shown before (see Wolanik Boström 2016). Narrative analysis offers several analytical instruments to tackle this issue which enabled me to understand these dynam-

ics while addressing the encounters with “self-aware” informants. This question has to be raised, given the possible limitations to the sample. First of all, I predict that I certainly would not have heard many descriptions of problematic or conflict-laden situations if I had stayed with the first role, that of the intern. All the information collected and passed on by third parties helps to make the complex and intertwined processes in international organizations more familiar, to understand, and to be able to classify them—as others have pointed out already (Brumann 2012, 13; e.g. J. Cowan and Billaud 2017, 115).

### 3.2.1 On Positionality

Since the *Writing Culture* debate in anthropology (Clifford and Marcus 1986), ethnographers have acknowledged that they co-produce texts and thus a specific knowledge about their field of research and the research subjects they encounter. Today, cultural anthropologists agree that knowledge is situated on an epistemological, ethical, ontological and political level (Haraway 1988). In “times of transition” (Faubion and Marcus 2009), the anthropological endeavor is constantly being scrutinized. By presenting methodological reflections on mobile, highly skilled, early career professionals, I do not aim to be excessively self-focused and, eventually, run the risk of ending up with what Bourdieu once provocatively called “narcissist reflexivity” (Bourdieu 1993). As a sociologist, criticized what he perceived as the excessive and over-acted self-indulgence and navel-gazing of ethnographers (say, anthropologists) who, according to Bourdieu, misunderstood the real purpose of the *Writing Culture* debate.<sup>8</sup> In his short article on the difference between what he termed “scientific reflexivity” as opposed to the epistemologically irrelevant “narcissistic reflexivity,” Bourdieu (1993, 396) underlines that researchers are, equal to the researched subjects, not detached from social determination. Therefore, it is the formers’ scientific task and responsibility to reflect not only on the observation they conducted on the researched subjects but also on the experiences to which they were exposed. These methodological considerations inherent in the moment of “epistemic reflexivity” are beneficial “to open up [...] new vistas of the research process and the researcher for critical examination” (Maton 2003, 56).

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<sup>8</sup> Maybe, as the thinker Didier Eribon writes, Pierre Bourdieu was simply afraid of fully applying an auto-ethnographic approach (Eribon 2017, 57).

By outlining the methodological approach, I seek to address the more recent discussions about epistemology in cultural anthropology (e.g. Haraway 1988). By doing so, I take up Lewicki's reflections in his study on the "EU space" in responding to the call of Sarah Pink (2009) for more transparency in conducting and in writing ethnographies. Referring to his research, Lewicki emphasizes that since "positionality equals situated knowledge, this kind of knowledge shapes the knowledge [he] produced about the EU Europe in Brussels" (Lewicki 2017, 21). Likewise, my positionality and the corresponding knowledge I had about the UN led to the specific research approach I chose and the research questions I have raised. In a nutshell, the way I had to approach the field of research does not only point to the specific logics of inclusion and exclusion of my field. This approach also enables one to unwrap performances encountered in the field of research. It enables raising awareness and illustrating what it takes to enter it as a person who is still at the beginning of their career; by this, I mean, *any* career. Entering the field of research as an intern raised my awareness of the peer group or career starters and the respective research gap. Hence, I agree with the ethnographers mentioned above and am convinced that it is insightful to reflect on the researchers' positionality by focusing on what it represents. Depending on one's (lack of) *capital* in the Bourdieusian sense and other factors, some doors to the field of research are opened easily while others, in turn, remain firmly closed. In this case, the ethnographer is motivated to seek other paths into the field of research. So was I. As illustrated before, without having the initial intention, my *intern self* was all of a sudden accompanied by the *researcher self*. While the former was still trying to understand the new work environment, the latter started pondering a potential research study on the daily practices in a major and powerful international organization. In this context, David Mosse suggested the notion of "insider ethnography" (Mosse 2006), an endeavor undertaken by someone who is closely connected to their field of research both as a professional and an ethnographer. In this sense, coming from what from a UN perspective is perceived as the outside context into the ethnographic field of the VIC, it meant always having this double role of both intern and "participant-insider" (ibid. 2006, 935).

Sometimes, cultural anthropologists are imagined as the Other, too (e.g. Wolanik Boström 2016). Such incidences stimulate us even more to thoroughly scrutinize our positionality in the research field as well as our engagement with our informants. It affects how we move in the field of research,

which questions we ask, and what type of power relations and hierarchies unfold along the research process. Retrospectively, such anecdotes or turning points gain in significance precisely because they are directly related to the positionality of the researcher. The latter defines how we engage with our field, how we try to become part of it in one moment—and distance ourselves in the next. I will illustrate the constantly (re)negotiated field dynamics, particularly the relationship between proximity and distance, by means of an encounter which was astonishing for me at the time. The scene described hereinafter occurred at the very beginning of my foray into the field of research. I will use this anecdote productively by illustrating the mechanisms of negotiating positionalities in the field of research.<sup>9</sup>

One day in June 2014, I was a few weeks into my three-month internship and met some friends for lunch in the cafeteria of the VIC. We individually selected the meal we wanted to queue for, got it freshly cooked by one of the chefs who carefully placed it on a plate in front of us, we went to the cashier to pay for it, and then sat down at one of the long, white tables.

There was a face unknown to me at the table; one of my colleagues had brought a new intern along. As I understood it, they did not work in the same team but on the same floor. (This is a common strategy to introduce a newly arrived person to colleagues. This informal way of introducing a new arrival will eventually enable them to establish their own network (of friends). For obvious, hierarchical reasons, this can be more frequently observed with interns and consultants, less with P staff.) We were a larger group, and I sat vis-à-vis the new intern, who presented himself as “Croatian-Canadian.” By presenting himself in that manner, I supposed he aimed to underline his “cosmopolitan” identity. He was speaking very fast, and I wondered if his speaking pace was rapid because it was energized by enthusiasm, pride, and joyful anticipation of starting an internship at a UN organization.

We started the kind of small talk that is very typical for those situations where it is about classifying the person to whom one has just been introduced. He asked where I was from and what my “professional background” was. I responded that I was Swiss and a qualified cultural anthropologist. “So, you are an anthropologist? Oh yes, I can see that,” he responded immediately and pointed to my colorfully patterned scarf. Apparently, in his eyes, the scarf did not fit the usual business look but rather that of what he considered a “typical” anthropologist. I was puzzled by his reaction.

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<sup>9</sup> The following descriptions are based on the notes in my field diary, June 2014. I translated the passage from German into English. In parallel, I re-wrote the story in order to enhance the clarity of the language and the fluidity of the text. For that reason, this passage is marked as a quote (of the field diary). I also elaborated on this passage and positionality elsewhere (Müllli 2017c).

Indeed, it should be added at this point, I had bought this scarf once at a bazaar in Switzerland where handicraft products from across the globe were sold. Even though I adapted to my environment by wearing uniform-like business clothes for the very purpose of adaptation and thus tried to blend into this business-oriented organizational environment, I was eager to keep my personal style and clothing habits.<sup>10</sup> On purpose, I sometimes used colorful combinations to mix up the typical “business colors” white, grey, dark blue and black with a special pair of shoes or, as on that very day, a scarf. I wanted to stand out and differentiate myself a bit with my clothes or, at least, keep something personal in my business style. Nevertheless, I remember being entirely puzzled by the frank reaction of this intern colleague to my outfit since nobody had ever commented my clothing habits before. Also, I felt caught out as “the anthropologist” (versus those who had studied economics, political science, international relations, or engineering and who, from experience, asked questions about different issues linked to the organization than I did). The intern colleague revealed my “fluid identity” (Razon and Ross 2012) and invited me to position myself. Retrospectively, this scene marked a particular turning point with regard to my role and positionality in the field of research. It was a scene which established that fieldwork is always a rite of passage (Tedlock 1991, 70). Being both an intern and a future ethnographer, I, therefore, had to position myself in the UN environment which resulted in a permanent oscillation between my intern self and my ethnographer self. Although I was aware of the stereotyped idea by my intern colleague, namely that anthropologists allegedly liked to shop for their clothes in “world shops,” this encounter helped me as an ethnographer and made me “show my colors”—*Farbe bekennen*—as the saying goes in German, or, put my cards on the table. Gradually, I started to understand (and present) myself as an ethnographer. This also happened because the field provoked it, as illustrated with the scene depicted above.

In the quoted diary entry, the following aspects are pivotal. The constant oscillating between the intern self and the researcher self during the first phase of my field research was connected to the fact that just before starting the internship, I had finished my MA studies. Thus, I still had one foot

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10 Style matters in this research setting. Lewicki, who conducted his research among EU officials, chose another approach, yet also insisted on keeping “his style.” He writes that he “was not prepared for these spaces: [He] did not have a label outfit [...] and with [his] worn-out jeans and cheap sneakers, on many occasions [he] felt out of place” (Lewicki 2017, 27). For further considerations of the matters of style see Chapter 4.2.1.

in the academic world. Having applied for the internship out of curiosity, I thought it might become a potential future professional space. However, just a few days or weeks into the internship, I observed many interesting dynamics and decided to apply for a start-up scholarship from my university (which I luckily was awarded). Retrospectively, I analyze my choice of clothing to be an unconscious way of marking a difference between the UN as a work environment and me as an individual. I started to create a hybrid intern-ethnographer self.<sup>11</sup> Receiving this scholarship did not only help to finance my unpaid internship and gap month (the second internship was remunerated with a monthly compensation of 1,000 Euros, which enables a single person living in a shared flat to live a decent life in Vienna). It also served as *symbolic capital* in the Bourdieusian sense and confirmed the academic importance of my research topic. Receiving the start-up scholarship motivated me to apply for a national research grant for young social scientists, which I received in spring 2016. This was the moment when I quit my double-role to become a full-time researcher. Thus, my situation was not so very different from the early career workers who I was researching. Whereas they tried to establish themselves as UN workers, I was labeled as a young scholar and thus seeking to establish myself as such.

Finally, having entered as an intern and identifying with my peers explains, from an epistemological point of view, my interest in early career UN workers. Being able to create a bond with them and benefitting from the participatory observation and my own experiences, I was able to raise the specific questions necessary to address the existing research gap on early career UN workers in UN headquarter offices. Being who I am, I had access to early career workers in the UN and their stories. I was therefore not interested in stories of the more “established” UN employees. I knew about the fragile moments of the early career workers’ professional lives and their struggles, but also their permanent efforts to downplay the situation and to blend into the UN world. This is why I wanted to understand the underlying logics.

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11 As I saw during the interviews, some changed clothes after work, and before the interview. Apparently, for some people, it is more important to mark the separation of work and private space through clothes.

### 3.3 The Para-ethnographic Knowledge and Sensibilities of UN Workers

I have explained how immersion in a research field like the UN is linked to the methodological discourse of *researching up*. In this section, I will show how this research approach slowly transformed into a *studying across* process, where I interviewed individuals who I described as “self-aware” informants. These considerations are complemented by detailed descriptions of the interview process and the sample, and they focus on the power relations or “power dance” (Vähäsantanen and Saarinen 2013) with my informants in the second phase of the data collection.<sup>12</sup> The up or across dynamics concerning the rivalry about the power of interpretation (in German, *Deutungsmacht*) are manifested in the interviews. This subchapter elaborates on the fact that the resulting negotiation of positions becomes apparent in some of the interviews I have conducted.

As already mentioned, Nader called for research on groups that might appear like “secret societies” (1969, 293) with underlying asymmetric power relations. Subsequently, ethnographers across the globe have entered large institutions (and companies) and researched, for example, white-collar staff. In the resulting (and related) methodological considerations, cultural anthropologists discussed the resulting asymmetric relationship between them and the researched. Scholars reflected on the “reluctant researcher[s] shyness in the field” (Scott et al. 2012) or the ethnographer’s “fear” (Warneken and Wittel 1997) when researching in contexts of power and influence and engaging with informants who are exactly aware of that.<sup>13</sup> They showed that ethnographers themselves are susceptible to feelings of (lacking) self-consciousness or even doubt. The repetitively scrutinized asymmetry in research settings is thus characterized by the reflection of the difference in status, power, and interests. This is because, generally, power relations are in favor of the large institutions, organizations and corporations being investigated. The resulting greater or lesser distance and/or proximity to the field and the actors to be re-

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12 Parts of this subchapter have already been published (Müllli 2018, 93–98).

13 This well-received article in German-speaking cultural anthropology, together with a second piece written by Rolf Lindner (1981), can be seen as corresponding to the discussions that Nader’s paper stimulated.



searched, together with the unclear level of transparency, potentially impairs the autonomy of the researcher.<sup>14</sup>

As indicated above, authors of recent ethnographies following a researching up approach, however, reject the overcautious approach towards influential subjects and/or powerful objects of study. In turn, as I have already described elsewhere (Müllli 2018, 95), they make a case for anthropologists who aim to meet their research field and their informants on an equal footing (von Döbeneck and Zinn-Thomas 2014). In addition, this methodological strategy of *studying through* “avoids presuming a hierarchical relation between policy makers determining policy and implementing it on the governed” (Wright and Reinhold 2011, 101) and follows emerging issues across time and space. Therefore, the concept of studying through or studying across entails, as coined by Marcus (1995), a *multi-sited* ethnography or, as it was further developed, the “anti-structural concept” of *assemblage* (Marcus & Saka 2006, 101).

During the interviews, my interlocutors were demonstrating self-confidence and, at the same time, controlling the narrative. Because of this, it repeatedly emerged that I, the female academic who grew up and is currently working in the Western hemisphere and who is more or less the same age as her interviewees, was often perceived as a potential competitor in the working world of international cooperation and policy-making. Or, on the contrary, they were keen to “recruit” me as a potential colleague, as shown in the ethnographic vignette. I interpret this dynamic as a potential side effect of studying up and across in the UN context. The feature of self-aware interviewees alludes to them as being very much aware of themselves as highly skilled individuals.<sup>15</sup> Compared to the population of the countries where UN projects are carried out, early career professionals in Geneva and Vienna have a privileged migration background. As I will explain later, it is precisely this mobility that enabled them to become international civil servants belonging to a global bureaucratic elite. In addition, because many of them are being trained in social sciences, they come up against similar questions, which also arise in this research. Many also repeatedly and very accurately reflect their positionality in the complex field of power of the UN. When shared with the interviewer, these insights can be identified as para-ethnographic knowl-

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14 I emphasize that the researcher also faces similar challenges in research “down” situations. The seemingly easy access is never guaranteed.

15 I am aware of the ongoing debate about the definition of “highly skilled” individuals. For further reading, see Hercog and Sandoz (2018); Nowicka (2014); Urciuoli (2008); Raghuram (2004) and my reflections in Chapter 5.2.1.

edge (Holmes and Marcus 2005a) or, as I prefer to call it, para-ethnographic sensibilities (ibid. 2012) encountered in professional or expert communities.

As I have summarized elsewhere (Müllli 2018, 93–94), para-ethnography is the reconceptualization of fieldwork as what the anthropologists Douglas R. Holmes and George E. Marcus define as highly professionalized cultures of expertise. This concept recognizes the quasi-ethnographic sensibilities, knowledge and interpretations with which ethnographers are confronted. Building upon this ontological premise, the concept of para-ethnography allows revising the process of negotiating the relationship between the researched and the researcher. Additionally, it enables one to reconsider this relationship both at the methodological and analytical levels, albeit focusing almost exclusively on researching up settings. The two scholars encouraged fruitful debates on challenges faced in such research situations when noting that “[...] ethnographers trained in the tradition of anthropology do not approach the study of formal institutions such as banks, bureaucracies, corporations, and state agencies with much confidence” (Holmes and Marcus 2005a, 263). They continued that these are realms “in which the traditional informants of ethnography must be rethought as counterparts rather than ‘others’—as both subjects and intellectual partners in inquiry” (ibid.). With the concept of para-ethnography, the authors address contemporary research challenges (but also potentials) linked to the role of ethnographic researchers. They stress that this means a shift in how ethnographers approach their fields of interest and, in particular, their informants:

Making ethnography from the found para-ethnographic redefines the status of the subject or informant, asks what different accounts one wants from such key figures in the fieldwork process, and indeed questions what the ethnography of experts means within a broad, multi-sited design of research (Holmes and Marcus 2005a, 236).

The two authors problematize the fact that, especially in studying up situations and when investigating powerful institutions and expert cultures, the subjects in the field we study grapple with similar questions to those we, the researchers, are interested in.

In a recently published article, the ethnologist Ilona Gershon agrees that “everyone is a social analyst” (Gershon 2019a, 409). However, she admits that the “discrepancies between fieldwork interlocutor’s social analysis and the ethnographer’s analysis can be productive, showing that, while reflexivity is a general mode of being social, it is not necessarily experienced in the same way across social orders” (ibid., 410). Likewise, the cultural anthropologists Katarzyna Wolanik Boström and Magnus Öhlander show in their ethnography of

Polish physicians in Sweden how informants “[...] try to understand the new settings where they work and live—and to understand themselves in the process of adjusting” (Wolanik Boström and Öhlander 2015, 7). What these two authors frame as “mobile everyday ethnography” refers to the “ethnography-like descriptions, made by reflexive subjects” (ibid., 18). In other words, it refers to the highly skilled mobile individuals’ processes of grasping and adjusting to the realities of life and work in a new country, and their corresponding narration and narrative thereof. Correspondingly, the *self-aware interviewees* can be seen as epistemic partners, who, like most informants in ethnographic research, are actively insisting in the interpretation of their situation; yet, whose (auto-)narrations have to be analyzed carefully (see Chapter 5).

Inspired by the above-mentioned scholars and following the approach suggested by Holmes and Marcus, I thus recognize the self-aware interviewees as reflexive subjects who are members of epistemic communities “in which ‘research’ [...] is integral to the function of these communities” (Holmes and Marcus 2008, 82). This makes it possible to break down conventional notions of power relations in interaction and analysis or, as Holmes and Marcus put it, for anthropologists it becomes possible to focus on “the analytical acumen and existential insights of our subjects to recast the intellectual imperatives of our own methodological practices, in short, the para-ethnographic practices of our subjects” (ibid.). The para-ethnographic observations of “self-aware” interviewees are therefore useful to gain a deeper understanding not only of the complex world of the United Nations but also to increase the clarity regarding the question of why and how my informants often present perfectly smooth images of themselves. However, even if the exchange is desired to take place among equals, it has been emphasized that there is a clear difference between the para-ethnographic knowledge that is still identified as a lay perspective and the anthropological analysis (Wolanik Boström and Öhlander 2015).

### 3.3.1 Researching Sideways: The Interviews (Sample, Place of Interviews, Analysis)

In order to deepen the research on narratives and to understand biographical logics linked to UN careers, I planned recorded interviews. I consider this approach as studying sideways, which is defined as “inquiring into the ways of life, work and thought of groups of people who are on more or less parallel tracks to that of the anthropologists, other knowledge producers” (Hannerz

2016, 5). Thus, in the second phase of my data collection (2016–2019), I conducted in-depth semi-structured or semi-narrative interviews (Spiritova 2014; Schmidt-Lauber 2007; Jovchelovitch and Bauer 2007) with early career UN workers. In order to contrast and mirror the narrations of early career professionals, I also conducted five expert interviews (Helffferich 2014; Bogner, Littig, and Menz 2002) with mid-level and senior professionals. In this book, I draw on twenty-five in-depth interviews, which involved mostly face-to-face encounters, with the exception of three interviews conducted via Skype.

First, three questions must be answered: Who participated in this study? How did I find and approach the informants? And what were their possible motives for telling me their life stories? At the time of the interview, my informants were between their mid-twenties and their late thirties: the two youngest interviewees were 26 years old, and the oldest was 39. They had spent a few years within the UN system, many of them mainly in the UN HQ duty stations in Geneva and Vienna, yet in different positions. All of them were involved in project-based work, responsible for management and operational tasks in, *inter alia*, social and economic development, political processes (advocating occidental ideas of democracy), maintaining peace and security, legal issues, and public relation activities. Their tasks were either to monitor projects in different countries and regions across the globe or to implement projects within the UN, such as HR management systems, IT solutions or press reports. They both interacted with stakeholders from outside their organization but also closely cooperated with other UN staff.

Since this research focuses on early career professionals, I primarily interviewed individuals who are considered to be at an early stage of their UN career. I met the early career informants during my stay in the field. In Vienna, I met my future interviewees during routine work events such as workshops or during leisure time activities. When I was at the UNSSC in Turin, I introduced myself and was then approached by participants of the JPO workshop who were open to participating in this study. I mostly recruited the informants working in Geneva via the so-called snowball sampling method (Lucht 2017; Noy 2008; R. Atkinson and Flint 2004; 2001). Hence, I contacted them either through people I had already interviewed, through mutual acquaintances or via social media platforms. On websites such as LinkedIn, particularly established for (online) networking and presenting one's work résumé, it was easy to search and purposefully contact potential informants. Based on sampling criteria including job position and age, I could therefore

contact some persons on social media platforms directly. In the light of the fact that both my informants and myself as well as early career ethnographers in general, “spend a significant portion of our personal and professional lives in various domains of ‘the digital’” (Abidin and Seta 2020, 14), this approach felt obvious as it is embedded in everyday life (Hine 2015).

One key component for ethnographic interviews is trust and the researcher’s true commitment to hearing the informants’ life stories.<sup>16</sup> Trust is even the more important in a research field where people experience a high level of professional competition in a fast-paced work setting, I observed that early career professionals were more reluctant to respond to my (online) request. Senior professionals, in turn, showed fewer reservations in that regard. Bearing these limitations in mind, I finally recruited only a small number of the interviewees online, precisely due to the lacking relationship of trust that usually comes with an online request. The lack of a personal encounter might also explain why some of the two early career workers I contacted via LinkedIn did not respond to my follow up questions.

The issue of trust leads me to another aspect: the anonymization and protection of my informants’ identity. While in the already published articles I anonymized my informants by applying a chronological order (e.g. informant E), for this book, I asked the interviewees to send me their preferred pseudonyms which I now use in this book (e.g. informant Erik). Since some of my informants were concerned that their identity could be disclosed and were afraid of personal and professional consequences, anonymization was essential. It gave them the possibility to hide their identity by choosing a gender-neutral first name or a name of another gender.

It goes without saying that the snowball sampling and the combination of in-depth interviews do not allow us to reach out to a myriad of informants. My informants were careful to whom they referred me. This, I believe, is strongly connected to the manner in which I entered the field of research. My way of approaching the UN as a research topic and the corresponding questions that emerged along this process influenced who of my potential informants were interested in participating in an ethnographic interview. I argue that persons who agreed to a recorded interview could identify with my research questions. As I will show later, they were interested in sharing their insights with me. By participating in a qualitative interview,

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16 When approaching informants online, trust and commitment can, as some suggest, be expressed by prompt replies (Orgad 2005, 55–56).

they were able to reconfirm their impact by “doing science a favor,” as one informant phrased it.<sup>17</sup> Presenting themselves as growing up with a supposedly middle-class background and as first or second generation university graduates, they were able to tell me success stories that fit in well with the meritocratic ideal of the UN and, conversely, present counter-stories (see Chapter 5.3.4). Others, in turn, clearly did not wish to participate in a recorded interview since they continually refused my request by politely stating that they did not have time at the moment. Despite repeated requests, these contacts finally dried up. Supposedly, they did not see the relevance of my research and could not identify with my questions regarding access, or they had other priorities. The fact that no one decisively rejected my question has, I believe, a lot to do with the dynamics of my field because even rejecting an interview request can be read as an act of self-positioning.

I reiterate that the only criterion for my sample was my informants’ position in the UN staff hierarchy system and the fact that they were willing to talk to me and offer their points of view for the purpose of an ethnographic study. Other characteristics such as their exact age, generation, nationality, religion, race, gender, socio-economic background, and education, for example, were and are not crucial for the primary research interest. Therefore, these markers are only mentioned in this book when such a characteristic is important for the informants themselves and mentioned accordingly. I did not double-check such seemingly quantitative data because I am primarily interested in the self-assessment, self-narrations and the corresponding self-positioning of early career UN professionals. I consider them “newcomers” because at the time of their interview they were not yet fully established—either from a formal or emotional point of view—as international civil servants. While, at the time of the interview, their situation was relatively stable, only one person I contacted had already left her job at the UN at the moment of the interview.

Secondly, I want to address the interview situation. This includes the questions I was interested in investigating as well as the overall research setting, which includes aspects such as the modes of communication. I will also address the possible impact of these factors on the data. In the in-depth interviews conducted, I posed open questions regarding the personal and professional background of my informants. I asked them to tell me about their current private and professional situation, and about their “role” as inter-

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<sup>17</sup> Interview with James Mantha (July 12, 2016); Carlo (Dec 28, 2017).

national civil servants, to name a few topics addressed. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed according to the rules in the annex to this study (see Annex). This information was completed by follow up questions I sent the interviewees approximately two years after the recorded interview. It gave the interviewees the opportunity to share their perspectives again and I learned that many of them were already working in other positions (see epilogue). The questionnaire is one element of this study. Another important element of conducting an inductive study based on semi-structured interviews is to be open to insights brought up by the informants. Hence, I was open to allowing the conversation to flow in any direction the interviewee might suggest. This was also due to my last question, asking if the interviewee wanted to add anything I had not asked. This last and completely open question turned out to be essential since it provoked the interviewees to position themselves actively. In my first interview, I already learned more about the importance of the salary for a UN career (see also Chapter 6).<sup>18</sup>

The interviews took place under different circumstances and, for this reason, also lasted for different lengths of time depending on the interviewees' time resources and interest in sharing their story and point of view. For instance, the shortest interview, which took only thirty minutes, was interrupted. Even though I received some relevant statements, I regretted that the interview could not be continued after the interruption. The longest recorded interview lasted for four solid hours. On average, the interviews took between one and a half and two and a half hours. Before turning on the audio recorder, a consent form was signed to request my informants' permission to carry out fieldwork among them. Then I orally informed the person to be interviewed about the research focus, the way I collected ethnographic data and the anonymization process. When sending them an official interview request, I had already shared some crucial information in the form of a small abstract, which did not contain technical terms or specific academic language, and my affiliation.

With few exceptions, the interviews were held in English.<sup>19</sup> English, although it is only one of the official languages of the UN, is the *lingua franca*

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18 Interview with Emmanuel Snow (Apr 27, 2016).

19 In general, the informants and I communicated in languages in which both parties were fluent. It resulted in regular code-switching, short exchanges of words that had nothing to do with the interview content, as well as greetings and goodbyes in French, Portuguese, Spanish and (Swiss) German. One interview was entirely conducted in Spanish, and another in Swiss German.

most used in the UN. As an informant (with whom I could also have communicated in another language we both speak) expressed, this leads to a particular feeling of community: “We all speak this weird English and that makes me feel like [...] I am on another planet, you know, in the international world. [...] I don’t feel uncomfortable with English in an international atmosphere. I don’t feel it’s an alien thing. Actually, it’s more home. [...]”<sup>20</sup> Speaking “this weird English” is part of the narrative habitus discussed later in this book: English is the language of the community in question and also emotionally close to the individuals (“it’s more home”).<sup>21</sup> In the context of recorded interviews, the power relations are of a specific nature. Even though the informants had initially responded positively to my request, (recorded) interviewees are always in a vulnerable situation. In order to create a more comfortable and pleasant situation for the informants, I asked them to choose the place of our interview.<sup>22</sup> The choices of location for the interview could not have been more different. The choice comprises a performative aspect and can be interpreted with regards to the value and importance attributed to the interview—and how “close” I was (allowed to get) to their lives. Most of the interviews were not conducted in the work context but took place during my informants’ spare time. Conducting the interviews outside of the work context allowed long and open conversations of trust between the interviewee and the interviewer, as I will outline in the next section. I was asked to meet informants right after work. Whereas some informants had gone home before the interview and showed up in their “personal outfit” (say, more casually looking clothes), others decided to come straight from work and to meet me in their business attire.<sup>23</sup> Whereas with the former, the interview had a more personal touch, the interview with the latter had, at least sometimes, a more formal feel. However, it also shows the normality of an urban, international lifestyle in *international Vienna* and *Genève internationale* where the boundary between the professional and personal space is fluid.

Once, I was asked for dinner at a traditional Viennese café. Another informant asked me to meet in an American coffee house chain (where, funnily enough, my informants and I had a large cup of tea since my informant

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20 Jordan (May 21, 2016).

21 With this quote, I would also like to make the case for investigation beyond the researcher’s linguistic origin and reality (Griffin 2016).

22 The following descriptions are based on the notes I took after every interview.

23 On the importance of style and clothes see Chapter 4.2.1.



does not drink coffee). To meet in those central places, which are well connected to public transport or located close to the informant's home, was very convenient for my informants (and for me, too, of course). There was also an informant whom I met for brunch on a Sunday morning. I also remember very relaxed interview situations, where the roles changed again and I ended up being the guest; one informant invited me to their home where we sat on the balcony nibbling Spanish *chorizo* and cheese purchased in the VIC's commissary. There was even someone with whom I sat in a park on a sunny Saturday afternoon (on the tape, there is birdsong in the background of the recording). This was, of course, the most relaxed interview. Being outside opened up the possibility for a deep engagement with the answers my informant gave to my questions. It also allowed us to talk about topics that were not directly related to the questionnaire, albeit revealing for the research as a whole.

When I was invited to the office of some of my informants, time was usually in short supply. These interviews had essentially been squeezed into the busy workday of my informants. Being scheduled between one meeting and the next, I understood that the informants had a limited time budget. Hence, the interviews conducted in the work area had a very formal character and turned out to be the most efficient ones. Although efficient in terms of time, they were not necessarily so in terms of information or rich data. When my informants asked me to meet them for a coffee break at the local cafeteria, the atmosphere was more relaxed, and I was, in fact, surprised that these persons were not concerned about me interviewing them in public. Retrospectively, I understand that it could also have been the (unconsciously taken) strategy to keep the interview situation more formal *because* it was taken in a more public space such as the local cafeteria. In this interview setting, I, of course, thought twice before asking the personal questions. Sometimes it was not possible or too complicated to meet in person. Then, my informants asked me to do the interview online. When these sessions were conducted with the camera turned off (for the sake of better audio quality), and we thus did not see each other's faces, the situation was again more distant and formal.

The online/offline approach of this study also involved interviews conducted via Skype. As I will show later (Chapter 5), the Skype conversations and the fact that people could not see each other because of insufficient internet connections certainly caused some informants to employ the well-structured story-telling and speech patterns demanded in UN job interviews. The

latter are increasingly conducted online and sometimes even recorded. On the other hand, I did not encounter this narrative with the one informant I never met in person. I therefore agree with other researchers (Abidin 2020; Hine 2005) that online and offline research methods should be used in a complementing manner. Especially for people who are used to this kind of communication, it can even be an insightful approach to contrast narratives.

Bearing all this in mind, the methodological considerations outlined hereinafter have an impact on the analysis of the data. I worked with Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss 2006) applying the insights of Cindy Charmaz (Charmaz 2006; Clarke and Charmaz 2014; Charmaz 2015) and did inductive coding.<sup>24</sup> This approach prescribes that the ethnographer constantly scrutinizes the chosen research approach and interactions with both her field of research and her informants during the whole research process: when entering the field, during the period of data collection and, eventually, when analyzing the set of data. Returning to the field during and conducting interviews over the period of two years (2016–2018), and keeping in touch with my informants for another year to do a follow-up, enabled me to adapt my questionnaire on a constant basis. In the recorded interviews, my final question was an open one that gave the informants the possibility to make an open statement (2019–2020). Some added an interesting aspect to the interview content, others told me an anecdote or gave me feedback on how they felt during the interview. I combined this inductive and circular method with recent approaches from the field of narrative analysis as applied recently by cultural anthropologists as will be explained subsequently.

### 3.3.2 “Doing Science a Favor”: Self-aware Informants Negotiating Narrative Positions

As elaborated elsewhere (Müllli 2018), I understand the notion of self-awareness as twofold: First, self-aware interviewees formulate and narrate sophisticated stories, which place them in a specific narrative habitus (some of them are also self-assured and give off an air of confidence in the ethnographic interview). Second, they reflect upon their representation as UN workers (self-reflective and having developed a sensitivity toward what it means to work

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<sup>24</sup> The process of inductive and circular research methods was addressed by several authors representing the German-speaking branches of cultural anthropology (Götzö 2014; Kaschuba 2012).

in a powerful organization often capitalizing on its enigmatic aura) and in which manner.

The passage of my fieldnotes illustrates the dynamics in informal, yet competitive everyday encounters among young UN workers. Given the significant fluctuation of interns and consultants, small talk is almost commonplace. As shown earlier, in quasi-ritualized encounters, people introduce themselves to each other in short sentences peppered with catchwords and acronyms answering to the following questions: What is your name? Where are you from? In which department do you work? What is your (professional) background? Which studies have you just completed or still intend to tackle? At least superficially, these conversations are full of energy, optimism, and self-confidence. In this highly competitive work environment, uncertainties and other topics that may contain political explosiveness are addressed only hesitantly. The rules of self-representation which newcomers<sup>25</sup> (have to) learn quickly, as I will also show in Chapter 5, inspired me to coin the ideal figure *homo UN*. In order to understand these dynamics and to decode and analytically unravel the supposedly stringent and linear narratives of my informants, methodological considerations in the field of narrative analysis are enormously fruitful. In the following section, I will address a few key assumptions in narrative analysis which help to grasp the phenomenon of self-aware interviewees and to understand the narrative habitus of early career UN workers.

According to a cultural anthropologist, “ethnographically based narrative inquiry deals with personal experience as it is memorized and narrated” (Bönisch-Brednich 2016, 201).<sup>26</sup> The author continues that the paradigms in cultural anthropological and related disciplines “are framed by viewing narratives as embedded in cultures and societies and lives lived” (ibid.). Since “narratives are embedded within discourse and give shape to experience” (Tedlock 2011, 335), narrated stories are understood “as a mirror of history and present, of collectively lived lives, collective belonging and the rupture and frictions in such collectives. [...]” (Bönisch-Brednich 2016, 201–2).

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25 By newcomers I allude to the fact, that according to my fieldwork interlocutors it may take up to two years to fully “understand” or “grasp” the UN system and to be productive. A former boss, from the P staff category, told me that in his seven-year assignment he needed two years to understand the UN agency at which he was working, and then he was productive for three years. The last two years he spent looking for a new job, fieldnote (April 29, 2014), see also footnote 73, p. 92.

26 For the following see also (Müllli 2018, 99–102).

Thus, narrations and stories report people's belonging, yet also "mirror and guide [their] not-belonging" (ibid., 202). Indeed, it has been shown that storytelling and telling one's own story are closely linked to the construction of the self because it is a practice of consolidating the narrative identity (Lucius-Hoene and Deppermann 2002) and offers the narrating subject a possibility to word personal agency (Lucius-Hoene 2012; S. Meyer 2015; 2014). People are doing so by narratively integrating the lived experience into "the plot of [their] life stories" (Tedlock 2011, 335). Thus, the analysis of an (autobiographical) narrative provides access to the formation of experiences, to how a person creates meaning, identity and self-continuity—not only through what is told but also just through the act of telling. Even though, at first sight, there seems to be a lack of agency, it is about telling the "desired" or "good" story: "A good story well told is a means of empowerment; narrative competence becomes a social competence. It is therefore the task of narrative research to elucidate how stories are employed to achieve agency, positioning and thereby social inclusion" (S. Meyer 2018b, 66).

In an ethnographic interview situation, the narration of the fieldwork interlocutor is provoked by the researcher's interest. Nonetheless, narrating one's own story fosters mechanisms of personal affirmation (Lucius-Hoene and Deppermann 2002, 87). The individual's biographic and narrative identity as it is captured in the narrative interview (and, as I suggest, in the semi-structured interview) is, first, based on the temporal dimension, say, the "historicity of identity" (ibid. 2002, 89, my translation). Second, this interview situation enables the interviewee to construct the narrative identity vis-à-vis the listening researcher. As the cultural anthropologist Silke Meyer puts it, "Telling my story becomes an essential part of constructing, explaining, affirming or scrutinizing who I am" (S. Meyer 2018b, 51). It is the "social dimension of the narrative identity" (Lucius-Hoene and Deppermann 2002, 89–90, my translation). The process of re-negotiating the respondent's past and current identity during the interview goes along with the "self-referential dimension" (ibid. 2002, 90, my translation) of the narrative identity.

Constructions of narrative identities also appear in interviews conducted for the present study. I observed that some of these particular narrative patterns encountered in the interviews with my respondents are part of everyday interactions among colleagues. They are part of everyday professional life in the UN context. My interview partners who aim to establish themselves as international civil servants are used to presenting (themselves) in (job) interviews and other professional situations on a regular basis. Correspondingly,

my interview partners approach (and eventually embody) a specific *narrative habitus* (Frank 2010; see also S. Meyer 2014, 250–51). The sociologist Arthur W. Frank argues that “stories inform in the sense of providing information, but more significantly, stories give form—temporal and spatial orientation, coherence, meaning, intention and especially boundaries—to lives that inherently lack form” (Frank 2010, 2). Based on Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus*, he conceptualizes the idea of narrative habitus, meaning “the embedding of stories in bodies” (ibid. 2010, 52) and, more essentially, “knowing a corpus of stories (and not others)” (ibid. 2010, 195). Frank identifies four components of the narrative habitus that take effect in a particular environment: a specific *repertoire* of stories; the *competence* in telling and using them; the *taste* displayed by the narrative habitus; and the tacit knowledge (when being a listener or reader) that enables one to predict the continuation or end of an unfinished story. This is what Frank calls *predictable plot completions* (Frank 2010, 53–54, emphasis in original; see also S. Meyer 2018b).

During the interviews, it became visible or, rather, audible, that the informants had conscious knowledge of their character and their feelings. My informants are self-confident and conscious about their appearance, and also often acted with full awareness and control during the interviews. They applied and employed specific communication strategies and discursive practices simply because working in this competitive work environment is about being self-confident and insisting on one’s expert knowledge vis-à-vis complex questions of global inequality and injustice. Some informants, for example, thought out loud whether or not they would constitute adequate subjects of study for my methodology before agreeing to participate in the interview. Informant Kahluit, for instance, showed active interest in my study and pondered if their answers would be “of use” for my research.<sup>27</sup> Others, in turn, repeatedly made sure that what they were about to tell me was interesting and relevant. (Of course, it was.) I interviewed individuals who, at least in the beginning, actively sought to control the interview. They negotiated the situation and our roles of interviewee and interviewer; perhaps also because they were unfamiliar with narrative interviews. Being aware of the competitive environment, Vanessa refused to be recorded.<sup>28</sup> I suggested I could take handwritten notes. On the grounds that “We can compare afterwards,” she then announced she would take notes, too. Somewhat surprised, I agreed to

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27 Email correspondence with Kahluit (Aug 17, 2017).

28 Ad hoc protocol, interview with Vanessa.

her conditions. With time, she seemed to be more relaxed and even forgot to take notes at all. Yet she would always pause during the interview and wait for me to write down every single word. After the interview, she congratulated me on my interviewing skills, which confirmed my first impression that she did not know what to expect and that she was unsure how to behave in an interview situation that was not the type of (job) interview or encounter in the UN context with which she might be more familiar. Other interviewees made it clear that they would gladly collaborate in order to “do science a favor” and support me in my research.<sup>29</sup> They created a bond and showed their empathy for the researcher’s situation (namely the dependence on finding fieldwork interlocutors who shared their perspectives). These statements reveal the informants’ self-perception of playing a supportive role for humanity. This self-perception is surely influenced by the image promoted by the UN itself. In the light of this, I refer to a promotional series published on social media platforms by the UN’s human resources organ, *United Nations careers*. Here, UN staff serve as role models when stating slogans such as, “I believe the essence of what we do [...] is to serve others” (UN Careers 2016a, *Facebook*, emphasis in original). An additional aspect of why my informants agreed to participate in the interview and exchange ideas with me can be explained by their explicit curiosity in gaining a better understanding of the setting they work and live in. They admitted that they often pondered their current situation and possible future scenarios of their careers and lives, and had discussed these with close friends. I thus agree that many anthropologists today “are dealing with counterparts rather than ‘others’ – who differ from us in many ways but who also share broadly the same world of representation with us, and the same curiosity and predicament about constituting the social in our affinities” (Holmes and Marcus 2005a, 250).

The narrative position of the interview partners was also determined by their self-reflective habitus. The informants, who by profession hold a certain expert position and are, in some cases, even trained as social scientists, insist on the power of interpreting their live stories with the interviewer as a guide. It is striking how several informants presented their stories by announcing a dramatic construction of their narrative through commenting on a meta-level. Emmanuel Snow (April 27, 2016) introduced one of his statements by letting me know that “I tell you this because it is important for you to understand what I am going to tell you next.” They guided the interviewer by

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29 Cf. correspondence and interviews with Kalhuit, Erik, James Mantha, and others.

controlling the choreography of the interview content and by firmly stating and commenting on the relevance of the information. With these evaluative meta-commentaries (“Now this is important”), they insisted on maintaining agency within the interview situation and position themselves as confident and assertive conversational epistemic partners. They actively thought about what might or should be interesting for an ethnographic study—or not.

In closing, early career UN workers are confronted with a language and its symbolic power (Bourdieu 1991) on a daily basis. They actively use the narrative strategies in interview situations. Against that background, the knowledge I had collected during my internships about everyday routines and interactions among the UN white-collar staff enabled me to position myself in the second phase of my research. At the time of the recorded interviews with my informants, this insider-knowledge helped me to scrutinize linear narrations.

### 3.4 Immersion in the UN as a Fluid Research Process

Access to the field and the resulting effects on the data set are discussed in all research projects. After my colleagues at work had recognized me as “the anthropologist,” they repeatedly told me about observations they made, which, according to them, must be of interest to me. Others provided information that they thought was of utmost relevance for my research study. (Evidently, this information was coupled with a set of expectations.) Others, in turn, suddenly acted more wary and skeptical when I was around. They were careful and self-conscious about what they would share with me or not. They made me understand that they saw me as the anthropologist who was, in their view, curiously nosing around. Consequently, they would not go into detail when talking about difficulties, for instance, in the cooperation with other teams and colleagues, or when they had to deal with challenging issues regarding the progression of their project work.

Since this book shows that even the supposedly privileged (and powerful) are not always privileged, it is also the declared aim of this chapter to question and resolve the binary perspective with regard to methodological considerations in order to discuss new concepts of cooperative research. Hence, this chapter addressed the manifold methodological considerations that correspond with my chosen research focus. I provided insights into a *research*

*up* process at the UN site in Vienna, where I did participant observation. In a second step, I conducted semi-structured interviews. This second phase of my research is classified as *studying across*. Finally, it is crucial to elaborate how these considerations are implemented in the process of data analysis. I tackled the question of power relations and the corresponding effects on accessibility to both my field of research and my informants. This is always directly linked to parameters of instability or established positions in a working environment.

As I have shown, since the first calls for research on prestigious organizations and staff cultures, status differences between the ethnographer and their field was (and is still) regarded as consensus, despite the attempts to overcome “the fear” of the fieldwork interlocutors and create a new paradigm. Soon, ethnographers published their methodological considerations to create a research paradigm that attempts to break up common power differences and happens on an equal footing. Moreover, scholars looked for more collaborative ways to engage with the para-ethnographic insights of their research subjects.

The conventional assumption would classify the present study conducted in two UN HQ duty stations as a classic researching up endeavor. I argue, however, that first and foremost, this intuitive perception clarifies with which images we cultural anthropologists operate. It illustrates and confirms the conventional image of the prestigious UN organization, which can only be explored through sophisticated research strategies. Thus, there is access to the field thanks to a *gatekeeper*, understood as key member of a community (O’Reilly 2009, 132–37), or, on the contrary, the attempt to be perceived as a naïve, established researcher in order to gain access to hidden corners of the field (Halme-Tuomisaari 2018). It is an image of a distant organization which the UN tries to maintain. Nevertheless, status differences are leveled down. Status differences in a field like the UN are *situational*. In other words, the (negotiation of) power depends on the context and the concrete situation. On the one hand, the difference in status is significant. This became apparent when I took a closer look at the mechanisms of access to the VIC and how the complicated access materializes in the form of fences and badges, for example. Depending on the job position, I had indeed less “power” when engaging with established senior UN professionals. However, when interacting with JPOs or non-permanent staff such as UN consultants or interns, we shared moments of professional and economic insecurity; in short, the precariousness of the working conditions of early career UN workers. It was an interviewing across situation.



There are more parallels between the researched and the researcher: both of us “highly skilled” and thus sharing, to refer to Bourdieu, *cultural capital*. I also share similar values with my informants. Having grown up in a European country that, from a historical perspective, joined the UN more recently (in 2002) but has nonetheless been hosting one of the four UN HQ duty stations for almost a century, I was socialized with a sense of the democratic importance of the UN. I had, to follow Bourdieu again, enough *economic capital* to apply for an unpaid internship and could smoothly move across national borders.

Many of my informants, all of them trained at universities and holding MA or Ph.D. degrees, identify with science. Researchers are employed in a professional field (field of action) and at institutions such as universities and research hubs which, in the majority, are funded by public funds and governments. While UN workers are providing services to the world, scientists are developing knowledge accessible to the public. Therefore, the structures and values lived in an international organization and in a university are, to a certain extent, comparable. Nevertheless, I experienced moments of status difference during the research process. This difference was based on moral considerations and manifested in statements like “doing science a favor”.

In sum, a successful research trajectory is linked to the subject of the research. When studying the UN, the researcher faces significant hurdles of access. Yet, different forms of capital as Bourdieu conceived them can compensate for differences in status in the research context. My way of accessing the research topic, together with my own experiences collected as an intern, drew my attention to the research gap on early career UN professionals working in UN HQ duty stations. They were not yet established international civil servants. On the contrary, they were and are still on their way to get *into* the UN.



# Promoting Cross-cultural Competences

July 2015. An office colleague persuades me to join a workshop on “intercultural communication and understanding.” She comments, “The morning session was very interesting. We learned about the difference of cultures and that we have to respect others. You do not necessarily have to agree with other cultural habits, but you should be aware of them.” Excited, she continues, “There was quite a good quote in the slides: you should not treat people like you want to be treated but how they want to be treated.” Her descriptions sound like an alternative to the HR initiatives I had witnessed previously. Now curious, I ask to join the workshop.<sup>1</sup>

I find myself sitting among the other attendees, on one of the chairs that have been informally arranged in a semi-circle. This allows us, the attendees, to both read the content projected on the wall and make eye contact with each other. All work for the same UN agency, yet in different positions. Some hold G positions, other work as P staff or as interns. I look around. The twenty attendees are mainly (younger) women. Only three men have joined the workshop. In geographical terms, too, I note an imbalance. This will be confirmed later by the instructor. In an informal chat after the workshop, the instructor will comment that, according to his experience, it is “mostly Europeans” who are interested in learning more about cross-cultural competences and understanding. The trained psychologist dedicates the afternoon session to an issue quite similar to one of my research interests. The central questions can be paraphrased as follows: What impact do formal, informal, and social aspects of the organization have on the work environment? And how do these aspects intersect with social markers of UN employees such as an employee’s nationality, religion, gender, and professional role? First, the aspect of nationality is addressed. On a formal level, the attendees agree unanimously that the UN and especially this UN agency is “dominated by the American culture” since the U.S. has been the most important donor for this UN agency. The instructor points out that the host country also influences the organization, for example, when it comes to health and social security is-

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<sup>1</sup> The following is based on ad hoc notes I took during the workshop.

sues. He asks, "Are there other examples where nationality influences the informal aspects of the organization?" A future informant responds, "Of course there are. Just today I had lunch at the 'Spanish' table." He goes on explaining that Spanish-speaking staff meet for lunch and thereby create an informal network. The group goes on to discuss another social marker: Religion. Attendees point to (religious) holidays and the fact that the prayer room in the building is called "meditation room"—a more neutral term. The instructor adds, "Now it's the time of Ramadan. So you might be more patient and show understanding if a colleague is fasting. It [religion] has an impact on daily life."

As the group begins to discuss the third category, gender, and its role in the organizational context, opinions suddenly diverge more. Different perspectives become apparent. The reason, I assume quietly, is probably due to the fact that gender parity tops the list of the UN's current reform agenda. There is a raised awareness of gender discrimination across all UN organizations. Women are actively encouraged to apply for (high-level) UN positions, and selected employees have been appointed as gender focal points, where UN employees can, for instance, report issues of discrimination. For a few months, the HR department has also regularly been organizing something called the Gender Insight Series. I am fascinated by the contrasting perceptions of the attendees. While some praise a positively connoted "gentlemen's culture" that they encountered in this organization, others address moments and practices of discrimination. Before discussions are heating up, the group moves on to discuss a fourth aspect. The job function is examined in terms of its formal, informal, and social impact on the everyday working life. The workshop instructor alerts us, "Don't underestimate the functional categories. They have to be considered when making decisions." He explains that there have been significant changes in HR practices, "Whereas in earlier days HR people believed you to be a good team player if you practiced a team sport and it was, therefore, recommendable to write this into your CV, nowadays HR professionals know that in many cultures women cannot do certain sports or activities." Then, he invites the group to think about further social markers and how they mold the everyday working culture. Someone mentions age, another person mentions education. A third person adds ethnicity to the list. At 5 p.m., the workshop session is over. At the end everyone returns to their office—probably to do the work that has been left undone during the day.

The next day, it's a Tuesday, the group meets in the same room again. Today, the instructor asks the attendees to think of communication processes and different levels of explicit and implicit ways to transmit a message. This, they learn, includes conversational patterns, including pace and volume. Also, the notion of time and timing is addressed. The instructor suggests being patient and tolerant in a setting such as

the UN, “You have to understand the impact you have on each other.” Later he presents insights of linguistic and psychological studies. He illustrates them with graphics and images. At some point, the instructor asks the group to silently respond to the questions, “What significance does nationality have for each of you individually? What aspects of your cultural background do you like? Which aspects of your cultural background do you dislike?” A woman in her late forties says that these questions are quite challenging to answer “because I am confronted with parts of myself I dislike.” Others agree that responding to these questions “is complicated” or “difficult.” Another participant states that, “The image I have of myself is constantly changing; I answer these questions differently than I would have done five years ago.” One participant mentions that he had recently done a DNA ancestry test. The result found, this participant goes on telling the group, that he genetically belongs to “a small group of people somewhere on a Greek island.” Subsequently, the conversation revolves around genetics and ethnicity; the question of cultural and social identity has been upstaged.

In the next exercise, the instructor brings up another question. He asks the group to think of an incident related to “other cultures” happening in the working environment that puzzled them. However, only a few of the attendees write something down. Someone finally says, “I do not want to find any situation like that.” Why? I think quietly. Possibly because the issue of different socio-cultural backgrounds is still a taboo in an organization that labels itself as international? When the participants discuss the puzzling moments, the example from one participant is, “In [home country], we usually say, ‘Hello’. So when I came here, I did the same. But ninety percent don’t even answer.” He sounds disillusioned. A difficult topic, I think. Slowly, other participants share their examples of puzzling moments. Arriving at the UN felt “like a cultural shock,” remembers a workshop participant who joined the UN after working in private companies. For three years, the group learns, she has been working as a project assistant in the Department of Technical Cooperation, “When you smile as a woman, it can be misinterpreted.” (After the workshop, I will meet her walking across the VIC Plaza, and she tells me that here, in the UN, she always remembers the famous sentence of philosopher Ortega y Gasset<sup>2</sup>: “Yo soy yo y mi circunstancia.”) Another attendee, a law professional probably in her early thirties, confesses that despite being Austrian her feeling of belonging to the UN community is much stronger than that felt in relation to “the world outside.” The latter, I

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<sup>2</sup> Spanish philosopher and essayist José Ortega y Gasset (1883–1955) wrote, “*Yo soy yo y mi circunstancia, y si no la salvo a ella no me salvo yo*” published in *Meditaciones del Quijote* (1914). In English, it is translated as, “I am I, plus my surroundings, and if I do not preserve the latter, I do not preserve myself” (Ratcliffe 2018).

understand, refers to Vienna or Austria. According to another participant's experience, "The interactions are directly correlated with the culture of the senior staff." This person means that subordinates have to adapt to their supervisors. Is that true? I ask myself. What I observed is that staff members have to actively create interpersonal and inter-cultural relationships *because* the organization is hesitant about approaching and actively molding cultural issues. Culturally based conflicts are still a big taboo. The idea of the "UN family" based on tolerance and harmony is very persistent.

In the next exercise, the instructor invites attendees to name "typically" male and female ways of communicating. They name attributes such as "direct, result-oriented, aggressive/ dominating, structured, short, not very descriptive, more factual, macho-alpha, linear, short-sighted" as typically male communication manners. I quickly copy the keywords a workshop attendee wrote on a whiteboard. "What would you describe as typically female?" the instructor asks. "It would be all the opposite," one attendee responds. "Not necessarily," the instructor comments. He starts a new attempt, "How do you describe typically female communicating?" The group collects the following attributes, "Descriptive, detailed, thorough, logical, emotional, diffusing, submissive, conciliatory, harmonizing, mediated, flexible, far-sighted, compassionate." When someone mentions "multi-tasking," the instructor reminds them to find words describing the communication style and not activity-based descriptions. While the group discusses stereotypical gender attributes, the atmosphere is heating up. Two women leave the room in quick succession. They criticize the separation into stereotypes. One even shouts indignantly, "I can't listen to this anymore!" The instructor remarks dryly to the remaining participants, "It is not my place or role to judge. This is just a linguistic study. You have to be aware of these stereotypes in order to be more effective in your communication. Not thinking that this person talks in a certain way, they are like that."

## 4 Ritualized Practices and Interactions: Insights into the (In)formal Organizational Culture of the UN

When scholars focus on social orders, ritual becomes relevant as an ethnographic site through which people on the ground create temporarily distinct social orders. [...] By highlighting when permeable and contingent boundaries and circulation matter in social life, theorists avoid treating social orders as totalizing or object-like.

(Gershon 2019a, 411, 414)

*Rites de passage* [...] are not restricted, sociologically speaking, to movements between ascribed statuses. They also concern entry into a new achieved status, whether this be a political office or membership of an exclusive club or secret society.

(Turner 1967, 95, *emphasis in original*)

Informant Erik (May 22, 2016) told me that a dream came true when he got accepted for an internship at a Vienna-based UN organization. “I was very excited,” he recalled. Nevertheless, he told me, excitement was not his only reaction when receiving the good news; at the same moment, he thought, “Oh my God, I need to buy clothes and I need to get a haircut.” Hence, shortly before starting work, the future UN intern hurriedly bought a suit and, as he put it, got a “professional-ish” haircut. “You prepare physically for it,” he explained, referring to what awaited him at the VIC.

Following the perspective of individuals who aim to pursue a professional career in the UN context and join the “UN family” (UN 2021, *UN Family of Organizations*), this chapter sheds light on their practices to establish themselves as UN workers. Taking up the imagined and actual spatial separation in the UN context, which was addressed at the beginning of this book, this chapter examines the behavior and performances of a group treated as “outsiders” of the UN—interns and external contractors—who aspire to become UN “insiders”. This part of the study explores the question of how, in the everyday work environment of the UN, ritual-like actions such as the visit to the hairdresser mentioned above, and other habitualized activities operate as specific practices that manufacture and consolidate hierarchies and social orders within the organization. Erik’s visit to the hairdresser has great simi-

larities with a rite of passage as described by Arnold van Gennep (1960) since this activity points to the image he had *before* he actually even entered and became a UN worker. It already contributes to the process of *becoming* habitualized into the UN.

In the everyday work context, belonging is negotiated through hierarchies and scale. I refer to the negotiation processes of social orders manifested in the “formal” organizational culture and “informal” staff culture as *ritualized cross-cultural relations and interactions*. By doing so, I embrace the definition that the term social orders is conceived as “a broad umbrella term to refer to patterned, perduring, interwoven, and transportable repertoires of interactions that are available for reflexive explanation” (Gershon 2019a, 405). When analyzing the multiplicity of social orders, ethnographers usually focus on “typical” (cultural) anthropological topics such as circulation, ritual, scale, and power. Gershon (*ibid.*) specifies,

Focusing on circulation and scale spurs ethnographers to study when and how multiple social orders are maintained as simultaneously distinct and interconnected. By contrast, ritual and bounded performances, in general, let fieldwork interlocutors experiment with creating a separate social order, however temporarily. Lastly, ethnographers of multiple social orders interrogate how power is at stake when people maintain, impose, or dismantle social orders and distinguish one social order from another over space and time.

Against this background, the ethnographic interest towards the UN as a workplace underlying this part of the book can be summarized as follows: How is the workforce culture of the UN constituted, and how is it continually (re-)constructed by various actors through habitualized practices? How are power and hierarchies anchored in specific routinized acts? How are social orders manufactured and challenged by habitualized activities? What are the scopes of action when boundaries become porous (and are possibly crossed), and what are the acts undermining social orders? Thus, my interest is directed towards routinized moments and habitualized practices of the informal staff culture (in German, *Belegschaftskultur*) on the one hand and the mechanisms of managed and formal corporate culture on the other.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The informal staff culture differs from the formal corporate culture; whereas management techniques are dedicated to the latter, the ethnography of a company or an organization is more interested in the former (see Götz 2000, 55–74).



The structure of this empirical chapter<sup>2</sup> is as follows: First, I will outline the theoretical approach chosen to discuss the topic of social orders. By starting with theories deeply anchored in the (cultural) anthropological research tradition, I will show how ritual as an analytical concept can be tailored to conduct the analysis of post-modern societies. The theoretical approaches to rituals will be discussed with regard to their use for cultural anthropological organizational research. In the sense of a historical and knowledge-theoretical discussion, this also concerns the *ordering* character of ritual theories. To be precise, on a meta-level, it is interesting to examine the implicit effect of the analytical endeavor of ordering when researchers try to describe and understand ritualized practices. Hermeneutically, theories of ritual and ritualization are thus approached as key techniques for making, habitualized practices tangible in the everyday work of the UN.

The second section focuses on routinized moments and habitualized actions of the informal UN staff culture. It focuses on habitualized behavior<sup>3</sup> and everyday practices that are shaped by formal rules, regulations and procedures—and ultimately orchestrated by the organization. The resulting resonances materialize in the behavior of UN workers. I will illustrate the mechanisms of how ritualized moments operate across boundaries, and how these imagined and existing boundaries are separating different spaces and crossing different statuses and hierarchy levels. To do this, I will analyze three moments of everyday UN work culture that can be grasped as moments of *rites of passage* (van Gennep 1981): the above-mentioned example of a haircut and other physical adaptations; the moment of a job interview, and the function of the employee badge as both a marker of boundaries and an object for passing and confirming boundaries. From this viewpoint, Turner observes that “rites of separation and aggregation [...] are more closely implicated in social structure than rites of liminality” (Turner 1977, 95). Against this background, the different “paths” into the UN (the recruitment initiatives for hiring JPOs and the YPP, as well as the self-initiated entry) can also be interpreted as a rite of passage. The last two subsections are dedicated to ritualized

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2 This chapter takes up my reflections on the ritualized practices in the UN (Müllli 2019). While I have adopted a few paragraphs directly, I have further thought through most parts of the chapters and enriched them with theoretical considerations and empirical material.

3 According to Bourdieu, habitus describes socio-structural dimensions of human action, “a system of shared social dispositions and cognitive structures which generates perceptions, appreciations, and actions” (Bourdieu 1988, 279; see also 1995). The term ‘habitualization’ refers to the subjective genesis of habitus (Knoblauch 2003, 187).

moments and situations of the everyday working life that emerge in everyday work settings and are used to deal with boundaries, negotiate scale and formal hierarchies. Two examples will be discussed in more detail to show how people refuse to fully comply with supposedly fixed boundaries of social orders. The social order of the break focuses on caesura-like moments in everyday work life such as coffee and lunch breaks or post-work drinks, and when a selected group of people gathers for lunch at the *mesa española* (to be translated as Spanish/Hispanic [lunch] table). These examples show “power in action” (Gershon 2019a, 406) and illustrate circulation across social order in moments not orchestrated by the organization. In a nutshell, whereas the first three subsections (4.2.1–3) address ritualized moments and habitualized behavior that contributes to *becoming* part of the organization’s social order, the last two subsections (4.2.4–5) exemplify how a given social order is negotiated in the everyday work context.

The last section concludes the aforementioned ethnographic data and discusses its meaning in a broader context. Based on classical cultural anthropological ritual theories, which, as I will show, can also contribute to the understanding of profane moments in contemporary societies<sup>4</sup>, I will analyze habitualized practices as well as routinized everyday interactions within the UN HQ duty stations in Geneva and Vienna with regard to their role in the organization on the one hand and the UN employees moving within it on the other. I will show how using the analytical lens of ritual theories enables us to understand the everyday behavior and routines of UN workers as a response to rules and regulations within the UN. These routines are often *orchestrated* by the organization (or at least inspired by its rules) while affirming the formal organizational culture. This happens against the background in which individuals today are encouraged to find manners of coping with a particular work environment (and beyond), precisely because subversion is part of their optimization (Bröckling 2002, 176). Self-introduced and self-organized ritualized moments, in turn, can be interpreted as a way my informants are experimenting with social orders by circumventing modes of behavior or structures that are considered “typically” UN.

This chapter contributes to the understanding of social, hierarchical and ordering processes within an international organization that is located in particular and current dynamics of the world of work. It shows how social

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<sup>4</sup> As I will show in the following chapter, our era is labeled as post-Fordism (e.g. Götz 2013b), aesthetic capitalism (Reckwitz 2012), liquid modernity (Z. Bauman 2011) or digital modernity (Fast and Jansson 2019).

orders in everyday life, in discourses and practices are continuously (re)produced, but also explicitly challenged and questioned. This approach enables us to learn more about power; to understand when, in a hierarchically structured organization such as the UN, social orders become porous, how employees put social orders imposed on them into question by undermining (informal) rules, and how they insist on alternatives. Thereby, the primary goal is not only to simply understand how people negotiate, experience and enact rules in a given social order, but to eventually categorize various versions of social order. By making use of the methodological artifice<sup>5</sup> in cultural anthropological ritual theories, I seek to understand the multiplicity of social orders as they materialize and consolidate themselves in everyday working practices. The main aim is to understand how my informants tackle multiple social orders.

#### 4.1 Theories of Social Orders: Ritual Theories Applied to Contemporary Societies and Organizations

Ritual studies, which have existed since the late 1970s, have developed into a broad field of research in social sciences (Belliger and Krieger 2006, 10). Ritual studies are continuously applied in contemporary studies: “Organizational anthropology in its contemporary versions can be traced back to essential concerns in anthropology—the study of social relations and social forms, in a comparative perspective” (Garsten and Nyqvist 2013, 4). The recourse to ritual theories enables an analytical understanding of the dynamics of the world of work. Therefore, it is pertinent to clarify how the concept of ritual(ization) can be made fruitful for the hermeneutic endeavor in ethnographic organizational research. Rituals, which materialize in different manners and varying forms, are viewed from different disciplinary perspectives and are located and interpreted differently. Which approaches, therefore, are interesting for cultural anthropologists focusing on mundane moments, such as ritualized everyday practices, and not (only) ritual actions, as they can traditionally be found in decidedly sacred or spiritual spaces?

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<sup>5</sup> On the usefulness of a methodological artifice (in German, *methodischer Kunstgriff*) see Bourdieu (1997, 90).

Since there are many different concepts of (transitional) rituals/rites of passage producing a large range of ritualized attributions, a cultural anthropologist noted that “the boom of rituals offers a diffuse picture for the folkloristic observer” (Herlyn 2002, 7, my translation). Scholars of neighboring disciplines such as religious studies agree and offer a broad definition when suggesting that a ritual “is not a particular kind of discrete action, but rather a quality of action potentially available across of a spectrum of behavior” (Stephenson 2015, 3; see also S. F. Moore and Myerhoff 1977). Based on the assumption that ritual is a meta-category characterized by many different dimensions (political, economic, biological, for example), it suggests that “the study of ritual is largely a hermeneutical, rather than theoretical, endeavor” (Stephenson 2015, 61). Taking up this statement and following the ritual scholar Catherine Bell, I show elsewhere (Müllli 2019, 46–48) that ritual theory decoding and understanding social orders attempts *to create order* on a scientific and analytical level. Thus, on the basis of the hermeneutic interest underlying them, ritual theories have a structuring effect on the analytical view, too.<sup>6</sup>

Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner, two scholars whose oeuvres count among the canonical studies of ritual, marked the crucial understanding of ritualization in the last century, underlining the synthesizing nature and function of rituals. (This is also because Turner’s reflections published in 1969 are based on van Gennep’s work that had first been published in 1909.) Based on the premise that social order is motionless, van Gennep suggested a three-phase model of ritual practice where rituals can be interpreted as vehicles enabling (he repeatedly used the verb accompany) the transitional period (van Gennep 1960). He differed between three rites of passage, namely the phase of separation; the liminal period and the moment of aggregation.<sup>7</sup> Turner, in turn, when introducing the terms *liminality* and *communitas*, focused on the state of the “in-between” and the specific community that is formed in the moment of this state. This implies, compared to van Gennep, a more dynamic social model that is divided into clear structure and anti-

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6 Social and other orders play a crucial role in everyday life and society (Groth and Mülli 2019).

7 Van Gennep’s model of moments of transition (or *rites of passage*) consists of three phases; he proposed calling “the rites of separation from a previous world, *preliminal rites*, those executed during the transitional stage *liminal (or threshold) rites*, and the ceremonies of incorporation into the new world *post-liminal rites*” (van Gennep 1960, 21, emphasis in original).

structure (Turner 1977). According to Turner, “the attributes of liminality of liminal personae (‘threshold people’) are necessarily ambiguous since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space” (Turner 1977, 95).<sup>8</sup> Precisely when they are in a state of ambiguity, fixed and old ideas can be challenged. New interpretations, in turn, can be tested. It must, however, be noted that Turner differentiates between ritual and ceremony by stressing that “ritual is transformative, ceremony confirmatory” (Turner 1977, 95).

Religious scholar Bell (2009, 23) notes that traditional theoretical approaches interpret ritual actions only as vehicles that bring together opposing cultural logics (for more details see Mülli 2019, 46–48). Therefore, she questions the notion that transitions between different stages of life can be interpreted in a dichotomous relationship to the normal state. Instead, Bell suggests that ritual theories—understood as products of Western research interest—turn into the subject of analysis. Thus she succeeds in displaying on a historical level that previous research on rituals followed two “structural patterns,”

ritual [was] first differentiated as a discrete object of analysis by means of various dichotomies that are loosely analogous to thought and action; then ritual [was] subsequently elaborated as the very means by which these dichotomous categories, neither of which could exist without the other, are reintegrated. (Bell 2009, 21)

Accordingly, the scientific concept of ritual was first coined as an explicitly cultural and social anthropological object of research, in which the ritualized activity (practiced by the observed) was juxtaposed with the analytical thinking (of the researcher). Then, in the historical sense, ritual has been identified as a necessary practice that is able to abolish the dichotomies that have arisen.

Against this background, reflections on the genesis of ritual theories are relevant with regard to their analytical application in the context of staff cultures due to a twofold impact: On the one hand, by “a distorting recourse to [cultural] anthropological models and methods” (Götz 2000, 58–61, my translation), management literature has been appropriating the notions of

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<sup>8</sup> Elsewhere Turner defines state as “‘a relatively fixed or stable condition’ and [he] would include in its meaning such social constancies as legal status, profession, office or calling, rank or degree” (Turner 1967, 93, for more details see also p. 94).

culture and ritual since the 1990s.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, dichotomous ideas about the “inside” and “outside” of the organizational context are also explicitly taken up by UN employees, and the UN can thus, as I will show later, also be interpreted as a *communitas*.

In her comments on the dichotomous understanding of ritual, Bell takes up the concept of ritualization. By this, she means a strategic form of action in a given social situation, whereby action is formalized in some form and thus repeatable (Bell 2009, 67; 88–93). Based on reflections on habitus, ritual and society (Bourdieu 1995), Bell understands ritualized actions not only in their synthesizing function but also as moments in which individual and collective identities are negotiated and produced. Ritualization is therefore “first and foremost a strategy for the construction of certain types of power relationships effective within particular social organizations” (Bell 2009, 197; see also Belliger and Krieger 2006, 300). Besides, Bell takes up the theoretical framework on power and governmentality by Foucault. Power, according to Foucault (1980), is described as “a matter of techniques and discursive practices that comprise the micropolitics of everyday life” (Bell 2009, 199)<sup>10</sup>, and manifests itself and operates in everyday practices. Hence, power creates social order. Thereby, power structures emerge only through the numerous, everyday and often invisible (micro-)practices of the actors involved.

Following Foucault’s approach, Bell directs the emphasis to the individual body of the “ritual subjects,” as Turner (1977, 94) phrased it. These individual bodies participating in a moment of ritual or ceremonial nature are part of the social body. Hence, ritualization becomes a “strategic play of power, of domination and resistance, within the arena of the social body” (Bell 2009, 204 for more details see pp. 197–204). With regard to power relations, Bell notes that the “dynamics of the social body, its projection and embodiment of a structured environment” are to be considered and that the question of moments of empowerment is interesting when “the power relations constituted by ritualization also empower those who may at first appear to be controlled by them” (Bell 2009, 207). It is, therefore, necessary to ask where

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9 Similar manners of appropriation are observed with the term diversity, for instance when companies are embracing international staff (Moosmüller 2010). The concept of diversity is central to current concepts of leadership and marketing (Schuchert-Güler and Eisend 2007).

10 Bell refers to Foucault’s reflections published in several works, among others (Foucault and Gordon 1980).

ritualizations *condense* into moments of power and where they *open up* the possibility of agency and (self-)empowerment.

The theoretical embedding shows that ritualized practices have both an order-constituting function, and thus, as conceived by Foucault, act as “micropolitics of power.” Ritual practices, however, are also central to the construction of individual and social identity (C. Wulf 2017, 109).<sup>11</sup> The above-mentioned explanatory approaches in relation to rituals and social orders have proved to be fruitful for cultural anthropological analysis since they offer patterns of interpretation that focus on the power of action of the actors in the threshold state. Again, I refer to Gershon (2019a, 405) who stresses that

[s]ocial orders are porous, sometimes by design and sometimes by accident. People who live among multiple social orders continually try to create and maintain boundaries between them, boundaries that are leaky in the right ways, not in the wrong ways. For this reason, boundaries emerge as a lens for making visible the distinctions between social orders, for ethnographers and sometimes for those they study.

Following the cultural anthropological approach that moves between empirical examples and theoretical thinking, I will thus analyze *ritualized cross-cultural relations and interactions*—that is, moments of ritualization, processes of habitualization, and boundaries created to navigate between different social orders in an international work setting. By doing so, I follow the premise that a ritual is “a bounded moment of separation, and participants will return to other social orders once the ritual has ended” (ibid. 2019a, 412). This approach enables us to examine and understand how UN workers seek to achieve orientation and anchorage—not in a religious-spiritual moment but in profane activities of the everyday working life. Put differently, the ethnographic endeavor is to gain an understanding of “how people on the ground deal with multiplicity, how they labor to ensure the coexistence of multiple social orders, and manage the boundaries between them, and how they center and locate social orders at different moments and for different purposes” (ibid. 2019a, 413).

After working out analytical “lenses” based on ritual theory—lenses that can be used to understand social order—I will now apply this theoretical approach to the ethnographic material in order to explain how routines, habit-

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<sup>11</sup> This has already been pointed out by Bourdieu, who discusses social order and “male domination” (Bourdieu 2005, 45). I will include this approach in the following discussion of the ethnographic material.

ualized actions, and ritualized operate in the UN HQ duty stations Geneva and Vienna: Sometimes, behavior is self-initiated, sometimes orchestrated by the organization; sometimes it is about transgressing a virtual or actual threshold and conciliating boundaries, or negotiating power and agency.

## 4.2 Routinized Moments and Habitualized Actions of the Everyday UN Work Culture

As elaborated before, ritualized action is aimed at the assertion of a group identity operating in a specific moment and striving for a personal, social, cultural and ontological totality (Belliger and Krieger 2006, 31). It is therefore hardly surprising that, as early as the 1990s, management literature propagated rituals in everyday business life, such as joint lunch breaks, staff meetings or annual meetings of a ritual-like nature. Nor is it surprising that, ever since, cultural and social scientists have been striving to re-appropriate interpretations of rituals in work-related contexts (see also Götz 2000).

Recent research interested in large corporations, international organizations and the field of humanitarianism has taken up the topic of rituals. Ethnographers have been looking at rituals in mundane and everyday work-related contexts. Here, the scope of enquiries is substantial. Anthropologists describe institutionalized practices bound up with auditing as rituals: With reference to the anthropologist Marc Abélès, audit processes at universities are staged events that have acquired “all the characteristics of what Abélès (1988) calls ‘modern political ritual’: formalized, choreographed, theatrical and ideologically loaded” (Shore and Wright 2000, 72). Others use ritual as a theoretical lens to underscore ritualizing effects of international auditing at the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (Harper 2000) or the Human Rights Council (J. K. Cowan and Billaud 2017, 108–10). The ethnographic approach enables the analysis of ritual transformation and symbolization strategies of staged practices at the stock exchange (Goldinger 2002). Anthropologist Anette Nyqvist, following Erving Goffman’s definition of performance, scrutinizes how general meetings are orchestrated by a specific dramaturgy. Therefore, these events are an occasion when the corporation is “performed”: “It is at these formal annual gatherings, that the CEO, members of the Board and the owners of the corporation meet and perform their distinct roles in decision-making rituals” (Nyqvist 2015, 342). (Here, Turner



probably would have written about the ceremonial and therefore confirmative character of an annual general assembly.) Sociologist Silke Roth uses the concept of liminality “for understanding the circumstances in which people decide to become involved in aidwork” and thereby describes one of her informants’ gradually emerging interest in development (Roth 2015b, 66–67). However, she does not focus on the power aspects of ritualized practices. As indicated above, the ritual approach related to work, especially when they include moments of transition, is quite evident. But above all, the ritual lens is exciting for analyzing microstructures. Therefore the question arises: How do routinized and habitualized (micro)practices unfold in everyday work situations in the researched sites of UN HQ duty stations?

After the preceding theoretical approaches, applying the theoretical considerations on ritualized practices to the analysis of social order in companies and organizations is evident: Through the specific consideration of ritual theory, the synthesizing (i. e. mediating), function of ritualized practices can be grasped and described. It is possible to decode how social orders operate. Bell’s conception of ritualization can be used to show how hierarchies or power relations and structures are produced by everyday practices. Using concrete empirical examples, it can be shown how social order manifests itself in habitualized practices and how the acceptance of such social structures is strengthened. In this part, backed by empirical evidence, I will exemplify what I mean by *ritualized relations and interactions*. Ritualizations and routines, imposed at the level of organizational management, actively shape daily life within an organization. Therefore, they can also be analyzed as moments of power due to existing control mechanisms; this is precisely because they represent moments of ceremonial collectivity and are based on ostentatious elements. However, in my opinion, it is equally interesting to ask where everyday habitual practices and ritualized interactions emerge *spontaneously* in the context of work and *un-orchestrated* by the institution. This makes it possible to understand how individuals express and perform their belonging to a social or societal group, for example to the UN workforce. It is about the construction of self-understanding and perhaps even self-identification as a UN employee. Although ritualized actions are initiated by the individual persons, the actions also stand for (indirect) moments of power, namely, when the organization demands a certain ability to (implicitly) fit in.

#### 4.2.1 Getting a “Professional-ish Haircut”: An Exemplary Rite of Passage and Physical Approaches to the UN

The visit to the hairdresser mentioned at the beginning of this chapter equals a *rite of passage*, which, according to van Gennep (1960, 21), can always be divided into three successive phases: First, there is a *phase of separation* detaching the subject(s) involved in the ritual practice from the old place or state. In the case of an application to the UN, this begins with the completion of the so-called *Personal History Form* (PHF) and the application on an online platform specially set up for this purpose (see also Chapter 5). Second, the *liminal period* describes the more ambivalent phase of transition, namely when the ritual subject is passing between two states, two worlds, and is therefore neither here nor there. As Turner puts it, “the symbolism attached to and surrounding the liminal persona is complex and bizarre. [...] The structural ‘invisibility’ of liminal *personae* has a twofold character. They are at once no longer classified and not yet classified” (Turner 1967, 96, emphasis in original). In the UN such moments are, for instance, an internship or training workshops offered at the UN staff training center (UNSSC) in Turin where prospective JPOs build a *communitas*, as described in the next vignette. Finally, in the *moment of aggregation*, the ritual subject is integrated into the new location or state. It is therefore especially interesting to look at strategies of newcomers to the UN and to understand how they make sure they “fit in.” My data suggest that (physical) appearance (haircuts and clothes, for example) are the first step to doing so before individuals then adapt on a behavioral level. A “professional” haircut or business attire make boundaries permeable—and passable.

To exemplify the importance of a transitional moment, I will share the full interview excerpt describing the anecdote that was mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. Informant Erik described the first step in transforming himself from the student he was to a potential UN employee with the following words:

A: And to me, yeah, the UN/ international, I mean not the UN necessarily, but an international career was always the dream job. So that was really a dream come true (..) (um) (..) I mean, of course, the UN was always one of the main institutions, organizations you have in mind, but (..) For me it was not the only one, but definitely one of *the* ones. So it was very (..) I was very excited, I can remember all, I, you know, you get this (..) and then you/ immediately what you think is: Oh my God, I need to buy clothes and I need to get a haircut, and/

LM: Ah, you thought about that?

A: Yeah, I did. I went to (..) I bought a suit; I got a professional-ish haircut (..) So you prepare physically for it.

According to Erik, the transition from his student life to an internship at the UN—a career step he had secretly always dreamt of—meant a moment of excitement for him (“I was very excited”). This feeling is also reflected in his speech: He seems to be constantly interrupted by his own memory, and so is his telling.<sup>12</sup> But in addition to the enthusiasm and excitement, there was also a moment of insecurity linked to the uncertainty about his new (working) life and identity as a UN intern, for which he wanted to prepare.

The appearance in general and thus also the clothing play an important role in settings of belonging to international organizations and diplomacy. As Bourdieu describes, using the example of his milieu study on French society, a certain or supposed sense of belonging can be expressed through the use of clothing in (self-)representation; clothes are elements of social distinction (Bourdieu 1984). Following Bourdieu, political geographer, Merje Kuus, shows how “style” expressing *symbolic capital* can be interpreted as a diplomatic practice. Cultural anthropologist Paweł M. Lewicki went one step further in his analysis when scrutinizing the EU’s *bodily hexis*, namely when the “body is the site of incorporated history” (Bourdieu 1984, 437, 466–68). Thereby, Lewicki shows how clothes mark (not) belonging to the EU class (Lewicki 2017, 143–44).

The knowledge of the desired appearance in the context of international organizations seems to exist beyond the organizational context. In the light of this, it is interesting to observe that already at career fairs on work(s) in IDC, many of the visitors appear in business attire and, thus, a clear idea of IDC is tested.<sup>13</sup> In order to understand the dynamics behind the physical performance, once again, I would like to draw attention to Erik’s thoughts, who carefully prepared his appearance before starting his job as an intern. And, as it turns out, rightly so. This informant mentioned an-

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12 On the difference between *the told* and *telling*, see S. Meyer (2014, 248 referring to Mishler 1995).

13 In fall 2015, I attended a public lecture by political geographer Merje Kuus at the semi-private university Diplomatic Academy (DA) in Vienna. Kuus was invited to present her findings of the above-mentioned article (Kuus 2015). In the subsequent discussion round, a DA student asked the scholar what business attire she recommends to wear—a question Kuus evidently refused to answer by underlining that she is a researcher, not a career consultant (field diary, fall 2015). This incident points to the importance of educational institutions such as the DA; see also Poehls (2015).

other anecdote that exemplifies the significance of clothing in the context of a UN headquarters. Furthermore, his descriptions illustrate the importance of business attire when it comes to a successful transformation into a UN worker who is perceived as “respectable.” In the interview, he told me that, due to a lack of money, he had bought his first business outfit at a fashion discounter. Only later did he notice that this was not quite enough and that an investment in his appearance could be worthwhile. One day in the elevator, Erik was approached by a senior staff: “A P-5, I wasn’t working for him, I never worked for him, but we have a nice relationship,” Erik described this senior staff who advised him to buy new shirts because the ones the young UN worker wore “look cheap.”<sup>14</sup> “They are cheap,” Erik replied. The senior employee reiterated his advice, “Okay. You have to/, your image is important.” In retrospect, Erik said, “I understood that he was trying to give me what he perceived to be a good advice. So, I asked a few people I trust at work and I got similar feedback. Okay, you know then. Yeah, so I bought, instead of the [few] Euro shirts, the more expensive ones.” Erik had correctly assessed the UN’s field of work, and his visit to the hairdresser seemed retroactively justified:

So there is also an expectation of you to/, and again this is not written anywhere, but it’s funny because the mission and the objective of the UN is not that. But the culture around the organization is like in any other organization and then you have to adapt to it [...]. Because you are in a culture where you have meetings with very high-level people, ambassadors, ministers, prime ministers, sometimes, and within the organization, diplomats, and directors, things like this, so there is a (..) yeah, there is a business culture. [...] I mean for me, for example, the first time (..) I don’t feel uncomfortable wearing a tie anymore but the first time I felt like I was choking myself, something that is really restrictive.

Erik underlines the importance of business attire by the fact that he sometimes meets “high-level people.” However, he seems to be bewildered by the importance of clothes because he believes that they are secondary to the “mission and the objective of the UN.” He positions himself somewhere in-between. He accepted the fact that “you have to adapt.” Nevertheless, he remembers the time when wearing a “restrictive” accessory, such as a tie, “felt like [he] was choking [himself].”

Another informant, Jordan, working in the communication department of a Vienna based UN agency, shared this experience of being observed as a

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<sup>14</sup> Interview Erik (May 22, 2016). This source also applies to the next quotes.

young professional and how difficult it might be to fit in only at the physical level. When we met for the interview in a park on a Saturday afternoon, Jordan tells me, while referring to colleagues at work, that “I would not dress like this in front of them.” Jordan points to the comfortable leisure wear, and proceeds as follows:

A: You have to dress up in a certain way, and act in a certain way. I don't mean I am fake; I am honest with my perspective of things, you know (laughing). But I am careful.

LM: So, the whole clothing, styling. How do you prepare that? When you go buying new clothes/? And [what about the difference to] leisure time clothing?

A: [...] Yeah, there is a big difference. I, for example, never wear jeans at work. Some people do, I just don't [...] feel comfortable. I feel like it's a bit of a respect thing. If everyone is going to go for a certain etiquette [...], then why do you wanna be different? But at the same time, I don't wanna (..) um, how do I explain it? [As a consultant at another Vienna based agency, LM] everyone was wearing jeans and Converse and stuff and still I was wearing more or less normal clothes. [...] But when I got the P2 [position, LM], I thought, okay, now I really have to dress up, to look older and I have to look more serious. And my friends were laughing like, “C'mon, it's not that you are the president of something, don't worry” (laughing). But I did buy some blazers (laughing). And I wear them and actually the person who I told you is my mentor now, she is like, yeah, “I really like your style because you are like casual but not too serious, [and] I want to find that [, too].” But she struggles with it, she's wearing really casual stuff but she wants to be seen as serious. So, it's difficult. [...]

LM: But still, the clothes are/ people will see you. If you go for lunch, for/

A: Yeah, for meetings. I even talked about this with my boss, actually, once. Because we were talking about clothes and how lazy you are in the morning, you just want to wear anything and not iron or whatever. And then I have a blazer that I really like and I wear all the time and then I was saying that and my colleague [said], “Yeah, true, that's a cool blazer.” And my boss said, “Yeah, even I noticed that you wear it a lot!” (laughing). And I was like, “Oh no!” He was like, “As long you don't wear it to the same meetings with the same people, it's fine.” So he's also aware of those things. And on Friday he wears jeans and stuff. Fridays are more casual. People wear their own/

LM: So you have this Casual Friday tradition.

A: Yeah, although I don't follow it.

When talking about dress code, Jordan refers to a colleague who feels like a mentor to them. This person would not be at ease wearing a more formal outfit. Later, Jordan mentioned, they are “very aware that [...] there is racism, sexism and ageism. And I am aware that there is, if you are young, people would treat you really differently. And I feel that, a lot. Like, ‘What are you doing? [At your age, LM] you are supposed to be an intern!’” By rais-

ing this rhetorical question, Jordan refers to moments when they were questioned by (older) colleagues who might think that someone at the age of twenty-six should be an intern and not hold a P2 position. Jordan closes this thought with the following words: “I am not saying I wanna act old. I just want to be taken more seriously.” Jordan uses clothes strategically to appear “older” in order to be perceived as more senior. Unlike their supervisor, Jordan does not wear more casual clothes on Fridays, as it is often done in business cultures. Thereby, this informant expresses their aspiration to be seen as professional. It is, however, interesting here, that Jordan used informal language (“I wanna act old.”), maybe to distance themselves from the formality they were just talking about.

What is interesting here is that both informants struggle to accept the dressing rules that would transform them into employees “to be taken more seriously,” as an informant phrased it. This is also what Gershon observes when referring to another example: “The performative act of creation is fragile. [...] Even this example shows some crucial aspects about how social orders operate, demonstrating that these orders are emergent and vulnerable, as are the distinctions between them” (Gershon 2019a, 406). Thus, what could be described as an act of *rite of passage* is, at the same time self-initiated and as a response to the working environment orchestrated through expectations by (senior) colleagues and the organization that understands the physical appearance as *symbolic capital* (Bourdieu 1986b). Against this background, it was therefore not surprising to me when an intern colleague once told me that she had taken out a small loan in order to be able to afford not only the unpaid internship but also the corresponding clothing.<sup>15</sup> She felt that prestigious clothes and accessories would be a shaping factor for her position as a newly arrived person in the UN context. And indeed, she was always dressed smartly, and I rarely saw her in the same outfit. This example shows that when it comes to the symbolic value of a person’s clothes, economic means (*economic capital*) are crucial.

Undeniably, the intangible message of clothes and garments is strategically used for political statements and (self-)positioning. During my own stay in the field, I observed how folk costumes serve as identity markers for diplomats. By setting aside the suit, the most typical of Western business attire, they make a political statement for their “non-Western” identity.<sup>16</sup> In the

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<sup>15</sup> Field diary, July 2014.

<sup>16</sup> Field diary, June 10, 2015. A Latin American diplomat told me, “No somos del Oeste; un traje no es nuestro vestido nacional” (to be translated as, “We are not Western, a suit

Viennese UN setting, dresses are important at a special event. Following the Viennese ball tradition, every winter since the 1960s, the IAEA staff association is invited to a traditional ball at the *Hofburg* palace. At this event attended by UN workers and the diplomatic community in Vienna, guests are expressly invited to wear festive costumes of their countries of origin. While at the ball plurality of clothing (and the allegedly cultural representation that comes with it) is welcomed, UN workers are expected to leave their national affiliation behind and wear Western business attire at work every day. This shows that once people entered the UN context, they do not question the imposed choice of attire anymore.

Since the message of the clothes one wears is important in the UN context, there are, of course, also UN employees who oppose this unwritten dress code. By doing so, they aim to transmit another message. They only slip into a role if it is explicitly demanded. In this context, I refer to Bell, who described how ritual subjects also resist the ritual procedure (Bell 2009, 200–223). Informant Teodoro Salas (May 22, 2016)<sup>17</sup>, who is employed as *professional staff* in a middle managerial position, does not wear a tie as a matter of principle, for his appearance should signalize, “I wanna be approachable.” Teodoro uses dress codes to signal his approachability to subordinated team members (mainly consultants). Nevertheless, he explains to me in the course of the interview, he has an “emergency suit” hanging in his office. In the case of a “high-level meeting” with the director where clothes again mark seniority, Teodoro puts it on quickly. To be precise, if this informant has a meeting with the much higher director of the department, he slips into an official outfit that he believes he is indirectly expected to wear. This action, which is actually based on a refusal, can also be interpreted as a moment of a *rite of passage*. In Turner’s sense, a moment of (self-)empowerment arises when this informant temporarily transforms into a conformist employee—someone he does not (want to) perceive himself as being. Erik has a similar strategy to make his tattooed body “compliant” to the UN. In summer, when cycling to work, he uses shorts to relieve the Viennese summer heat. However, before entering the UN building, he adds the long trouser legs to his zip-off trousers. In this way, he tells me, he preserves the desired appearance and anticipates possible speculations about his tattooed legs. These examples show the

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is not our national costume.”). This diplomat explained that clothes serve to show and raise awareness [“conciente”]. He explicitly mentioned that the national costume was by no means informal, since he was wearing it as festive costume.

<sup>17</sup> This source also applies to the next quotes.

division between the “real” self and the “professional” self that are unified by a quasi-ritualized act. This strategy, sociologist Arlie R. Hochschild writes, is often “a saving grace.” On the flip side, she stresses that “in dividing up our sense of self in order to save the ‘real’ self from unwelcome intrusions, we necessarily relinquish a health sense of wholeness. We come to accept as normal the tension we feel between our ‘real’ and our ‘on-stage’ selves” (Hochschild 2003, 183–84).

As will be shown in the subsequent part of this book, the external strategy of adaptation and belonging is also accompanied by an inner, narrative one. In the following section, however, I first address the behavioral adjustment influenced by job interviews.

#### 4.2.2 Performing (in) the Job Interview: Learning Habitualized Practices and Experiencing Organizational Power in a Moment of Professional Transition

Several studies point to the changing job requirements and recruiting agendas in a globalized world (Garsten and Jacobsson 2004). They show how recruitment agencies and jobseeker workshops ask candidates to rehearse job interviews in order to present the allegedly required skills (Gershon 2019b; 2017). Other studies point to the fact that the meta-knowledge<sup>18</sup> of knowing how to express alignment with the employer’s values is crucial for presenting the self as employable (Urciuoli 2008). Echoing these studies and based on my own empirical material, I show that recruitment processes, in the UN and beyond, consist of quasi-ritualized moments. Particularly in job interviews, habitualized practices materialized in the (self-)performances of candidates as well as recruiters who have *learned* to behave according to rules given by so-called competency-based interviews.

In this section, I focus on the analysis of interview procedures to show how ritualized processes are transformed into habitualized practices. Thereby I follow the assumption that, in order to participate in a ritualized behavior, a specific ritual knowledge is needed. To be precise, it is a meta-knowledge, a specific knowledge of action that “is ‘opened up’ or ‘constructed’ with the

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18 With meta-knowledge I mean knowledge about the formally and informally requested skills a person has to show in the job interview. It is a knowledge about meta-processes that includes knowledge about the acquisition of knowledge and its relation to the interview situation.



execution of the ritual” (Belliger and Krieger 2006, 27, my translation). This contributes to the construction of one’s own identity. In fact, it is supposed that interview techniques follow a specific logic of the presentation of the self, and, as it is the case in the UN, are part of an application process lasting several months and have a normative effect. The *performance* in the sense of Goffman (1959) is decisive whether a candidate convinces the panel, is therefore eligible and consequently gets the job or not.

For some years now, competency-based interviews<sup>19</sup> have been used to facilitate and guarantee an allegedly fair and objective application process. In 2010, the UN introduced a new human resources (HR)<sup>20</sup> portal (the IT system is called *inspira*) with the aim of homogenizing both recruiting procedures and HR processes (UN 2015c, *What is inspira?*). The assumption of competency-based interviews is that, thanks to a standardized interview procedure directed at ascertaining the applicant’s technical knowledge and personal qualities, it is easier to find out whether the applicant is “suitable” for the advertised position—or not. The UN’s manual for job applicants, *The Applicant’s Manual* (UN 2012),<sup>21</sup> highlights “the applicant’s qualities or capabilities on a number of job-related dimensions of behavior (competencies), as defined in the job opening” (UN 2012, 105). In a thirteen-minute video, the HR director of a UN sub-organization explains the meaning of this new recruitment instrument. Standing in front of a wall emblazoned with the organizational logo, the HR director declares into the camera,

The basic premise is that if you can demonstrate that you [could] do the competency in the past, [the] chances are that you will be able to do it in the future. [...] So, it’s

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19 This assessment technique is also known as a behavioral interview or criterion-based interview. The whole application process is described in detail in the instructional manuals for the applicants and the recruiters.

20 The term human resources (HR) was coined in the 1960s to describe working human beings as an economic resource. It was mostly applied to so-called white-collar employees working in offices (vs. blue-collar factory workers). Today, the acronym HR is used to describe a company’s or organization’s department responsible for managing issues related to employees or external contractors. This includes recruitment, training, compensation and benefits, as well as labor-employee relations, for example. However, as history shows, employers’ efforts to measure, train and manage the labor force go back as far as the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Augst 2003). Taking the example of 19<sup>th</sup> century (male) clerks, the author shows that individual processes of self-making corresponded with literacy practices linked to moral aspirations (Augst 2003, 259–61). In this study, I use the emic abbreviation HR when referring to organizational management of the labor force.

21 The complement manual for HR personnel and recruiters is called *The Recruiter’s Manual* (UN 2015b).

a very strong predictor to see whether somebody will be able to perform in this role. [...] So, there will be a question, “Tell me about the time when you were part of a successful team. What made that team successful? What was your role in that team? How did you overcome problems [...]?” And a good panel will be proving and delving and trying to get to the bottom of what your role was in that particular team. (Global Career Fair 2013, *UNFPA Competency-based interviewing*)

This recruitment officer seems to be convinced of the efficiency and confidence of the forecasting effect of the interview form in question, in particular the fact that the assessment panel is able to read the appearance of the candidate correctly. In job interviews, however, the general appearance also plays a central role, as does the eloquence with which the candidate's own skills and performance are presented (Urciuoli 2008). This depends in particular on eloquence, dexterity and the ability to present oneself in a certain light to capitalize resources and dispositions (Bourdieu 1991; 1986b). This is also why Gershon, who researched workshops for unemployed job seekers in the U.S., points to the “unresolvable tension between general advice and specific practices play[ing] out in the hiring ritual” (Gershon 2019b, 85). She explicates that such advice only continually urges “vigilant, self-reflexive and disciplining engagement with the tasks of representing the self in putatively appropriate ways” (ibid. 2019b, 85–86), to be precise, to reproduce specific historically evolved “genre repertoires” (ibid. 2019b, 86–90) representing the *entrepreneurial self* (Bröckling 2016).<sup>22</sup> Gershon finds more precise words when writing that hiring turns into a “documentary ritual in which applicants are presenting an interwoven genre repertoire whose elements are all intended to represent the job candidate as employable, which nowadays means representing the self as a business” (Gershon 2019b, 95). (I will address the representation of the committed “UN-self” in the next chapter where I will analyze narrative patterns of self-representation.) Whereas the creation of the persuasive self starts when filling in the standardized résumés (PHF) after a first screening, the most promising eligible candidates are invited to the assessment exercise (a knowledge-based test or any other simulation exercise such as an essay exercise or a presentation to evaluate the candidate's expertise) and/or with a competency-based interview (UN 2012, 99–105). How is the process of current job interviews at the UN perceived

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22 Gershon follows linguistic anthropologist Richard Bauman, who defined genre as “a routinized vehicle for encoding and expressing particular orders of knowledge and experience” (R. Bauman 1999; cited after Gershon 2019b, 85).

by my informants: job applicants, hiring managers (future supervisors) and HR recruiters? I let them explain in their own words.

After applying for a junior P position, Jordan was invited for a personal interview. Jordan recalls the interview situation, “It was a panel. It was *super* intimidating. A big room. The [organization’s] flag in the background, a camera and a table of like five people. My boss, an HR person, and super interestingly enough, a girl who I had worked with in [UN organization].” Jordan recounts that he had carefully prepared for their specific interview situation; they had asked colleagues who had been interviewed before and had rehearsed the expected situation when meeting the interview panel.<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, an assessment panel undertakes the job interview, which, if not face-to-face, can also be conducted through a telephone call or a video conference (UN 2012, 105). This is what informant Carlo (Dec 28, 2019), who successfully applied for a JPO position, experienced. He explains,

I mean, in the interviews inside the JPO program, they are a bit like the fellowships [addressed before, LM]. I mean, there are some guidelines which you can find on the internet, so of course, you know, you are trying to look out for these competency-based interviews, manuals and stuff like that. Um, it’s the only way you can get through, eh? I mean, you have to study all of these manuals and try to *understand*, you know, what there should be, what are, sorry, what are the main ideas, the main purposes of this interview. What you have to demonstrate. So, you know, I have, like again/, thank God (..) (um) (..) I did already the fellowship program.

Carlo goes on explaining that he had experienced similar interview situations (“thank God, [...] I did already the fellowship program”). Therefore, he was aware that he had to prepare and “try to *understand* [...] what you have to demonstrate” in the interview situation. Like Carlo, many informants and, according to the comments on social platforms such as *YouTube*, other persons aspiring to a career in the UN context inform themselves by means of the official HR websites of the UN or via recruitment manuals about the application process.<sup>24</sup> Thus, not only the knowledge about the (ritualized) interview *performance* is acquired, but also specific practices that are required and consolidated in the application process. Orders of knowledge arise as

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23 This example shows that besides the tough and competitive environment, there are many moments of solidarity among peers.

24 A great deal of previous research into the creation of the contemporary employee-self has pointed to the impact of business and management literature, as well as self-management and success guidebooks on the construction and performance of self (Illouz and Cabanas 2018; Bröckling 2016; 2002; Rose 1998).

to how one should (allegedly) behave as a UN worker. Hence a job interview is transformed into a ritualized moment because a specific behavior of the participants is expected. The openly-published manuals for applicants (and recruiters) as well as the detailed instructions on the official UN website show that applicants are actively offered processed information about the interview procedure. However, informants are left alone when it comes to forming what I want to call meta-knowledge or process knowledge (*Prozesswissen*). Like Carlo, they draw on experiences and practices that they have already successfully applied in other but similar contexts.

I ask Carlo to elaborate more on the interview situation; his interview was not, like Jordan's, a personal one, but an interview recorded on video. By contradicting the allegedly homogenized interview procedures, Carlo refers to Frank Sinatra's famous song "My Way" (1967) when saying: "The interview, the interview system, this is also another interesting issue, each agency they like to do it their own way. It's a little bit like Frank Sinatra. [LM (laughing): Okay.] It's basically each of these agencies; they decide how to carry out the interview. So in my case, my interview was completely automatized, let's say. It was completely robotic." He then thoroughly describes the interview situation he refers to as "automatized" and "robotic":

So, you go on the internet, I'll try to explain to you very quickly, you go on the internet, you have your credentials, you are putting your credentials on a website, okay, and then they tell you, please, adjust your camera, adjust your volume and then the interview would start. So, you click on "next" (..) and there is a set of questions which appear and two timers. One of them tells you, you have this time to respond, and you have this time to think and to pass on the next question or to drink a glass of water, go to the toilet or whatever (laughing). Okay? So, it's completely different from, you know, from other agencies, how they do it, (hum)? And mine was, was wow, was like, I mean it helped that I did some theater studying, studies when I was at the high school, so that it helped, you know. So, you *never* know what's gonna happen in your life, so it's better to do as many things as you can. This is one of my, one of my/ [pieces of advice], and to be as interested, as open as possible. Because that things I did at the high school, and partially when I was in Paris at [elite university], it really helped me. You know, because it's, you have, you know, you need to, you know, you need to, it's like being recorded, you know. Many people, they are reacting in different ways, but if you follow certain guidelines you can be, you can be really, really effective, you know.

Four aspects are pivotal here. First, the automatized interview situation when the candidate is asked to align their computer to guarantee optimal picture and sound quality. On the screen, the question appears with two timers. The

candidate is therefore responsible for monitoring the time of their answer and the time between the answer and the next question. Later in the interview, Carlo stresses the aspect of timing again, “You have a question, you have a timing, if the question has two subsections, you have to organize your time in a way that you *touch* all three points within the given time.” He continues, “And you have to organize the time *in equal shares*. Not to provide more space or more time to one question instead of another. So let’s say you have, I don’t know, six minutes, you have three questions, two minutes, two minutes, two minutes, nothing more.” This clarification shows that even if the timer directs the pace of the interview and controls the alleged options of how to organize the minutes between one question and the next, the importance is to address all points and to balance the answers according to potential subsections. Hence, this sequence shows that already during the orchestrated and hence ritualized interview process candidates have to prove their quality as a self-disciplining *entrepreneurial self* as conceived by Bröckling (2016). Second, informant Carlo seems retrospectively to pat himself on the back, however expressing nervousness (that is also reflected in the speech pace) when stressing how he could draw on lessons learned in theatre classes he took during high school and when studying at a French elite university.<sup>25</sup> However, and this is the third aspect of this quote to be highlighted, he does not stop at looking back at the memory, but at the same time formulates an instruction for action (to potential applicants, as which he imagines the interviewer, for example).<sup>26</sup> He refers to characteristics of an ideal worker (and UN employee) as discussed in Chapter 5, namely being “as interested, as open as possible.” Fourth, after searching for words, this informant finally says that “it’s like being recorded.” After my question addressing the theater classes (“So you knew your role, or your part? Like, how to present yourself?”), Carlo specifies what might be scary for some:

No, I mean, present myself. I mean, (um), there were questions, I responded to the questions. So, eh (..) it’s not a role. It’s really (..) it’s really showing your knowledge. What’s, what are your capabilities, okay? So, so (eh) (..) so, playing the role, I don’t think, it’s playing the role, I think it’s more (..) *responding effectively* to the questions, eh? Because then, when you have registered the interview, okay, (um) (..) the people can *stop, rewind, going back*. So you have to be (..) very *precise* in what you say, you

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25 Bourdieu offers an in-depth analysis of the French elite schools as a place where the new nobility is educated (Bourdieu 1996).

26 I have reflected on self-aware interviewees providing career advice and imagining the interviewer as a potential competitor before (Chapter 3).

know. Because the interview is being *registered*, recorded, then *sent* to Vienna and in Vienna they can spend one hour, one week, one month looking at it, you know. So it's, so you have to, I mean, to some it's a bit scary, you know, because you really have to carefully, (um), you know, how do you say, in [mother tongue] there is an expression, you know, you have really to *weight* your words, you know, to *carefully* looking after what you are saying and how to present it in an *effective* way. Because one error is one error, eh? The system, they (laughing), the systems they don't forget. *Plus*, the systems, they have a shortcoming, so sometimes [...], you know, you cannot say, "Okay, I'm sorry I didn't understand the question, can we go back? Can we [...] analyze/?" There is nobody telling you, "Okay, let's stop there, I understood," you know? There is just one question, nobody looking at you, nobody telling you, you are doing right.

There is no time to absorb the question. On the contrary, the candidate has to respond quickly and precisely—like a robot. The candidate is aware of the interview being recorded. This is a double effect of observation; Carlo emphasizes how he has encouraged himself to respond "*effectively*" and "be (..) very *precise*" because he knew that the assessment panel has the possibility to watch and analyze the recorded video again and again. He describes the interview as a Foucauldian moment by referring to systems that "don't forget." In his view, it is almost impossible to find alternative genres in such interview processes. He again stresses that, when talking to a camera without a human being on the other side, "controlling your emotions" is central. Being diligent and aiming to "fit in" are also central characteristics because there is no simple solution to a complicated issue ("no silver bullet"):

I think that it's a matter of studying sometimes, you know, developing your capabilities by practicing, by working on issues. I mean, there is no silver bullet. I think, some people, they are born with this innate issues, you know, presenting themselves. I don't think I was born with that. I think I just (um), I just was interested into that and (um) I worked on it.

Informant Carlo describes the video-recorded competency-based interview as a moment requiring utmost self-control and knowledge about the interview process in general. Being aware that recruiters have the possibility to re-watch the sequences repetitively—even if they, in reality, might not have the time to do so. Despite this pressure, Carlo identifies one benefit for the interviewed candidate. "I have to admit it, the system has one interesting thing," he says and continues that "You can record the interview at the time that you want. So, if you're in Australia, Indonesia, Antarctica [...], Argentina, Europe, whatever position of the world [...] you are at the moment,

you can record and you can put yourself in a comfortable position.” Recording an interview helps to avoid time zones. He says, “You don’t have to do the interview at night or two in the morning because somebody in the headquarters decided that it should be the timing. So, I think this is a positive point for the system.”

Temporal flexibility, however, is not always an option. Ana (March 2, 2017) experienced an extreme situation when was interviewed for her YPP position on the exact day of her wedding (see ethnographic vignette). She remembers, “And they actually booked my interview the day of my wedding. (Both laughing) And I, yeah, I couldn’t say no, so I was like, ‘Well, I need to be interviewed and get married.’ Which is the two most nervous moments of your life at the same day, it’s not very nice, but/ (laughing).” Now, after successfully passing the job interview, she is laughing. But then, she remembers, “I was like (laughing) very nervous.” Also she had prepared for the competency-based interview she had when actually sitting at home: “It was a Skype interview. It was with four people from different UN agencies. And it’s about an hour, an hour and a half interview.” When I asked for details, she said, “It’s a/ you have basically competency-based, is like you need to give examples of situations in your career. Or your studies. That, yeah, answer to their questions.” I asked if she prepared for the interview. Ana responded,

A: You need to learn how to structure yourself well. Like (..) And remember a lot of examples. Because I don’t think that we normally think a lot about our work experience in that sense. Like how they help us to develop. So, it’s an exercise that you need to prepare yourself to. Because you cannot just come up with something on the spot, you know?

LM: Can you maybe give an example? Like (..) I’m really interested like how/ if you remember something?

A: Yeah. The thing is my interview/ I don’t remember a lot because of the wedding situation. I was so nervous that I think I blanked everything. So (..) (laughing) I (..) I don’t really remember a lot of/ (..) besides being very nervous. (laughing)

These ethnographic interview sections show how candidates have to acquire a certain procedural knowledge about the clearly structured and therefore ritualized process of a job interview. However, not only do candidates *learn* how to perform in these specific interview situations, this recruiting procedure is also a novum for many senior professionals and hiring managers. Fernanda, a senior professional and head of a larger unit, remembers “the huge change” in the recruitment process “HR has implemented.” Using the plural form to underline her belonging to the UN organization, she continues,

“Now [UN organization] is very (..) the phase/ we have written exams, we/it didn’t used to be the case, in the past.”<sup>27</sup> When I then asked her how recruiting was done before, she explains, “Before it was like CVs and (..) analysis of experiences, but not/ eventually written, eventually an interview, but not obliged. It was not (..) now it is/ it is/ the practice, it has to be written and then interviews. And the interviews are competency-based interviews.” She continues to explain that “[t]he written is more technical and the interviews serve more to inform us on the competences.” Due to the implementation of the new procedure, Fernanda says laughing, “And because the boards, you know, people that participate in boards here, were not familiar/ familiarized with all that new, or new/ new for [organization] (laughs). There has been many trainings, internal trainings, on how we should conduct competency-based interviews.” Hence, also senior professionals *learn* the specific interview procedure. “And how should you conduct them?” I asked referring to the interviews. Fernanda responds, “We were told (laughs) that this is the moment to not/ to first focus on the competencies, not on the technical.” She laughs and refers to the difficulty, “It has been very/ a little bit of a challenge for some committees because people still tend to see the interview as the moment to check on the technical part, you know, the technical knowledge.” “But,” she continues, “I think I understood that, you know, we should dedicate or take the most of this moment only/ to *focus* on the competency (..) based questions.” She goes on and thereby—consciously or not—points to the long-term impact of this procedure on hiring rituals,

And we also (..) (thinking) learned or we have been learning/ I think it’s learning by doing also, how to probe, how to get the most from the candidates, because many, many times they’re also nervous and/ so all this technique, technicalities and skills on how to interview, we have been attending some trainings for that, which I hope it will be, little by little, something that will be already incorporated and/ and we/ and the boards will perform better and better also, not only the candidates. But what I have been listening from colleagues is that (..) colleagues that did not have to go to all this and are inside. They said, “Oh my gosh, this is very tough,” you know, “This is/ I wonder somehow these young people, they’re very good.” Because they have to/ I mean this is a tough process. And many of the ones that are here would never/ [pass].

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27 On purpose, I show the original pace of Fernanda’s speech. Compared to the upper interview passage, it is noticeable that their statements are much less “ready for press.” In general, younger informants used much shorter sentences and made sure that I as a listener followed them, while older informants who had not actively gone through competency-based interview procedures gave longer sentences and “thought out loud.”



Fernanda here points to the hiring ritual that is about being established (“learning by doing”). As I will show in the next chapter, narrative patterns are studied and reproduced. However, when comparing the speech pace of the two interviewees (in the audio version, this is even more apparent), a difference is noticeable. Carlo, the JPO, tries to explain his position fully, whereas Fernanda, the senior professional, speaks with a more interrupted pace that maybe also reflects her way of thinking and feeling, which, contrary to what competency-based interview procedures suggest, is never a linear process. Even if this type of interview aims to be inclusive (which it is, since both Carlo and Fernanda underline the moment of learning), it is insofar problematic that it homogenizes not only ways of performance but also of speech and eventually thinking. There is a risk of homogenization and of choosing those who understand the ritual order and align their narration best with the organizational values.

In this regard, it is not surprising that I have also encountered orchestrated practices of telling and presenting oneself in the ethnographic interviews. The acquired knowledge about the application process as well as a specific experience and action knowledge about (job) interviews led some of my informants to adapt this particular interview performance also when talking to me, the ethnographer. The narrative habitus at the UN, based on conciseness and persuasiveness, is shaped by this form of interview (for more details see Chapter 5). The examples above do not only underline how competency-based interviews structure performances and assign roles, they also *mold* and *order* speech performances. The confident self-portrayal worked smoothly when telling about one’s own career or one’s own function in the organization. As soon as my questions went beyond work issues, informants were reserved, some even irritated. Arnold (Mar 16, 2018), for instance, reacts somewhat perplexed to my usual initial question as to whether the interviewee should tell me something about their personal and professional background, “Well, I did not expect that question. Personal? Well, I will start with my professional background. I am an economist, I studied industrial economies and I have been in development since 2012.” He then names the various stages of his professional career. Only after telling the well-known “script” addressing his career, he returns to the question of personal background. However, instead of talking about his personal life which my question pointed to, he lists his hobbies, “I like travelling, that’s the best part, I am dreaming a lot and wondering, I should actually focus more, I like music and sports [...]” It seemed visibly difficult for this informant to refrain from the usual narrative addressing his professional self. The quote shows how, due to the disturbed order triggered by an unexpected ques-

tion, Arnold departs from the dominant narrative and begins to think aloud. The self-confident narrative pattern is suddenly disrupted when he speaks of the fact that he likes to travel and mentions the (day) dreams associated with it. A more fragile, sensitive persona expressing personal dreams comes to the surface. However, in the same breath, Arnold declassified this quality and he interprets daydreaming as the opposite of efficient (“I should actually focus more”). His evaluation refers to an (unwanted) reflection or pondering in contrast to the apparently positively evaluated being focused. The latter is the expected quality the UN as an employing body wants employees to perform on the job and candidates in the thoroughly structured job interview. Besides, the almost automatic self-regulation points to the “micro-political rationale, on which contemporary technologies of governing and self-governing converge” (Bröckling 2016, 21).

At this point it becomes clear to what extent the ritualized practices such as standardized job interviews prescribed by the organization, in which those employees who are at the beginning of their UN career are repeatedly involved, operate as moments of power in the sense of governmental techniques. The “techniques or technologies of the self (relationship)” as described by Foucault, structure not only the speech of the persons but imply an emotional desirability and an inner self-discipline. In sum, the ethnographic interviews show that early career UN workers, after “becoming part” of the UN internalized specific habitualized practices (informant Carlo). However, they can also be disturbed by unexpected questions (informant Arnold). The recruitment process and the competency-based interview are crucial instruments for selecting people who show the ability to pass without much hesitation (or to pass with ease) through the rite of passage to eventually ease into (or adapt to) the social order of the UN. In what follows, I scrutinize the moment of crossing the threshold to the UN and analyze the impact daily queuing at Gate 1 in Vienna (see prologue) might have on young newcomers to the UN.

#### 4.2.3 Entering the VIC with a Gentle Swipe: The Badge as a Key Object and Marker of Boundaries and Belonging

As addressed above, physically crossing a boundary (a threshold) is a classic example in ritual theory (van Gennep 1960, 21).<sup>28</sup> Accordingly, the ritual subject crosses and affirms the boundary representing social order; the

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<sup>28</sup> See also footnote 7, p. 154.

accompanying ritual guarantees the smooth transition from one state to the next, while ritual objects playing a central role facilitate the moment of transition.

Today, anthropologists agree that some social orders seem encompassing, while others are excluding; consequently it is best studied in ethnographic terms how boundaries and borders are drawn and how they are crossed (Gershon 2019a, 411–12). By highlighting the contingent and permeable nature of boundaries and circulation, scholars avoid describing social orders as “totalizing and object-like” (ibid. 2019a, 414). To be precise, cultural anthropologists use concepts such as border(line), boundary and frontier zone as figures of thought (in German, *Denkfigur*) and as a heuristic tool to uncover, analyze and understand “cultures” as systems constituted by imagined and actual boundaries and differentiations (Picard, Chakkalal, and Andris 2016; referring to Braun 2006, 26). “When reflecting on boundaries and borders, it is therefore not only crucial to understand the geographical and topographical dimensions of the phenomenon, but also to focus on socially and discursively anchored understanding thereof” (ibid. 2016, 12). This approach concurs with the attempt to use *Border as a Method* (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). The political thinkers use the heterogeneous concept of the border as an epistemic angle to highlight “the tensions and conflicts that blur the line between inclusion and exclusion” (ibid. 2013, viii) on a global scale.

Inspired by these approaches, which enable us to understand how people and their cultural practices draw, instrumentalize and question boundaries and borders, this section sheds light on actual and metaphorical boundaries in the UN context by analyzing habitualized actions of entering the UN HQ duty station in Vienna. The identification badge of UN workers represents a key object and marker of condensed, yet always porous and moveable boundaries. This is based on the assumption that, while borders separate, they also represent a connection and mediate between the two supposedly separate spheres (Picard 2016). As for the cultural practices of crossing borders, cultural anthropologist Silvy Chakkalal, in referring to Foucault, writes that overrunning borders is the affirmation of the limited and unlimited being (Chakkalal 2016, 64).

This book started with an ethnographic description of entering the VIC while looking at various dimensions of access. I used the ethnographic vignette (prologue) to reflect on the daily ritualized act of entering the VIC. The ethnographic vignette takes the reader into the subway U1, where the intern-researcher already spots individuals who are also going to the VIC for

work. I recognize some of them, especially the new interns, by the identification badge they are proudly wearing on a neon-blue nylon cord around their necks. Unlike those who have been working for the UN for a long time and therefore their UN membership has become part of their identity (which is why they act more discreetly), the newcomers (usually young interns) proudly wear the badge like a gold medal on their chest (something similar can be observed in Geneva on a tram or bus). The vignette, based on several entries in my field diary, then goes on to describe a scene of queuing interns at Gate 1 of the UN HQ duty station in Vienna. Waiting in line turns into a daily routine. The actual everyday queuing at the VIC mirrors, as expressed in the terms of cultural anthropologists Billy Ehn and Orvar Löfgren, “cultural assumptions regarding time and order” (Ehn and Löfgren 2010, 79) and is therefore also commonly used as cultural metaphor.<sup>29</sup> Queuing as everyday behavior is clearly permeated by norms, rules and rituals, as well as the corresponding feelings (ibid. 2010, 25). For instance, making someone wait is a moment of exercised power. “Making others wait can be seen as an aggressive act” (ibid. 2010, 134), Ehn and Löfgren write in reference to the concept of “ritual waiting” (Schwartz 1975, 125). The latter stands for a situation when someone expresses importance and power by letting others wait for them. However, waiting as a practice has many facets and evokes, in certain moments, feelings of joyful anticipation. In others, it turns into a routine that might evoke predictability and a feeling of control, albeit the current ideas of flexibility suggest that routinized practices belong to the past (Sennett 1998, 44). Nevertheless, orchestrated routinized habits, such as the daily queuing interns have to undergo on most working days, are permeated by rules and take effect when practiced over a considerable time period. (Remember that many young people work for several months or years as interns.) The vignette describes the metamorphic moment repeated daily and therefore effective over a longer period, namely when civilians coming from outside *transform* into young UN workers entering the UN world. Passing the security check, in turn, marks the not-fully-belonging of young interns. (Also, it allows the ethnographer to keep the distant gaze of a researcher and prevents her from fully transforming into an intern-self.) Important here is,

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29 The metaphor of an escalator successively carrying people downstairs was recently used by another scholar (Nachtwey 2016). As I emphasized before, in my research, queuing works not only as a simple metaphor but actually structures the everyday practices of early career workers at the UN in Vienna.

however, that it is another routinized act, a daily rite of passage in which interns have to participate.

There is another interesting aspect in the ethnographic vignette that is based on my field diary. In the scene described, the badge is the central object when it comes to belonging to the UN. The border between UN and the non-UN sphere is, according to the central argument of this section, not exactly at Gate 1 (or entrance portals in general). Belonging is closely interlinked with the UN workers' identity badge. As a mobile object the badge makes borders porous and, at least on a metaphorical level, moveable. The public display of the badge (even if it is that of an intern who is not officially a member of the UN staff and has to *pass* the UN threshold every day through the security check) serves not only the purpose of status performance, but it also underlines the affiliation to the UN.<sup>30</sup> Following actor-network theory as devised by Bruno Latour (2005; 1999), one can say that *every* time someone (*actor*) is showing their UN badge (*actant*) in the public space, the borderline between what can be described as the UN and non-UN space becomes visible, is performed and therefore also confirmed (see also my reflections in Chapter 2). In this way, the UN as a social space diffuses into the public space of the city of Vienna. For visitors of the UN compound sitting on the same subway, the difference between the two entries is not directly clear. As they do not belong to the international bureaucratic or diplomatic staff, most of the visitors must be unaware of the daily routine of UN interns in Vienna. Visitors, together with UN interns and unaccredited actors in and around the UN organizations and its many conferences, mandatorily pass the UN compound via the security check before being registered and receiving a grounds pass issued by the security guards.<sup>31</sup> An observation in my field diary reads that, "when passing the body scanner, they clearly get intimidated."<sup>32</sup>

For UN workers, yet also for UN interns, reminded daily of their not-fully-belonging to the UN, the entering the VIC with a gentle swipe of the card

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30 The verb to pass has a double meaning here: To physically cross as well as to pass the ritualized test of belonging to the UN.

31 The rules are strict. For example, the UNOG informs that holders of the grounds pass "are subject to relevant UN rules and regulations and must fully comply with the processes and directions set forth [by the UNOG]. Sanctions may be taken in cases of issue of the accreditation or grounds passes, as well as any transgression of the rules while on UNOG premises" (UNOG 2020, *Grounds Pass*).

32 Field diary, July 2014. For recent developments in surveillance and security technologies in Europe and the U.S. see Genner (2017).

turns into affirmative routine. As shown elsewhere, sociotechnical dynamics (especially body movements related to technologies) have a profound impact on our being (David and Cambre 2016). Entering with a gentle swipe, as I phrased it, is an important moment and can equally be described as a rite of passage, precisely because the bodily movement marks this transition. The badge marks belonging to a certain hierarchy or group of staff marked by different colors (see prologue). In the context of the outside, non-UN world, the badge of an intern marks prestige. This is why some of them show the badge off on the subway. By entering the VIC building, the interns are then reminded of their not belonging; which, as I observed and sometimes practiced myself, provokes some interns to turn their badge round in order to hide their position (one would only see the back side of the employee badge which does not reveal the position of the badge owner).<sup>33</sup>

I interpret the employee badge as a key object with ambivalent effects on belonging and not-belonging, especially for early career UN professionals. On the one hand, it marks belonging to the UN, on the other, not belonging to UN staff. For all UN workers, the badge is a literal key to enter the building and start their working day. A badge makes certain boundaries porous, while others remain firm and closed.

This is why, in everyday work, situations such as work-related meetings or breaks during and after work are used to negotiate formal power and scale.

#### 4.2.4 Negotiating Formal Power and Scale: Seating Arrangements and Orders of Speakers in Meetings

Meetings are essential for contemporary work life. In organizations like the UN, where most employees are involved in project-based work, there are various meetings where negotiation processes, internal agreements, task sharing and the division of labor are discussed. These professional gatherings are held in various forms and provide a selective insight into multiple social orders that (co)exist in an organization or company. As already shown by others, the specific meeting and negotiation culture of multilateral organizations (Bendix 2013; Fresia 2013; Thedvall 2012) and institutions (Schwartzman 1993; 1989; 1987), corporations (Nyqvist 2015), networks or movements (Graeber 2009; Haug 2015) is indicative of the organizational culture.

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<sup>33</sup> As mentioned, being a researcher, it was not always favorable to wear an intern badge.

In this part, I interpret work-related meetings as another arena where *ritualized cross-cultural relations and interactions* can be observed. By focusing on the agents' perspectives as my informants share their perspectives as newcomers to the UN system, I take meetings in their various forms as a specific moment of work and lifeworlds of the UN as a point of departure to analyze how power and scale are negotiated in everyday working situations: Habitualized practices such as seating arrangements and the order of speakers are significant and send a message to everyone participating. In this section, I focus on encounters that are specifically related to work and not part of the leisure time. The latter will be addressed in the next section. I consider face-to-face staff meetings as settings where different forms of organizational cultures manifest themselves (Götz 2007, 251–53, see also 2013b). Conceptualizing meetings as ritualized performances is one possible approach to understanding their significance for the *formal* corporate culture on the one hand and the function for the *informal* staff culture on the other. A meeting is understood as an arena in which power and hierarchies manifest themselves and different aspects of social order materialize. In meetings, participants are involved in boundary-making work. Hence, I consider meetings not only as “containers for cooperation” where the participants discuss meeting topics, make decisions, or arrange different ideas of collaboration. I consider them a context in which attendees negotiate hierarchies, express sympathies and settle and ideally resolve subliminal and open disagreements, disputes or conflicts.

Taking meetings as one component of the UN work and lifeworld as a point of departure, I suggest focusing on the agents' perspectives. In this regard, psychological anthropologist Helen B. Schwartzman<sup>34</sup> encourages “more research on retrospective talk because [...] this form of talk (such as *telling stories* about meetings that have occurred) has a powerful influence on how a group defines, and sometimes redefines, its understanding of what happens, before, during, and after meetings” (ibid. 2015, 739, emphasis added). Therefore, this section is about face-to-face staff meetings in their different visible forms and about how my informants perceive their own role as young international civil servants in a bureaucratic meeting setting.<sup>35</sup>

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34 Schwartzman is a pioneer of the ethnographic study of meetings and other forms of gatherings in communities and different forms of organizations (Schwartzman 1989; 1987). She was also interested in conducting ethnographies in organizations (ibid. 1993).

35 Virtual meetings like videoconferences, Skype calls or chats are left aside. In 2020, online meetings became the “new” normal due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, that was after the data collection period of my research.

Equipped with the theoretical background, the rest of the section will first address work-related meetings as mirrors, as well as regulators of cooperation, decision-making and ritualized negotiation processes. Second, I will look more closely at chance encounters, or as I put it, quick coincidental meetings and what they mean for different modes of cooperation. With the aim to comprehend social orders with in the UN context, I will then analyze how UN workers are *doing* meetings and how they are *making sense* of meetings. This enables us to disclose hierarchies as well as ritualized interactions among the staff members. Therefore, this section raises preliminary questions concerning possibilities and/or limitations for cooperation and negotiations, and the resulting consequences for project outcomes. Additionally, I hypothesize that there are ritualized interactions that help to bridge gaps, insecurities, and misunderstandings among the staff members or rather the meeting attendees.

As an insight into the data shows, scheduling meetings via emails or phone calls, preparing, holding or attending various forms of meetings and writing the minutes afterwards, as well as communicating and sharing information with colleagues are all officially required and part of the job description as shown in this example for a vacant P2 position, which is the entry level for young UN workers in the *professional and higher category* (see Chapter 2). The job description states that, amongst others, one of the candidate's responsibilities comprises "organizing online and face-to-face meetings"; and later it reads that the required competencies include "openness in sharing information and keeping people informed" (UN Careers 2016b, *Job Opening*). It is, thus, implicitly assumed that future UN workers possess meeting skills. Yet, even though the HR offices offer corresponding training, it is more often the case that young professionals gradually learn *how to do meetings* on the job. It is a process of observing and adapting. They are told how to behave and perform. "I was told to invite them to my office [when hosting a meeting]," explains informant Erik. When I asked how they approach meetings in the UN context, informant Jordan simply replies, "I adapted." They naturally adapt to these different degrees of formality—they observe and act as their colleagues do. Mechanisms of self-governmentality in the Foucauldian sense are deliberate here (see also Bröckling 2016). The contexts in which the examples are set, which my informants describe as moments when hierarchies and power are negotiated, are central. However, it is not about comparing dominant versions of social orders in particular contexts, which, as I claim, would only play into the hands of those who instrumentalize ritualized be-



havior for management purposes. In the same vein, this would be a rather limited perspective since “not everyone in a given situation has equal authority or ability to determine the social order or classifications that will shape *how* relationships and interactions unfold in a particular situations. This is a well-documented dynamic in, for example, bureaucracies, border crossing and resettlement camps” (Gershon 2019a, 413, emphasis added). What interests me here is how my informants recall, classify and narrate different forms of meetings they experience in their everyday work life.

In the ethnographic interviews, I asked my informants if they see a specific meeting culture in the UN. Erik’s detailed response illustrates the diversity of professional encounters perceived as meetings:

LM: Can you elaborate a bit on what we talked about in the beginning: meetings? You said that you have different meetings where you also have different roles.

A: Yeah, exactly. About meetings (..) (um) (..) meetings is a (..) you have meetings every day and you have more than one meeting a day. There are formal meetings and informal meetings. Informal in the sense of a (..) you just go to somebody’s office and knock on the door and [say], “Can I talk to you?” (..) with I don’t know, your boss or (..) (um) (..) somebody, you know, your assistant. So those are meetings and those are informal meetings. You have formal meetings that are informal in the context and informal meetings that are more formal, like, for example, if you need talk about something specifically with peers you call for a meeting, that’s a formal call. But then it’s an informal meeting in the sense that it’s peers and you need to discuss a specific topic. And sometimes you will have formal meetings that require a formal behavior, too, like (..) (um) (..) I agree upon meetings with diplomats or, you know, representatives from different organizations, or/ (..) And those things, you know, require an agreement on decisions or think like this, so (..).

This quote suggests that it is worth engaging more deeply with the significance of formality. The informants’ description here can be summarized as follows: There are formal-formal meetings, formal-informal meetings, informal-formal meetings and informal-informal meetings.<sup>36</sup> The level of formality mentioned by this informant also serves meeting scholars as a parameter to categorize meetings (Schwartzman 1989, 41). It is expressed in the broader “meeting frame” (ibid. 1989, 125), as well as in “bracketing meeting talk” (Haug 2015, 578). Hence, formality determines “how meetings shape, and are in turn shaped by their involving and evolving environments” (Schwartzman 2015, 736). The degree of formality also determines *where* a meeting will take place and *for how long*, *who* will attend it and *how* the meeting at-

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36 Incidentally, this is in line with my own experience.

tendees are supposed to perform, what they would wear, what will be discussed, who talks versus who listens and takes notes, who improvises and who has to be prepared.

According to this logic, meetings with a high organizational representation factor towards internal and external actors can be framed as *formal-formal*. It applies, for instance, to employee town hall meetings, reunions with external stakeholders like ambassadors and other country representatives, partners from other international organizations or the private sector. The seating arrangement is strict and reflects the different roles (Goffman 1959) and hierarchies: The higher the rank of an official the more central is their position at the meeting table, followed by their subordinates and the interns who would automatically use the chairs that are placed at the wall; the experiences of my informants correspond with my own observations.<sup>37</sup> In a *formal-formal* setting, the most apparent ritualized form of interaction is probably the ritual of exchanging business cards with unknown attendees. Reading the job title on a business card immediately reveals the other attendees' rank. Another ritual moment of transformation (by changing clothes) is described by informant Teodoro Salas (May 22, 2016). As already mentioned above, in the case that an important meeting is imminent, he gets dressed decently by changing his sweater for the "emergency suit" hanging in the locker of his office. With this ritualized action of putting on professional attire, this informant even physically prepares himself to match the organization's and his supervisors' expectations.

Such meetings are occasions where either the attendees meet to get to know each other or they meet at a superior's behest where a particular performance is expected. These meetings are perceived as an obligation. "I don't feel that [these] meetings are very useful, it's a bit of a show," informant Jordan comments and explains, "The more you talk, the better. The director likes it." The fact that scale is negotiated in the conversational culture of meetings, is also shared by informant Emmanuel Snow. He finds drastic words:

So you always tend to/ always have something to say. Being silent is perceived as being an idiot. Sometimes if you don't have [any, LM] input to make, in certain cultures you just don't make it. You listen and then you make your contribution when you think you add value. In certain cultures like (laughing) in the U.S., you need

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<sup>37</sup> See interview with Jordan and fieldnotes (July 8; Aug 14, 2014).

to be [quoted?, unclear audio]. If you go to a meeting and you do not open your mouth, you didn't fulfill your role in the meeting. So these are things I noticed.

Having "anything" to say seems to be the dominant position rather than adding value to a debate. It creates visibility on the meeting stage and confirms desired performances. Here Emmanuel Snow identifies certain parallels of the UN meeting culture with what he describes as a performative culture he has encountered in the U.S.<sup>38</sup>

However, there is another factor. Erik goes on explaining that the degree of a meeting's formality is decisive in terms of who has to show flexibility:

But the thing is that [in different meeting situations, LM] your behavior doesn't change much in the sense of (..) you are already within this UN behavior (..) and (..) I mean, what may change is your flexibility. If you have a meeting with an ambassador, you know is going to come, that is a priority, no matter (..) or you know, if your director calls you and says, can you come here [...] that's a priority, too. Whereas there is more flexibility with peers or with people that [who] work for you. That's different.

According to this quote, formality serves as a guideline for assessing how to behave appropriately. Whereas literature defines a meeting as a designated and planned gathering of two/three or more individuals (Haug 2013; Schwartzman 2015), the next quote points out that a work-related meeting can also be very short and spontaneous. Erik's goes on explaining,

So, you have a hierarchy and priorities and then you have formal meetings that require a formal environment. Formal meetings that/ (..) the environment could be more informal and the informal meetings/ (..) There are a lot of meetings [when] you're going somewhere, you meet somebody in the corridor and you have a quick meeting there to quickly discuss something and say, "Okay. We agree [on] this" and "Okay, let's do this." And you see somebody and [say], "Ah, keep remembering that we have to do this" and [the other person responds], "Oh, yeah, I'll do it right now and please don't forget to cover this and that topic" and [I respond], "Ah okay." And that's maybe thirty, forty seconds.

The quote points to the manifold opportunities for getting involved with other staff members beyond the office or workplace, which offer room for a lot of quick coincidental meetings. These are face-to-face meetings without a particular time slot or location, and it goes without saying that online meetings follow another logic. These chance encounters or quick coinciden-

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38 Emmanuel Snow visited the U.S. during his sports career and during his university studies.

tal meetings could be framed as *informal encounters*, to be precise, spatial and temporally dissolved meeting entities. These interactions are not declared beforehand and have to be seen in the particular spatiality of the UN HQ building in Vienna, particularly, at the VIC. The latter is, as elaborated in a previous chapter, a closed building complex where the UN employees spend their whole working day, without the necessity to leave, not even for lunch. The architecture (and corresponding spatiality) of this building complex provides crucial conditions for interactions, and cooperation. Architecture is crucial for coincidental meetings and random encounters. The VIC, for instance, offers many possibilities to meet and to coincidentally encounter colleagues: in the corridors and elevators, in the cafeteria, in the in-house supermarket, in the health center or the pharmacy when feeling sick, when attending sports sessions or other leisure activities during lunch time, and even when arriving/leaving by metro or in the parking lot.<sup>39</sup> In *formal-informal* settings, attendees working in the same or various departments, sections or units hold different positions. It might be a meeting with the branch director when (young) UN workers find themselves on the lower end of the hierarchy. In such meetings, they still have to show a lot of flexibility whereas, in *informal-formal* meetings and in *informal-informal* meetings, they can more openly defend positions and discuss work-related issues. The latter happens in a more relaxed environment, for instance when having a coffee together, another ritualized and, in my field of research, well-established form of interaction. It is when UN workers meet with their direct supervisors, peers or colleagues with whom they have a confidential relation. In these settings, the meeting subject is more central than the negotiation of hierarchies and power plays.

As we can see from this example, spontaneous conversations in the corridor are not simple moments to exchange information and ideas before or after a meeting, and therefore separable from the latter. They are part of the continuing flow of cooperation. Taking into account that my informants have “several meetings a day,”<sup>40</sup> it might be worth considering meetings as a continuing form of cooperation instead of conceptualizing meetings as a compact happening (when a meeting is conceptualized as a container). This quote about unanticipated face-to-face meetings does not only show the dynamics of cooperation in the setting of a large international organization,

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39 It is evident that meeting situations in other locations can be completely different.

40 This was stated by all of my interviewees.

but also the workflow of project work (Löffler 2010). The lower the grade of formality, the more central is the subject to be discussed. Boundary-making work, in turn, is important in more formal meeting settings.

The aim of this section was to show that meetings are key sites for ethnographies of organizational cultures and modes of cooperation. By elaborating on various degrees of (in)formality as meeting classification that emerged from my field material, I showed that, at least in the headquarters context, *doing meetings* is linked to how UN workers involved in project-based work differentiate between various degrees of a meeting's formality. Further aspects such as the attendees' performance, the content and purpose of the meeting, as well as the meeting's locality and temporality, are central. It can be stated that the differentiation between the first verbal interactions formal- and informal- refers to the above-mentioned official, or explicit staff culture, whereas the suffixed second verbal interactions -formal or -informal refer to what is perceived as an implicit culture within the working context. I am therefore arguing that all of these different degrees of formality have to be understood as part of a fluent work routine within the particular spatial context of the VIC as illustrated above.<sup>41</sup> To conclude, the varying perceived formality of meetings, comprising both the official or evidently formal character that is given to a meeting as well as the unofficial, discloses hierarchies that often need too much space and overshadow processes of cooperation. And it goes without saying that decisions are often taken elsewhere, for instance, in unforeseen meeting interspaces.

#### 4.2.5 Having Lunch at “La Mesa Española” and other Ritualized Gatherings: Negotiating Hierarchies and Scale While Networking and Circulation across Social Orders

In any (work) setting, breaks have a specific function. They do not only symbolize an interruption in the working process and are thus moments of potential emotional decoupling from the activity, but also enable employees to meet in another arrangement than in the teams in which they work. Breaks allow colleagues to approach each other and engage differently. Analyzing the example of interdisciplinary work they were involved in, a group of cultural anthropologists have, for instance, shown that breaks—joint lunch

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<sup>41</sup> I presume that similar observations could also be made in headquarter contexts of other large bureaucracies and even of large corporations.

breaks and spontaneous encounters at the coffee machine—were fruitful to creating an atmosphere of unity that was crucial for cooperation, in general, and the interdisciplinary endeavor, in particular (Bendix, Bizer, and Noyes 2017, 60–76). While studying ritual allows for revealing how people produce temporary or separate social orders, Gershon writes, “focusing on scale reveals how people on the ground contrast and interweave social orders” (Gershon 2019a, 412). By alluding to Latour, she then concludes that just as social order and boundaries characterized as porous “are not given, neither is scale” (ibid.). Against this background, this section provides insights into everyday moments where UN workers negotiate or question scale through ritualized actions.

I already briefly addressed the importance of breaks in the working day elsewhere (Müllli 2019, 50). In this subsection, I will elaborate more on this aspect. I observed (and, as mentioned above, participated in) certain arrangements of individuals or groups who mingle for lunches or coffee breaks in the VIC canteen (commonly referred to as the “cafeteria”) where food is, thanks to tax exemption, inexpensive (a vegetarian meal freshly cooked on-site costs around 3.50 Euro and the most expensive meal prepared at one of the different food corners costs less than 10 Euros). In Geneva, it is similar: in the WIPO building, for instance, is a newly built and, according to one of my contacts in Geneva, “fancy” canteen where food is relatively cheap in comparison to restaurants in the neighborhood as my informants in Geneva told me.<sup>42</sup> Coffee corners, where I conducted some of the interviews (in the ILO, Palais des Nations, Palais Wilson), can be found all over the many UN buildings. Thus, at lunch in the canteen, which is shared by employees of several organizations, the meeting of friends and the interaction with colleagues plays an important role—some employees literally want *to be seen*, greeting a person here, and sharing a quick, informal “How are you?” with another person. Whoever wants to avoid running into work colleagues in the canteen (or simply seeks culinary variety) consciously eats outside the building.

Near the *Place des Nations* in Geneva, for instance, I observed many UN workers eating in the nearby canteen of a Swiss supermarket chain.<sup>43</sup> While some use the lunch break for its actual purpose of having lunch, others do sports or other activities. At the VIC, there is also a sleeping area that is fre-

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42 Fieldnote (Sept 13, 2017).

43 Ibid.

quently visited by employees who seek to have a short nap. Informant Eduardo (May 19, 2016), who had previously worked in a large corporation in the U.S., was after his arrival at the UN site in Vienna quite bewildered when observing the dynamics. When we were talking about work breaks, he compared the VIC to the work culture in a U.S. corporation:

When I worked at [corporation], they had this entire building in Manhattan. It was their building basically. And they had a lunch, they had a huge cafeteria, and a lot of people would eat lunch there and/. [...] But in the U.S., [they] don't have this culture of going for coffees and these small breaks. It's a very workaholic lifestyle. So, I think/ (..) my guess would be that would probably be the reason why we didn't really have that because we didn't generally break that often. Of course, they did. It was very short. You/ you couldn't just disappear like you can in the VIC, because (..) the VIC is much more a relaxed atmosphere in that sense. Like when I started (..) my co-worker kind of (..) maybe not quite openly said it, but suggested that between like twelve and two nobody does anything there. You can do whatever you want, it doesn't matter. [They] will [be] walking around, in the outside, by the fountain, somewhere nice. (..) It's like (..) I think that kind of is the attitude that they have there. It's hard to schedule meetings with people between those times. [LM: (laughing)] And it's not/ it's not (..) mostly because people can't be held accountable for a lot of things. You have to really work/ You have to really screw up to get fired, for example. So you don't have this fear that I have to do (..) certain things. And I suspect that is probably the reason.

In whatever way workers spend the break, it represents a caesura in everyday working life. When asked about the rhythm of her working day, a former UN employee first mentions how unhappy she was at work at the time. However, she always felt that lunch was a moment that belonged to her. Koolibri (May 23, 2016) told me,

Fue muy deprimente, ¿no? Venir en un ámbito de trabajo dónde tú dices [...] mis lunch breaks eran siempre sagradas. ¿Ya? Me encanta ir porque yo decía, si ya estoy haciendo un trabajo aburrido y súper estresante [...] y siempre las cosas tienen que ser [listas, LM] para antes de ayer [...], entonces por lo menos quiero tener mi hora de almuerzo y es para interrelacionarse con gente que *yo quiero*.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>44</sup> In English it can be translated with: "It was very depressing, wasn't it? Coming into a work environment where you say [...] my lunch breaks were always sacred. Right? I love going [for lunch, LM] because I said, if I'm already doing a boring and super stressful job [...] and things always have to be done/ready by the day before yesterday [...], then at least I want to have my lunch hour in order to interact with people I like [and want to spend time with, LM]."

This informant, who at the time of the interview no longer worked at one of the Vienna-based UN organizations, talked about how she proverbially regarded her lunch break as “sacred” (“my lunch breaks were always sacred”). In a working day when work tasks had to be done quickly and almost immediately (“things always have to be done by the day before yesterday”), the lunch break structured the daily routine. Here, I think, the person who grew up in a bilingual family with Spanish and German, indirectly refers to the German proverb “*die Arbeit lieber gestern als heute erledigen*” (symbolically speaking, “Rather do the job today than tomorrow”) because the supervisor constantly signals that there is no time for procrastination. Since, as I learned during the conversation, informant Kolibri thought that her supervisor caused her unnecessary stress as a measure of power (and not, as one might expect, productivity), she pictured the lunch break as a moment of self-empowerment: one hour of her working day she mingled with people *she* liked and with whom she wanted to spend time (“mi hora de almuerzo [...] es para interrelacionarse con gente que *yo quiero*”).

An informant told me about a special lunch reunion, *la mesa española*. It refers to a group of Spanish-speaking persons working at several VIC based UN organizations who meet for lunch. At irregular intervals the group meets for lunch in the cafeteria in response to spontaneous email enquiries. Most of the people gathering in this setting are P staff, “[T]he table is not Ps only. I mean, there is one G. And that G is a friend of mine I *forced* to come because he was very reluctant always to sit down with the table. He wouldn’t call it the ‘Spanish table’ but the ‘P table’. So it’s the same. For him it’s the P table and for me it’s the Spanish table.” He describes the group in the following words, “It’s mostly males and the females, we have one, two females, but the females also have a male-like behavior.” I asked the informant how exactly he would describe “a male-like behavior.” He replied, “Dirty jokes for example, and these kind of things.” According to this informant who was introduced to the lunch group by one of his coworkers, they form a humorous group. It is a setting where people look beyond hierarchies and “simply” share a lunch together. Moreover, I learned, in this group it is allowed, even desired, to make jokes about higher-ranking colleagues. As my informant, a male, early career UN worker, puts it,

A: It’s really about just sitting together and eating together [...], like sharing a meal and having a good time or a time that is as good as possible. So for example one of the persons who sits with us [...] is a DDG [Deputy Director-General, LM]. So it’s a very high-level person and he is also part of the game. He sits there and he knows



that at some point somebody is going to make fun of him. And that's fine. [...] At the table everybody is equal (..) doesn't matter if you are male or female or again (..) The behavior is male-like, in the sense of/(..)

LM: Female-like would be talking about nail polish? (laughing)

A: No, not *that*. But I mean, what I mean it (um), you know, there are persons who are biological males who are more female-like in their behavior, you know, more like (um) the ideas associated with female role in society and this table is more male-like because it is very *childish*. It's very (..) you can also call it childish in the sense that there is *nothing* that is taken seriously and it's all about making jokes. We talk about serious things; we talk about politics and things like this but/.

Bringing back the conversation to the topics discussed at the *mesa española* and the manner of speaking of its members, he said, "You can be outspoken." He explained that this is because the group does not desire "a politically correct UN normal behavior." At this point it should be noted that the so-called UN *core values* "integrity, professionalism and respect for diversity" are already advertised in every job posting (UN Careers 2019b, *What we look for*). Thus, this round table, consisting primarily of project leaders (categorized as *professional staff*), becomes a community (or *communitas* as Turner conceived it) that *turns away* from the common narrative habitus of the UN at least for the brief moment of lunch. The group seems to cultivate a contact that is otherwise undesirable in everyday UN life.<sup>45</sup> Clearly, the *mesa española* can be interpreted as a bounded ritualized moment since, once the ritual comes to the end, participants return to the social order. It is a selected group; only those who have been invited by an existing member are allowed to participate in the lunch table. Hence, new faces are accepted essentially on a recommendation basis in order to guarantee like-minded persons who will easily fit into this temporary situation where a particular way of behaving is desired. This is a possible reason why the only G staff at the table does not feel part of the lunch group. The informant's formulation suggests that everyone at the table is aware of the fact that their behavior is, at least to a certain extent, opposed to the official UN working culture. One could say that the *mesa española* is a "detached moment" where a desired behavior is practiced.

In this context Gershon (2019a, 412) notes that scholars of multiple social orders understand rituals "not primarily as a symbolically charged space in which to reflect on larger social structures," but as a moment in which the

<sup>45</sup> I have addressed the increasingly high standards UN workers have to respond to elsewhere (Müllli 2017b, 175–77).

ritual subjects play with boundary-making and form organized interactions in an autopoietic way. Naturally, the extent to which heteronormative behavior is reproduced during these lunch encounters remains a matter of speculation. The descriptions of my informant suggest that when having lunch in a tight-knit group of like-minded people identifying with a particular behavior that is described as “male-like” and “Hispanic,” the ritualized encounter is intended to establish and strengthen social bonds and to perform a specific form of masculinity (see also Bourdieu 2005).<sup>46</sup> Also, for a limited moment, hierarchies are dissolved and everyone is invited to make jokes about another member of the lunch table, regardless of their official position in the UN staff hierarchy system. Here, the ritualized act works as a vehicle since it is a self-contained activity, clearly defined by its spatiality and temporarily—a fact, that “affirms the temporariness of social order” (Gershon 2019a, 412). This ethnographic anecdote also confirms Gershon’s theoretical reflections when she writes that “studying ritual thus reveals both the tactics and potential in fashioning separate social orders, and the dilemmas people face when hoping that some aspects of a recently created social order will travel [or vanish, LM]” (ibid.). Moreover, this example emphasizes Gershon’s emphasis on circulation: By simultaneously undermining the official hierarchy, the members of the *mesa española* construct their own social order. In other words, two social orders, a formal and informal one, are circulating.

At the *mesa española* the performed behavior characterized by a specific humor, *nonchalance* and a sort of complicity among socially similar persons is certainly used for networking and for strengthening rope teams; however, this can also take place in a looser setting after work. I thus want to introduce another place for (young) UN workers to network and renegotiate formal social orders; the so-called UN bar at the VIC. While lunch is organized spontaneously, many UN workers, especially the younger ones, meet every Friday late afternoon for a drink after work, to enjoy themselves but certainly also to network. It is another arena formally established “outside” the immediate working task, yet directly enhanced by the organization since the bar located at the heart of the VIC building is also run internally by one of the UN organizations; one where social orders are renegotiated and formal relationships are transformed into informal ones. There are parallels to the context of the EU in Brussels, where EU officials negotiate the “EU space” in bars and at

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<sup>46</sup> It is also important to emphasize that a group, which agrees on a certain code, offers the possibility for networking, the consolidation of personal relationships and the formation of rope teams, which are extremely beneficial for a UN career.

parties as well as in more formal contexts inside the EU buildings. Thereby, the location of a bar and with whom one mingles is crucial (Lewicki 2017, 26–27; 51–52).<sup>47</sup>

This brings me to networking. Some informants oppose networking and express it as something those have to rely on who are not “good” workers. This is also confirmed in the interview with Vanessa. She understands networking as part of everyday working encounters:

[Networking] is part of the work, [because] if they don't know you they don't hire you. [In order not to rely on networking, LM] You must be so good! [...] In lunch and coffee breaks you socialize, it's part of the job, I think, anywhere. For me, networking is not negative. Most of this is extra work. [LM asks how the informant networks.] You email for coffee, everyone is so friendly because everyone knows [that one needs contacts?], everyone is an expat, [then] your circle expands and is getting bigger. There are no groups, everyone talks to everyone.

Networking is a crucial part of early career UN workers' everyday lives. They have to make themselves visible in a professional sense. This shows that ritualized practices do not only enhance social orders (and within a certain security for agents to behave correctly), they also open up a certain space for new interpretations of existing conditions.

### 4.3 Habitualized Practices and Social Orders in the UN

The previous pages were dedicated to the UN staff system and its differentiation between the different hierarchy levels. This chapter approached the social orders of the UN through the eyes of UN workers and the author's observations by using everyday examples addressing access to the social and physical world of the UN as well as assimilation and dissimilation practices within and outside the organizational space. Using a ritual-theory approach, this chapter discussed how well-rehearsed, everyday interactions and habitual practices operate. Based on ritual theories, it showed how habitualized practices do not only establish hierarchies but also consolidate and strengthen social orders and UN workers' compliance with them.

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<sup>47</sup> The associated “hookup culture” (Pham 2017), which Lewicki observed in the case of the EU, has also been described for the humanitarian context (Roth 2015b, 102).

The first part of this chapter dealt with the theoretical literature. I addressed ritual theories and how they emerged at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As I have shown by discussing their applicability for the analysis of habitualized practices in everyday work situations, this theoretical lens still serves as a heuristic instrument today. I particularly pointed out mechanisms of power, which appear in the form of ritualizations and are fundamental aspects when it comes to understanding the UN.

In the subsequent analysis of the empirical material, I focused on the element of routinized moments and habitualized actions that is constitutive for the social orders in the UN context. The individual readiness for ritualized actions manifests itself on a material level before starting work in the form of visiting the hairdresser and buying or wearing a suit. The time dimension of ritualized routines was explained by the meaning of lunch breaks. The latter, in their ritualized dimension, serve in particular as a caesura in everyday working life as well as a new or a reinterpretation of behavior and interactions among UN staff that are implemented by the organization and are thus desired. How ritualized processes operate with regard to spatial separation and boundary-making was shown in the analysis of the daily transition from the Viennese public space, which is perceived as the outside world, into the UN building, choreographed by surveillance mechanisms and security precautions. In the application process, the ritualized structure influences certain narrative practices. A visit to the hairdresser is an obvious step to guarantee a certain ability to fit in with regard to one's appearance. The acquisition of self-(re)presentation techniques assures the interview panel of the candidate's inner ability to fit in with the advertised position as a UN employee.

The initiatory crossing over of the outside world into one of the many sub-organizations of the UN is, as I explained, first of all an *un-orchestrated*, ritualized action, precisely because the ritualized action is introduced by the individuals (and not orchestrated by the organization). The actions described in the broadest sense as (momentary) rituals of transition can thus represent an empowering moment in the highly hierarchical working world of the UN. They unfold a synthesizing effect. This is the case when ties are demonstratively not (cannot be) worn—only to appear when the informal protocol of hierarchy actually provides for it.

In everyday, habitual or ultimately ritualized actions, the aim is to express and to solidify a certain self-image, membership and identity of a group. The function of habitual (micro)practices in the sense of Foucault's micropolitics of power becomes evident. Governmentality, the techniques of the self and

the processes of subjectivation come into play. The explicitly orchestrated behavior during a job interview prescribed by the organization's choice for competency-based interviews, which is actively co-modeled by the UN and its HR staff by means of instructions available online, has a habitualizing effect, as was shown in the interaction with informants. In later working life, the entrance portals assume an important hinge function and can, therefore, also be described and interpreted from a cultural anthropological perspective as thresholds between the two worlds.

The theoretical reflection using the example of my empirical data has shown that a recourse to the concept of ritual(ization) can be made productive for the understanding of work contexts: The modes of adaptability, acceptance, hierarchies and social order became visible in work-world behavior, which partly leads to habitualized practices. Although the ritualized actions cannot always be described as ideal-typical in terms of classical ritual theories, they are widespread in companies and international institutions. This raises the question of whether, from a cultural anthropological perspective, an expansion of the concept of ritual seems necessary in order to draw attention to the initially inconspicuous ritualized actions of everyday life.



# “You are not UNICEF. You are not UNDP. You are UN!”

Wednesday, September 27, 2017. My joyful anticipation is directed towards what I will observe on this day. It is the second day of my three-day field trip to the United Nations System Staff College (UNSSC) in Turin where I was invited to interview senior staff engaged in education and professional development courses for UN workers and country officials. The director of this organization is open-minded, curious, and interested in the results of this research study. I perceive his attitude as a contrast to the otherwise distanced and skeptical view I have come to know so far. I am thrilled that I am also allowed to attend the morning session of a training workshop for future UN staff hired as Junior Professional Officers (JPOs). In a two-week training workshop presented as an orientation program, recently appointed JPOs are introduced to the UN, its values, the most critical policies regarding the 2030 Agenda in particular and humanitarian work in general. They learn how to respond to emergency situations. They receive career advice and reflect on themselves as individuals and on their role as JPOs. How can they, as young professionals, be an asset to the organization?

It is 9 a.m. and the participants have just come to the course building from the accommodation they are staying at for two weeks. They help themselves to coffee, croissants, and fruit at the buffet. The workshop takes place in a building called Africa 12; on this UN campus, building clusters are named after continents. While drinking coffee, the group receives information about the agenda for that morning: the participants will spend the first hour of the morning session together and then split up into two groups for practical workshops. In the afternoon, they will switch. I count approximately forty participants, with slightly more women than men. Most of them, I will learn later, are financed by one European country, which opened many JPO positions that year. The course organizer is a UNSSC employee. He wants to be called Tomas, after his favorite book character. I guess that he is about the same age as the JPOs and I; between mid-twenties to early thirties. Tomas has a dynamic, almost bubbly, personality. He obviously enjoys his role as a host and entertainer. He radiates enthusiasm as if it was he (and not the attendees) who soon would be sent abroad to a JPO position in a UN sub-organization.

The workshop has now begun. I am sitting apart on a sofa in the rear part of the room. There is a large, cozy, woven carpet on the floor. This sitting area is comfortable and meant to let people linger. On my left, I can see the park through the windows. The wall to my right has been prepared for the participants of the workshop; some of the large white sheets of paper have already got notes and keywords written on them. Others still wait to be filled with thoughts. I watch the workshop participants at the front. Six to eight people are sitting at tables clustered together. They are wearing smart-casual clothes, only a few of them are in business attire. Although the room is prepared for informal engagement, I sense a high level of concentration and eagerness to learn. The attendees show their readiness to learn and to engage in discussions.

I, in turn, have difficulties following the pace of today's workshop session and understanding the program. Sitting in the back, it is difficult to hear and see what the instructor teaches. He has been introduced as a specialist in stress management. I take brief information about the instructor's background from the agenda the personal assistant of the UNSSC's director had prepared and sent to me before my visit. The instructor, I read, is a psychologist and was engaged at a UN court of law. Thus, he is not a UNSSC employee but was especially invited to teach a specific module of the orientation program. Today, he is instructing the attendees on hostage-taking and how to survive such an incident. His first question is if anyone in the group had been kidnapped before and if they want to share their story. Or, on the contrary, if someone felt discomfort at the thought of hostage-taking. One person raises her hand and confirms the first question. "It is a very moderate story. It was on a bus in Mexico, the 'narcos' were on one side, the police on the other. But it felt peace[ful]," she says appealingly. "It felt as if it was a regular scenario." I look around; the group seems to be affected by this information—so am I. My attention turns back to the instructor, who asks rhetorically, "Why do we have this module? Because we might be [taken hostage] at some point in our career." After the personal story shared by one of the JPOs, the instructor introduces the theory. "We distinguish between abduction and hostage-taking," he says, and adds that for UN workers, it is important to know the difference because the UN would assist in some instances and try to rescue the person but not in others. He goes on to ask, "What might be the different phases in hostage-taking? Think, for example, of a movie. The moment of capture, the moving phase? The rescue or the release? What is the longest phase?" The answer is prompt: "The post-release phase." Indeed, it takes time to process such a (traumatic) experience, I think and tell myself inwardly how far away this scenario is from all of us, who are, at this moment, sitting in a warm room behind high concrete walls on a UN campus in Turin. While I am still thinking about it, the partici-



pants are asked to split into groups to discuss the different phases: capture, transport, rescue, release.

The interactive group task is a brainstorming technique to find keywords associated with a particular topic. Starting with an arbitrary letter or word, participants have to find words describing their thoughts when thinking of hostage-taking. In continuation, a representative of each small group presents the results to the plenum. Today, the randomly picked letter is R. The group comes up with a number of words. I note a few of them down: revolution; rhythm; road map; rocket; react; rebel; ratio; rights; responsibility; risk; resilience; romance; redundant; resolution; rise; river; rubbish. It is not always clear what the person who mentions a keyword thought when mentioning romance, for example, or rubbish. Keywords such as react, road map, ratio, or resolution are associated with following the organizational agenda: staying calm, and behave in the organizational interest, whereas the terms resilience and responsibility clearly point to the UN's values.

While the participants continue with the exercise, UNSSC employee Tomas, who has been busy until now, approaches me and takes me aside. In order not to disturb the workshop, we leave the room and step out into the autumn sun. Pointing to the participants engaged in the exercise, he tells me that on Monday he had started the workshop with such a group activity as well. "The question was," he tells me, "What is a good JPO and what do they bring to the UN?" And he goes on explaining, "So you start, for example, with [the word] dust." Then Tomas explains the brainstorming technique and mentions a few exemplarily words standing for the associations that came up in the attendees' minds. "The results are still hanging on the wall there," he informs and points to the wall by which I was sitting. Because of the delay in recruiting JPOs in certain countries, one country's appointees are in the majority. Tomas tells me that the government of that particular country had recruited a high number of JPOs. Usually, he affirms, JPO workshops are more mixed. I wonder why the scenario of hostage-taking is discussed so prominently. "One part of the group will work at the headquarters, others will work in the field," he says, while watching them through the window. He adds that the UN as a workplace is familiar to most of the attendees, "Many of them already have UN experience." In response to his openness, I ask him how he ended up at the UN.

Tomas tells me that he is twenty-five years old and that this is his first job after university. However, he adds, he also completed a UN internship previously. "I developed the workshop, but now I am responsible for refilling the water, for the coordination—everything," he says, laughing. "In this two-week course," he explains, referring to the workshop participants, "the aim is to bring them onto the UN level. You are not UNICEF. You are not UNDP. You are UN!" He continues to state that the aim

is to take new appointees out of their national context in preparation for working at the UN. “They have a one-year contract. And if they don’t behave very badly, this will be extended. This contract is paid by [their country, LM] and they can stay a maximum of two years.” Tomas seems to be busy again, and I reenter the room. I go back to the sofa and type the notes about the short conversation on my laptop.

The participants are now discussing the reasons for hostage-taking: political ideas and money, they conclude. However, after the interruption and the short conversation with the UNSSC employee, it feels even more challenging to follow the content of the workshop. I feel that I have lost track of the topic of hostage-taking. Now, the instructor is presenting statistics on how many UN hostages were taken in recent years and how long it took for them to be released.

The results of the exercises written on the sheets of paper hanging on the wall at my right catch my attention. Tomas had mentioned a few of the keywords before when he was explaining the brainstorming technique to me. I take a closer look; what the keywords epitomize is explained in brackets. And reading the content, I suppose these answers point to a question about the organizational values. I read:

Train (seize [the] opportunity, don’t miss the train);  
 Training (for better knowledge but also to go beyond current ideas);  
 Technology (more efficient and smart ways of using it);  
 Transport (transfer your expertise in a different way);  
 Truth (embrace relativism);  
 Transgender (no gender-bias);  
 Team (work in [a] team, using diversity);  
 Tools (leveraging on your own tools but also [em]bracing new tools);  
 Transformation ([be aware of] change but also accept you will be transformed);  
 Transparency 1 (innovation should lead to transparency and be a system closer to people);  
 Transparency 2 (make innovation accessible/ understandable to people);  
 Trump (be ready to deal with drastic changes and challenges);  
 Theory (embrace new theories, should also take into account existing ones);  
 Teeth ([get your teeth into an] opportunity);  
 Trail (don’t follow the trail);  
 Total (use holistic approach).

I reflect on the keywords of the group activity. The keywords mirror several so-called core competencies, managerial competencies and core values as they can be found on the UN’s websites, in manuals, and brochures. The associations express the participants’ motivation to “seize [every] opportunity” or “[get your teeth into an] opportunity,” be constant learners, be flexible, innovative, and do not follow prescribed paths (or “trails”) but think outside the box, and embrace personal change. They ex-

press their political opinion when referring to the forty-fifth U.S. president, who was elected in 2016 and in office since the beginning of the year. This political figure typifies "be[ing] ready to deal with drastic changes and challenges." In contrast to the entrepreneur-politician, the participants clearly embrace diversity.

The first hour is over and, after a short break, the next session about first aid instructions starts. I want to join the other group on stress management but did not dare to interfere in my field. I really try to only observe, I remind myself. The instructor of the first aid course is a trained nurse and has, as she tells the group, experienced many emergency situations. Instead of paying full attention to the instructions, I still think about the outcome of the group exercise. Then, I hear the second instructor, a vigorous woman, saying, "Even if you are in a headquarters, you might one day deal with an emergency." She seems to warn the group to take the issue seriously. "You should especially know how to make an emergency call and what you should not do while waiting for the ambulance. Ask for the emergency number, you wanna know it by heart!" She seems to want to appeal to the JPOs' sense of responsibility and reminds the participants standing in a circle around her to always keep plastic gloves at their desks. "You might think, 'Ah, isn't there a secretary who helps with an emergency?'," she says almost reproachfully and asks rhetorically, "Will you take the risk? No! Better be safe than sorry."

At 12:45 p.m., Tomas gives some final instructions and announces the end of the morning session. The group, which until now seemed serious, breaks out into clapping and cheering, looking forward to their lunch. I, in turn, have to go back to another building to conduct expert interviews.

Six months later, on March 16, 2018, one of my informants and I recalled the training week. I asked him "to say a few words about the JPO training." Arnold, as he wants to be called, responded that two weeks of training "is too much." "Too much?" I asked. And he said, "The intense training and involvement. (Um), with people you don't even know. (Um), it becomes, what I felt is like (..) it becomes a kind of artificial situation when, you know, a group of thirty professionals for 24 hours a day, in the end (..) because you hang around 24 hours a day (..) is forced to perform and to show the best of themselves, you know. So it's as per markets in economics, that becomes a distort system," referring to his professional background as an economist. Also, Arnold told me that the training was "too much focus[ing] on peacebuilding and human rights and this stuff. But many of yourselves, you know, are either analysts or economists, [and] are going to work on substance and I think, the words development or economic were mentioned a couple of times in two weeks. Which is not enough. So, I believe, yeah, [it should] be shorter and also in terms of content, I would reshuffle it (..) (um) (..) slightly."



## 5 Homo UN and the Habitus of International Life and Work

A biography is a story put together with the help of culturally available instruments and ingredients.

(Järvinen 2000, 372)

We are so much products of the order of the social world that we end up reproducing it ourselves: Even if we accuse it or fight on another level to change it, we still affirm its legitimacy.

(Eribon 2017, 63, *my translation*)

The official recruitment website of the UN is called UN Careers. It is where open positions are announced and career advice is given. In short, this website serves as a platform to attract and inform potential new employees. Besides information on the complex staff hierarchy system of the UN and instructions regarding the recruitment process, the website (and its corresponding sites on social media platforms, especially Facebook and LinkedIn) published a series of quotes from UN staff members holding different positions across the world. These testimonials are short sentences where actual UN staff members allegedly give direct advice to their future and especially young colleagues. The series of advertisements shows photographs of UN staff and, occasionally, UN consultants and UN interns. The detail of a photograph usually shows the upper part of the person's body, most of them with their arms crossed in a "professional" posture, holding a document, a folder or another object in their arms. Others have assertively placed one arm on the hip. Additionally, the advertisement shows the depicted person's name, position and duty station. The speech bubble attached to the person in the picture reflects their clue, advice or positioning. It is striking that most of the pictures depict middle-aged to younger people who are more in the middle of their working lives. I found only one statement explicitly referring to a possible age gap between the person providing advice and the addressees. The speech bubble attached to an elderly-looking woman reflects her advice. She gives clues on how to apply for a "UN job" by stressing the inner attitude ("My advice to young people: *be persistent and strategic*").<sup>1</sup> Another lady is quoted as saying what to consider when applying

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the advertisements could be found on the organizational website (UN Careers 2016c, *Meet our Global Workforce*), others on Facebook (UN Careers 2016a, *Face-*

by referring to the application as an entry ticket (“Your application is your *passport* to a career with the United Nations”). (As I will explain later with reference to the *regimes of mobility* (Glick-Schiller and Salazar 2013), the word *passport* takes on a completely different meaning here.) Further quotations could be summarized as follows: they describe what a UN worker can expect in their daily work. A quote refers to continuous learning (“Every day *offers a new learning* experience”; or as expressed in another quote: “*The United Nations* is a place where *learning never stops*”). This implies that continuous learning is a prerequisite for career advancement (“In the United Nations, job enrichment opportunities, *continuous learning and skills development* are a key part of career growth”). We read in another statement that mobility across positions and leading the person to different world regions is a key to the continuous expansion of the UN staff members’ horizons (“Mobility across functions and geographic locations *encourages learning, flexibility, adaptability, and empathy*: all essential qualities of United Nations staff”). In this connection, another quote alludes to the double-edged nature of the organization’s high standards and the emotional reward that will eventually arise when there is enough commitment (“If you are willing to take that extra step and *go beyond your comfort zone*, then working with the United Nations can be truly exciting”).

Some quotes stress the emotional or ethical added value from the employees’ point of view. A statement underlines the personal usefulness and satisfaction (“The United Nations makes it possible for me to *use my skill set to make a difference*”). Another statement expresses pride as an emotional reward (“I am proud to be part of an organization that can *make a real difference in people’s lives*”). A third statement underlines the alleged selflessness of UN workers (“I believe the essence of what we do [...] *is to serve others*”). Finally, I would like to mention a quote that seems to be directly aimed at individuals aspiring to a career at the UN, although (or precisely because) it conveys an ambiguous message: “Approach your *dream for a career* with the United Nations with a healthy mix of *realism and idealism*.” This quote evokes the picture of UN staff members who start their careers somewhere between dream and reality. A field of tension opens up here, which is the focus of this chapter.

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*book*, emphasis in original). They have been collected over a long period—from 2016 to 2019—and were last accessed on Jan 9, 2020. The source applies to all quotes in this and the following two paragraphs. In the original quotes, the emphasis adding more weight to the statement is marked by means of a slightly enlarged font and blue font color. Here, I mark the emphasized passages in italics.

The persons shown in the pictures might be (or have been) UN workers, the quotes in the speech bubbles next to them might actually be theirs—we don't know. Nevertheless, this testimonial series, showing “a peculiar idiom” (Graeber 2015, 21) that is characteristic for the era of *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007), is soaked with administrative ideals. Therefore, they can be used for a specific purpose: the publicity and circulation of what, in management terms, is framed as the “corporate identity.” The real purpose of these testimonials manifests itself in the fact that some pictures are used twice to share different motivational quotes.

Taking the last quote as its point of departure, this chapter examines what it means to approach the goal (or “the dream”) of pursuing what might be paraphrased as a UN career (or life as a UN worker) “with a healthy mix of realism and idealism,” as expressed in the advertisement. This aim is approached by critically juxtaposing the construction of the UN's corporate subject, allegorized as *homo UN* with my informants' narrations and actual experiences. *Homo UN* stands for the idea of an “ideal” UN employee. It refers to the ideal type as theorized by Weber (2013). Seen as an analytical figure, the notion is inspired by Bourdieu's figure *homo academicus* (Bourdieu 1988) displaying a specific (academic) habitus defined as “a system of shared social dispositions and cognitive structures which generates perceptions, appreciations, and actions” (Bourdieu 1988, 279; see also 1995), in the academic field. Written in the aftermath of the civil unrest in France, starting in Paris with a series of student occupation protests against traditional institutions and social order at universities in May 1968, the book is an “analysis of the academic world” (ibid. 1988, xi). Or, in the words of one of his former students and collaborators, Loïc J. D. Wacquant, Bourdieu “applies his sociological acumen and interpretative virtuosity to his own tribe, that of French university professors” (Wacquant 1990, 678). The book identifies different political attitudes, styles, and works among French scholars (Bourdieu 1988, 23–24) and dedicates a whole chapter to the analysis of “types of capital and forms of power” (ibid. 1988, 73–127). Therefore, I keep in mind the notion of *The Plural Actor* (Lahire 2011). Bernhard Lahire, another pupil of Bourdieu's, criticized Bourdieu's rigid conception of field and the determinism (supposedly) inherent in the habitus concept. Instead, Lahire underlines the plurality of social agents and the broad spectrum of agency—in the present study exemplified in affirming stories and counter-stories—because “[...] not all actors are cast in the same mold” (ibid. 2011, 12). Accordingly, the notion of *homo UN* serves as an epistemic category I have coined to

grasp, describe and analyze the dynamics of the UN as an assemblage field, as sketched before. Hence, this empirically informed chapter serves to theorize specific habitus patterns constituted in the UN.

The entry paths for a position as a UN staff member (see Chapter 2.4.2) require different skills needed for passing. Thereby, the analysis of the recruitment procedure combined with insights gained from the ethnographic interviews reveals formal and informal requirements for a UN career. Key moments in such a career reveal the need for emotional flexibility and adaptability. Whereas the organization demands specific skills, competencies and values from UN candidates at the formal level, during the application process, (future) employees are implicitly required to be able to present themselves as potential UN employees in their interview *performance* as theorized by Goffman (1959). I will address my informants' strategies for coping with the required standards UN workers are supposed to fulfill and the new work environment. A point to note here is that the dichotomy of idealism and realism is inherent in both narratives that are discussed hereinafter. Hence, the corporate subject *homo UN* is the "ideal employee" materialized in narratives of junior professionals. In this sense, the ideal figure is not only shaped by the organization's perspective but also by the adoption, performance and narration of UN workers. Precisely, it will be shown how UN workers adapt to the organizational culture through the development and adoption of a particular *narrative habitus* (Frank 2010). Thus, in this chapter, biographical insights serve as an "exemplary reification" (in German, "*exemplarische Verdinglichung*") (Picard 2014, 181) of the UN work and lifeworlds.

The structure of this chapter unfolds as follows: First, I will briefly discuss the most important cultural anthropological and sociological literature regarding the creation of the (employee-)self in contemporary workplaces. Today, we live in a knowledge-based economy that emerged in industrialized countries in the last third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Alluding to the nature of the capitalist mode of production, the new era has variously been labeled as post-Fordism<sup>2</sup> (Götz 2013b; Gorz 1982), cognitive capitalism (Lorey and Neundlinger 2012a; Moulrier Boutang 2012), or neoliberalism (Graeber 2010; Har-

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2 A synonym is post-Taylorism. The term post-Taylorism refers to Frederick W. Taylor (1856–1915). The American mechanical engineer invented management strategies for the synthesis of work processes. The term post-Fordism refers to the car manufacturer Henry Ford (1863–1947), who promoted mass production with simultaneous mass consumption. These two terms are central to the changed conditions of capitalist production methods and consumer behavior in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.



vey 2005)—depending on the author’s academic background and political positioning that the name is intended to indicate. This term describes the ongoing blending of work and non-work areas and activities; emerging narratives of de-hierarchization; knowledge work and project-based work coupled with aesthetic practices; and the demand for life-long self-activation as well as the capitalization of resources and dispositions.<sup>3</sup> To put it bluntly, due to the “new spirit of capitalism” (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007), life itself is seen as a persisting project of improvement and enhancement. Yet today, the cognitive and aesthetic practices have become more central to modes of production, distributions and consumption. This is emphasized by another notion describing the contemporary economic system, namely “aesthetic capitalism” (Reckwitz 2012, 143; Murphy and Fuente 2014; see also Böhme 2016).<sup>4</sup> From a cultural anthropologist point of view, this label seems more appropriate precisely because it aims to shed more light on the everyday practices and aesthetic aspects of everyday life. Most relevantly to this study, it mainly includes the increasing aestheticization of work and everyday life (Sutter, Flor, and Schönberger 2017; see also Hamm 2015).

Second, I will explain the notion *homo UN* and how I make use of the ideal figure as conceived by Weber. *Homo UN* represents the desired UN employee as influenced by the above-mentioned dynamics. Two subsections address the UN’s explicit requirements (skills and competencies) on the one hand and implicit requirements (the ability to be flexible and mobile) on the other. To explain the effect of the latter, I use Bourdieu’s concept of *illusio*. The recourse to this abstraction allows me to unravel the mechanisms of the UN corporate culture. The *narrative habitus* (Frank 2010) of UN employees is analyzed in the third section. Drawing then upon Bourdieu’s concept of *biographical illusion* (Bourdieu 2004) and applying it to my empirical data, this concept undergirds the following thesis: The *narrative habitus* has to be interpreted in relation to the above-mentioned requirements. These, in turn, are enhanced by recruitment tools such as the competency-based interview technique applied in UN recruitment procedures. In the subchapter on skillful rhetoric, I analyze three narrative patterns which are oriented towards

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3 The German term *Entgrenzung* (Herlyn et al. 2009; Gottschall and Voss 2003) best describes this ending of limits.

4 The term cognitive capitalism was coined by economists (Moulier Boutang 2012). Sometimes used as a synonym for aesthetic capitalism, it refers to similar dynamics. However, the term ignores the fact that aesthetic practices are central to contemporary capitalist modes of production and consumption (Reckwitz 2012, 142–45).

*homo UN*: the importance of linearity, “doing good” and examples of counter-narratives or counter-stories. The fourth part of this chapter is informed by ethnographic data and analyses of the reactions to the requirements mentioned above. This includes attempts to, as I frame it, *create uniqueness* and the narrative performance of, as I call it, *balanced modesty*. The latter is linked to ideals of meritocracy. Referring to cultural anthropologist Hadas Weiss (2019), I show how this ideal combines notions of middle-class belonging with narratives of ambition and success. It reveals how individuals respond to requirements of the organization and how, in turn, they understand the UN as a place of personal and career growth. UN workers capitalize their resources and dispositions in order to pursue a UN career. I argue that they shape their self towards the *habitus of international life and work*. I don’t call it “UN habitus” because the behavior needed in the UN is comparable to the EU-space (Lewicki 2017). This assumption is confirmed by the fact that, as of this writing, many informants already found work outside the UN but in organizations with similar dynamics such as NGOs and other IOs.

This chapter offers theoretical reflections underscored by ethnographic data. The overarching argument is that young UN workers adopt a specific (*narrative*) *habitus* by responding to the corporate subject called *homo UN*. This is shown by drawing on methods of narrative analysis. The last section is thus dedicated to this summary.

## 5.1 The Discursive Creation (and Critical Analysis) of the (Employee-)Self in Contemporary Workplaces

In the field of cultural anthropology focusing on work and organizations, the transformation of economic mechanisms starting in the last third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the corresponding changes in workplaces and the new requirements addressed to the working subjects is referred to as post-Fordism (Götz 2013b; Sutter 2013; Schönberger 2007). This term concurs with cognitive capitalism (Lorey and Neundlinger 2012a; Moulier Boutang 2012), emphasizing that knowledge has become a central commodity. The terms stand for the continuous blending of work and non-work areas and activities, emerging narratives of de-hierarchization, increasing project-based work and the growing demand for life-long self-activation and capitalization of individual

resources and dispositions. Moreover, aesthetic practices are central to modes of production, distribution and consumption of goods.

In times of aesthetic capitalism (Reckwitz 2012, 143), the cultural sociologist writes, inspired by Foucault, life is permeated by a “creativity dispositive” (*Kreativitätsdispositiv*) which “aligns the *aesthetic* with the *new* and the regime of the *new* with the *aesthetic*” (Reckwitz 2012, 20 my translation, emphasis in original). Reckwitz continues that we can only grasp (and analyze) the creativity dispositive if we see in its effect “a process of *aestheticization*” (ibid., 21, my translation, emphasis in original). Following Reckwitz’s argumentation, aesthetic processes “are based on *self-dynamic* processes of sensory perception, which have become detached from their embedding in purpose-rational action” (ibid., 23, my translation, emphasis in original). Additionally, aesthetic perceptions are not purely sensory activities, but are also based on affectivity, i. e. “the emotional involvement of the subject” (ibid., 23, my translation, emphasis in original).<sup>5</sup> In relation to work, we witness a “specific motivation culture” (Reckwitz 2012, 142), according to which a satisfying job means that it is based on a creative process. The author goes on to explain that the fulfillment of work today involves the diverse and challenging production of new, aesthetic objects and events—not, as in the past, the repetition of technical or administrative processes. If we think back to the quotes listed at the beginning, the attributes “new” and “challenging” combined with emotional reward are central. Thus, how to define aesthetic practices? Reckwitz writes elsewhere that “*aesthetic practices* [...] routinely or habitually produce aesthetic perceptions or objects for such perception. Aesthetic practices thus always contain an (often implied) aesthetic knowledge and cultural schemata that guide the production and reception of aesthetic events” (Reckwitz 2016, 139, my translation, emphasis in original). Aestheticization thus permeates the individual—hereinafter referred by the broader notion of “self”—and consequently how we engage in the workplace. So how can the discursive creation and academic analysis of the working individual and specifically what I call the “employee-self”<sup>6</sup> be summed up?

As the 20<sup>th</sup> century unfolded, psychology started to create new objects of analysis in order to objectivize and measure human behavior, most impor-

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5 Cultural anthropologists point out that not only the aestheticization of work can be studied, but also that of protests and social movements. This is precisely because today the whole of life is productive (Sutter, Flor, and Schönberger 2017, 20).

6 Thereby, I focus on contexts where a wage-earning individual is part of an organization that pays them.

tantly communication (Illouz 2007). Soon, the main goal became to manage and enhance economic productivity by molding the “corporate culture”—at least in the corporate world. New disciplines and institutions evolved. Notably, this has given rise to significant transformations in the discursive field: a particular idiom sketched new concepts around happiness, resilience, skills, competencies etc. These are all attributes the individual in the era of “liquid modernity” (Z. Bauman 2000) is supposed to possess.<sup>7</sup> The notion alludes to a focus on the individual. “Our” modernity, the sociologist writes, is “an individualized, privatized version of modernity, with the burden of pattern-weaving and the responsibility for failure falling primarily on the individual’s shoulders” (ibid. 2012, 7–8). By the same token, we witnessed a shift of perceptions and processes attached to these concepts as cultural practices and knowledge techniques evolved. Today, social scientists agree that professions and disciplines that aim to improve economic productivity through human capital are an “ideology [...] which conceived of the workplace as a ‘system,’ in which the individual would be eradicated and where general rules and laws would be formalized and applied to the worker and to the work process” (Illouz 2007, 32).

With regard to the corporate world, social scientists have shown how the idea of a simultaneously composed mutual interest between institutions and individuals replaced former power structures. In the last thirty years, as the sociologists Eva Illouz and Edgar Cabanas write, “the increasing transference from external control to self-control has been mainly channeled through the notion of ‘corporate culture’” (Illouz and Cabanas 2018, 97). Thereby, a new “moral bond of mutual trust and commitment” (ibid.) complements or even supersedes the conditions set out in the working contract. This neoliberal ideal created new dynamics which imply that workers allegedly share an identical interest with their employing body (see also Boltanski and Chiapello 2007). (However, it still holds true that the corporate world views a manager as “successful” when he/she “is able to enforce his (more rarely her) vision, making employees follow the prescribed course faction” (Z. Bauman et al. 2015, 143)). Since then, we can observe an increased economization of emotions and commercialization of human feelings, both on the workers’ and the consumers’ part (e.g. Illouz 2018; Hochschild 2003; Götz 1997). The individual and thus “the self” moves to the center of academic analysis.

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<sup>7</sup> Here, I use Bauman’s notion to allude to the “individualized, privatized version of modernity, with the burden of pattern-weaving and the responsibility for failure falling primarily on the individual’s shoulders” (Z. Bauman 2000, 7–8).

Critical social analysis has a large toolkit to analyze and understand the above-described dynamics. During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the question of the self as an analytical category was already discussed in international academic forums. This is exemplified in an essay by Marcel Mauss, an ancestral figure in anthropology. Mauss suggests (with reference to his own work and that of his uncle, Émile Durkheim, another key figure in modern social science) that the categories “person,” “self,” and “I” are historically constructed and culturally variable (Mauss 1938, for discussion see N. J. Allen 1986). Erving Goffman’s “micro-sociology” tackles the construction of the self in everyday life; his reflections show that “performance” is a key element to understanding the creation of the self through how the self is presented and performed (Goffman 1959, see also R. Bauman 2012). This includes physical gestures and postures (Goffman 1972), yet also verbal performances, as addressed later in this chapter. In the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, cultural anthropologists and sociologists from the English school of thought took up the thoughts of anthropologists in order to analyze the fabrics and fabrications of the self (Carrithers, Collins, and Steven Lukes 1986; see also Cahill 1998), personhood and the corresponding mechanisms of subjectivity influenced by the enterprise culture (Rose 1998, 150–68). In the anthology, *Rhetorics of Self-making* (Battaglia 1995b), cultural anthropologists specifically locate agency in the recognition and experience of selfhood. With reference to Foucault, the editor Debora Battaglia writes, “The invisibility [of technologies of self] is an important factor when considering the ethics and effects of self-rhetoric in context of the conditions and issues of postmodernity” (Battaglia 1995a, 4).

Foucault’s historical theories explain how the self as an individual is linked and related to institutions. In different works published from the 1970s onwards, he developed the notion of *governmentality* to address the creation of the self as it is desired and molded by institutions (Foucault 2008; for a detailed summary see Lemke 2001). In the article *Technologies of the Self* (Foucault 1988), the historian and philosopher describes four interconnected types of technologies “each a matrix of practical reason” (Foucault 1988, 18)—the *technologies of production*; the *technologies of sign systems*; the *technologies of power* and the *technologies of the self*. The latter “permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality” (ibid.). The first two

technologies are, Foucault writes, used by sciences and linguistics, whereas the last two kept his attention. He states, “This contact between the technologies of domination of others and those of the self I call governmentality” (ibid. 1988, 19). Hence, the concept of governmentality serves as an analytical instrument that semantically associates techniques and knowledge of ruling, governing and exercising power with repertoires of the self. Foucault and scholars who took up Foucault’s idea and carried it further have shown how in (post)modern times the alleged absence of rigid external control by institutions was slowly internalized by individuals.

Various scholars adopted the Foucauldian concept and described the “economization of the social” in post-Fordist times (Bröckling, Krasmann, and Lemke 2000). The sociologist Ulrich Bröckling then referred to the impact this shift of paradigm had on the new type of subject (in German, *Subjektierungsform*). Hence, self-control and commitment are internalized by the individual and replace pre-existing power structures. The author emphasizes that “the entrepreneurial self is not a heuristic category capable of guiding an analysis of social structure. Instead, it is the micro-political rationale or logic, on which contemporary technologies of governing and self-governing converge” (Bröckling 2016, 21). In this new paradigm, individuals are treated as if they were entrepreneurs of their lives and act accordingly. Trust, together with a certain “liberty” and scope of action, self-determination and self-learning, was introduced as a new currency between the neoliberal organization and its employees. Sociologists have conceived this process in the notion of dual constitution of “subjectification of work” (in German, *Subjektivierung von Arbeit*) (Kleemann, Matuscheck, and Voss 2003; Lohr 2003). The notion points to the subject-orientation in the work and labor context in the era of aesthetic capitalism. It refers to the tendency that companies and employers demand full engagement (such as specific know-how, self-organization, self-control, the capacity to take initiative, to be innovative and creative, and ultimately to self-economize) of their employees. The flipside of the coin is that subjectification also describes how employees develop new demands for their organization and work. Especially in knowledge-based industries, workers aim to receive rewards from work that go beyond a salary and economic privileges (such as career prospects, autonomy, team work, interesting and satisfying tasks, and personal fulfillment). These exact dynamics can be proven with my interview material (see later in this chapter). In the German academic landscape, cultural anthropologists have presented numerous ethnographic studies that illustrate how, in the era of aesthet-

ic capitalism, norms of flexibility (Seifert, Götz, and Huber 2007), mobility (Götz et al. 2010) and even life courses (Garstenauer, Hübel, and Löffler 2016) associated with the new work regime affect everyday life. The ideal of allegedly “linear” working biographies, which originated in the era of Fordism, has stood the test of time. As a projection screen it has been molding the narratives of workers until today (Sutter 2013, 26–34). In a professional context, such as among writers of TV series, where self-staging and self-assurance coupled with the impetus for speed and adaptability are part of the work culture, workers have to show specific narrative competences and thus their ability for “pitching” their ideas (Knöhr 2017). A case study conducted at an institution offering public speaking courses in Japan shows how the organization makes use of personal narratives; “people are socialized to narrate their personal experience according to institutional frameworks” (Dunn 2014, 147). It shows how narrative patterns are explicitly demanded in professional contexts. In this light, I refer to Bourdieu who described the function of language when forming and performing the self. I do so because I approach my analysis of my interview material with a narrative analysis approach (as discussed in Chapter 3). His thoughts on the economy of linguistic exchanges (Bourdieu 1991) are crucial for my analytical approach in this chapter, where I try to understand how agency through narrating the self is created or diminished. However, before presenting the analysis of interview sequences, I will pursue the ideal figure of *homo UN* and the explicit and implicit requirements for which this epistemic figure stands.

## 5.2 Homo UN – the Wanted UN Worker

The above-described evolution of a managerial discourse and corresponding techniques have found their way into the UN.<sup>8</sup> The current paradigm of “corporate culture” directly influences visions of how employees are supposed to behave, perform, feel, and communicate. In this section, I aim to address and grasp what, from the organization’s point of view, could be depicted as the “ideal” UN employee. Therefore, I coined the term *homo UN*

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<sup>8</sup> How exactly this transition happened is the subject of a historical investigation that is still pending. Due to the difficulty of accessing sensitive data, which includes HR-related issues, this is a challenging undertaking.

(Müllli 2017b) inspired by Bourdieu's *homo academicus* (Bourdieu 1988) and according to Weber's conceptualization of an ideal type. The latter represents, as conceived by the sociologist, an absolute abstraction. In other words, conceptualized as the abstract-artificial essence of the real world, the "*Idealtypus*" (Weber 2013, 170, emphasis in original) serves as a heuristic tool kit: "The more precise and clearer the ideal types are: the more *unworldly* they are, in the proper sense, the better they perform their service, terminologically and classificatory as well as heuristically" (Weber 2013, 171, emphasis in original). In this study, the conceptualization of *homo UN* serves as a heuristic model. It is a metaphor for the corporate subject—that is, the desired UN worker as designed by the discourse of what in management jargon is called corporate culture. As was elaborated in the previous chapter, I understand corporate culture as the opposite of staff culture. While the former is orchestrated by the organization, the latter is more spontaneous and organic.

In what follows hereinafter, I will focus on selected sites where *homo UN* is constructed. My data show that the ideal vision of what UN employees are and should represent affects the way they think and feel. The ideal vision enhances the creation of a specific speech pattern and practices (*narrative habitus*) encountered among early career UN workers, which I call the *habitus of international life and work*. Thereby, I show, by drawing on Bourdieu (1988, 65), that the adoption of the UN habitus diminishes, at least to a certain extent, the potential to develop alternative behaviors and narratives in the workplace. As I will show in the next subsection, at specific moments, interviewees formulate counter-stories to underline their individual perspective.

Social scientists critically scrutinize how corporate culture influences the way in which persons behave and *perform*, as Goffman (1959) conceived it. This implies that the UN—as any other institution or corporation today—designs its "culture" and, as I argue here, uses the vision of the corporate subject as a tool to mold its employees. The model of an "ideal" employee supposedly possessing the appropriate competencies and sharing particular values manifests itself in official UN records, such as staff regulations and rules, staff manuals and job postings. As mentioned above, the required characteristics for a "UN career" are promoted in advertisements and published on the organization's official website. In the case of the UN, they are transported via regularly consulted videos circulating on social media platforms, via career development training, as described in the vignette prior to this chapter, as well as at career fairs for young professionals and graduate students who aim to work in the field of international development and aid.



### 5.2.1 Explicit Requirements: On the Discursive Development of Skills, Values and Competencies in the UN Context

As mentioned above, research drawing upon critical social theory has shown that terms attached to human behavior, expertise and experience as used in the contexts of corporate and public management as well as policy-making are a negotiable category. In the disciplines of cultural anthropology and sociology, the notion of “skills” has been especially researched with the impact to migration (Hercog and Sandoz 2018) and how the perception (and definition) of “skills” in policy-making relates to embodied bearers of ethnicity, class (Prentice 2012), gender (Raghuram 2004), nationality (Nowicka 2014), and age. The important role of employers becomes particularly apparent with regard to immigration; corporations that recruit internationally influence the category of “wanted” immigrant workers (Sandoz 2019). So there is an academic interest and sensitivity to the barriers for migrants affected by the definition of skills. It has been investigated how these perceptions of an economically sought-after, socially desirable (and therefore politically acceptable) mobile worker impact recruiting procedures for immigrants to Switzerland. Other anthropologists researched skills as commodities on online platforms marketing workplace skills-related services (Urciuoli 2008) and analyzed the dynamics at job-seekers’ workshops, notably the advice to use specific genre repertoires or “self-branding” techniques to demonstrate not only their skills but their employability (Gershon 2019b; 2017). Notwithstanding, these parameters are directional beyond institutional and national borders. The UN is not excluded from this phenomenon of “flexible capitalism.” Flexibility here means that “workers are asked to behave nimbly, to be open to change on short notice, to take risks continually, to become ever less dependent on regulations and formal processes” (Sennett 1998, 9).

In what follows, I will draw upon a few anecdotal examples in (recent) history. I will elaborate on some managerial initiatives directed towards the value regime of the UN in order to show how the perception of an overall managerial approach influenced the establishment of a grid of “skills,” “capabilities” and “values”—and the required flexible reactions to it.

What I describe as the UN value regime was clearly proclaimed at the moment the organization was established. The desire to seek international civil servants recruited “on as wide a geographical basis as possible” as well as meeting the “highest standards” possible was already stipulated in the 1945 UN Charter (1945, 18): “The paramount consideration in the employment of the staff and in the determination of the conditions of service shall be the

necessity of securing the highest standards of efficiency, competence, and integrity” (UN Charter 1945, 18). In the mid-1990s, the managerial paradigm including the initiative for staff training was pushed further (see also Chapter 2.3.3). As the director of the UN training center UNSSC, remembers,

I think it was 1995 or 96, (um), there was this idea and this is during the time when Boutros-Ghali was the Secretary General, when he said, “Look, in many countries there is a training institute for the foreign service employees, there you have to go if you wanna work in the foreign ministry. Why don’t we have that in the UN?” [...] Then you [sic] had a new Secretary General Kofi Annan. And Kofi said, “You know what? I think such an institute is so important that it [...] should become part of the UN as a whole.” Because as long as it is associated, affiliated with ILO, then, you know, it’s part of ILO. So, he basically went to the General Assembly, made the proposal, the General Assembly accepted it and in basically 2002 (..) we got the UN System Staff College. So we are relatively young. We are about 15 years old. As an independent organization.

Indeed, SG Kofi Annan played an important role and called upon “renewing” the organization at the last millennium (UN 1997). In summer 1997, half a year after being assigned as SG, Annan (who served in this position until 2006) called for a UN reform. The “One-UN” approach was thus a top-down and managerial initiative. In March 1998, SG Annan specified his reform plans by addressing the need to “build the future” (UN Secretariat 1998, ST/SGB/1998/6). However, it was only in 2006 that the SG’s initiative bore fruit when the GA finalized a report that called for a UN “Delivering as One” (UN GA 2006, A/61/583). In the same year, the *UN Ethics Office* was established to “secure the highest standards of integrity of staff members” in accordance with the UN Charter (UN GA 1945) and, as the text of the website continues, to promote “an ethical organizational culture based on UN’s core values of integrity, professionalism and respect for diversity [...] and [...] independence, loyalty, impartiality, integrity, accountability and respect for human rights” (UN Ethics Office 2017, *About*).<sup>9</sup>

The aim to “Deliver as One” implied establishing cross-organizational managerial practices as well as a new corporate identity: the “United Nations Competencies for the Future,” described in HR reference material provided by the organization’s HR portal (UN 2009, *United Nations Competencies for the Future*). This booklet aiming to establish a managerial language “that will assist us in our continuing efforts to prepare the organization to meet the

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<sup>9</sup> This source also applies to the next quotes.

challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (ibid., 3) is still widely consulted today. Informant Jordan recalled,

the other day I found a UN presentation, it’s called One UN and it’s for communication: people telling them how to write, how to do the website, how to involve, engage with the audience. And my boss said/, I shared it with everyone/, he said, “Great, show it in this meeting.” So, I presented it and explained it a bit and it was a bit refreshing.

The booklet, which is still available online, introduces the concept of competencies and values as they were defined by a process of interviews and focus groups with (senior) UN officials. The UN defined eight so-called “core competencies,” six “managerial competencies” and, most importantly, three “core values,” which should be embraced by UN staff—especially the new ones. In the *Applicant’s Manual* published in 2012, which informs candidates about the UN’s recruiting procedures, competencies are defined as “skills, attributes and behaviors that are directly related to the successful performance on the job” (UN 2012, 179). Further, it reads, “Core competencies [comprise] communication, teamwork, planning and organizing, accountability, client orientation, creativity, technological awareness and commitment to continuous learning”. In addition to the aforementioned core competencies, the UN defined managerial competencies covering ability categories such as “vision, leadership, empowering others, managing performance, building trust and judgment/decision making.” UN values (in emic terms: core values) are defined by “integrity, professionalism and respect for diversity” and are, as I claim, strongly interconnected with the implicit requirements of *homo UN*. As mentioned in a previous chapters, since the beginning of his term in January 2017, current SG António Guterres has made proposals for a new cycle of UN reforms.<sup>10</sup> This includes reforms on three pillars called Development, Peace and Security, and Management. The latter strives for a new management paradigm aiming to simplify processes and increase transparency of the UN’s work in relation to its mandate. There is a special focus on senior staff and the need to embrace feedback culture and to have fewer hierarchies and forms of bureaucracy that may impede the mission. In this regard, the UNSSC and the ITC-ILO, the training center of the ILO, play a significant role, as I learned during the interviews in Turin.

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10 Notably, the issue enjoys a significant web presence: UN, *United to Reform* (n.d.).

“All but empty terms,” as Graeber (2015) would say?<sup>11</sup> This is not quite so. But this enumeration of concepts requires at least some clarification and definition. Notably, in classic disciplines interested in the UN (administrative science, international relations studies, management studies, for example), there is extensive research on skills and competencies. Regarding the latter, management scholars came up with a definition in response to “a number of confusions within the area of performance assessment with regard to the use of terminology” (D. R. Moore, Cheng, and Dainty 2002, 314). They suggest the following distinction and definition, respectively: The term competence should be used to describe “an area of work” or, as I suggest, scope of activity or, to introduce another blurry word, portfolio. The word competency describes the “behavior(s) supporting the area of work,” and the capability to perform a specific task. The plural form thereof, competencies, is equivalent to “the attributes underpinning a behavior” (D. R. Moore, Cheng, and Dainty 2002, 316). I will not extend the literature review at this point but refer to my experience at scientific congresses,<sup>12</sup> where I often was the only cultural anthropologist. I felt that, instead of deconstructing the concept of skills and competencies, most of these scholars aim to find the “correct” definition. However, this confirms that the notion of “skills” can be understood as an episteme in the Foucauldian sense. Here, I see parallels to what has been written on the concept of communication, “an outstanding example of what Foucault called an episteme, a new object of knowledge which in turn generates new instruments and practices of knowledge” (Illouz 2007, 47). Therefore, in the analysis following hereinafter, I will use the terms ability or capability for competency and requirements or expertise instead of skills. Hence, the following result is the impact of these definitions on *homo UN*. This includes formal requirements, such as education, professional experience, and indirect requirements, such as mental and emotional predispositions (see also Mülli 2017b, 175–80). The latter become apparent through the informants’ ac-

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11 See my reflections in Chapter 2.3.

12 I have already mentioned that I believe in the importance and added value of interdisciplinary thinking. That is why I have attended congresses where scientists have shared an interest in the UN. However, it is a context in which there is little understanding of (and knowledge about) ethnographic research as conducted by anthropologists. In addition to different methods, these researchers usually use different theoretical frameworks. Nevertheless, I try to do justice to my approach of *studying sideways* (e. g. Hannerz 2006) and at least take a look at these approaches.

tions and responses, as I will show later. These values are used in each employment advertisement and are part of the job description.

### 5.2.2 Implicit Requirements and the Effect of Illusio

The former SG Ban Ki-moon once stated, “Joining the United Nations isn’t just a job, it’s a calling” (UNSSC 2016b, *Welcome to the UN Family*). As I have elaborated elsewhere (Müllli 2017a, 202), this quote points to the implicit requirements for UN employees. Ban Ki-moon’s statement is repeated in an e-learning course “Welcome to the UN: New Staff Orientation” found on the virtual campus of the UNSSC—the latter is described as “a distinct, system-wide, knowledge management and learning institution” (UNSSC 2016a, *History*). In the virtual course<sup>13</sup> that is designed to enhance the UN’s corporate identity, participants can choose between various “missions.” (This is also how shorter trips and project visits to specific world regions are termed from an emic perspective.) These course sessions are titled “our organizational culture,” “standards of conduct,” “career development,” and “conditions of service”—to name just a few examples. Assuming, a user starts with the first option, the following question pops up, “What motivated you to seek employment at the United Nations?” After replying to the question, the computer program invites the user to compare their motivation with other answers. The “motivation of others” is depicted in a virtual notebook, on the opposite page to the users’ answers. Then, a female-like computer voice comments, “You’ll quickly find that there are many rewarding reasons to be part of the United Nations!” Indeed, the other users’ answers include not only the motivation “to improve the lives of others” but also “to learn about different cultures and points of view” as well as “to work in different parts of the world.” The next step of the virtual learning platform presents testimonials of UN workers who, for instance, talk about “the privilege and honor” of working for the UN. It is reasonable to think that other possible reasons to work for the UN, such the wish for social security, status, prestige and privileges, would be inappropriate to mention. However, it is the reason why many informants apply to the UN in the first place. Informant Ana, for instance, admits, “I saw the UN internship as a big step because it’s not very common. At least where I come from in/(..) to have like

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13 At least certain parts of the virtual course are accessible to the public; this is why I had access to them.

any kind of UN experience. And the UN is seen as this very important international organization. So, my idea was like, ‘Wow, this will really make a difference to my CV.’”

How can the above be interpreted? What impact does the value regime have on the corporate culture? I suggest that the online learning course mentioned above avails the UN workers’ *illusio* as theorized by Bourdieu (1988, 56–57). His key concept uses the metaphor of a (soccer) game. The notion *illusio* describes the interest, commitment and willingness of actors to engage in certain meaningful ideas and embrace particular modes of behavior. They cooperate with (or even act against) other players on the *field* (understood as an enclosed terrain) because they are convinced that participation in the game will one day pay off.<sup>14</sup> This is why Graeber describes bureaucracies, at least to a certain degree, as inherently utopian, because bureaucracies propose “an abstract idea that real human beings can never live up to” (Graeber 2015, 26):

The first criterion of loyalty to the organization becomes complicity. Career advancement is not based on merit, and not even based necessarily on being someone’s cousin; above all, it’s based on a willingness to play along with the fiction that career advancement is *based* on merit, even though everyone knows this not to be true. Or with the fiction that rules and regulations apply to everyone equally, when, in fact, they are often deployed as a means for entirely arbitrary personal power. (Graeber 2015, 26–27, emphasis in original)

In the example of the e-learning course presented above, the fictional or utopian idea of bureaucracies can be grasped with Bourdieu’s concept of *illusio* that builds upon the international organization’s branding, which includes prestige, honor and status. Workshops and e-learning courses serve to guarantee the continuing reproduction of the organizational culture, and attendees are supposed to be socialized accordingly. The aforementioned normative modes of behavior and mental states, which are presented not only on official websites but also at career fairs, as shown later, again appear in the e-learning courses of the staff college and are, as illustrated in the vignette, embraced by workshop participants. Employees take and accept the normative concepts; they respond to them and (re-)construct them further. The interrelation between *illusio* and the construction of a specific UN corporate culture evokes Arlie R. Hochschild’s notion of *emotional labor* (Hochschild 2003, 7). Using the example of stewardesses, the sociologist analyzes how, in the service sector, emotions and feelings are

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<sup>14</sup> For discussion see also Fröhlich and Rehbein (2014, 129–30).

commercially exploited. As Hochschild puts it, the individual emotions are replaced by institutional mechanisms, “The locus of acting, of emotion management, moves up to the level of the institution” (ibid. 2003, 49). Hochschild shows that emotional norms and institutional expectations are embodied into a specific professional habitus (Götz 2012, 123; 2013a). This requires informal knowledge acquired through interaction and, as I have shown in the previous chapter, habitualized practices. Research shows that social actors do not simply adopt these concepts unilaterally. In the sense of practices of resistance, they use these norms to adopt and creatively transform the external demand towards their own needs. This can, as I will show later, be exemplified in narrative practices.

In a similar vein, the *illusio*, actually (re)produced by the international civil servants, is instrumentalized on a macro-institutional level as shown in the last chapter of this book (Chapter 6). The *illusio* bridges moments of (financial) insecurity, pressure and stress, especially when employees’ positions are not permanent but financed through third-party funds. Because employees *believe* in their “mission”—the missionary connotation of the word is only marginally mentioned here—and truly identify with the above-mentioned aim to “improve the lives of others,” they are willing to work hard; yet, the project’s continuation and, connected to it, their own future within the UN system might not be guaranteed. It is therefore entirely plausible that a strong *illusio* serves the organization not only in view of the organization’s social and cultural cohesion but also with regard to economic dimensions. This is particularly relevant for early career professionals on short-term contracts, yet also for UN professionals affected by the staff rotation policy. The *illusio*, the UN’s “ideology,” is embracing and powerful in such a strong manner that many interns and consultants who, sometimes after a long period of trying to secure a permanent staff position, do not succeed in establishing themselves as international civil servants are terribly ashamed and depressed.<sup>15</sup> They perceive their dropout as a personal failure. Therefore, as I will show in the next section, it is crucial to develop a narrative that responds to UN requirements—or, on the contrary, counter-stories to stress one’s individuality.

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15 An informant, for instance, needed several months to overcome what she perceived as personal failure, see interview with Kolibri.

### 5.3 Skillful Rhetoric – the Narrative Habitus of UN Employees

The “invention” of communication as a key ability in the corporate world started almost a century ago. According to Illouz (2007, 31),

psychologists created new models of behavior by creating new objects of analysis which in turn mobilized a wide array of instruments, practices, and institutions. The different theories that were elaborated by popular psychologists writing guidebooks on management from the 1930s to the 1970s converged around one leading cultural model: that of “communication.”

These practices of communication have also influenced how job interviews are done today and are reflected in the lengthy interviews conducted for this study. Therefore, in the methodological chapter (Chapter 3), I introduced the analytical category of *self-aware interviewees* to describe informants who are highly self-conscious and/or self-confident, and self-reflective. In their own words they use descriptions like “stubborn” or “ambitious”—to which they attribute positive meaning.<sup>16</sup> Elsewhere (Müllli 2018), I have described how self-aware interviewees formulate and narrate sophisticated stories which constitute a specific *narrative habitus* as theorized by Frank (2010). It refers to the narrations of early career UN workers as informants who speak about their work and life situations with apparent routine and control. By doing so, they respond to the requirements materialized in the ideal figure *homo UN*. My informants presented me with a well-defined narrative of their lives; their biographies seem to be free of any doubts, insecurities or frictions.<sup>17</sup> At the beginning of their careers, these perceptions can assist them in finding a way to auto-narrate their individual selves into the general self-perception of UN staff. To be precise, the feature of self-aware interviewees becomes apparent in the informants’ ability to auto-narrate their individual self which is identified as a crucial ability when working in the highly competitive professional environment of the UN. The latter is entangled and embedded in the (self-)image of a larger community of highly skilled and highly mobile professionals in prestigious settings such as, for instance, the high-end financial sector (e.g. Harrington 2016; Ho 2009). They are representative of the contemporary interview so-

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16 Interviews with Erik and Emmanuel Snow.

17 As I mentioned earlier in this book, friction does not solely address interruptions and discontinuities. Frictions also remind us of “the importance of interaction in defining movement, cultural form, and agency” (Tsing 2005, 6).



ciety (Gubrium and Holstein 2001) and a working world that is shaped by Western ideals of the *new economy* (Sennett 2006).

For the analysis, I therefore suggest a combination of narrative analysis underpinned with the insights of Bourdieu's article titled *L'illusion biographique* (Bourdieu 1986a; [in English 2004]). The concept of the *biographical illusion* enables us to grasp the *narrative habitus* of junior UN workers and shows that it incorporates specific ideas of a (professional) life. In this article, Bourdieu encompasses a critique of traditional life history research that co-produces the conception of a linear biography. He shows that biographical linearity is a social construction created by the narrator and co-produced by the specific environment and audience. Bourdieu stresses that instead of acknowledging (and trying to understand) the unforeseen twists of any life that consists of indecisiveness and contradictions, frictions and confusions, repetitions and reversions, (everyday) narrations of the biographical illusion insist on a linear (and thus one-dimensional) logic. Although many incidents and decisions are not necessarily related, the biographical illusion "describes life as a clearly delimited and progressive process formed by the individual's characteristics, experiences, triumphs, and crisis" (Järvinen 2000, 372). In her article, which is insightful for cultural anthropological narrative analysis, Margaretha Järvinen, a sociologist, further writes, "In Western cultures, biographies are constructed as unambiguously individual projects, in which the actor gradually realizes his inner essence, be it defined positively [...] or negatively [...]" (ibid.). Indeed, this understanding of life as a "path" or "journey"—that influences imaginations of a career path and the "many roads to Timbuktu" as discussed later—goes back to the work *Une vie* by Guy de Maupassant, published in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the imagination of a life as a completed and fulfilling personal endeavor (Bourdieu 1986a, 69). Narrated (and perceived) as a logical sequence of events, a neatly narrated personal life history is thus serving both the narrator and the person who listens to the story. Bourdieu shows that biographies can only be understood as fragments, as insight into a specific situation. The way a life story is presented only shows the narrator's position, and more precisely, how they present themselves (and their self) in a specific situation. The next subsection then explains, by drawing on the UN context, how narrations are influenced by job interviews that follow the idea of biography as a linear life story.

### 5.3.1 The Ability to “Tell Your Story” Impacting Everyday Narratives

Candidates applying for positions under recruitment in the UN need to demonstrate, apart from a specific professional expertise, the above-mentioned capabilities. They need to “*be persistent and strategic*” and show the ability to fit in by handing in an application dossier, “your *passport* to a career with the United Nations,” as mentioned in one of the initially presented quotes.<sup>18</sup> It is a process of adaptability and adaptation of an individual’s working life to pre-existing structures, as Bourdieu (1986a) shows, which starts by meeting the formal requirements in the so-called personal history forms (PHF), for instance with regard education and professional experience. Later, at any stage of the complex, time-consuming and highly competitive assessment procedure that is supposed to ensure finding (and hiring) the best possible professionals for a specific position, candidates must be able to *perform* like the corporate subject *homo UN*.

Here, I understand performance not in the managerial sense but, according to Goffman, as “all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants” (Goffman 1959, 15). Based on this assumption, candidates influence their counterparts. Candidates must, as in any other modern job interview situation, convince both HR personnel and hiring managers that they are capable of explicitly (and implicitly, as discussed later) fitting into the UN. Then, applicants need to pass the assessment exercise (or knowledge-based test) and, as already mentioned in the previous section, a so-called competency-based interview<sup>19</sup> in front of an assessment panel, which consists of the hiring manager, the HR recruiter and further staff members.<sup>20</sup> This particular form of job interview is based on the assumption that “[the] history [of the interviewed person] tells a story about [them]: [their] talents, skills, abilities, knowledge and actual experience in handling a variety of situations” (UN Careers 2020a, *At your interview*).<sup>21</sup> The interviewee responds to questions like, “Tell us about a situation when you went above and beyond your manager’s expectations.” Evidently, the candidate under recruitment then aims to *perform* as expect-

18 The word passport evokes the idea of a regime, as I will show later when briefly addressing the regimes of (im)mobility (Fradejas-García and Mülli 2019).

19 See also Chapter 4.2.2.

20 On the “Composition of the Assessment Panel”, see UN Careers (2012), *The Applicant’s Manual*, p. 101.

21 This source also applies to the next quote.

ed.<sup>22</sup> This observation is prompted in the interview with Fernanda who as a senior professional holds the position of a hiring manager in recruiting processes. In the ethnographic interview, Fernanda interrupts my thought and almost affirms the theatrical aspect of this interview form that has already been pointed out by other scholars (Gershon 2019b). The sequence developed as follows:

LM: And do you think these competency-based interviews work well? [...] And how to “tell your story”/ so it’s actually like/

A: It’s acting.

LM: It’s acting, yeah, it’s a performance.

This finding, namely the fact that job candidates re-narrate specific forms of stories, is reflected in a new trend of the recruitment process through competency-based interviews in the UN system. The aim is then to offer (and guarantee) future performance that is based on past success stories; the life story becomes a currency on the job market. The form of recruitment and the idea that there is “the right story” therefore further facilitates the *narrative habitus* of the early career aspirants. There is another point here. According to an HR staff member, the hiring process for a position in the *professional and higher categories* takes eight to nine months, as recruiter Montse told me. Thus, the process of recruitment *performance* takes several months and eventually turns into a *routine* (Goffman 1959, 16). It is suspected that a well-practiced candidate will better convince the hiring officials in comparison to someone who is not quite familiar with how *homo UN* is supposed to act and to be. Given the importance of rhetorical performance, I aim to have a closer look at what could be framed as the *narrative habitus* of UN workers. Also, in reference to cultural anthropologist Gershon, who researched workshops giving job-seeking advice, the recommended practices of self-representation eventually remain in force because workers are “encouraged to continue these practices of self-monitoring and instrumental networking even after finding a job, because nowadays every job is temporary” and continues that “as an enhancing self, one is supposed to commit to always being a job-hunting self too” (Gershon 2019b, 95).

As elaborated elsewhere (Müllli 2018, 106–7), dealing with language as a means of identity formation and as symbolic power (Bourdieu 1991) constitutes a daily experience for UN employees. According to Bourdieu, the phe-

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22 Notably, we can observe these patterns of performance and adaptability also in other fields of employment.

nomenon of legitimate language is one of the vehicles that reproduces and perpetuates existing power relations and structures (S. Meyer 2018a). In the social field of the UN, legitimate language does not only depend on the *cultural capital* (Bourdieu 1986b, 254–56) and the accumulated knowledge of technical vocabulary and acronyms in the official UN languages, which for many UN employees are not their mother tongue.<sup>23</sup> In the words of informant Jordan,

I think [...] it's an international English. So, we speak with different words in that English, like, "Bring me the *valise* [suitcase, LM]" or whatever and you know what you are talking about. So that's really cool (..) English with accents (..) English with a different (..) yeah (..) with completely wrong grammar (laughing), I assume. We all speak this weird English and that makes me feel like (..) yeah, I am on another (..) planet, you know, in the international world. And the language is also a fact that we can exchange.

Native English speakers experience the opposite; they have to adapt their level of complexity accordingly in order to explain themselves to their colleagues who don't natively speak English. Native-speaker Eduardo tells me that this happens naturally, "Most of the time I don't even think about it. [...] But the problem is/ the byproduct of that is that I get used to saying things in a very simple way maybe or (..) I picked up certain phrases that people here say a lot [...] People use the word 'fit' in a weird context."<sup>24</sup>

Legitimate language comprises the social competence of establishing and incorporating the desired *narrative habitus* the individual can build upon in the new work environment. As we have seen, the narrative patterns demonstrated in the interviews point to linearity and have to be almost teleological. Mostly, they do not entail any doubts, problems or frictions. (This narrative pattern coincides with the organizational narrative. In organizational meetings, as I observed, staff members hardly talk about problems but prefer to paraphrase them as challenges.) Candidates accordingly present themselves as "super humans" who, thanks to their cosmopolitan diligence and humanitarian enthusiasm, merit being part of the UN staff corps. In what follows

23 The importance of language proficiency as *cultural capital* has been addressed in anthropological and sociological articles on Red Cross employees (Garrido 2019; 2018) in particular and aid workers in general (Roth 2018). Whereas the official languages English and French are mandatory, in certain contexts other languages are "wanted," depending on geopolitical events. For example, proficiency in Arabic and other local languages is currently considered a relevant skill due to the humanitarian crisis in the Middle East.

24 In German the adjective 'fit' means 'in a good shape'.

hereinafter, three examples of narrative patterns pointing to a specific *narrative habitus* are addressed in more detail.

### 5.3.2 “Everything was just aligning” – The Importance of Linearity in the UN Narrative

As mentioned before, linearity is crucial for the narrative of the UN’s organizational history. Frictions are rarely mentioned. In addition to establishing epistemic partnership, there are a number of strategies which constitute the *narrative habitus* of newcomers to the UN (Müllli 2018, 103–4). Particularly for somebody who does not entirely feel part of the new organization, the telling and retelling (Mishler 2004) of selected sequences of their life consolidates the self-image when presenting themselves to colleagues. When answering frequent questions like “where are you from?”<sup>25</sup> and “what is your background?” as exemplified in the previous chapter, newcomers to the UN learn quickly that different stories have different communicative functions and values. In the context of career advancement and promotion prospects, a first aspect is the linearity of those stories. Early career UN workers present their lives as an (almost) chronological line of successful dispositions, encounters and events. Evidently, career development is generally not easy and involves a lot of flexibility on the part of the aspiring professionals. The reference to Bourdieu’s concept of *biographical illusion* also underscores that life is not linear even though that is what is suggested, for instance, in the format of a *curriculum vitae* (Bourdieu 1986a, 70). Therefore, difficult situations and problems are rarely mentioned in the interviews, and if they are, these stories are converted into challenges the teller has successfully overcome. Informant Erik, for instance, remembers the phone call when he was offered his first position at a UN organization, yet only under the condition that he had to start immediately.

And then he [the hiring manager, LM] told me, “I [’ll] offer you an internship if you wanna start next Monday.” And this was like a Wednesday. So, this is how I started. I applied for this internship, I got a phone call, a very brief interview, and I started the following Monday.

The ordering principle in this most certainly chaotic situation is clear and simple linearity (“This is how I started”). When I ask Erik who, at the time

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25 Fieldnote (June 2014).

of the phone call had lived in another country, how it was possible to start his new position so quickly, he responds, “I was also finishing [the university exchange, LM] in Geneva, so it worked out, in terms of timing it worked out. I was lucky, it could have been in the beginning and I would have to (..) you know (..) I would have (..) It worked out, that’s the thing. Everything was just aligning.” Instead of mentioning possible difficulties that naturally occur when someone moves quickly from one country to another, this informant hints that this unexpected and quick start presented a challenge he mastered with his flexibility and determination to join the UN. The story Erik tells almost puts him in the fairy tale role of the chosen one (“I was lucky”) whose career simply had to take this course. The narrative alludes to the fact that the “once-in-a-lifetime opportunity” is what makes the moment noteworthy, which is heightened by direct speech (“‘I [’ll] offer you an internship if you wanna start next Monday’”). Although in reality, as I will show later, the career development depends on external factors and actors (mentors who support careers and enable the development of personal networks to other senior staff, HR recruiters, and others), within the competitive work environment of the UN it seems to be important to stress that the career was determined to be. The linearity in self-narration can be interpreted as “a marker of aesthetic quality; the maxim of ‘one thing follows neatly after the other’ denotes narrative continuity and a uniform self” (S. Meyer 2018b, 56).

### 5.3.3 “Somehow to travel and to be useful” – Doing Good as a Dominant Subject Position

Another aspect in the *narrative habitus* of the young professionals is the way personal interests and ambitions are balanced with a humanitarian attitude of serving others (Müllli 2018, 104–6). This subject position is undoubtedly the dominant one in UN discourse and resonates in the initially quoted slogans on advertisements published on social media platforms: “I believe the essence of what we do [...] is to serve others,” and “to use [one’s personal] skill set to make a difference,” as well as somewhat hyperbolically to “make a real difference in people’s lives” and thereby, for instance, “to have an *impact* on the socio-economic *welfare* of people.”<sup>26</sup> I will frame this narrative as an envisioning of “doing good” in the humanitarian sense and interest and see it as another essential positioning strategy among early career UN professionals.

<sup>26</sup> Facebook website of UN Careers [Jan 28, 2017], emphasis in original.

The narrative of “making a difference” is quite common and can be found among humanitarian workers in field contexts (Roth 2015b, 92–96). The narrative presented in this section aligns with cultural practices described as *The Cultures of Doing Good* (Lashaw, Vannier, and Sampson 2017). Anthropologist Steven Sampson describes the moral claim around humanitarian work, found in NGOs (and I add, also in large IOs). According to him, the “world of NGOs [...] is a world of ‘doing good’. The ‘good’ involves a moral claim, and the ‘doing’ involves moralized practice. NGOs are thus a world of engagement. [...] NGO people are good people with a good project; they are supposed to be good at doing good” (Sampson 2017, 8–9). The flipside to the moral claim of doing good, the scholar concludes, is entanglement.<sup>27</sup> A genuine emotional involvement is needed to convincingly present the performance of morally desired engagement.

Let us look at two examples from my data. First, I refer to the interview with informant Marie. When invited to tell me something about her background, JPO Marie emphasizes her family’s stances and influence on her interest in international politics and social issues. She tells me,

And I was just reflecting on what you asked and I think I come from a family that has always been, for a long time, engaged in politics, like in social life and very interested in social policies, yeah, in life in the community. And (...) (ah) (...) on my dad’s side. So, it has always been very, very important to know what’s going on and yeah, to participate. And on my mom’s side it’s very social, so, everyone is always interested in helping others and contributing to society in that way. [...] And on the other hand, I think I had a very large influence from my grandmother who always wanted to travel but could not really [travel, LM] until she was pretty old. So, there was always this appeal to go internationally and discover the planet, so. Also, on my dad’s side a lot of people have been working as delegates for [international organization]. [...] So, I think that was also something that always appealed to me, to (...) yeah, somehow to travel and to be useful. So, this combination.

In this narrative, Marie retrospectively combines the pleasant and the useful (“I was just reflecting on what you asked”). The personal wish to “discover the planet” is underpinned with the family’s tradition in “participating” politically (“on my dad’s side”) as well as socially (“on my mom’s side”). Her

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<sup>27</sup> The author argues that often researchers and research subjects are equally entangled: “Personal engagements and social entanglements thus intersect at several levels, both in the NGO scene being described, and in the relationship between ourselves and those we study” (Sampson 2017, 10). What is true for NGOs is also true for the UN. I discussed this in the methodological chapter.

own ambitions are further grounded on the humanitarian interest “in helping others” and the personal experiences of the grandmother who wanted to but could not travel. Her grandchild, however, is offered the opportunity and takes it, almost as if she can make up for her grandmother’s generational limitations. Moreover, the tradition is intertwined with the fact that several family members already work in an international environment. It can therefore be assumed that this respondent could capitalize resources and dispositions as conceived by Bourdieu. The quote is a typical example of the subjectification of work as introduced above. The employee’s wish for personal fulfillment and an inspiring (or adventurous) work environment is shown in the above-mentioned quote; it expresses the personal satisfaction of being able “to travel” and justifies this privilege with being “useful” for a larger global society. The privileged position of belonging to an international (elite) bureaucracy is narratively negotiated with the subject position of “helping others and contributing to society in that way.” It echoes the advertisement presented at the beginning of this chapter. “Somehow to travel and to be useful,” “this combination” provides the foundation for her narrative construction of identity as an international civil servant. Yet, there are not only confirming narratives but also counter-stories as shown down the line.

The aspect of self-distancing while confirming certain images of the UN is introduced by the second example of a narrative alluding to doing good. I quote from the interview with an informant I call Justice (Jan 15, 2018). The JPO confirms the moral claim inscribed in UN work by their observation on the one hand, and simultaneous adoption of a “doing good” narrative position on the other:

A: You feel it, you have two profiles, also among the JPOs. You have those who are clearly (laughing) the international civil servants and/ it was an insider joke, like these are the/ (laughing) and others just are there because it’s a platform for (..) their bigger dreams.

LM: Yeah, okay. What is your bigger dream?

A: (Um) (thinking) It’s/ I don’t know (smiling, then continues seriously). I think to be able to have a job with an *impact*. With what I do now, I am *happy*. If I was told that I will be working in Human Rights when I was younger and (um) at the United Nations, I would have been/ I would have said, “It’s my dream job.” And now that I have it, I wonder like maybe the same but with more *impact*? Or maybe the same with more field exposure? I don’t know. Yeah, I think that’s my dream job. (..) Maybe, yeah, I think I’d like to work in post-conflict like negotiations, like be a relevant actor in negotiating between different factions, state and guerrilla (laughing) I don’t know. But something related to that. So if the UN is a platform for that, okay, if it’s another organization, of course, why not.



Two interlinked aspects are pivotal here. First, Justice distances himself from “those who are *clearly* civil servants.” They quickly explain the “an insider joke” told by those who feel committed to the “bigger dreams.” This joking statement was not the first time I had heard this during my research process; it aims to create a moral-based distancing from colleagues who are supposedly not emotionally entangled. This narrative pattern resembles the counter-stories as shown in the next section. However, what is striking here is that Justice positions himself as someone who sees the UN as “a platform for (..) their bigger dreams.” For them, this means to have “more field exposure” where they suspect (and hope) to have “more impact.” This narrative further fuels the dichotomy between UN HQ duty stations and “the field.” The statement affirms the moral-based identity of emotionally committed UN workers.

This narrative pattern is not shared by all informants. Some of them construct their identity based on counter-stories, sometimes directly referring to the narrative patterns discussed until now. In the next section, I will examine some of the counter-stories in more detail.

### 5.3.4 “If I would be a true UN” and “Demographically outstanding” – On Counter-Stories

Narrative analysis works with comparison and contrast, that is, when there is a right story, there must be a wrong one, too (see also Mülli 2018, 107–8). Variation analysis is a helpful tool in distinguishing what can be said from what cannot be said in a particular group like the young UN workers. In this section, I will elaborate on how informants use counter-stories or counter-narratives to position themselves. This, based on the assumption that “with a positioning act, a narrator can seize the opportunity to reassess a situation or an ascription and thereby express individual moral judgment which challenges social norms and societal discourse” (S. Meyer 2018b, 59).

Informant Emmanuel Snow, who graduated in pharmacy and at the time of the interview worked as a UN health specialist, positions himself as quite the opposite of the typical UN person by choosing different narratives. He starts out by marking his family background as non-international and non-elitist, “my grandfather used to work in the fields [...] that is to say that I didn’t grow up in an international environment [...] I don’t have any diplomat in my family or anyone who had an international civil career.” His way into the institution was thus different than the path he projects as “normal” for UN workers. He never assumed he would have this kind of career, “I real-

ly mean, to be honest, I never thought I would end up with the UN. It came up a little bit by chance.” Almost in a confessional mode (“I really mean, to be honest”), he admits that his career was more of a coincidence than a plan, “Yeah, actually, to be honest, this never crossed my mind, international studies. I thought I would end up in international things anyhow. [...] I wanted to get specialized in something very concrete.” He distances himself from what he assumes to be the “typical” career chosen by UN workers (“international studies”) and at the same time expresses his confidence that he was going “to end up in international things anyhow.” By using this narrative, Emmanuel confirms his own self-deserved social advancement. This quote combines two characteristics of *homo UN*; meritocracy and self-confidence. This is in keeping with the following. Along those lines of the non-elitist and the concrete, he also describes himself as “competitive” (“it was not just about playing, it was about winning” when referring to his past as a young basketball player) and ambitious, as well as “humble” and down-to-earth. All these attributes are set as an opposition to the allegedly typical UN worker *homo UN*.

The same pattern can be found in his attitude to the international background of most UN professionals. In contrast to them, the fact that he lived in the same city for twenty-four years of his life, makes him “connected.” Whereas colleagues are “a little bit (um) (..) not lost, but, eh, but they are (..) they have no strings [ties, LM],” the informant underscores, “[I] have strings (laughing) (..) very strong ones.” Being connected to his origins makes him special in the international world of the UN, “I realized that having such strong roots with a place would make me more interesting to others than being (..) living here and there.” He deliberately chooses a counter-narrative to the self-representations of his colleagues presented in the two subsections above and thus makes his story an individual one (Bamberg and Andrews 2004). The narrative construction of a rooted self is transformed into *symbolic capital* as conceived by Bourdieu (1986b) that makes these informants “different” compared to those “other” employees with a purportedly more international or cosmopolitan identity. Also, the affirmation of rootedness seems to be almost at odds with the challenge faced particularly by UN employees working in the headquarters to keep up with target groups and local stakeholders in places where UN projects are implemented. Even if my informants are sent “on mission” once in a while to visit the locally implemented projects all over the globe, it seems hard to imagine and meet the local challenges.

This assumption is also shared by another informant, who underlines how lonesome and fenced off the UN world can be: “[It] can be very harmful. If there are no other options, you do anything to not lose your job,” Vanessa tells me. She then talks about “the VIC people” to whom she, as a UN employee, actually belongs, yet insists on being different, “They admire it. They know I am integrated. I speak German. I have Austrian friends. Most of them stick to the UN so much, they even live around the UN. I live in [another] district. I am separated, on purpose.”

Emmanuel Snow also comments on the stereotypical story pattern of his colleagues, from which he wishes to distinguish himself. He chooses a deviant narration. While colleagues chose to explain and justify their career paths by the motifs of what can be grasped as doing good and “help[ing] the people,” he explains,

I am fully aware that, for instance, my program will have very little impact on cancer patients. Because those/ (..) We cannot replace the role of the local professionals, so we are there to assist them, the professions and the country. But we/ we are not there to solve the problems for them. So that’s why I don’t say “the people.” I could say that, for instance, my biological mother died of cancer and I am now working in [a] cancer [program, LM], it actually happened. If I would be a true UN, this is what I would say. No. It was a casualty, you know, ending up there. And I don’t say I’m there because I think [care, LM] about the cancer patients. Yes, I think about the cancer patients, but as a health professional, I know that this is not my role. Everybody has a role and this is the role of the clinician. So my role is to advise and to/ to work with the countries to make better investments, to achieve better results. But they are responsible, they are doing it. We cannot do it for them. So that’s why I don’t say “the people,” “help the people.” It’s very abstract.

Again, informant Emmanuel Snow chooses a counter-narrative to stand out from the UN crowd. Using an example from his biography, he intentionally contradicts the institution’s common theme of “help[ing] the people”: The loss of his mother to cancer has nothing to do with him “ending up” working in a cancer program. According to him, what I grasp as the narrative habitus of the UN is also reflected in conversational styles and manners,

Like (..) for instance (..) this mentor I had (..) is a person that is known for being very harsh, for telling things as they are. So, in the UN world this is very rare. So if/ Because in the UN world everybody says, “Many thanks.” Everybody says that they are greatly appreciated, everybody says, “Great, amazing.” You know. Very little people say, “This is shit.” You know. So when you have a person like this and another person like this saying, “Okay, you know what, you can trust me, he’s reliable.”

Using direct language with a swearword is translated into being “reliable” and trustworthy. The appreciation and politeness which characterizes the UN language is, in contrast, seen as superficial and meaningless.

Narrative analysis means “the examination of story patterns as well as of patterns of silence. When looking for stories not told, motives suppressed and plots withheld, one can arrive at valuable information about what is sayable and what is better left unsaid” (S. Meyer 2018b, 61). Against this background, I want to show another example of a counter-narrative. It occurred in the interview with an informant I call Viviane (Sept 15, 2017).<sup>28</sup> By her own account, this informant is “one of the few Africans [working in the UN HR duty station] who was brought up in Africa.” Viviane told me that a friend from back home was prevented from doing a paid internship at one of the two European UN HQ duty station because of a lack of financial resources to pay for a flight, the visa, and insurance, let alone living expenses. After the recorded interview in the cafeteria of the employing organization, the informant walked me back to the exit. In the corridor, several co-workers greeted my informant who greeted them back, commenting half-jokingly in my direction, “I don’t remember most of the faces, they look all similar to me; old, white men with grey hair.” Referring to the three categories of age, gender and ethnicity, JPO Viviane reiterates her positioning by describing herself as being “demographically outstanding” or different. This statement makes clear that she enjoys double visibility (or suffers the colonial gaze). On the one hand, the contrast of being “demographically outstanding” accentuates the predominance of “old, white men.” On the other, Viviane is highly aware that she becomes a key figure in HR statistics by being able to counteract the gender and geographical imbalance. Without any accusatory undertone but cool practicality, she tells me that, after her internship, job interviews were easy since everyone remembered her. By confronting me with the majority (“old, white men”) and not the minority represented by her, a young, female BPoC, Viviane makes her missing voice clear and underlines her personal perspective. This informant describes herself as different; she uses the counter-narrative of “being different” to create agency. In the light of this, cultural anthropologist Michael Herzfeld, who analyzed counter-narratives towards bureaucratic systems (Herzfeld 1993), points out that the fatalism that often comes along with counter-stories is a form of retrospective rationalism. Thereby, the scholar writes, narrators become compli-

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<sup>28</sup> The following is based on the memory protocol written after interview with Viviane.

ant in bureaucracies either way, whether they support a system narratively or are against it.

## 5.4 Walking on the “Many Roads to Timbuktu”?

### Resonances of Explicit and Implicit Requirements

In this section, I introduce another anecdote from my fieldwork to sum up the micro-analysis of narrative patterns and arrange them in a broader discursive context. “Many roads lead to Timbuktu” was the title of the introductory presentation at a career fair for graduates and young professionals at the end of October 2016 in Bern (see also Mülli 2017a, 198–99). The presentation was the prelude to a one-day event on “entry points in international [development] cooperation” as it read in the subtitle. Official numbers indicated that more than a thousand visitors attended the event that day.<sup>29</sup> The introductory lecture by a senior employee of the foundation organizing the career event was the beginning of a long series of information and discussion panels on work and working in IDC, both in the NGO sector, but also at international organizations such as the UN. Hence, in this section, I want to make use of fieldwork episodes to discuss reactions to implicit requirements as suggested in the presentation title.

At first sight, the quote “many roads lead to Timbuktu” reminds German speakers—many in the audience in Berne were proficient in German—of the saying “*Alle Wege führen nach Rom* [all roads lead to Rome]” which signifies that “there isn’t just one way of doing it.” It points to the main purpose of a career event: showing different entry possibilities to a career in IC. Thus the sentence would be a metaphor for the career paths of young professionals in the UN context. This parallel, I suspect, the speaker wanted to create. There is a second reference to this title: a historical allusion to the city’s name and the legends it has produced. It is what the speaker, a European man in his fifties who was introduced as a proven development collaborator, admitted when showing the third slide of his PowerPoint presentation that displayed an image of the ochre-colored city. He said,

Timbuktu, here we are. [Points to the picture.] (Um) (..) When I talk to people or (..) I’ve talked to many people, I just realized that Timbuktu is (..) has something magic

<sup>29</sup> Fieldnote, Career fair Berne (Oct 30, 2016).

in this name [sic]. Also to people who have absolutely no relation to international cooperation, who have never been there, including myself. And when there is something sounding in the name, we have associations.<sup>30</sup>

Indeed, the metaphor “on the many roads to Timbuktu” evokes, at least for those socialized in the Western hemisphere, imaginations of an exotic and adventurous place. Apparently, this includes the speaker who has never visited the city. As history shows, the sub-Saharan city has been an object of (European) imaginations and legend-crafting transmitted through various channels since the 19<sup>th</sup> and into the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Corlan-Ioan 2014, 344). The title somewhat reminded me more of a mirage than of a post-colonially sensitive approach to development. The city bears a twofold reference to the UN. First, the city of Timbuktu, which is in the Republic of Mali, has been inscribed as a UN World Heritage Site since 1988. Second, in April 2013, the UN peacekeeping mission MINUSMA (*Mission multidimensionnelle intégrée des Nations Unies pour la stabilisation au Mali*) was established due to political instability and a humanitarian crisis. In 2012, Islamist militant groups destroyed parts of the city, for which they were found guilty in 2016. Thus, there are many further associations to the city. I do not want to further elaborate on the lack of post-colonial sensibility at an IDC career fair, but rather focus on aspirants to a professional life in the context of IOs.

I suspect that the fascination for a job in the UN is also based, among other things, on images that are picked up or created at such career fairs and circulate beyond them. To be precise, such images and ideas, as the example mentioned above, certainly have an impact on the addressees of the presentation still online available. They respond to numerous testimonials of UN staff available online, namely in UN-produced videos with titles alluding to the topics journey and adventure (JPO Service Center 2015, *A JPO Journey around the World*). Moreover, career events serve as an extended platform for transporting the organizational value regime and implicit requirements to which UN workers have responded. This includes mobility, flexibility and permanent readiness (I repeat the quote from the beginning: “Mobility across functions and geographic locations *encourages learning, flexibility, adaptability, and empathy*: all essential qualities of United Nations staff”). The emphasis on commitment, hard work and the idea that a long and precarious dry spell of unpaid or low-paid internships and short-term consultancy contracts would pay off one day is omnipresent at such career events.

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30 Transcript of video (cinfo 2016, *Many Roads*).

Thus, the normative requirement to be committed, dedicated, and highly motivated builds a discursive net in the UN context.

At the career event, however, the audience did not simply accept those images. (Nor do my informants, as shown above). It was striking that several attendees raised their voices to rebut the image of a comfortable and carefree life as a UN worker. They expressed their opinions and reported on the uncertain prospects as interns and consultants. Their testimonials mirror what most of my informants experienced before their assignment as entry-level professionals. I have termed this the “third career path” towards the UN system (Chapter 2.4.2). This individual, self-initiated and self-made entry option is chosen by many and seen as an alternative to a JPO position or the YPP career path.

As described elsewhere, the UN requires flexibility and mobility—across borders, organizations and positions. However, mobility is not always possible nor needed for pursuing a career and getting a more permanent position as an *early career professional*. By comparing four different UN locations—Geneva, Vienna, Goma and Gaziantep—my colleague Ignacio Fradejas-García and I suggest the notion of (im)mobility to grasp the complex dynamics around mobility in the UN context. Based on the theoretical framework of regimes of mobility (Glick-Schiller and Salazar 2013), we question the typical narrative of effortless mobility in the UN context by showing how “(im)mobilities of UN workers [...] are reproduced by the UN system and its terms of employment, maintaining certain benefits for some while limiting the physical and social movement of others” (Fradejas-García and Mülli 2019, 907). By analyzing the regime of mobility in Geneva and Vienna, I have shown that it is sometimes more beneficial for someone’s career to stay *in situ* (ibid. 2019, 913), simply because it is where early career UN workers are able to build their network. I will elaborate upon this issue further in the next section.

#### 5.4.1 Capitalizing Resources and Dispositions: On Availability and Creating Uniqueness

As outlined in an earlier chapter of this book, the competition among applicants who aim to pursue a UN career remains high. Before elaborating on what I mean by *creating uniqueness* (see also Mülli 2017b, 181–86), I share a quote from an informant, the UN recruitment manager Montse. Montse describes the challenge of actually employing people at the beginning of their professional life in a junior position:

In the UN there is a lot of competition. For a P2 position, for instance, there are four hundred people applying. There are always many candidates who offer more than only the basic skills for a P2 position and a minimum of two years of experience. There are people applying with ten years of experience. That's the line. [...] For an intern, it's hard to compete. I ask you: Which performance is better?

Recruitment manager Montse rhetorically asks whether and how junior professionals could compare with more experienced competitors who apply due to the attractive positions the UN offers (on privileges, see Chapter 6.2). In this section, I trace junior professionals' reactions to explicit and formal requirements (remember the UN's core competencies, managerial competencies and core values) as well as implicit and informal requirements. The latter are implicitly conveyed through recruitment practices and therefore integrated in organizational processes. It is particularly the individual's readiness to respond to these implicit requirements that would make a difference when approaching the ideal of *homo UN*. The competitive HR assessment process suggests the assumption that the recruitment process is objective and offers equal opportunities for all the candidates. I claim, however, that an additional competency is necessary to become an international civil servant: The ability to create uniqueness. The individual disposition is manifested in different modes to become a "unique" junior employee. Thus, by applying Bourdieu's theory of *capital* (Bourdieu 1984; 1986b, 46–58), I will show how knowledge, abilities, university degrees and appearances are capitalized.

Creating uniqueness involves numerous aspects and is part of the process of adaptability towards the UN and its working culture. Creating uniqueness is shaped by the way UN professionals respond to requirements and values demanded by the organization. This becomes particularly apparent when analyzing interviews with early career professionals who, after a long period of being interns and consultants, finally are members of the UN staff members (P1-P3). Being in a more stable employment situation for the first time in the UN context, my informants in the interviews look back, to refer to the metaphor above, at the "journey" they have taken so far. The process of creating uniqueness is a long and complex one. During the recruitment procedure, UN career aspirants need to prove that they possess the required knowledge and competencies and that they share the corporate values of the future employer. They have to be "generic—and not—in the right way" (Gershon 2017, 61); candidates must have the right keywords to withstand the recruiting program and fast screening of HR recruiters. At the same time, they must stand out positively among other candidates. What does this mean in



terms of the capitalization of resources? Before entering the UN system, *objectified and institutionalized cultural capital* (ibid. 1986b, 50), in the form of a prestigious university degree or voluntary work in the area of international cooperation, enhances the chances of being invited for a job interview. Especially for those new to the UN system, *social capital* (ibid. 1986b, 51–53) in the form of a key person who would help to arrange an internship or communities and other networks can be crucial when applying for an internship. Both, *objectified cultural capital* and *social capital*, enhance the applicant's visibility in the vast number of applicants as I was told in an informal talk with an HR recruiter.<sup>31</sup>

How is uniqueness in the UN context created? First, creating uniqueness includes availability. Particularly, those junior professionals, who pursue what I have described as a self-initiated career path as junior UN workers, try to stay in the respective city due to professional reasons. A residence permit or visa decides if UN career aspirants are able to stay on site, meaning not only the geographic location of the respective country, city or UN HQ but also the UN environment in a broader sense, in order to (re-)activate the social network they have created during the stay in the UN from outside. It is important to keep regular contact with other peers who might have heard of a newly opened position. Staying on-site allows junior employees to be available on demand or, as informant Erik experienced it, to receive a phone call, be offered an internship and be asked to start work almost immediately. This is exactly what he did. Erik moved from a third country where he was finishing his studies directly to Vienna and started working in the new position. This was possible because Erik holds a European passport.

This anecdote about the importance of staying on site stands for numerous similar narrations I came across during my research. For early career UN workers applying for internships and consultancies, the commitment to constant readiness seems to be commonly accepted. They are ready to drop everything for a job with the UN. (This makes them more vulnerable for exploitative work contracts and precarization, as seen in the next chapter). I claim that the implicit message the UN sends is that early career professionals, in particular, have to be always available and ready to start working in a new position. Notably, in the cases of the UN HQ in Geneva and Vienna, two European cities, this availability strategy can be more easily followed by

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31 Fieldnote, Informal talk with an HR recruiter (Oct 21, 2014).

persons holding EU/EFTA citizenship who, after the termination of their employment contract, are in search of a new one. Career aspirants with other, for this purpose, less privileged citizenship find their individual strategies to bypass restrictive mobility policies (Fradejas-García and Mülli 2019). These strategies include marriage as well as a matriculation at a local university in order to receive a student visa. Especially during the flexible and unstable period of consultancies, student visas permit them to stay “on site”—or *in situ* (ibid. 2019, 913). Additionally, the availability afforded by staying on site thanks to legal citizenship that allows fast and flexible travel has to be enhanced through financial resources that will enable one to pay the living expenses in the respective site during periods without employment.

The crucial ability to stay on site is, notably, linked to *capital* as theorized by Bourdieu. Staying on site enables UN career aspirants to use and (re-)activate their *social capital*, after Bourdieu defined as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition [...]” (Bourdieu 1986b, 251). Given the premise of “indissolubly material and symbolic exchanges” (ibid.) for a well-established and sustained social network, Bourdieu underlines the importance of “objective relations of proximity and physical (geographical) space or even in economic and social space” (ibid.), as it was shown above. Furthermore, “the volume of the social capital possessed by a given agent thus depends on the size of the network of connections he can effectively mobilize and on the volume of capital (economic, cultural or symbolic) possessed in his own right by each of those to whom he is connected” (Bourdieu 1986b, 251). Accordingly, and this can be observed in my field of research, it is not sufficient to establish a network with peers, via social media platforms for example, but more importantly, in the offline world. Rather, in terms of creating uniqueness, it seems to be more recommendable to find a professional who would encourage and support a junior UN workers at the early stage of their career. This is of course, not a generally valid experience and depends on personal sympathies between individuals.

It is remarkable that several informants mentioned natural and friendly relationships with a mentor supporting their career. In this context, Bourdieu describes similar tendencies for the academic world, where professors ensure the “order of succession” (Bourdieu 1988, 87) by supporting and promoting certain students. In the case of the UN, it is mostly senior staff or supervisors who would not only provide support and guidance but particularly

a network with other professionals. This connection across hierarchical levels is intended and actively supported by the organization. It seems that mentoring is not only beneficial for knowledge transfer but it also preserves a specific staff culture and organizational values. At least semi-officially, the UN incorporated the mentor-mentee concept into the HR portal “as an informal learning option for staff to avail of as they wish” (UN 2017, *Mentoring*).<sup>32</sup> According to the HR Portal website, a mentor-mentee relationship would benefit both parties, “Mentoring provides career support and facilitates the transfer of knowledge and organizational culture.” Senior staff members are told that “supporting a mentee in their career development and aspirations can be personally and professionally rewarding; developing [their own] mentoring skills can help [senior staff members] to become a better manager/leader [...]” Junior professionals, in turn, read that “receive[ing] career support and feedback from a more experienced staff member [helps to] build a relationship that can help with career development.” Again, the organization implicitly recommends that career aspirants find a mentor. Informant Erik was lucky to find one,

I was talking to my supervisor, to my boss, and I was asking (..) Well, he took a personal interest in knowing me, or to get to know me, in the sense of “Why are you here? What are your plans?” [...] He was coaching me, he was mentoring me, too, which is really good. This was an opportunity. What I am saying [is], if your boss, when you are starting, if your supervisor, your boss, doesn't take the time to coach you, to mentor you, to help you, you know, take decisions or put you in a potential path, then things would have been completely different.

There was a crucial conversation Erik had with his supervisor towards the end of his internship in one organization headquartered at the VIC. The supervisor suggested his mentee apply for an internship in another UN organization headquartered in Vienna, promising,

that he would use his connections, contacts, so my application would be noticed. [...] And this is when I saw how things often work. [...] Afterwards, I was told, because they had so many applications [...], that they do [it] often [like this], somebody tells somebody, “Take a look at this application, and if it's good, go for it.”

Hand in hand with the *social capital*, the *incorporated cultural capital* enables one to understand “how to behave” and “how to interact” in an international bureaucratic and quasi-diplomatic work environment. Once within the UN system, language skills enhance the ability to communicate and underline

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<sup>32</sup> This source also applies to the following quotes.

the individual's match with the international field. The value of the mentor's sympathetic support is interlinked with the *cultural capital* (Bourdieu 1986b, 247–51) the junior professionals is able to acquire. This is shown by the subsequent quote extracted from another interview. Sitting in casual clothes in a restaurant after work, informant Emmanuel Snow recalls the learning experience he made when he was sent on a short professional visit, in UN parlance called mission, to one of the projects his unit was implementing in an African UN member state:

They sent me on a mission as an intern. [...] Which allowed me to learn a lot, to kind of learn *faster*, you know. And I was lucky because at that time my boss was not only my boss but mentoring me. He was really taking the time and kind of allowing me to grow and transpose myself into a lot/ and allowed me to do things that I thought I would never be able to.

Thanks to this work experience enabled by his supervisor, Emmanuel learned “on the job” how to interact with stakeholders and cooperation partners. He narratively transforms this experience into a story of how he acquired *embodied cultural capital* (Bourdieu 1986b, 245) through practical experience.

Formal requirements linked to education, knowledge and skills (“managerial competencies”) are clearly formulated in the UN context; “a place where *learning never stops*,” as expressed in an advertisement, and where “*continuous learning and skills development* are a key part of career growth” (UN Careers 2016a, *Facebook*). A strategy to enhance one's *institutionalized cultural capital* (Bourdieu 1986b, 247–50) includes the continuous participation in courses, trainings and workshops that might be offered both on- and offline either by the UN and its HR services or by other educational institutions.<sup>33</sup> This includes a broad range of language courses but also training on (self-)management, data processing programs, as well as training on particular areas of operation (human rights, migration, sustainability, for example) where the UN needs expertise. Moreover, some of my informants employed full time in the UN also work on a Ph.D. project or are enrolled in graduate programs. This is typical for a permanently activated working self in the era of *aesthetic capitalism*; an individual who has, according to Foucauldian theory, *learned*, *internalized* and *embodied* the impetus to permanently challenge themselves and to acquire new skills. Why? Because, in the current work regime, “workers are seen, and are encouraged to see themselves, as

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<sup>33</sup> The spreading of certain educational values linked to capitalism and market logics was described elsewhere (Orta 2019).

bundles of skills anticipating company needs, readily adaptable and subject to assessment” (Urciuoli 2008, 219). In the case of the UN this means that the appeal is to acquire “expert knowledge” through specializing in a particular field. This would enable the aspirants to apply for specific positions in specific UN organization. This pattern of international organizations’ needs to hire so-called “experts” is reflected by the increasing number of degrees that will enable graduates to be employed in the field of IDC. However, the strategy of specialization involves a challenging balancing act. In particular, young UN workers must prove their specialization, and at the same time still be open enough to be hired as generalists.

Mentors are also key figures when it comes to performing the desired behavior. The episode mentioned in the previous chapter illustrates this. Informant Erik was addressed by a senior staff member regarding the (low) quality of his shirts (see Chapter 4.2.1). This episode underpins the value of clothes as *symbolic capital* (Bourdieu 1984, 291). According to Erik, the superior staff told him to buy fine-quality business attire. Repeating what his supervisor said (“Okay, but you have to [buy fine quality shirts]. Your image is important.”), he goes on to describe his response:

I understood that he was trying to give me what he perceived to be a good advice. [...] There is also an expectation of you to/. And again, this is not written anywhere, but it’s funny because the mission and the objective of the UN is not *that*. But the culture around the organization is like in any other organization and then you have to adapt to it.

My informant took the advice of the superior staff member to heart, admitting that he has adapted to the organizational culture even though, in his mind, the people working in international cooperation should be concerned with more important issues than an elegant appearance. This scene illustrates the *economic capital* (Bourdieu 1986b, 47), which not only bridges the financial bottleneck during unpaid or low-paid internships and interruption between consultancy contracts but also allows the purchase of *symbolically* important objects like expensive clothes that would consolidate the image of being a serious professional. In this connection, I reiterate that the (entry) salaries are, compared to the economic realities in the vast majority of UN member states, fairly high. Nevertheless, they do not always enable one to accumulate *economic capital*. Particularly in view of long-term careers in the UN system, the accumulated financial capital enables one to bridge financial insecurities. Many of my informants told me that they save a considerable amount of their income. Informant Teodoro Salas, who holds a P3 contract

and who has a good chance of pursuing a UN career in the medium- and long-term future, stated that the high salaries are justified, especially in view of the insecurity, and also due to the fact that the majority of employees in Professionals and higher categories are geographically far away from their countries of origin and their local social security structures, family and community networks.

Bourdieu (1986b, 248) writes that the “work of acquisition [of capital] is work on oneself (self-improvement),” which is a premise for the agents to enter and stay in the *field*. From a perspective of *governmentality studies*, one can argue that the technology of the self is, in times of neoliberalism, a means to “economize the social” (Bröckling, Krasmann, and Lemke 2000). The individuals exploit themselves and are, by this, useful to economizing logics. To illustrate why combining these concepts, Bourdieu’s concept of *capital* and Foucault’s concept of governmentality, might be fruitful, I introduce another quote from the collected data. The candidate who successfully passed the above-mentioned YPP examination in 2011 shared her experiences with the general public. In her testimonial she gives advice and explains how she, thanks to diligence and persuasion, managed to pass the preparation period, described as “a relentless marathon (supported by surreal amounts of coffee)” (Petkov n.d., *The YPP Road*). The testimonial presents “best practices” that apparently involve self-exploitation, at least to a certain extent. The strong commitment that might turn into self-exploitation connected with the willingness to achieve a position in the UN is, at the same time, perceived as a positive characteristic of *homo UN*. This, and other experience reports circulating on the internet, shapes and contributes to the scaling and the standardization of the discourse around *homo UN*.

To summarize, uniqueness is comprised of various modes of adaptability. On the one hand, there is the capacity of availability that is associated with *economic capital* and residence permits that would allow on-site stays. The latter can, in the case of lacking economic capital or residence permits, turn into precarious living situations. On the other hand, being a “unique” or rather outstanding and indispensable junior employee also means building upon the *social capital* and the network created during the time of employment. Permanent contact with mentors and peers facilitates the pursuit of a career within the UN. The way junior professionals are able to activate their predispositions and different forms of capital as conceived by Bourdieu is essential. This also applies to their ability in terms of how they are able to absorb, embody and eventually reproduce the UN’s values, such as investing

in their *cultural capital* through continuous training offered by the UN and other education institutions.

Yet, what if the individual's experiences jar with the image of *homo UN*? In what follows, I draw attention to the narratives of early career professionals that are needed to build identity and create meaning when being part of the UN workforce and suddenly belonging to a global bureaucratic elite. I claim that there is a further attitude needed when working in the UN: balanced modesty.

#### 5.4.2 Locating Meritocracy: Balanced Modesty

In this section, I identify how young UN workers employed in the two UN HQ in Geneva and in Vienna recognize and understand their own becoming-part-of-the-United Nations vis-à-vis this "ideal" UN employee, *homo UN*. Where are the potential sources of friction and where do individual perspectives clash with the organizational vision of an international civil servant? And, to revisit the initial quote by one of the UN role models that was published on social media platforms, the question arises: Does a "healthy mix of *realism and idealism*" exist? This issue is approached by looking more closely at my informants' self-narratives that enable them to bridge the frictions between "the ideal" and "the real" that they encounter in the UN life-world. The overall argument here is that the narratives build on the idea of meritocracy, an ideal that I see as part of the UN's organizational culture. Therefore, I argue, for my informants it is crucial to adopt this narrative in order to ensure their position. By aligning their narrative with that of the organization, they not only demonstrate their own ability to fit in but gradually adapt their habitus. Thus, creating a narrative of what I call *balanced modesty* (Müllli 2017b, 187–90) is closely interlinked with narratives of meritocracy and imaginaries of middle-classness, as will be discussed hereinafter.

How can the method-theoretical approach of narrative analysis be made fruitful here? Since "the act of speaking [is] a correlation between thought and speech, [it is seen as] a prerequisite for an empirical analysis of consciousness out of autobiographical contexts" (Lehmann 2014, 84). According to the cultural anthropologist Albrecht Lehmann, the narrated stories, or more precisely, the informants' narrations echo "self-reflection and self-thematization" (ibid. 2014, 84) of the individual. Examining discursive practices does not only facilitate revealing the narrator's rhetorical skills, which are well developed among UN professionals as they are used to presenting not

only their work but also themselves, as demonstrated in the previous sections of this chapter. In particular, focusing on discursive practices enables a scientific approach to “the moral claims of those doing identity work in personal storytelling” (Lucius-Hoene 2013, 86).

When interviewing individuals at an early stage of their UN career, differences and frictions between the informants’ perspectives (“the real”) and the normed *homo UN* (“the ideal”) become evident. On the surface, organizational culture appears harmonious. Yet, there are “many conflicts, many layers,” as a senior professional with several years of UN experience once framed it.<sup>34</sup> He assumed that the “UN family,” having once been founded to keep peace, cannot allow internal conflicts, not even constructive criticism towards its own organizational culture, as “this would be against their own principles.” Even if the organizational culture of the UN is clearly occidental, the organization is rather reluctant to define its “international” part. Consequently, it is up to the individual to deal with their frictions. This is condensed in the notion of balanced modesty.

The balanced modesty concept is linked to ideals of meritocracy (and expressed by stressing one’s middle-class origin); it was brought up in many interviews. Many informants who grew up in different parts of the world located their personal background<sup>35</sup> in the middle class, a concept that is linked to certain a way of living, cultural practices, and economic realities, that have recently received a lot of scholarly attention (Egger and Moser 2019, e.g.; see also Skeggs 2004). Without going into the extensive bibliography on the topic of middle class, I aim to mention the following. The idea emerged in a “Western” context and has been applied at the scientific, political and cultural level (Wacquant 1991). For what follows hereinafter, it is worth mentioning that in the recent decades, especially in “non-Western” contexts, people have been adopting the idea of middle-class lifestyles, not least also with a view to underline their aspirations (Donner 2017). How to locate the middle class? Although the middle class can be measured according to occupation, relative immunity to poverty (and the corresponding ascent efforts, nowadays amalgamated with the prevention of descent (Nachtwey 2016)), absolute income levels, or subjective criteria, the concept remains rela-

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34 Informal interview with senior staff member, memory protocol (April 16, 2015). Also, including the following quote. The practices of “harmony” in UN organizations have been analyzed elsewhere (Müller 2013b).

35 In the qualitative interviews, the opening question was always: “Can you please elaborate on your personal and professional background.”



tively vague and unmasks the concept as an ideology that is defined in distinction to social groups imagined “below” or “above” the middle class (H. Weiss 2019, 2–7). In her book *We Have Never Been Middle Class* (H. Weiss 2019), anthropologist Hadas Weiss (2019) alludes to Bruno Latour’s trail-blazing book *We Have Never Been Modern* (Latour 1993) to show the imaginative power of the concept of middle class. In our context here, the subjective criterion serves to show the importance of meritocracy inherent to the UN narrative. By drawing on the assumption that “the middle” as a leitmotif “is a powerful concept structuring perception, expectations and practices” (Groth 2019, 43), it is not only linked to socioeconomic conditions but also to “ethical subjectification” (Gozzer 2019, 51). Being generally interested in the ideological aspects of middle class (H. Weiss 2019), I argue that the middle-classness mentioned in my interviews interrelates to discourses of meritocracy in the UN. I am therefore not interested in scrutinizing my informants’ socio-economic belonging (nor am I able to empirically grasp this information). I am interested in understanding the centrality of middle-class narrations with regards to the UN’s organizational culture. I interpret this fact along the line of what critical theorist Nancy Fraser expressed clearly when elaborating on the rise of “progressive” neoliberal thinking (she assesses the final breakthrough of the social-liberal movement endorsing the liberalization of capital in the early 1990s): The short-sighted policy “identify[ing] progress with meritocracy as opposed to equality” hence confirms “the winner-takes-all corporate hierarchy” rooted in the epochal transformation of capitalism beginning in the 1970s (instead of abolishing it) (Fraser 2017, 42–43). Fraser further criticizes the disastrous union of capitalist economy with a meritocratic corporate feminism focused on “leaning in” and “cracking the glass ceiling”, a union that transports the illusion that this approach enables excluded and marginalized groups to become involved (ibid. 2017, 43).

I want to illustrate this with ethnographic material. Several aspects are worth mentioning: First, by telling me that they grew up in a middle-class family, my informants auto-confirm their position and underline that, although they now belong to an international bureaucratic elite, they have humble roots. Also, they combine this narration with a self-assertive message. This is why Erik, after telling me about the supervisor’s support, expresses this anecdote as a moment of disillusionment: “I think, the system [...] has changed ever since, but at the beginning it was a bit discouraging to know that the networking factor was as important as [...] working hard, you know, [having a] good CV. [...] This was highly discouraging.” It con-

trasts with his previous experiments in life; Erik told me he was a dedicated student and was therefore awarded scholarships, “I am like a product of the welfare state. That’s clear to me.” Other informants explain they had the chance of social advancement (that culminates with a job at the UN) thanks to being excellent at chess (and therefore having their school fees paid), such as informant Teodoro Salas who was brought up in a Latin American country. Others such as Montse, who grew up in Europe, mentioned their parents working hard for them in order to guarantee an excellent education for their children; another informant brought up in an African country told me how her parents migrated to another country and could therefore pay her university fees.

All these quotes contrast with the statement by Jordan. When we talked about mentors, Jordan mentioned a few persons, which prompted me to comment,

LM: And all women.

A: Yeah, true, it’s funny that it is all women. I don’t think that I have/, well [a] man, it could be my dad. Because my dad is a guy who is *really smart, really human* and who has had traveled around the world.

LM: What is his profession?

A: Diplomat. He works for the [European country] government. But the thing is that I don’t like to say that he’s a diplomat because people think that he’s like ambassador or something. But it’s not the case.

Jordan went to international schools and therefore probably benefited in terms of cultural and social capital. Nevertheless, this informant did not effortlessly become a UN staff member. (Nobody does. The above-mentioned career practices inhibit this.) Therefore, Jordan who, I learned in the interview, worked hard to become a UN professional and went through moments of emotional struggles and hardship, avoids mentioning their father’s profession because it might allude to an elite and probably affluent background—and symbolically diminish the individual efforts which are key to the UN corporate identity. This subject position resonates with the aforementioned career quotes published on social media platforms. In this connection, I refer to the Facebook quote “In the United Nations, job enrichment opportunities, *continuous learning and skills development* are a key part of career growth.”)

Jordan’s positioning is complemented by another example. In order to illustrate the dynamics in more detail, I provide a deeper insight into the interview with an informant who wants to be called Henry McDonald (July

15, 2016). The interview, conducted in Henry's office, developed as follows: After thanking him for participating in the interview and since I had sensed his reservation, I quickly go on to assure him, "Just, (um) (..) just tell me, if you don't want to go deeper into a certain topic." And I go on asking, "So first I would like to ask you to kind of describe [to me] me a little bit of your biographical and then your professional background." Henry McDonald responds quickly,

Ok. Biographical: I was born in [Latin American country]. (Um) In the northeastern region of [country]. And, (um), I lived [there] until I was twenty-three years old. Then I moved to the U.S. (Um) (..) and I decided to go to school in the U.S. And I started again doing a Bachelor's degree.

After further query, he does not tell me more about his personal background but elaborates on his education by explaining that he did not like his studies in journalism back home. Therefore he went to the U.S. to study psychology and, in the end, finished his MA degree. He elaborates on his educational background ("Even though I had had been given the opportunity to go back to a Ph.D. program when I was finishing my degree in psychology [...] I decided not to take it") and goes on telling me how his professional career developed since. Fifteen minutes into the interview, I ask again about his personal background since I want to understand his story better:

LM: Mhm (affirming) Ok, ok. May I ask like, how you were brought up? I mean did your/ [A: Aha, how I was brought up?] parents study? Yeah, like (..) did they, kind of, are they happy that you're here now? Can you maybe/(..) do you have siblings?  
 A: Ok, well I come from like a middle class, probably initially lower-middle class in [country]. (Um), and my parents they finished some college. My mom did, my dad didn't. And (um), they were just kind of middle-class average workers. I have a brother, and I was lucky to be able to/ (um), my parents were able to afford private education for me. Because if you don't receive private education in [country] it's, it becomes very hard for you to move up the ladder and even compete to go to college. [...] And (um), I actually saved money for many, many years. Four or five years to actually try and do some sort of exchange program to improve my English in the U.S. Because even if my parents could afford to do that (..), they probably could have/ (..) they would not have done that for me. Especially not my father. So I had to finance my entire education and my entire stay at the U.S. myself.

Here, Henry McDonald, develops a narration of meritocracy, which, I argue in reference to Graeber (2015) and Bourdieu (1988), is in line with the UN narrative. By locating his family background in the lower-middle class with a mother who finished college and a father who did not (and, according to

my informant, would have been unlikely to have paid for his son's education abroad), Henry McDonald mainly underlines his own efforts to save money for "four or five years" which ultimately financed his own education abroad.

However the way in which the narrative is developed, in some cases, seems to be a strategy of understatement. Such understatement emphasizes the efforts the aspiring individuals and social climbers went through. It also legitimizes the award: a UN work contract. The UN tends to attract ambitious individuals who are not only willing to work hard in order to accomplish their goals but who also want to be recognized for their efforts and sacrifices. Central amongst the latter is that they accept the flexibility and insecurity caused by short term contracts. With the middle-class narrative, UN workers are able to stress both their achievements and the modesty underlying their commitment to the organization. Additionally, this narrative underscores the promise of meritocracy inherent in the UN's hiring practices and discourse, proclaiming that everyone is able to achieve a position in this prestigious international organization. As my empirical data show, UN career paths are shaped both by individual adaptability and coincidences such as, for instance, finding a mentor.

To conclude, the informants' self-interpretation or attitude of balanced modesty is linked to emotional adaptability, which in turn is connected to self-imagination. The accentuation of "the middle" here is particularly striking in contrast to the traditional visions of the UN as an elite context. As I have described at the beginning, the organization virtually celebrates this image of exclusivity. It is generally dominated by the idea that only people who belong economically and culturally to the elite of their country can join the UN. (This is in fact actually the case, albeit only to a certain extent). But at the same time there is also the internal narrative of meritocracy, which is inherent in bureaucracies as elaborated by Graeber and Weber. It follows, then, that you have to earn your place in the UN—and tell "your story" accordingly. For early career professionals, narratives of balanced modesty are a strategy to bridge the gaps and address the resulting frictions between their own identities and the identity of the "ideal UN employee." In a nutshell, creating the image of balanced modesty is a means to self-narrate one's own individual subjectivity into the UN context.

## 5.5 Habitus of International Life and Work or The Ability to Align Different Narratives

A quote from the UN's social media platforms, namely that "the dream" of pursuing a professional career in the UN context has to be approached "with a healthy mix of *realism and idealism*" sparked the analytical approach to the UN's organizational culture. I approached this topic by juxtaposing the corporate subject, *homo UN*, with the actual experiences and narrations of newcomers to the UN, most of them young professionals. *Homo UN* resonates with idealized expectations of life and work in the UN environment that are, in many cases, out of sync with the real experiences. The ideal figure of *homo UN* reflects the high expectations of UN workers as a human "resource." As we have seen, the corporate subject of the UN is aimed at being outstanding and successful. *Homo UN* is highly flexible and mobile, resilient and always ready to make use of the fact that "*every day offers a new learning experience.*" The ideal figure of a UN worker is cooperative and a selfless team player, honest, upright, professional (and not an emotional or private individual), respects diversity and is ready to "*go beyond their comfort zone.*"<sup>36</sup> All this exemplifies the multiple dynamics of subjectivity of work. Thus, both the UN worker and the organization interweave specific attributes of *homo UN*. In a process of continuous reciprocity they mold the idea of a flexible, eager and risk-taking employee that responds to explicit requirements such as expertise, capabilities and abilities (in the UN jargon coined as skills and competences) as well as "values." Since the UN defined so-called core competencies, managerial competencies and core values for its employees through job descriptions, applicants have to prove their abilities and commitment to the organizational value regime. This, together with explicit and implicit requirements transmitted by the UN recruitment procedure, shapes the corporate subject that has been identified as *homo UN*. It is embedded in a broader discourse as I will elaborate in the next chapter.

*Homo UN*, seen as a hermeneutic tool, conveys an idealized notion of life and work in the UN context, which does not necessarily correspond to real experiences. To address possible frictions and disjunction, young professionals aiming to enter the UN must find (narrative) strategies for coping with the UN environment and adapting to its organizational culture. This is precisely because current recruitment practices increasingly demand nar-

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<sup>36</sup> All the quotes were found on the Facebook page of UN career, see footnote 1, p. 203.

rative performances of shaping selves into (the demanded) stories. This can be shown clearly in my data. Applying narrative analysis, I have shown how newcomers to the UN live up to this figure and adopt a specific *narrative habitus*. Eventually, they try to adapt their story and practices to what is expected by the organization. Assuming that these repetitive actions are eventually embodied and reproduced, I assume that alongside the narrative habitus my informants also adapt their personal essence. This is what I grasp with the notion *habitus of international life and work*. However, UN workers can also be conceived as plural actors as conveyed by Lahire. My interviewees refer to a vast “repertoire of schemes of action (habits) [that] are ensembles of summaries of [their] social experiences” (Lahire 2011, 32), which was exemplified in the analysis of narrative patterns I came across in the ethnographic interviews. While some affirm ideas of *homo UN*, others create opposing narrative positions.

The narrative analysis of the interview passages suggests that for the lengthy and competitive application process, including the job interview, to be successful, it is of utmost importance that candidates are able to narratively convert their *capital* into the desired narrative. They succeed in this by crafting linearity despite challenging situations and by balancing personal dreams such as travelling with narrations of doing good. By constantly reflecting on their own position within the UN, my informants display a clear awareness of belonging to an international bureaucratic elite, as enshrined in the UN’s founding principles. A central tenet of these principles is the moral aspect of doing good and an ethical work attitude. The self-distancing from the personal narrative in favor of the organizational one is, I claim, a premise for a “successful” or, to quote the advertisement, “realistic” adaptation to the UN environment.

Affirmative narratives, however, are only one side of the coin. My informants also developed counter-stories that implicitly reject some of the ideals proclaimed in the UN. Thereby, they are able to critically distance themselves from their employer and focus on their own identity. It is interesting, however, that counter-narratives echo the bureaucratic ideal of meritocracy. I explained that besides the capitalizing of resources and dispositions, the adoption of a specific narrative habitus enhances the alienation of an individual self from the corporate figure of the UN. I explored the symbolic and ethical significance of the narrative of a middle-class affiliation. On the one hand, this contrasts with the image of the UN as a prestigious, sublime place. It is an image that has been evoked and cultivated by the organization itself

over many decades. This implies that the UN staff, and therefore my informants, (always) belong to a global elite, which, as we know, is not quite true. Also, my informants distance themselves from this idea by underlining their middle-class background. On the other hand, the narrative of having a middle-class origin underscores their own achievement in having made it into the (prestigious) UN. This serves the narrative of bureaucratic meritocracy in general and resonates with the organizational ideals that UN workers have, thus proving the speakers' worthiness of being part of the UN, in particular. This image underscores the individual's personal achievement. Finally, I also point to the fact that this finding directly correlates with my sampling; I mainly interviewed people who could provide me with this narrative. Therefore, I assume, only those who, for any reason, are capable of adopting the narrative of meritocracy participated in an interview for this study. This is because they are able to present me with the "wanted" or "desired" narrative. I assume that certain individuals due to their (indeed privileged and affluent) background and the corresponding biographical experiences, did not recognize the importance of my research question on inclusion and exclusion regarding UN careers—or simply did not identify with it.

To conclude, the issue of access to the UN as an employing body is based on how potential career aspirants are able to show their adaptability to the organizational structures. Accordingly, it favors candidates with certain attitudes and attributes, and eventually leads to a homogenization of UN staff. There is, however, a downside. It is highly possible that these narratives are not only influenced by the competency-based interview technique. The narratives also echo directly back into the organization and corporate culture—meaning that deviating narratives have no room. This may have serious repercussions for an organization that prizes its international representation and reach and whose success with a global agenda depends on inclusiveness and *real* diversity. So I conclude by referring to what an HR recruiter told me. This aspect is linked to the organization's goal of striving for gender parity and a balanced geographical representation among UN staff members. I learned that the HR department is responsible for shortlisting female candidates and candidates from under-represented countries.<sup>37</sup> When I asked how this goal is achieved in the case of the entry-level positions where UN officials are not appointed (and sometimes promoted on a diplomatic level) but

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<sup>37</sup> The continuously adapted list of *un- and under-represented countries* reflects the geographical representation among the UN workforce. Candidates from middle and high-income countries are usually over-represented.

have to apply independently, HR professional Montse laconically answered, “The best candidate is the best candidate. The issue is the short list because it will be kept as a record. If there are two hundred candidates for a job and only two females, we say, ‘Consider them’. But it finally depends on the performance and if they fulfill the requirements.” Thus, it depends on the *performance* of a candidate whether they are able to convince the assessment board that they are “the best.” Although the UN provides information about interview practices on its career website, not all candidates who are familiar with the IO context possess the specific forms of *capital* and dispositions as conceived by Bourdieu. Nor are they ready to present the “wanted” narrative. The recruiting process favors persons with an occidental education and work experience. As HR officer Montse admits later in the interview, “People from developing countries do not have the same chances to grow in the field, even if they might have a good education.”

This culminates in the aspect addressed in the following chapter: the precarization of a growing group or *non-staff UN personnel* contrasting with the privileges *UN staff* enjoy.



# In Limbo between Internships, Consultancies and a Staff Position

Thursday, March 2, 2017. I arrive a bit earlier than the scheduled time at the place Ana suggested for the ethnographic interview.<sup>1</sup> She suggested a restaurant that is on her way home from work. This is a pragmatic decision because of the large amount of work she has at the moment, as she told me by email. I am therefore more than happy to accept her suggestion to meet after she finishes work. Our idea was to meet in the evening and to have dinner while conducting the interview. I contacted Ana because I learned from a common acquaintance that she, after years of internships and then consultancies, (successfully) took the YPP exam. So, I already had some details about Ana's (professional) life.

I did not know the restaurant. Its French name suggests French cuisine. Fair enough, I think and enter. The warmth of the room contrasts with the cold winter weather outside. A waiter accompanies me to the reserved table. While waiting at the table, I watch the room and other guests. The restaurant is mostly decorated in white, and the lights are dimmed. Only candles in silver candleholders illuminate the room. It is noisy. I hope my audio recorder will be able to differentiate our voices from the background noise.

At around 7 p.m., Ana arrives. She joins me at the table and after a little bit of small talk about how her day was, I explain the interview procedure. After ordering, I start the recorder and ask her to tell me about her path to the UN. "Well (um)," Ana starts slowly, "I think/ I started the most common way of starting at the UN, which is doing internships." She tells me that, after graduating from her MA studies in Geneva, she searched for information with acquaintances who had already completed internships at the UN. One of these former interns recommended Ana to their former supervisors at the UN as her successor. That is how Ana started her first internship at a branch of the UN Secretariat. "Then I worked there as an intern for some time, but I didn't have/ I didn't enjoy it as much as I would nowadays because I considered it

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<sup>1</sup> Details of Ana's biography are slightly altered in order to protect her identity. During the interview, she was already very cautious and hid information that would expose her personal background.

to be, like, (...) only the internship,” she explains and continues, “I didn’t know the UN dynamics of, like, / like, networking, of, like, really understanding the structure. So (...) my first experience in the UN was basically going to work, doing my job and going back home. I didn’t really worry about, like (...) knowing how the other things work or anything.” Ana explains that she did not engage in networking nor tried to find another position after her short internship. She did not think of herself as an intern entitled to network for herself and her professional future. “That’s how I saw internships before. [...] I didn’t know that it was way beyond that.” Therefore, after finishing the internship, she had only one option, “I went back to my home country for a while, trying for jobs.”

Prior to her MA studies, Ana, a trained law professional, had already worked full time. Signing up for a UN internship meant going “from a full position, well-paid, to unpaid work. But sometimes you have to take a step backwards to move forward,” Ana says laughing. The now 32-year old explains her decision to “change [her] career” as follows: “I was happy [at the earlier job as a law professional]. Like (...) but I think I needed, like, some more experience. To see the world, to see other job cultures, to have/ (...) It’s a competitive job market nowadays. I think if you only work in your country and you do the same thing forever, it’s not (...) really the best. At one point this will come back to haunt you. Like, (...) to have very single, specific angle, yeah, experience.” She explains that she “saw the internship as a big step because it’s not very common. At least where I come from, in/ (...) To have, like, any kind of UN experience. And the UN is seen as this very important international organization. So, my idea was, like, ‘Wow, this will really make a difference in my CV!’”

Finding a job in her home country, Ana tells me, was difficult for several reasons. To cut a long story short, the symbolic value of the additional educational certificate from a university in Europe and her UN experience was not paying off. Returning to her home country, Ana soon noticed that during the time of being abroad, she “lost” many of her professional contacts. Also, she had a new professional profile. In a nutshell, it was difficult to gain a foothold as a law professional with an MA degree in international relations. In addition to all of these challenging factors connected to her return, Ana’s partner remained in Europe. Hence, her personal life influenced the decision to go back to Geneva and try to establish a professional career there, instead of investing energy in rebuilding her professional network in her home country while having a partner on another continent. The decision seemed to be obvious. “As my partner was in Geneva, I came back and I decided to/ try to find work at the UN. Because as an expat, I think it was the easier place to find work as a qualified expat without having to deal with all the bureaucracy required to get visas or work permits,” she recalls her decision and, after a pause, adds thoughtfully, “But it

proved to be more difficult (..) also (..) than I thought. I had no idea.” She continues that she “basically applied for any UN job that I thought my CV would fit” without knowing “that you really need to have all these years of experience.” Half smiling, she comments, “And I didn’t get anything for obvious reasons. Because I had just/ (laughs) I graduated and finished an internship. They would not give me, like, a P5. [...] I send my CV again for another internship.” (While writing these lines, I interpret Ana’s statement as a form of distancing. She obviously exaggerated by saying that she would of course not be hired as a P5. I guess, with this statement, she wanted to underline her not-understanding at that point. It is her manner of distancing herself from the inexperienced and “naïve” person she was back then.) Luckily, Ana continues, she received another internship position, now “at an agency working towards more development-oriented work.” Her internship lasted only three months. In spite of the short period, Ana recalls, “this time I paid more attention to these other things.” Ana slowly enumerates several things, “Like, I tried to really understand how the structure of the organization was. Like, how people interact, the hierarchies, the kind of job possibilities that would potentially exist in the future. So, I was really more engaged at like trying to get something out of this internship.” In retrospect, she continues, “it paid off, because after I finished, a few months later, I was called for a consultancy.” She closes her story, “And then/since then I’ve been working there.” First, it was a “more simple role and then I got more and more responsibilities.”

Ana is convinced that her attempt to try to understand the working dynamics during her second internship made the difference: “I came from the private sector, it’s very different. In my opinion at least. [...] I understood that the UN was a different kind of animal. Like, I would have to (..) yeah, deal with things in a different way.” She tells me how she expressed her aims explicitly, “Since the beginning, I set my interests, like, I really want to make a career here, I want to continue.” Looking back, she says that during the internship she could not have imagined that “consultancy even existed. [...] I was like, ‘Wow, that’s already too good to be true, to have an internship.’” She recalls thinking, “that’s all I can ask for. I leave and in, like, twenty years when I have all this great experience, I come back. But talking to other people I understood, ‘No, you can have other chances, too.’” This is how Ana started working as a consultant. She had to pass a test assessing her skills in “Word and Excel and things like that.” Being a former intern was a plus since the team “knew me already and they knew how I work and my skills.”

Aware of short-term consultancy contracts and being familiar with the major task of Ana’s team, I ask her, “And then you got this position. And how was it? Like, (..) how many months do you have? Or, did you know that it’s a project at least for (..) I don’t know (..) how many years?” Ana’s response shows the effects of job insecurity

at the UN: "It was very difficult in the beginning because they really needed me, but they didn't have [any] funds. So, I often had small breaks in my contract or very short-term contracts. I knew, like, the certainty I had, was, like, they wanted me there. But I had no certainty if they would manage to keep me." I remember that Ana told me in the preparatory talk prior to this interview that she and her husband, who also has no EU/EFTA citizenship and, at the time, worked under similarly uncertain conditions at the UN, had lived in an improvised home for several years. Only recently, the couple moved to a bigger flat, finally settling in, which in their case meant purchasing furniture instead of living out of their suitcases. With this in mind, I comment that this situation must have been stressful. "It's very stressful," Ana confirms, "Especially if you're/ (..) in this case being/ (..) the one of the Europe headquarters. If you don't have the permanent residency. Because not having a contract means you need to leave the country." "Immediately?" I ask. "Immediately. And sometimes at very short notice. Not because they don't want to tell you, because they don't know. Like sometimes they can only say, 'Yes,' once the funds get approved and then it's/ (..) you never know. I was always prepared to leave."

If the new contract started within three months, she could stay as a tourist. A popular strategy, I learned when talking to other persons, is to take a few days holiday outside the Schengen area in order to be able to enter the country legally again. Ana's alternative was, "Or I just left. Sometimes/ I took the/ (..) it was also an advantage for me in a certain way, because I could take the time to see my family. So I just went back home and/ (..)" I express my surprise when she mentions this. Ana explains, "I think this is one of the advantages of having this kind of contract. Like (..) you can have extended holidays." She adds laughing, "Unpaid holidays." She explains that these conditions "allowed" her to visit her family twice a year. I express my empathy, "You manage to see them regularly." To this, Ana comments laughing, "No, that I have better contracts, this is not possible anymore." By "better contracts" she means longer contracts which include paid holidays.

Ana explains that she enjoys working as a consultant, "It's really good for the experience. You learn a lot." She adds, "But the only problem is, as a consultant, you don't have career progression. Because you cannot go further. You can have a salary progression, depending on how long you stay. But there is a limit of responsibility you can get." She continues explaining, "Because not being staff, you're not allowed to do certain things. Like sign on behalf of the project and things like that. So, this is one thing that bothers me still (..). It's good to gain experience and to be exposed and to bring parts of the work. Different work experience, different kind of projects, but in terms of career development, there is one point that it's (..) at least for me (..) personally, it's not worth doing it anymore, because there's not really a progression."

After a pause, Ana shrugs, “Either you get a staff position or you/(..).” By not finishing the sentence, she alludes to the only alternative: to leave the UN—a decision her husband made in order to be able to follow Ana’s career path through the UN.

Yet, Ana, being a national from a country that within UN staff is under-represented, decided to apply for the YPP exam. “I applied, I think, once before. But I never got picked to actually write the exam,” she recalls. “Because they choose (..) a limited number of people (..) from each country (..) to sit the exam.” I agree that the exam is competitive because of the high number of applicants, “About 40,000 a year (laughing) worldwide. This is the number I found from two, three years ago.” I ask Ana if she, after not being picked for the YPP the first time, applied the following year. She responds, “This is the thing. Like, this is the examination that everybody talks about. Like, ‘Wow, it’s really/ (..) You should try!’ But I remember my boss telling me, ‘It’s too difficult. Don’t even/ (..) (laughs) (..) try other ways, easier ways of getting in.’ [...] Like getting more work experience and like, you know, working outside and going back to the UN.” Ana laughs while remembering the response of her boss.

After the rejection, Ana applied for the next years, thoroughly preparing, “Yeah, and the first time, I didn’t pass and then I saw my/looking to my CV again, and I was like, ‘What is wrong with my CV? Why they didn’t pick me?’,” Ana laughs and continues slowly, “And then I went/searched online (..) every information that I could find about, like, ‘How to write better CVs?’ I asked my friends who work in HR like: ‘How can I put in this thing to be picked?’,” she remembers and concludes, “I think my biggest change is, like, I really tailored the CV to what they were asking. Like, really put these specific skills that I thought they would want in this kind of job. Which is very broad, because when you apply for the YPP it’s really broad. The opening is like/ they give very little information. (..) And then I really took my time and I worked on a very long application. And by this time, I had a lot of experience in being denied for all the kind of/ (..) so I basically (laughing) could do a good CV by just eliminating (laughing) all the things (laughing) I thought were not good.” And after a pause she reiterates, “Because I got a lot of rejections.”

Ana gets ready to continue her story, “I totally forgot about it. (..) I just applied/ (..).” But then interrupts herself, “Ah, the first time was/funny, I forgot to mention (..) the first time that I applied for the YPP, I really thought I would be picked (laughing). I already started studying previously because they always give you notice that you’re accepted, maybe two month in advance, normally. And then I was like, there will not be enough time for me to study everything. So, I started studying before. And I never got picked. So I was really disappointed (laughing) because I had read a few stuffs (..) things.” But the next time, Ana changed her attitude. “I was like, ‘I’m just applying for the sake of applying’. But then I forgot about it, I didn’t study. And then I got

the notification that I was accepted to take the exam. And I was like, 'Oh, shit,' she laughs. I have to laugh, too. Ana turns more serious and illustrates her dilemma at the time, "And working full-time, it was like, 'How can I?' Like (...) And I couldn't take holidays anymore because I had used all my holiday because I wasn't expecting it. So I really needed to create like a working and studying schedule that would help me to go through everything in the time that I had." There were only two months to prepare. "And the list was huge. Of the things to read." She goes on to explain how she, given the stressful circumstances, reached out to other applicants in the same situation: "And then I researched online for, like, other people that would also sit exams. And there were, like, Facebook pages and LinkedIn web pages with study groups. So, I got in some of these study groups." Ana describes the positive experience of the group supporting each other in a period of extreme stress and pressure, "I found it really cool because it's basically people from all over the world helping each other." She will later explain the arrangement: "From my study group, most of the people, they were from all over the world. But most of them were somehow based in Western countries. So you had people from Africa, Latin-America, but we were all living or studying or working in Europe, U.S. (...) you know."

Studying on her own, she adds that she "fully concentrated on key UN texts. [...] I went to the UN website to search for the UN text or UN resolutions." I find her justification to do so interesting: "Well, I thought, like, (um) this is, like, an examination for you to get a kind of job working, like, in UN projects. So I figured they would want someone that could do/ perform a task. Not someone with extreme big theoretical knowledge about certain things, you know?" Finally, Ana and her study group focused on studying hard facts about the UN. But in the end, the exam was different than imagined: "My actual exam was way smarter. Like, it was a lot of applicable knowledge. You had to think and you had to analyze and find solutions. It wasn't much about memorizing (...) anything." She tells me how she practiced for the four-hour handwritten exam: "Handwriting which we are not used to doing anymore, you know? I only type right on the computer. So, being a non-native speaker of English and not having the prettiest handwriting in the world, I was like, 'How am I gonna do it? I need practice.' So I really practiced writing. Things I haven't done in years. [...] So I really went on and wrote, wrote, wrote, wrote, wrote tons of things."

Finally, the day of the exam arrived. Previous to that, Ana could choose where she wanted to take the exam, [Here] or in the capital city of her home country. She explains her decision with the following, "I decided/I thought about it because here would be an environment that I'm familiar with, that I know. But back home I would have the support from my family and friends. And I think it would make me more relaxed. (...) being with people that I don't know at all, you know? So, I actually have

to travel from my hometown to another place, but I (..) and it was extremely hot and uncomfortable. (Laughing) I have to say that when I sat in the exam, I regretted. I was like 'I could be in the comfortable/ like always in Geneva during this exam and here it is, like, so hot.'" After the exam, Ana got back to Geneva, and continued working as if nothing had happened. "You see so many people trying. And then I completely forgot about it. And I actually, yeah, just (..) continued my work and continued applying for other things or searching for other opportunities. And about springtime again (..), I got (um) an email saying that I was chosen to be interviewed. That I had succeeded the exam. And that the interview would be in a week or, yeah. [...] And then I started, like, quickly preparing for the interview. Like, finding materials online that (..) which the UN has a lot to (..) how to prepare for interviews. The UN has a specific kind of interview. That's competency-based interview." I affirm knowing this type of interview technique. Ana adds, "And they actually booked my interview the day of my wedding." We both laugh. Ana continues, "And I (..) yeah, I couldn't say, 'No,' so I was like, 'Well, I need to be interviewed and get married.' (..) Which is the two most nervous moments of your life at the same day it's not very (..) nice, but/ (..)" She laughs. "My whole family was here, my friends were here and then I was, like, (laughs) very nervous," Ana remembers. When I asked her to give an example of the question she got during the competency-based interview she illustrates the consequence of the immense pressure she must have felt: "Yeah. The thing is my interview/ (..) I don't remember a lot because of the wedding-situation. I was so nervous that I think I blanked everything. So (laughs) I/ (..) I don't really remember a lot of the things. Besides being very nervous. (laughs)."

Our conversation goes on and Ana explains to me how she experienced the situation of the exam in more detail. She describes her strategies for responding to the catalogue of questions, reminding herself of her time management while rationing her energy through the four hours of the exam. As the interview comes to the end, we are both exhausted. After one and a half hours, I switch off the audio recorder and we continue talking for another thirty minutes. Ana tells me that even after successfully passing the exam and the job interview on the day she was getting married, she is still waiting to be called as a YPP in the job family of "social affairs" for which she had applied. This is because successfully passing the exam simply guarantees that one is placed on a roster for a period of three years. Whoever is not called within this period of time has to take the exam again. (Luckily, I will receive notice later, at the beginning of 2018, that Ana has been called for a position on another continent while her partner was still employed in Europe and commuted back and forth. At the time of this writing, Ana is waiting for her next assignment.)

It is already late and I am keen that Ana can finally go home after her long working day. We pay and leave the restaurant, then say goodbye and walk away in opposite directions.



## 6 Privileged Precarities: Mechanisms of Flexibility, Subjectification and Precarity at the UN

To my mind, this is what should be at stake when we talk about capitalism. Not only why some have more and others less, but also why so few people now have stable lives and a sense of well-being; why so many have to scramble for precarious work, jiggling multiple jobs with fewer rights, protections, and benefits [...].

(Fraser and Jaeggi 2018, 3)

Indeed, [15<sup>th</sup> century book hunter Poggio Bracciolini's] later acquisitiveness may have been a reaction to the memory of those long months, stretching into several lean years, when he found himself in a strange land without a position or an income and with very few resources on which to fall back.

(Greenblatt 2011, 22)

“For many young international professionals coming to Geneva, *landing* a job at the United Nations is the *ultimate* dream. Just like [Tom Smith]<sup>1</sup>, they are *passionate* about what they do in playing a role towards bettering the world,” a female voice introduces a report broadcast on February 26, 2018 by CNN Money Switzerland (CNN Money Switzerland, Dupraz-Dobias 2018, *Concerns over Growing Ranks of UN Consultants*).<sup>2</sup> It is the voice of the reporter. Then the camera shows the interviewed UN consultant. Delightedly, he says, “We have a toe in this game. And there is (..) [laughing] a tremendous amount of satisfaction.” The interview is shot on the *Place des Nations*. Behind Tom Smith and the reporter, tourists take pictures of themselves standing in front of the Palais des Nations. Across the busy street, the television audience spots the most famous UN building in Geneva. Behind thick metal bars, an avenue of flags of all UN member states leads to the Palais illuminated by the February sun. While the camera shows the reporter and the UN consultant walking across the Place des Nations, the voice of the female reporter describes in the background that, after completing his international studies in Geneva, Tom Smith “found consultancy work in various

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1 In order to guarantee anonymity, I gave the mentioned person the name Tom Smith.

2 This source also applies to the following quotes.

organizations of the UN system.” The next shot shows a man who looks to be roughly in his mid-thirties. Tom Smith wears business attire; the light-blue shirt and dark-rose tie contrast with his dark winter coat. He is blinking in the sun while talking about his motivation to work for the UN. (If this report were a movie and the UN consultant an actor, this scene would clearly suggest that he also was bedazzled by the UN.) Tom Smith describes that, over several years, he worked on various projects, “And so, a lot of the work that I have done over the past, I would say, three to four years, has been focused on (..) *new* projects that have been *carved* out of existing *budgets* or brought together with a range of different budgets (..) to try something new and innovative.”

Taking this report as a starting point, this chapter sets out to address the ambiguous situation of early career professionals at the UN. They find themselves in a dynamic between the feeling of being privileged and increasing precarity. It also alludes to the dynamics described in the last chapters, namely the UN’s reputation, a mystification and positive image carefully built over the last century, hierarchies within the UN, and the cultivation of a particular narrative habitus. The statement by the interviewed consultant exemplifies his interpretation of working on various temporary projects as a quasi-creative process. The efforts to finance new projects labeled as “new and innovative” are those of an artist or craftsperson (“carved out [...] brought together”). He speaks enthusiastically of the “tremendous amount of satisfaction” that is related to his work at the UN. However, what remains unsaid is that, in the UN, temporary employment means a heavy workload coupled with uncertainties about the continuation of the project and, consequently, the position. At 45 percent, UN consultants represent almost half of the worldwide UN workforce as stated in an internal report (JIU/REP/2014/8, iii). Prior to their more stable position as UN staff members, almost all of my informants (22 out of 25) (senior staff included) had worked under short-term external contracts, and some of these had previously also worked as interns. In this chapter, I will explain how we can understand these numbers as a result of the altered conditions of the contemporary world of work. The latter is molded by historically changed modalities of working conditions and employment relationships. Moreover, this form of job insecurity (at the UN, and as I suspect, in other fields) is made possible through employees’ subjectivation. In particular, it is pivotal how working subjects approach, interpret and cope with working environments based on increasing flexibility and growing insecurity. Hence, this final analytical chapter shows what cur-

rent changing modalities of job (in)security mean from the individual and institutional perspective in the case of the UN.

Drawing upon the quotation above and other statements found in my interview material, in this part, I will show the ambiguous situation many early career professionals encounter at the UN. I label their situation *privileged precarity*.<sup>3</sup> I thereby bring together the dynamics addressed in the previous chapters that deeply engaged with the ethnographic data. On the one hand, I have described how early career UN workers make sense of their new position and how social order is negotiated. On the other, I have shown how organizational ideals impact the self who adopts specific narrative styles. Therefore, in this chapter, I place the findings into a wider perspective and analyze the situation of early career UN workers with the lens of what can be framed as the current *regime of work* interlinked with the *regimes of mobility* (Glick-Schiller and Salazar 2013). Evidently, the situation of interns, consultants (also called external contractors or non-staff personnel) or professional staff receiving a limited contract (such as JPOs) differs in terms of the degree of job insecurity and precarity. However, what these young workers have in common is that they are vulnerable to a certain degree *because* of their willingness to understand their work at the UN as offering “a tremendous amount of satisfaction,” as phrased by the above-mentioned UN consultant. Finally, due to this form of *privileged precarization*, such positions are from the outset only accessible to groups with high socio-economic capital.

Seeking to unpack tendencies that might, on the first sight, be contradictory, I will address the mechanisms behind the fact that the interpretation of (precarious) project-based work at the UN as a creative process goes hand-in-hand with different forms of actual structural benefits and narratives of privilege. I will show how workers respond to increasing demands for flexibility, the erosion of boundaries between the personal and the public, the work and non-work sphere, as well as the growing number of precarious employment relationships in the UN context. In the pages that follow, I will first address the academic discourse on work and precarity by focusing on the contemporary economic system in which cognitive assets and aesthetic practices are turned into commodities used on the labor market and beyond. The second section of this chapter deals with several aspects underlying the employment situation in the UN. The aim is to assess the extent to which various forms of flexibility and narratives of social advancement, modes of self-governmen-

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<sup>3</sup> This part echoes what I have addressed in a previously published article (Müllli 2020).

tality, and the reproduction of aesthetic practices and discursive figures contribute to the supposed paradoxical entanglement of privilege and precarity in the UN. The chapter concludes by summarizing the dynamics described and contextualizing them in the broader discourse. Finally, the outlook offers further perspectives on how the modes of agency of early career UN workers could be addressed in future research.

## 6.1 Discourses on Work and Precarity in the Era of Cognitive Capitalism

Before starting on the final synthesis of this work to which this chapter is dedicated, namely the entangled mechanism of privilege or privileged treatment and precarity, it is essential to briefly address the central terms and concepts alluded to in the title. The question arises: How do we locate the impact of precarity and privilege in the current working world, with a special focus on highly-skilled workers?

In their analysis of management literature, the sociologists Boltanski and Chiapello state that the understanding of work has changed from the 1970s onwards (see also Chapter 5).<sup>4</sup> Henceforth, work has mostly been project-oriented. The authors analyze the discursively detectable paradigm shift as a *New Spirit of Capitalism* (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007). The paradigm shift, also condensed into the term *cognitive capitalism* (Lorey and Neundlinger 2012a; Moulier Boutang 2012), describes the mechanisms by which knowledge as an economically exploitable resource and commodity moves to the center of attention. At the same time, economic success depends directly on the qualities and abilities of the working subjects, who have to prove the market presence and economic value of their *entrepreneurial self* (Bröckling 2016) in the work context and beyond on a daily basis. Other scholars emphasize an aestheticization of contemporary life and work by bringing up the notion of *aesthetic capitalism*. They acknowledge that creative work means aesthetic work (Reckwitz 2012, 142), precisely because both the product and

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<sup>4</sup> In the following lines, I address the scientific discourse directly in terms of its applicability and importance for the present study. A comprehensive (German) literature review of work in the era of post-Fordist capitalism is presented in a previous study (Sutter 2013, 23–119).

the work itself are based on cognition, knowledge, communication and affects (Lorey and Neundlinger 2012b, 23; see also Sutter, Flor, and Schönberger 2017, 18). The focus on aestheticization is, as I have elaborated in the previous chapters, particularly interesting from a cultural anthropology perspective. Against the background of an increasing “aestheticization of everyday life” (in German, *Ästhetisierung des Alltags*) (Maase 2008), based on ethnographic insights, some authors stress the continuous “aestheticization of work” (in German, *Ästhetisierung von Arbeit*) (Sutter, Flor, and Schönberger 2017, 8–10). This points to a world of work demanding and rewarding as well as remunerating working subjects who increasingly yield their own subjectivity into the working process. Thereby the working subjects “[become] the raw material and product of the new paradigm of the political economy [of knowledge, LM]” (Lorey and Neundlinger 2012b, 23–24, my translation). However, since knowledge *per se* is, at least in its intangible form, an infinite and freely accessible good, the neoliberal market logic keeps a tight grasp on knowledge: “for example through the regulation of copyrights, the evaluation and modularization of knowledge in the institutions of education and training, but also through the scarcity of secure working conditions” (Lorey and Neundlinger 2012b, 27, my translation). Having said this, precarity can be interpreted as a result of a specific logic of artificial scarcity (in German, *Logik der Verknappung*) (ibid. 2012b, 27).

Turning now to the notions of precarity as a condition and precarization as a process or phenomenon on the rise across social groups, the mechanisms and effects received increasing amounts of interest across social science in recent decades.<sup>5</sup> Most recently, scholarly and public attention was provoked by political mobilizations against social exclusion, unemployment, and a housing crisis.<sup>6</sup> Yet already in the late 1990s, Bourdieu outlined how the post-Fordist paradigm (Schönberger 2007) affects employment relationships. The title of his short essay is paradigmatic: *Job Insecurity is Everywhere Now* (Bourdieu 1998a).<sup>7</sup> Bourdieu (1998a, 82) writes,

5 German-speaking scholars differentiate between the noun precarity (*Prekariat*), suggesting a condition, and what could be translated as precarization (*Prekarisierung*), pointing to a process.

6 A prominent example is the EuroMayDay movement starting in 2001 in Milan (Kasmir 2018, Sutter 2016).

7 The original title of Bourdieu’s intervention at a European congress against precarity in Grenoble in 1997 points directly to precarity; *La précarité est aujourd’hui partout* (Bourdieu 1998b), as does the German translation; *Prekarität ist überall* (Bourdieu 1998c).

It has emerged clearly that job insecurity is now everywhere: in the private sector, but also in the public sector, which has greatly increased the number of temporary, part-time or casual positions; in industry, but also in the institutions of cultural production and diffusion—education, journalism, the media, etc.

Bourdieu grasps precarity first as an inherent aspect of profitable work. Second, he emphasizes subjective perspectives towards precarity. Third, Bourdieu deals with mechanisms of flexibilization. Thus, the process of casualization of employment corresponds to “a *mode of domination* of a new kind” (ibid. 1998a, 85, emphasis in original). The notion “*flexploitation*” is key here since it evokes a “rational management of insecurity” that is setting up competition between workers (ibid., emphasis in original).<sup>8</sup> Mechanisms of self-regulation and self-governance are not only demanded or desired by the current economic system, they also take effect at a broader scale since “submissive dispositions produced by insecurity are the prerequisite for an increasingly ‘successful’ exploitation” (ibid. 1998a, 85–86). The increasing thinning of stable jobs on the market and in the positions being offered, which is at least for some professional groups a long-term scenario, is also highlighted by others: “The long-term contracts once enjoyed by white-collar and union-backed blue-collar workers all but disappeared as companies downsized, merged, and reconstructed. Stable careers, long with pensions and benefits, were increasingly limited to the privileged, with other workers treated as casual labor” (Hochschild 2012, 8). This is why the focus from precarity in the context of work and economic independencies (see also Castel 2003) has to shift towards a focus on the emotional impact of precarity.

Recently, the notion of precarity suggesting uncertainty and insecurity has diffused beyond the context of wage labor. Scholars want to understand how insecure work conditions impact livelihood: “*Precarity* describes and conceptualizes this unpredictable cultural and economic terrain and conditions of life,” an anthropologist (Kasmir 2018, emphasis in original) writes. Therefore, the key focus of newer theoretical approaches is on aspects of governmentality inherent in precarious living and working situations. The consideration of political philosopher Isabell Lorey echoes Judith Butler’s understanding of precariousness (Butler 2009; 2004) suggesting the fundamental fragility of life. Based on this perspective, the conceptual structure of precariousness means exposure to insecurity, vulnerability, uncertainty and

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8 In the German translation, there is a reference to “the meaningful concept of *flexploitation*” that someone had suggested in the discussion following the lecture (Bourdieu 1998c, 100, emphasis in original).

the general process of jeopardization of a stable life (Lorey 2015, 24).<sup>9</sup> The socio-ontological understanding of, first, precariousness (in German, *Prekärsein*) as an ontological invariable is thus supplemented by, second, precarity (in German, *Prekarität/Prekariat*), a term that describes “the effects of different political, social, and legal compensations of a general precariousness as a category of order” (ibid. 2015, 26, my translation). Referring to the Foucauldian concept of *biopolitics* (Foucault 2008), a third pillar or dimension of precarity is framed as “governmental precarization” (Lorey 2015, 24; Butler 2004).<sup>10</sup> The Foucauldian term *governmentality* (of the self) describing the entanglement between the government of a nation state and the techniques of self-government in modern occidental societies is key. This is because, on the level of micropolitics, “[m]anaging’ a population is [...] not only a process through which regulatory power produces a set of subjects. It is also a process of their de-subjectivation, one with enormous political and legal consequences” (Butler 2004, 98). This theoretical approach allows problematizing precarity as an instrument of governance. It allows us to examine relationships of economic exploitation as well as modes of subjectivation while simultaneously focusing on ambivalences between subjugation and agency (Lorey 2015, 27). In a nutshell, mechanisms of precarity seen as a process diffusing into the core of the neoliberal(ized) society means acknowledging that the phenomenon is now “democratized” and, therefore, able to operate as a “normalized” political-economic instrument of power (ibid. 2015, 25; 58, see also 85–94).

The theoretical considerations outlined above find a strong empirical confirmation in ethnographic studies emphasizing the precarity discourse in everyday life (Götz and Lemberger 2009b; Sutter 2016; 2013; Bröckling 2013). Social markers such as age, gender, sexual orientation, milieu, social, regional, and political origin, as well as capital as conceived by Bourdieu, influence the way a person experiences, thematizes, defines and evaluates precarity and precariousness as an individual. What is more, “parameters of comparison” (in German, *Vergleichsfolie*) (Götz and Lemberger 2009a, 9) are pivotal when it comes to the ways science interprets precarity. Therefore, cultural anthropologists studying individual modes of adjustment to precarity continue to stress that people are not as passive towards this phenomenon as previous theoretical considerations might suggest. What is more, ethno-

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9 From this position, both authors emphasize the positively interpreted power of action and outline possible forms of social and political change.

10 On precarization in different world regions, see also Ettlinger (2007).

graphic studies point not only to vulnerabilities but also focus on people's scopes of action and agency. In the following section, I want to highlight two ethnographic approaches that are relevant for this study: changing modes of employment due to project-based work and the narrative handling (and agency) of precarization.

An increasing number of highly skilled and well-trained individuals earn their living through project-based work.<sup>11</sup> Previous studies have reported on the fundamental transformation of project-work in the creative and similar industries (Florida 2012). Consequently, project-based employment (and hiring practices) have creped into other sectors (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007). This leads to a new form of vulnerability among project workers (Löffler 2010, 439).<sup>12</sup> Project-based work in general and the attached financing mechanisms drastically influence the potentially fragile economic situations (and thus biographies) of project workers (Schönberger 2007, 79–84). Thus, due to increasing project-based work, the broad spectrum of fixed-term employment (which range from temporary contracts, freelance work and outsourced contracts alternating with periods of unemployment to self-employed occupations), and the resulting job insecurity and career instability, the phenomenon of precarity now transversally affects professions and work categories formerly understood as stable or even privileged. Against this backdrop, researchers observe new forms of precarity: for instance, socioemotional precarity correlating with the mobility required from allegedly privileged spouses who are required to trail along (Cangià 2018) or precarity in what has been termed “transmedia work” in times of digital modernity (Fast and Jansson 2019).

A significant analysis and discussion on the subject of narrative handling and agency regarding precarity among highly skilled workers is presented by Ove Sutter (2013). His comprehensive empirical study focuses on the everyday practice of “narrating precarity.” Since the pressure to present success stories is inherent in the form of capitalism we are currently witnessing, people are normally reluctant to talk about their own precarity (e.g. S. Meyer 2018b). However, Sutter encountered people employed in the area of “immaterial” work (he principally interviewed professionals who are considered highly skilled and, despite this or even because of this, face difficulties in

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11 As the quote at the beginning of this chapter suggests, there were highly-skilled persons living precariously already in the 15<sup>th</sup> century (Greenblatt 2011, 22).

12 Löffler refers to an interview with sociologist Robert Castel (Castel, Mazouz, and Kreide 2006).



finding permanent positions: journalists, academics, academic proofreaders, for example) who actively address their personal precarity. He offers an insightful analysis of the everyday practice of the self-narrated precarity. The latter is interpreted as a strategy of coping and, on the flipside, as an objecting gesture. This is precisely because the insecurity of social existence, stemming from the emergence of a historically grown form of capitalism, requires individual processing and coping practices. Therefore, autobiographical narrations are seen as a tool of individual processing mechanisms and coping strategies for economic precarity, resulting from fixed-term work contracts. Adopting narratives of precarity (and contrasting the real precarity with the individual perspective) is a form of personal agency. Based on this assumption, the author interprets the practice of narrating precarity as a symbolic compensation of the individual's status and meaning jeopardized by precarity, as well as of the corresponding deficits of recognition and calculability of someone's immediate future (ibid. 2013, 75). Finally, Sutter (2013, 337) highlights that autobiographical narrations seen as biographical forms of agency, on a broader scale, ultimately contribute to the *acceptance* of the *status quo*, namely precarious life circumstances.

Equipped with theoretical knowledge of the concept of precarity/precariousness and ethnographic insights into the issue of (precarious) project-work and (narrative) agency, the following questions arise: How is precarity to be understood in the UN context? How do mechanisms of precarization pointed towards one part of UN workers, namely UN consultants and UN interns but also young staff with contracts lasting one to two years, combine with the colorful bouquet of “benefits” enjoyed by the group of UN staff? And how do these facts interplay and interlock with narrations and imaginations of “being privileged” to work at the UN?

Talking about “landing a job” at the UN—to use the wording of the report broadcast by CNN Money Switzerland—an informant, let's call them Robin (Jan 15, 2018), now holding a position in the *professional and higher category*, recalls,

Well you feel a bit special when you are chosen for an internship, because there are a lot of candidates. (..) I know that for my [staff] position the one that I currently have, there were 238 candidates. [LM: Yeah.] And then only nine were selected for evaluation and I think they were interviewed and I was/ (..) Then you feel/ (laughing) [...] But it's the same with every other work. We have tons of people (..) of graduates, yeah that are looking for a job, so (..) If I applied tomorrow to Emirates because I want to be a flight attendant that might be true, we'd probably be twenty

men and women chosen from a 1000 or 500, you see, so we would still be special. I *think* today if you are chosen for a job whatever position it is, you are *very* lucky, you are *very* special.

In the UN and beyond, there is a dichotomy of two (or more) groups differently affected by mechanisms of increased flexibility and precarity.<sup>13</sup> In the case of the UN, a considerable group of (young) highly-skilled professionals waits to get a contract. Hence, Robin understands and directly points to the fact that in other job markets the situation is similar (“If I applied tomorrow to Emirates [...]”). More than two decades ago, Bourdieu described the division into two groups: the precarious and the lucky ones who can feel “special”. He writes, “Added to [the] effect of precariousness on those directly touched by it there are the effects on all the others, who are apparently spared” (Bourdieu 1998a, 82). Bourdieu (1998a, 82–83) interprets this situation as a side effect of the general overproduction of diplomas. The latter correlates directly with the hiring practices described in the previous chapter (and the paradox that a candidate actually *never* possesses “enough” technical knowledge and abilities). Thereby, employees suddenly feel and become potentially replaceable. Conversely, the presence of a growing group of young people with an overabundance of diplomas, skills and language knowledge suggests that (permanent) employment is, to some extent, a privilege.

However, it is a fragile and threatened privilege that vanishes the moment employees “step out of line” (Bourdieu 1998a, 83). While Robin’s quote confirms Bourdieu’s remarks and interprets being “special” as having prevailed against more than two hundred other candidates and thus being selected for the open position, the quote by the next informant points to the emotional privilege and satisfaction of working at the UN. Yet, this fortunate situation (“privilege”) also can never be taken for granted. The UNSSC director, a long-serving senior professional, explains his point of view as an experienced international civil servant,

But in terms of *young* people, you know, the way I really hope, for example the people who are now JPOs and many of them will (..) leave and many of them will *stay* in the UN, is that *this* organization has, well it has its problems, like any other organization, international organization. But it has (..) done (..) really (..) serious (..) positive work for the world. So it’s a *privilege* to join it, it’s an *honor* to join it. I always say,

13 At this point, I want to mention the insightful study on different contractual conditions in an Indian steel plant (Parry 2013). Elsewhere, the antagonistic class divide among workers has been described as “schism” (Kasimir 2018) to underline how difficult it is to overcome this divide.

you know, when people start to complain about, um, you know, this and that, and I said, maybe I am a bit too harsh, I said, “But look”, you know, “This is the door, you can leave.” Because there are *thousands* of people out there that wanna come in and work for the UN. So we should always think of it as a privilege. And, to be honest, *luck*. You heard my story, if the friend that called me and said, “Do you wanna move to New York and do an internship?,” he worked for, I don’t know, a bank (..) in New York, then I probably wouldn’t [have] end[ed] up working for the UN. So that was *pure* luck. So, with *luck*, we get this privilege.

“Special” (or privileged) is no longer just who is “selected” for the job from a large number of applicants as emphasized by the younger staff Robin. The second quote by an experienced international civil servant rather suggests that “privileged” contains a moral component: It is a privilege to work for the UN. The latter correlates of course with the desired narrative habitus in the UN.

Against the backdrop of precarization of certain jobs, I have conceived the notion of *privileged precarities* to explore the ambivalence of structural preferences interwoven with the feeling of “being privileged.” In the present study, the alignment of different employment categories in the UN (Chapter 2.4) with imaginations of privilege allows us to understand modes of economic, yet also socio-emotional, precarization, which particularly affect early career UN workers. Thereby, I focus on what mechanisms the informants perceive and interpret as privileged, and what, in turn, points to more precarious situations. On the one hand, UN employees with permanent contracts (*staff*) enjoy structural privileges, which are expressed in salaries, the exemption from certain taxes and the right of residence. On the other, the self-conception of being privileged goes along with what NGO anthropologists call practices of the *Cultures of Doing Good* (Lashaw, Vannier, and Sampson 2017), as will be explained later in this chapter. With an increasing tendency towards precarization of mobile, highly-qualified employees in the context of IOs, these representations are maintained and further narrated as the positively interpreted special position of UN consultants, as seen at the beginning of this chapter. This privilege stems also from the point of view of those affected. The highly-qualified UN consultants’ self-portrayal of being privileged and satisfied is fundamental for their emotional ability to “fit in.”

This section has analyzed the theoretical and empirical approach of precarity and privilege in the contemporary world of work. The next part of this chapter will shed light on the UN and address the structural benefits enjoyed by staff members versus the job insecurity of *non-staff personnel*,

namely external contractors and interns, who are structurally excluded from social security.

## 6.2 When Double Standards Are Applied: Aspects of Job (In) Security and (Im)Mobility at the UN

Before proceeding to examine aspects of flexibility and subjectification, it will be necessary to briefly recapitulate the different structural circumstances that full staff members and *non-staff personnel* encounter. This will explain the attractiveness of the UN as an employer and why external contractors are willing to accept flexible employment conditions.

In spite of public criticism towards the UN (including allegations of corruption, sexual harassment, and protests by unpaid or low-paid interns), a common view amongst the informants was that the UN continues to enjoy a positive reputation as an attractive employer.<sup>14</sup> Erik, for instance, said that a dream came true when he was invited for an internship (see Chapter 4). Also, a permanent position as a UN staff member is interpreted as social advancement. Robin states that, despite moments of frustration when, in their view, work processes are complicated or colleagues work inefficiently, “[I]t’s inspiring, I guess, because as I say you’re an international civil servant is, like, wow! So there is this social appreciation for some people. Then, I think, the working conditions are good, (um) (..) [LM: In what sense?] Yes, globally, I would say, the working conditions are good.” Another informant holding a JPO contract, Justice, explains that a UN career “is very tempting.” Justice continues by expressing a rejectionist stance, “You see some colleagues who have their badges that say 2050, like, until they’ll retire, retirement. Mine is two years. And I look at them and I feel they’re stuck, you know. I’d rather have this flexibility but obviously I say it now because I have no kids and no family.” Then Justice admits, “But having this safety and security that the UN gives you is also, I guess, it’s great for many people.” Hence, seeing safety and security as something opposed to job insecurity and flexibility, Justice interprets their flexible situation, at least at the current moment, positively. Facing job insecurity is of secondary concern to Justice.

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<sup>14</sup> Amongst others, intern protesters meet on *Place des Nations* on International Labor Day.

As outlined in Chapter 2, the UN system contains of a complex, ramified staff hierarchy that is divided into two groups: the *Professional and Higher Categories* (also called P staff) include managers and project workers; and the *General Service and Related Categories* (also called G staff) cover employees in administrative functions. Their concerns are addressed by a central organ responsible for the regulation of working conditions of staff members: The *International Civil Service Commission* (ICSC) headquartered in New York. It regulates “all facets of staff employment conditions” (ICSC 2019, *History*)<sup>15</sup> and ensures that employees in all (sub-)organizations within the UN system enjoy uniform working conditions. In consultation with the GA, this commission guarantees a “common system of salaries, allowances and other conditions of service.” Additionally, the concerns and interests of permanent employees are represented by the Staff Associations of the respective UN sub-organizations. However, the organization also makes a distinction here. Only those UN staff who hold a contract lasting more than twelve months are allowed to pay their share into the UN pension fund. A rule stipulates that UN employees belonging to the category of staff are,

(1) all persons participating in the UN Joint Staff Pension Fund (UNJSPF) in accordance with article 21 of the Pension Fund Regulations (i. e. six-month contract or employment) and (2) all “staff members” according to common system definitions (i. e. persons with a contract or employment of one year or more), whether or not they are Pension Fund participants. (UN System 2019, *Definition of Staff Categories*)

This means that the definition of who is staff is directly linked with access to the UN’s social security fund. In addition, a special legal status for UN permanent staff has been created at the legal level, which will be briefly explained using the example of Geneva.<sup>16</sup> As explained elsewhere (Müllli 2020, 50–55), the privileged status of facilitated residence for IO workers was a reason intended to attract them to work in IOs in the first place.<sup>17</sup> At the legislative level, the privileged residence status is regulated in the so-called *Host State Act* (The Federal Council 2020, *Federal Act on Privileges, Immunities and Facilities*). The agreement on “Privileges, Immunities and Facilities”<sup>18</sup> operates in the sense of a mobility regime and includes, among other things,

<sup>15</sup> This source also applies to the quote in the subsequent sentence.

<sup>16</sup> In Vienna, similar laws apply. However, in order to avoid repetition, I will not address them in more detail here.

<sup>17</sup> See my descriptions on the commissary at the VIC in Chapter 2.3.2.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

exemption from income tax and the lifting of visa requirements for persons with permanent employment with an international organization (and their family members) by means of obtaining a so-called *Legitimation Card*. The benefits for full-time employees of IOs at the study sites in Vienna and Turin are comparable to those in Geneva. In turn, access for persons working as external contractors for the UN who come from EU/EFTA states is facilitated thanks to the *Schengen Agreement*. This agreement guarantees that they can stay on site during periods of (brief) unemployment.

However, as I explained earlier, by far not all workers in the UN system are employed on long-term contracts and benefit from the facilitations associated with them. A UN consultant holding one three-month contract after the other is excluded from the above-mentioned definition of staff, even though this person is *de facto* working for the organization over a continuous period of time (JIU/NOTE/2014/1, iii). I reiterate that, according to an internal report, about 45 percent of the global workforce of the UN and its agencies are employed on flexible and temporary contracts (JIU/REP/2014/8, iii).<sup>19</sup> External contractors, depending on what stage they are at in their professional life, experience different situations: On the one hand, (elderly) consultants, often being former staff, work in an advisory capacity. They contribute their expertise to their former departments beyond retirement. Individual contractors, in turn, are persons in the middle or even at the beginning of their (potential) working life (at the UN). In their case, there can be no question of an advisory function. On the contrary, they use a short-term contract as an entry possibility for a staff position. Their entry path might resemble Tom Smith's story: After graduating from (a local) university<sup>20</sup>, they gain work experience in IO during an internship and then try to establish themselves as permanent employees in the long term. They belong to the growing group of UN employees whose project-based and therefore short-term contracts are limited to a few months or even days. The current *regime of work* entangled with the *regimes of mobility* (Glick-Schiller and Salazar 2013) causes considerable instability in the life of individual contractors. Endorsing the critique uttered by other scholars, namely that most literature on mobility contributed to a rigid definition and comprehension of "the dichotomy mobility/immobility as mutually constructed poles" (Franquesa 2011, 1016), the UN

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19 The short contracts are issued on a monthly, but sometimes also on a weekly or daily basis as I observed during my fieldwork in Vienna.

20 The *gatekeeper* function of local (semi-)private universities in Geneva and Vienna are pointed out elsewhere (Fradejas-García and Mülli 2019, 913).

employment rules create not only double standards for different groups of UN workers, but also varying forms of (im)mobile work at the UN (Fradejas-García and Mülli 2019, 908–9). When focusing on UN sites in Europe, persons from non-EU/EFTA countries experience these mechanisms of the regime of (im)mobility the most. I quote from the interview with Ana whose situation I addressed in the vignette subsequent to this chapter. She says,

It was very *difficult* in the beginning because they really needed me, but they didn't have no *funds*. So, I often had small breaks in my contract or, very short-term contracts. I knew, like, the certainty I had, was, like, they wanted me there. But I had no certainty if they would manage to keep me. [LM asks how this feels.] It's very stressful. Especially if you're/ (..) in this case being/ (..) the one of the Europe headquarters. If you don't have the permanent residency. Because not having a contract means you need to leave the country. [...] Immediately. And sometimes in very short notice. Not because they don't want to tell you, because they don't *know*. Like, sometimes they can only say, "Yes," once the funds get approved and then it's/ (..) you never know. [LM: Okay, so what did you do?] I was always prepared to leave (laughing). But I could stay actually three more months as a tourist.

This is also confirmed by Robin who was born into a diplomat family. Nevertheless, Robin experienced an insecurity after finishing university studies which directly related to their non-EU/EFTA citizenship. Holding a P1 contract does not spare Robin from a situation they had previously experienced. The ability to turn this situation into an opportunity is, I assume, connected with their personal background,

So I stayed here in [city] because my family was here and that was where home *was* at the time for me. It was easier, I think being in [city] to look for a job in/ (um) [incomprehensible]. (..) And those were six months of unemployment because one thing, one thing, one *disadvantage* we have is that we do not pay taxes. We have a salary that is (um) (..) we do we say, *net* (um) *sans tax*, it's not gross, it's like tax-free. So we don't pay taxes, so we do not pay all these social fees you know (..) So the disadvantage, that might be an advantage while you keep, I mean if you keep your job, while you are employed, but once you're unemployed (..) (um) *first* you have three months to stay in the country. *Second* you don't receive any (um) money (coughs) from anywhere, so you don't have any social security exactly. So your health insurance is over and your wage is over. That is also a thing that makes our situation a bit scary (..) because *my* situation is a bit scary because I don't know what's gonna happen with me at the end of this year or the end of next year and you don't have a backup. But (..) as it scares, as that scares *me*, it scares everyone, every other colleague who is in my situation.

There are two sides to the coin of belonging to the international community. Not paying full taxes might sound comfortable, Robin affirms. However, this also causes potential instability and, as in Robin's case, probably also dependence on their parents.

Since administrative processes in the individual sub-organizations differ, it has not yet been possible to establish a comprehensive system for UN workers. Thus, not only their employment relationships but also the conditions surrounding UN consultants themselves, are, at least statistically speaking, extremely volatile. As pointed out elsewhere (Müllli 2020, 51–52), this problem came to public attention in summer 2018 when Switzerland introduced the automatic exchange of financial account information (AEOI), i. e. the official taxation of UN consultant salaries as of October 1, 2018.<sup>21</sup> In response to their own uncertainty and in fear of having to pay unpaid taxes to date retroactively, UN consultants established the *Consultants Coordinating Board* (CCB) in Geneva.

When I meet two CCB representatives for an informal conversation at a Genevan bar, they tell me that due to the practice of contracting at short notice, as described by Ana above, many UN organizations are unable to keep a tally of the number of external contractors working for them.<sup>22</sup> At the moment of the interview, the CCB president has just been assigned, on a renewed short-term contract, to a Geneva-based UN organization promoting environmental issues. The other CCB representative, who was already active in the public health sector in his country of origin before joining the UN, points out that the CCB has already received several requests from organizations with regard to the issue of short-term contracts. They show me a survey the CCB conducted among external contractors in Geneva (referred to above) according to which, in fall 2018, 38 percent of external contractors were between 20 and 30 years old, 67 percent were women and half of the respondents had neither a European nor a Swiss passport. Despite the fact that more than 60 percent of the survey participants stated that they perform comparable activities (project work) to permanent staff and almost all of them said that they work full-time as UN consultants and have an official email address, just over half of the respondents had a contract of less than six months. The JIU report quoted above comes to a similar conclusion. It

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21 See the article published by an online journal (SWI, Dupraz-Dobias 2018, *UN Consultants Could Fall Below Poverty Line*). The issue was covered by the same journalist interviewing Tom Smith for the CNN Money Report.

22 Fieldnote, Informal talk with CCB representatives (May 7, 2019).



states that “many of them [on temporary contracts, LM] are working for extended periods under a de facto employment relationship, like staff” (JIU/REP/2014/8, iii). UN consultants have no access to the UN social security system (neither to the UN pension fund nor to the health insurance fund, and increasingly do not even receive holiday and sickness benefits), as I was informed by Vanessa in the follow-up conversation.<sup>23</sup> These characteristics become relevant for considerations of the contemporary regime of precarity in the UN context insofar as factors such as age, gender, and nationality, for example, have a hinged function. This is the case when the emotional and formal ability to fit in and the willingness to engage in certain work circumstances become effective in the sense of inclusion and exclusion mechanisms for a career in the UN.

Although in the meantime Swiss authorities reacted by establishing tax and social legislation for non-staff members of IOs and for interns, discussions on social media platforms show that the information flow is far from clear and transparent (FDFA 2019, *Non-staff Members IO and Interns*). For many external contractors to the UN, it seems difficult to understand the conditions of the obligations, i. e. to contribute to the Swiss unemployment system. The reason is, as I learn from the CCB representatives and other consultants working in Geneva, connected to the fact that UN organizations are reluctant to spread the relevant information. This is also what the CCB finds fault with. The problem can be exemplified by the example of (rather expensive) health insurance. Holders of a *Carte de légitimation H* (also known as H permit) do not benefit from any privileges, e.g. from health insurance.<sup>24</sup> This makes them subject to ordinary Swiss health insurance law, although mostly without being paid an equivalent rate to normal Swiss wages. Even though the Swiss authorities treat UN consultants as if they were self-employed, as the letter stresses, the exact opposite is true, given the fact that UN consultants take their orders from UN entities, use the UN entities’ work equipment to perform their task, and have a work schedule similar to that of the UN organization for which they are working, to give just a few examples.

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23 Fieldnote, Follow up with Vanessa (Feb 8, 2019). Other consultants (individual contractors) I know from my personal network confirm this.

24 The H permit is issued to persons working in IO headquartered in Geneva who are from non-EU/EFTA countries and who hold contracts lasting less than twelve months. This permit was established exclusively for holders of short-term contracts. Staff receive a different document, the *carte de légitimation*.

At a dinner in early September 2019, a friend, let's call her Hanna, reports on the situation.<sup>25</sup> She works remotely as an individual contractor for a Geneva-based UN organization focusing on environmental issues. While some organizations elevated the salaries of consultants, to make up for the taxation, Hanna is scandalized by the approach of other UN organizations, "The reactions of some UN organizations are inadequate." She tells me that, while the Swiss authorities started to look for consultants who, mostly due to being uninformed, had failed to pay their taxes, some UN organizations threatened UN consultants with not renewing their contracts if they did not commit to paying their taxes. This is why a friend and compatriot of Hanna's is now planning to either move on or return to their country of origin. They are holders of the H permit.<sup>26</sup> Luckily, Hanna is in a better situation; she recently got married and, therefore, received the residence permit through her partner's nationality. This shows that attempts for better working conditions for external contractors and consultants at the UN are still ongoing.

The most insecure and thus also the most precarious employment practice in the UN can be observed in the case of interns. Most UN interns receive little or no pay, depending on the regulations of the individual organizations. As Ross Perlin writes in his ethnography of the *Intern Nation* (2011), "unpaid internships represent a double injustice—according to legal experts, the lack of pay also means that these interns have no standing in court as employees, even if they have worked full-time for a year in the same office" (Perlin 2011, 78). In the UN system, interns are considered "free personnel" (UN Secretariat 2014, ST/AI/2014/1, 2) who are supposed to assist the organization and, in return, are given the opportunity to gain initial work experience in an international context. "The objective of the internship is to give you a first-hand impression of the day-to-day working environment of the UN. You will be given a real chance to work with our people," it says on the UN Careers website (UN Careers 2020b, *Internship Programme*). This, SG António Guterres, who has repeatedly been criticized by the interns, never tires of emphasizing. Paradoxically, work experience gained during internships is not considered relevant by most UN organizations and is not taken into account when applying for a permanent position. Nonetheless, as I pointed

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25 Fieldnote (Sept 2, 2019).

26 Notably, non-EU/EFTA citizens working as consultants are in a more fragile position than their European colleagues who, at least after a while, have the chance to get a more permanent residence permit (B) which allows them to apply for jobs on the Swiss job market. This is another example of the restrictive Swiss (im)migration regime.

out before, many young professionals try to get a staff position through this very competitive route—internships and consultant contracts—and some of them, with enough perseverance and the required ability to fit in, succeed.<sup>27</sup> As stated at the beginning of this book, most of my informants belong to the group of “young” P Staff on medium-term contracts. The procedure appears to be like the eye of a needle. Also, because even the minimum work experience for these positions is two to five years, many positions are filled with more experienced candidates as we learned from HR professional Montse (Chapter 5.4). This “fresh talent” are UN workers who remain in the statistically unrecorded positions of external contractors and interns. Since the UN does not recognize internships as relevant work experience and, as another rule stipulates, interns and consultants are barred from applying for a staff position for up to six months after the end of their employment contract, continuation can only be guaranteed if the rules are ignored. Several informants report that they were offered contracts within less than the official time delay. This again shows the importance of mentors and rope teams. This is also confirmed by my ethnographic data. Two thirds of my interviewees in staff positions completed several internships and/or consultancy positions in different UN organizations before earning their contract as staffs. Their more flexible résumés are typical for current times (Schönberger 2007, 75–79). P staff in entry-level positions also work on fixed-term contracts, but, with a duration of two to four years, they have comparatively longer-term employment prospects.

Having discussed the double standards in the UN for different types of employment, I will now move on to mechanisms of the (young) UN workers’ readiness to accept flexibilization and to interpret working at the UN as a privilege. I argue that the very prospect—no matter how unrealistic or utopian it may be—of a permanent assignment drives those exposed to job insecurity to give everything in order to eventually get a permanent job in the future. The hope and the actual prospect of a permanent job turns into a motivating factor. More than that, it becomes an instrument of power that the (or an) organization uses to permanently attract highly motivated young workers who accept job instability and precarity. This will be illustrated by three examples illustrating the following aspects: flexibility, narrations of privilege, and governmental precarity.

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27 Mentors and rope teams play a crucial role, as already stated (see Chapter 5.4.1).

### 6.2.1 “Moving into a more standard career path”: Flexibility, Privilege and Narratives of Social Advancement

Previous parts of this book showed how UN career aspirants encounter specific success stories online as well as at career fairs. I argued that encountering these narratives is the first step in aligning their personal identity and story with the corporate subject *homo UN*. I also explained that a frequent recommendation addressed to young professionals aiming to work at the UN is, apart from applying for the official recruiting channels JPO and YPP, to start with an (unpaid) internship and then gradually step up the “career ladder” by working as a UNV receiving a “basic living allowance” (not a salary, *nota bene*) or as an external contractor working on a short-term contract, to then expand their personal network and hope to accumulate enough capital as conceived by Bourdieu in order to be assigned to a more stable position as *full* UN staff member.

In order to recapitulate the mechanism of flexibility, privilege and narratives of social advancement, I want to share an anecdote from one of my field trips to a career fair in Berne, Switzerland, in 2016. The speaker who had been invited to share his career path (that was presented as exemplary) told his audience that the time as a UNV “was a really great experience and I recommend to all of you to look into that.”<sup>28</sup> In the ensuing round of questions, one person asked more concretely for “tips for transitioning into a professional life.” The podium speaker replied,

I was a former UN volunteer. And I have to say [...] that as a volunteer I have never been treated as a volunteer. I have always been treated as a full-fledged professional. So actually, I didn't really see the difference between transitioning from volunteering into a professional position. I think the *difference* is the *spirit*. You are not going there with a full package of benefits and salary that you would get in a normal UN position. So, it means that you would make you know a certain, (um) you know, (..) *sacrifice* to a certain extent to (..) to give something to the community [...] and also to gain an experience. So it's really a win-win. But actually for me being a UN volunteer has really allowed me to get me the exposure I needed in the UN. And then, after that, I *had* the experience I needed to apply for a position [...] and to move into let's say a more *standard* career path. So in that sense the transition was very easy.<sup>29</sup>

28 Fieldnote, Career Fair (Oct 30, 2016), addressed in Chapter 5.4. This source also applies to the next quotes.

29 Ad hoc protocol, Career Fair (Oct 30, 2016).

Three aspects are pivotal here. First, this statement affirms the importance of non-staff personnel for the everyday work at the UN. It underlines the allegedly equal treatment of non-staff personnel (“I have never been treated as a volunteer. I have always been treated as a full fledge professional”). Notably, looking at today’s recruitment policies of the UN, the job title “volunteer” describes not the person’s intention to actually volunteer, nor does the notion “consultant” allude to their actual possibility to consult.<sup>30</sup> Then, the second part of the podium speaker’s statement aligns with the desired UN narrative of stressing that “the *difference* is the *spirit*.” The normal and more stable employment relationship is imagined as a “reward” that comes with a great willingness and “*sacrifice* to a certain extent.” Working at the UN is suggested as a good deed (“to give something to the community”). This narrative is possible because “development is a moral mission, seeking to improve the quality of life for people in other societies” (Sampson 2017, 5). The logic of subjectification is that those who, despite the job insecurity, work with full commitment are, at least on a moral scale, rewarded even more. In the light of the above, the quote implies that it is precisely the affective-emotional commitment and the renunciation of “the full package of benefits and salary” that shows someone’s true motivation. Third, the quotation aligns with the meritocratic ideals according to which the involvement in flexible and insecure employment relationships, especially for young workers, is necessarily part of a UN career and ends in successful entry or promotion. The panel speaker depicts his past working life in a specific logic: *First*, the podium speaker stresses, one gains experience (“to get me the exposure I needed in the UN”), which *then* allows one to “move into a more *standard* career path.” Here, volunteering illustrates the aim of improving the personal portfolio and expresses the individual’s hope of capitalizing their experience (Allan 2019). The most prominent example for an allegedly linear career progression is the former SG and UN role model Kofi Annan: “The former Secretary-General was the first chief to rise through the ranks of the organization.”<sup>31</sup>

30 The tradition of international volunteering goes back to the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the early 1970s, the United Nations Volunteering program was established. A fund was established by the GA in 1976 (UN GA 1976b, A/RES/31/131). In the mid-1990s, at the invitation of the German government, UNV successively relocated its offices to Bonn, Germany. The UN campus in Bonn was officially inaugurated ten years later. Today, UNV has several partnerships with other UN organizations.

31 This was mentioned in an obituary released on UN Web TV (UN Web TV 2018, *Kofi Annan passes*).

Thus, it is not surprising that a growing number of young professionals accept short-term and flexible work and, at the same time, narratively reproduce moral superiority and overall satisfaction despite all the obstacles, just as the previously mentioned consultant expressed it in the interview with CNN Money Switzerland. There exists the imperative of exposing oneself to flexibility that is allegedly needed in order to be able to work in different contexts of development and aid work around the world and to be able to exist in the UN context on a long-term basis. As Boltanski and Chiapello write, individuals influenced by the “new” spirit of capitalism find self-fulfillment by discovering their potential. They underline that “the succession of projects is conceived as an opportunity” revealing someone’s essence and deepest identity while stressing that “this quest for the self undergoes a series of ordeals that assumes both a variation in the identities adopted, depending on the project, and the preservation of a constant personality that makes it possible to capitalize assets during displacement in networks” (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007, 462).

Taken together, these aspects suggest that there is an association between affective practices and mechanisms of (precarious) self-governmentality. This emotional entanglement of staff and non-staff personnel is a result of increasing project-financing in the UN, which will be addressed on the next pages.

### 6.2.2 Carving out Financial Resources and Forming Empathy: Affective Practices and Precarious Self-Governmentality in the Light of Privately Inspired Restructuring Processes

As indicated before, the UN workforce has changed in recent years in that the group of short-term and precarious workers has increased. However, permanent employees, too, have been confronted with increasing flexible working conditions due to changed financing practices and project-based work.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, the increasingly complex mandates of the UN in the course of Agenda 2030<sup>33</sup> have led to an expansion or overlapping of the areas of re-

32 The UN is financed by contributions from the Member States (MS). More and more MS, however, prefer one-off voluntary contributions to fixed and longer-term mandatory membership fees. Through these voluntary contributions from states, foundations (e.g. the Gates Foundation is important for the World Health Organization WHO) and private companies, nearly 50 billion US dollars per year have been collected over the last decade for UN economic and social cooperation; see Laurenti (2018).

33 The Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) were introduced in 2015 and build on the Millennium Development Goals.

sponsibility of individual UN institutions. The lines of cooperation between the individual organizations are not always strengthened, and there may even be competition for project launches and funds between individual departments within the organization.<sup>34</sup> In a study focusing on the relationship between NGOs and donors, anthropologist Sampson (2017, 13) writes, “Donors speak the language of ‘partnership,’ but it is clear that the partnership is unequal. Donors have resources that NGOs do not have.” I argue that similar conditions of the relationship between the organization and donors, first and foremost member states, apply to the UN. These processes are linked to the organization’s own goal of learning more from private sector structures and mechanisms in *public-private partnerships* (PPP) as a bureaucratic organization financed mainly by public funds.<sup>35</sup> Closer cooperation with private-sector actors should also guarantee more money for development projects. However, resources must come from elsewhere. The lack of money for projects is compensated, among other things, by the commitment of project workers. Informant Annabelle (Dec 12, 2016), a former staff member, describes the effect the uncertainty of funding, coupled with the pressure on employees to be productive,

And especially in this context of financial insecurity, that’s what I’ve learned also, in many UN institutions, the *constant* pressure or the financial *bottlenecks* naturally push you towards/ (..), the fact that you, like, you form such an empathy for the institution and the group, you put in so *much* and you want it to survive.<sup>36</sup>

This quote exemplifies tendencies towards delimitation and precarization, and it shows that mechanisms of “aestheticization of work” (Sutter, Flor, and Schönberger 2017, 18) not only consist of the worker’s cognitive abilities but also of the affective-emotional ones (“you form such an empathy”). Moreover, affective-emotional competences enhance the organization and the team. Retrospectively, Annabelle is aware of this ambivalence that has become apparent with time (“that’s what I’ve learned”). Although she stresses the “constant pressure,” she cannot escape the emotional involvement with (development) work. This is what Sampson describes as “emotional entanglement” (Sampson 2017, 8–12), which is typical for work in international development and humanitar-

34 I witnessed this form of intra-organizational competition for funding during my internship. Fieldnotes, Vienna (July 4, 2017).

35 Doubts are expressed regarding the efficiency of PPP financing strategies (Kwame Sundaram et al. 2016).

36 Translated from German. This also applies to the following quotes by Annabelle.

ian aid. Annabelle underlines the existential aspect of emotional entanglement when concluding, “You want it to survive.” Mechanisms of subjectification are closely interwoven with the actual processual nature of immaterial work; subjectification is not a faculty “but a starting point” of precarization (Tsianos and Papadopoulos 2016, 299). The dissolution of the boundary of work thus leads to a growing willingness to accept and practice precarious self-governing (Lorey 2015). Therefore, Lorey (2015, 17) stresses, the “servile” side of precarious self-governing cannot be separated from the currently hegemonic form of work. The latter demands the whole person and is primarily based on communication, knowledge and affect. Likewise, Sutter describes everyday mechanisms of acceptance of one’s own precariousness; he found that speaking about a personal situation is solicited and finally accepted. Annabelle who, at the time of the interview is training to become a social worker, looks with quiet astonishment at the dynamics of her former work context. She positions herself as an observer who has already escaped the uncertainty.<sup>37</sup> Although Annabelle feels deeply connected with her work at an emotional level, she tells me that the financial insecurity and thus the job insecurity of her former team members motivated them to look for jobs not during leisure time but while sitting at their desks. When the director learned of it, Annabelle recounts, “he said that he actually understands that the team is looking for jobs due to the job insecurity, yet that they would continue to take up too much time.” And she goes on to explain that he was kindly asking them to do it after work. Putting herself in the position of the observer analyzing the efforts made by her former colleagues, she concludes that “it was significant for me how much time is probably needed to secure this uncertainty.” Pressure caused, amongst others, by external job insecurity is internalized. By alluding to the concept of emotional labor (Hochschild 2003) and the general capitalization of emotions and feelings in contemporary capitalism, I claim that, in the UN, lacking financial resources must be compensated with *emotional efforts* of project workers at all hierarchical levels.

Now turning to financing practices linked to project-based work, it is pertinent to mention that in the UN many positions depend on projects funded by external donors. Informant Marie, holding a JPO position, addresses project-based financing and the effects on cooperation between the

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37 In the follow-up email (Dec 6, 2019), Annabelle writes to me that, now 38 years old, she has finished her studies to become a social worker and has the first permanent position since she started working. Having left the precarious setting, she now has a daughter and has enough personal resources to engage in local politics.



the relevant headquarters section and the field offices. We are sitting in one of the organization's cafeterias. She explains that regional offices and the headquarters are competing for funding:

So, I think. Hi! [Greeting a colleague passing by]. [...] I think it varies very much depending on the regional offices and the people in them, you know. So, it's very much an individual question. Because there *are* agreements for example on funding, on support, things like that but it's a shaky (...). So, for example we, we all apply for projects, (um) (...) For example, concretely (...) the State Department of the U.S. (...) has (um) money on the trafficking and we apply for it but there are regional offices as well. So somehow, we compete for funding and somehow, *they* also compete among each other for/ for funding. Like, um, the territories are not always clear (...) so we have issues sometimes for some countries where *both* or two regional offices would apply for funding and fight among each other. And sometimes they don't report to *us* because they don't want to give us ideas and/ (...) So, so it's not always very joyful. So with some offices we have excellent cooperation and with others we have zero because they refuse to give us any information. [...] Which is for me is, like, (...) crazy.

She goes on to illustrate that the UN organization in which she is working is based on and structured by project-based work and project-funding:

Our section and [UN organization] in general, we are 95 per cent funded by projects/ by donors. Only five per cent by the UN. And (...) that's a disaster because (...) we need to find funding (...) all the time. So, fundraising is a *major* task. And like, for example, in my section out of all the colleagues/, we are twelve, only one is funded by the UN. Everybody has donor-funding. Project funding or like me JPO funding. And (...) that's not very comfortable.

I then respond that the projects are linked to salaries, which Marie confirms. She concludes my sentence, "If the project ends, the people will/" with the words, "lose their contracts" and continues,

Yeah, especially the consultants, I think that's really a problem for them. We have like (um) several/ several of them, but even others, yes. It's tied to projects. But at the same time, it's an expanding topic, like I told you, so, (um), at the moment it's not really a problem, it's, (um), we have one more funding, we rather need to implement a project (laughing)

Likewise, JPO positions are designed to mobilize the self-activation of the person on the job.<sup>38</sup> Informant Marie, for instance, explains that her posi-

38 The financing for JPO positions depends on the policy of each country. In general, the donor country pays half of the two to three, sometimes even four years for the position while the JPO is then responsible for funding the other half.

tion as a JPO was only funded for one year. When I asked her how the JPO position is funded, she explains,

So, it's like a JPO. It's, um, for two years. So, one year renewable once and then a third year is co-shared, meaning that [the donor country financing her position] would agree to pay my, my salary for half of it if I find half/ the other half. [...] But that's a general JPO thing. Like, I have now colleagues from Italy and Denmark and it's the same for them. They have to find their own funding for the third year.

She then explains that she wants to do the same as her predecessor: "She started her third year paid by (..) (um) (..) co-shared [country] and I don't know what funding. But some months later she managed to jump into another position (..) more *fixed*. So, she left the JPO program." This corresponds to the quote of the panelist at the career fair.

Another JPO, Justice, mentions their situation to be similar, and reminds themselves of being "realistic." Justice tells me,

I am funded for two years by the [country] government. And after that, dilemma, interrogation mark. We don't know. I don't think the [nationality] fund by policy a third year. The idea is that the office has to take over in funding the position. But we have a lot of cuts in our section, I mean, in our office. We have a big crisis, especially after the U.S. foreign/ *new* foreign policy. They are not very keen on funding [human rights] (laughing). So, most of our colleagues are also (um) fearing for their positions. We have a lot of colleagues who are on temporary assignments. Who part, who see their positions disappear. So, I have to start looking for something, maybe in the field, maybe in another organization. I don't know. I am just hoping that this is like (..) first, an open door towards future opportunities but I am not, like, I am not definite that I am gonna continue in this office. Because I have to be realistic, too.

Justice knows that the JPO position is seen as an investment into their career by the donor country. Given the circumstances, however, it seems doubtful whether a continuation on the post is possible. Due to the foreign policy of the U.S. under its 45<sup>th</sup> president who is "not keen" to fund human rights issues, Justice is just another UN worker envisioning job insecurity. This example also shows why financing JPO positions and investment in an *entrepreneurial [UN] self* (Bröckling 2016) is the right path to enhance job opportunities in the UN. This example further confirms that the global political landscape always has to be taken into account when focusing on the situation of an individual. As the senior staff quoted at the beginning of this chapter said, "[M]any of them will (..) *leave*." Yet, most of them not on a voluntary basis. Their ability to capitalize dispositions and other, especially financial, resources decides their options. This leads to the paradox that "it is

a privilege to participate in low or unpaid precarious aidwork” (Roth 2015b, 63). Moreover, Roth’s research of humanitarian personnel in so-called field contexts found that unpaid or low-paid work in the IDC sector “appears to be an elite profession” because “[it] requires capital to which those from the upper-middle class have access” (ibid. 2015b). Likewise, the Fair Internship Initiative (FII) in Geneva points out the same shortcoming; the FII is a group of interns who advocate for fair and paid internship conditions. An internal survey found that most interns at the UN in Geneva come from high- and middle-income countries and are financially supported by their parents.<sup>39</sup>

Turning now back to the above-quoted statement by the UN consultant from the report broadcast by CNN Money Switzerland, project-based work is presented as a creative task. The consultant, Tom Smith, tells the journalist that he was repeatedly involved in the acquisition of project funds (“the work I have done [...] has been focused on (..) new projects”). He describes the acquisition of financing for new projects as a quasi-creative process (“carved out of existing budgets”; “brought together with a range of different budgets”). This form of creative and aesthetic work guarantees not only the progress of the work and the continuation of the project, but more importantly, by doing so, this consultant actively contributes to the establishment of new projects that will also guarantee, finance and secure their position. His efforts are presented as a creative process with the aim to “try something new and innovative.” In this way, the UN consultant not only draws on his expertise but also draws on indirect knowledge since, as Reckwitz (2012, 139) underlines, aesthetic practices always contain aesthetic knowledge that is often implicit as well as cultural schemata guiding the production and reception of aesthetic practices and moments. In parallel, the interviewed consultant demonstrates the performance of his entrepreneurial self (Bröckling 2016) and praises his future willingness to perform and applicability. The agile switching between different projects is thus understood as a learning process and appears in the light of conventional mechanisms of subjectivation. This is also confirmed by the CCB president who assured me of the continuity of signing short-term external contracts “until she stops learning new things.”<sup>40</sup> But then the question arises: Has one ever learned enough? Has one ever gathered enough experience? Of course not. This is why the mecha-

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39 Correspondence with FII representative in February and March 2020. The situation of interns in Geneva has worsened during the pandemic in 2020/2021.

40 Fieldnote (May 7, 2019).

nisms described above are no contradistinction. Embedded in and driven by a discourse of infinite growth, economic success and self-fulfillment based on self-realization are not only interdependent but mutually reinforcing (Bröckling 2016, 28–29; Rose 1998). The underlying reason is precisely because “[t]he world of work is [conceptualized] as a realm in which productivity is to be enhanced, quality assured, and innovation fostered through the active engagement of the self-fulfilling impulses of the employee, through aligning the objectives of the organization with the desires of the self” (Rose 1998, 160).

This explains, why Tom Smith, the UN consultant interviewed for the report of CNN Money Switzerland, speaks of the “tremendous amount of satisfaction” he feels in his work in various UN organizations. It alludes to the evidence that aesthetic and emotional practices are important in everyday (project-based) work at the UN. Tom Smith’s statement can be seen as a way of re-appropriation of this type of work, just as Sutter’s precarious workers appropriate their precarity. Organizations and employees involved in humanitarian aid and development, “may need to have strong administrative and fund-raising skills. But it is in the moral sphere, of ‘doing good,’ of helping ‘vulnerable groups’ through advocacy, mobilization, or channeling resources, that they sustain their moral claim” (Sampson 2017, 9). Thus, subjectivation mechanisms in the UN context are to be understood both in the light of the “aesthetic regime of the new” (in German, *ästhetische Regime des Neuen*) (Reckwitz 2016), which is based on the creativity *dispositive* in the Foucauldian sense, and in connection with social and affective practices (“doing good”). The individual’s innovative power thus is not only placed at the service of the organization (and in the case of the UN, at the service of the world community in the broadest sense). It also serves the (self-)creation and (self-)assurance of the creative and thus constantly developing individual. The confirmation of the UN consultant as a creative worker thus finds its “moral” support in “doing good” or in standing up for the “community” with the decisive passion (“spirit”), as stated by the UN worker quoted above. Through the successful acquisition of project funds, the consultant in the interview with CNN Money Switzerland asserts himself beyond the UN context as someone who can actually create “something new and innovative.” The mechanism of subjectivation thus enhances the modes of *acceptance* to sign up to precarious employment relationships in the future, as well. This confirms the narrative of the alleged moral superiority over permanent employees, and the creative self-assures its existence.

### 6.3 Precarity of Highly-Skilled Early Career Professionals

In this chapter, I have addressed the field of tension between individual social practices and decisions, narratives echoing neoliberal discourses on flexibility and especially the mechanisms of subjectivation in the UN resulting in increasing project-based work funded by external donors. On a theoretical level, I discussed the concept of privilege and the phenomenon of precarity, which at an institutional and individual level, is generally off-limits in the UN context.

I have suggested that juxtaposing privilege and precarity enables us to understand the readiness of (young) early career workers in the UN to engage in precarious employment. With this in mind, self-governmentality increases the effect of (self-)precarization (Lorey 2015) and can, at least in the UN, be explained in the light of a structural preference for permanent employees and the demarcation from them. The supposed moral superiority, the passion for “doing good” is narratively transformed into a privilege, if economic conditions make this possible at all. Admitting that *capital*, as conceived by Bourdieu (1986b), especially sufficient economic capital, must be available in the first place to realistically pursue such a career is a taboo in the UN context. This, together with residency permits, decides how well someone overcomes financial constraints caused by job insecurity. To the moral privilege of working at the UN, there is added another one: the privilege of enduring job insecurity. In other words, not all early career workers are unwillingly exposed to precarious work conditions. They belong to a socio-economic group of people who are able to take a certain risk (Sennett 1998, 76–97).

As explained above, the combination of both perspectives proposed here is not only about juxtaposing objective categories that can be tied to economic and power structural aspects such as wage or position in the workforce hierarchy, but rather, it is more interesting to engage in the question of how young workers in the UN context position themselves and (re)act in relation to the existing conditions and changes. When researching the UN staff system, it became clear that only a part of the UN staff (the permanent staff) enjoys structural and legal privileges compared to the other, short-term and precarious employees (UN consultants, UNVs, interns). From the perspective of the latter, the situation of the former (normal employment) thus appears to be a privileged situation. In this sense, this comparative slide (structural privilege vs. exclusion from the staff system) is to be understood

as a partial aspect in the complex phenomenon of the interweaving of narratives and interpretations of privileges and precarization.

In the empirical part of this chapter, I showed how the notion of privileged permanent employees, who allegedly achieved their posts thanks to the necessary commitment and zeal, is supplemented in the case of the UN by a set of actual, structural benefits. While the declared goal of most entrants to the profession is a staff position, many of them actually remain for months, if not years, in the position of UN consultants employed on short-term contracts and in extremely strong competition with each other. The combination of changing financing mechanisms and digitalized increasingly unfettered working leads to a situation in the UN where especially young professionals find themselves in precarious working and living conditions. As a result of the shortage of secure employment relationships (Lorey and Neundlinger 2012b, 12), those employed on (unpaid) short-term contracts are in competition with each other (Bourdieu 1998a). The *regimes of mobility* framework (Glick-Schiller and Salazar 2013) have a strengthening effect on the *regime or work*, i. e. on the already high pressure to be able to sign the next contract as a UN consultant as soon as a short-term contract expires and the permanent readiness to move to another UN location. As Ana's case in the vignette prior to this chapter shows, these employment mechanisms deeply and directly affect biographies. In the UN context, subjectivation mechanisms are also mixed with practices of the *cultures of doing good* (Lashaw, Vannier, and Sampson 2017). In this way, people who are starting their careers become attuned to this kind of desired willingness at job fairs and can later easily be inspired to use their creativity in a moral sense and "do good." At the same time, they are keen to present themselves as entrepreneurs of their own selves in an attractive way for the organization and thus remain employable. Precarious working and living conditions are accepted in order to continue to work in the UN context—especially when personal circumstances require it. As has already been emphasized, precarization does not mean pure "being at the company's mercy" but rather opens up power of action, in the form of contradiction, refusal and (political) solidarity beyond supposedly hierarchical stages of precarization (Lorey 2015; Sutter 2013; Butler 2009; 2004).

Juxtaposing privilege and precarity allowed me to show that professionals at the beginning of their potential (UN) career are especially vulnerable to facing precarity because, according to the logics of the job market, they have to improve their portfolio by earning more professional experience and accu-

mulate different forms of *capital* in the Bourdieusian sense, which they eventually will be able to bring into their future working life. The recognition of the alleged lack of work experience correlates with the willingness to accept precarity. Strictly speaking, employers such as the UN (ab)use the promise of offering the chance to their non-staff personnel who ostensibly enhance their attractiveness on the job market through accumulated work experience. The supposed opportunity to reduce someone's (professional) deficit and lack of experience is used as "currency," thus legitimizing precarious work. It is a "barter trade" in which an alleged lack of experience goes hand in hand with the acceptance of precarious employment. The *regime of work* intersects with the *regimes of mobility* and enhances precarity because of many (young) people's willingness to endure job insecurity and move to a new UN location at any time, just as Ana's example shows.

I want to reiterate that in Geneva, both UN consultants and interns have begun to form loose groups and, more recently, increasingly professionalized associations and, at least for the interns, to protest publicly because of their mostly unpaid or low-paid employment.<sup>41</sup> For the "art of governing" this means, as Lorey expresses it in reference to Foucault, that it has no longer been possible to "balance out a maximum of precarization that probably cannot be calculated exactly and that correlates with a minimum of security" (Lorey 2015, 8 my translation). Here, agency arises when this purported deficit of interns and consultants is no longer tolerated and they demand fair employment and remuneration. This is even more true when they leave their individual position and start to organize themselves politically as a group. Agency appears also in less obvious forms, when the usual narrative is questioned and thus critical faculty develops or when someone turns their back on the situation by leaving the UN and moving into other professional fields.

As an outlook, the above-mentioned public and personal practices of resistance do not distract from the fact that the precarity of highly qualified people described here, using the example of the UN, is encompassing more and more professional groups. Examples are the creative industries and the art sector, the field of science, but also all large international companies which, due to their reputation, are able to employ people in precarious positions. More recently, this phenomenon has even been observed in gov-

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41 A recent article written by FII representatives describes UN interns as "invisible" workers (UN Today, Fair Internship Initiative 2020, *United Nations' Invisible Workforce*).

ernments and public administrations. In times of looming global economic crises, such as that triggered at present by the COVID-19 pandemic, a rethinking of these employment relationships is urgently needed. It is unacceptable that permanent positions are reserved for senior staff while more and more workers are misled with temporary assignments and held back in a *limbo* of job insecurity. In my opinion, the UN has a moral duty to set a good example.



## 7 Conclusion

Precarity designates that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support [...].

*(Butler 2009, 25)*

This book set out to understand the work and lifeworlds at the UN HQ duty stations in Geneva and Vienna by assessing the views and experiences of professionals at the beginning of their potential UN career. It followed an ethnographic approach focusing on everyday work situations, moments in the informants' biographies and their professional careers in order to assess what it means to work in this organization in times of cognitive-based and affect-driven capitalism.

This study takes place within a work environment where immaterial assets such as knowledge, networks, information or communication as well as emotional experience, are not only produced but also desired by its employees. In the light of increasing job instability caused by project-based forms of employment, this study focuses on strategies of 20 individuals who, at the time of the recorded interview, look back at two to five years of working in the UN system. Their perspective is contrasted in expert interviews with five senior professionals. The data is enriched with informal, unrecorded conversations and observations during spontaneous encounters, later written down in memory protocols. Having experienced different forms of employment as unpaid or low-paid interns, individual contractors (commonly known as consultants) and eventually as full UN staff members with a more stable working contract, the informants of this study tell their work and life stories and how they make sense of their (work) environment. The analysis of the collected data assesses narrative and performative forms of agency and individual meaning-making of UN workers. Based on ethnographic data collected over a considerable period of time (13 months of participant observation at the UN site in Vienna) and 25 in-depth ethnographic interviews, this study contributes to knowledge about working in an international environment in times of increasing capitalization of knowledge, emotions and affects in the field of cultural anthropology and beyond. It contributes to the better understanding of the double-edged sword of intrinsic motivation and readiness for self-exploitation for a "good cause" in a prestigious international organization such as the UN.

## 7.1 Summary of the Chapters

In this chapter I will summarize, make conclusions and reflect on the central results of this study. First, I will outline the main message of each chapter including the prologue, the ethnographic vignettes and the epilogue. Second, I will contextualize my research findings and put them into a broader socio-political and economic context. Last but not least, I will provide a short outlook to round off this chapter.

### 7.1.1 Ethnographic Vignettes as Guiding Stories

This book starts by exploring the use of ethnographic vignettes for academic story-telling. Throughout the book, ethnographic vignettes serve as a “guiding story” (Bönisch-Brednich 2016, 199) to address major issues of interest and to develop central arguments discussed later in the subsequent analytical chapters. These text passages are characterized by a more visual vocabulary and a vivid writing style, inspired by creative non-fiction writing. As an ethnographer, I am involved in telling stories with the aim of creating reading memories. Based on the ethnographer’s perspective, ethnographic vignettes are a way to create proximity to the readers. Since ethnographic vignettes are the most consistent implementation of “thick descriptions” (Geertz 1973), it is also possible to read only the ethnographic vignettes—and still grasp the main message that is subsequently discussed in the analysis. While writing the manuscript, I was constantly concerned with taking the readers by their hands. In the light of the above, this book is an attempt to collectively look behind the fence of the UN and shine a light on the internal dynamics of an organization that is, to paraphrase a quote used in the introduction, often equally mysterious to the people “inside” an organization as it is to those looking at it from the “outside” (Moss Kanter 1993, 4).

What could be grasped as a rite of passage is thematized by the first vignette, the prologue. It leads the reader from the city of Vienna over the threshold at Gate 1 into the UN. It explains how the genesis of this book can be traced back to the time I worked as an (unpaid) intern at the UN HQ duty station called Vienna International Center (VIC). Following the perspective of an intern, the ethnographic descriptions prior to the introduction illustrate how I became interested in the situation of early career UN workers while experiencing their excitement, competition, and economic pres-

sure myself. Although the first descriptions emphasize the excitement for the UN I shared with my fellow internship colleagues in summer 2014, my observations already indicate the first issues problematized in the course of this book, such as the precarity of interns and their readiness and commitment to pursue what could be framed as a “UN career.”

### 7.1.2 A Historically Grown Fabric of Stories and Atmospheres: The UN as a Global Assemblage

The pages following the introduction of this book set out to determine the field of research conceptualized as an assemblage. Against this background, the second ethnographic vignette takes the reader to Geneva and describes the ethnographer’s futile search for the tourist gaze when taking a guided tour at the Palais des Nations. The main aim of this part of the study is to exemplify how the atmosphere in this place is used to maintain and permanently recreate the UN’s positive image and reputation.

The atmospheric descriptions in the second ethnographic vignette are followed by the chapter introducing the research field. Following a historical perspective, Chapter 2 describes how the UN HQ duty stations were established in Geneva and Vienna. By adopting a cultural-anthropological approach on atmospheres and narratives, this chapter also addresses the ways in which the historically grown aura of elevation of the UN and its great reputation of being an “attractive” workplace was constructed over time. This historic narrative goes back to the UN’s predecessor organization, the League of Nations. Throughout this chapter, I introduce further places where I conducted participant observation and encountered my informants, namely the UNSSC and career fairs. I reiterate that this research *assembles* multiple research sites of the UN. It acknowledges the conceptualization of an ethnographic field as a *global assemblage* (Collier and Ong 2005), which means that the field of research resembles a fabric that is constantly changing over time and space and whose loose ends and threads lead the inquiring look into new contexts each time. Hence, this research offers insights into a specific moment of the organization and the biographies of my informants alike.

Focusing on UN employees, the second chapter also introduces the UN staff system. It addresses the literal hierarchy based on the division of labor. The division between employees involved in management decisions (P staff) and administrative functions (G staff) goes back to the LoN. The division between staff and so-called non-staff personnel is a more recent phenome-

non, which is enhanced by project-based work now complemented by project-based financing of positions. Whereas full staff members enjoy a wide array of structural benefits, non-staff personnel (also called consultants or individual contractors) find themselves de facto excluded from the organization. The latter usually have less responsibility, decision-making capabilities and are not entitled to benefits, despite performing similar tasks to their staff-member colleagues. Usually employed through external contracts, the number of young(er) consultants has increased significantly in the last two decades. By accepting these short-term contracts, many of the external contractors at an early stage of their career work in these positions, aiming to make their way up the career ladder. This is addressed in a section on entry options for early career UN workers.

The general introduction to the research field in Chapter 2 is followed by the third, methodological chapter briefly addressed hereinafter. Before discussing the methodological approach, I make a quick detour to the ethnographic vignette that introduces the field site in Turin, namely the UN staff college UNSSC. Based on an anecdote from my field work, the ethnographic vignette describes how informants tried to “entrap” the interviewer with their stories, by using her as a dialogue partner who is, despite being a stranger, also very familiar with their concerns. This vignette alludes to the main methodological concern, namely how to encounter and decode narratives of what I termed *self-aware interviewees*. Therefore, in the third chapter, I reflect on my methodological approach.

### 7.1.3 Unraveling Linear Stories : Grasping Self-aware Interviewees

In Chapter 3 of this book, I debate what it means to conduct ethnographic research, as an early career academic, on early career workers at a powerful organization such as the UN. I discuss what has been termed studying up (Nader 1969), a label that applied to my first approach to the organization while I was doing an internship, before it gradually transformed into studying sideways (Hannerz 2006), which means studying persons who share several experiences and perspectives with the researcher. I introduce the data, containing participant observation and ethnographic interviews. I conducted in-depth interviews with 20 informants in junior staff positions and five senior professionals, who had not only more responsibility but also more years of work experience in the UN context. The conclusions drawn in this methodological chapter are twofold: On the one hand, this finding puts into

perspective the supposed “fear” of approaching and engaging with powerful and allegedly inaccessible fields of research; the list of researchers who have already expressed respective concerns is long. Depending on the research approach, I argue that having access is perfectly possible. However, as I have explained using the example of this study, the chosen access influences not only the perspective but also the questions that ethnographers (can) ask and are able to respond to. On the other hand, the commitment to a more collaborative research approach leads to fundamental considerations about ethnographic research on the UN as an institution and relevant methodological insights into the approaching of research subjects. In this chapter, I make a case for a more collaborative research approach to generate relevant para-ethnographic knowledge. My specific research approach and ethical commitment mean to recognize the informants’ para-ethnographic knowledge and sensibilities (Holmes and Marcus 2005b; 2012). This is one of the main reasons why many insights of narrative analysis are taken into account when analyzing narrations and narratives that I have encountered in specific interviews and the general research field. At the end of Chapter 3, I also discuss possible motives that led informants to agree to either participate in this study or to ignore my request by not responding to my invitation. The methodological part concludes with a discussion of what it means to immerse myself in the UN as a field of research and acknowledges the fluid process that comes with having multiple roles during the research process. I show that precisely these multiple roles can be fruitful for the ethnographer’s sensibility and critical reflection on “tales of the field” (van Maanen 2011).

#### 7.1.4 Routinized Moments and Habitualized Actions: Approaching the (In)formal UN Culture

The subsequent vignette introduces the reader to an everyday work situation at the VIC in Vienna and sets up the fourth chapter. It describes the dynamics of a workshop held by an external instructor at a Vienna-based UN agency. The aim of the workshop was to raise sensitivity for the UN’s “international” culture. However, this scene exemplifies the definition of culture promoted by HR. A concept that could not be more different to and distant from the cultural-anthropological approach to culture. Whereas my discipline acknowledges the dynamic and multiple forms of human behavior as well as the myriad ways of individual and collective sense-making, the HR department tends to use ideas around a specific “corporate culture” as

an instrument of power to mold the organizational culture with the final goal of managing employees. Conceptualizing culture as a container (Hess 2009) goes along with the successful implementation of the corporate culture. However, as observed in this workshop many UN workers are interested in everyday work dynamics and actively try to understand the “international” element of the UN, which I doubt to be as cosmopolitan as some consider the UN to be (Nowicka 2006). With this ethnographic vignette I show how the concept of culture within the UN is defined and how it differs from one of the most basic concepts of anthropology. This also shows the relevance of the work and the discussions of anthropologists.

In Chapter 4, the *ritualized cross-cultural relations and interactions* are at the center of analysis. It examines the impact of the formal organizational culture on the informal staff culture and vice-versa. By applying theories of social orders and ritual theories tailored to mundane contexts, this chapter explores routinized moments and habitualized actions in the everyday work culture. Drawing on my ethnographic interviews and fieldnotes, which report and reflect on situations of the everyday that I captured during the research phase of the participant observation, I analyze moments of rites of passage (van Gennep 1960) and dynamics of *communitas* (Turner 1977). The formation of social order is elaborated using five examples. The analysis of the ethnographic data starts with outlining the ways my informants prepare their physical approach to the employing organization. The range of (daily) (re)negotiation starts with getting “a professional-ish haircut” and ends with the preference for wearing a sweater over using a suit and a tie. It can, therefore, be stated that habitualized practices and ritualized behavior, which I documented while conducting long-term participant observation on site, contribute to both the formal and informal organizational culture. The chapter goes on to discuss possible ways of adopting a specific (narrative) performance that is influenced by the structure and set-up of official job interviews at the UN. It is a moment where the employees’ behavior is clearly orchestrated by organizational rules. A third example discusses a prominent and well-known ritual moment, namely crossing boundaries and passing thresholds by means of a ritualized action. Taking a closer look at the key object in the boundary-making and boundary-negotiating at the UN HQ duty stations, the employee badge, I show how the limits of the organization go as far as when a person wearing the employee badge moves into the city. Especially for interns, the badge is an important object in marking their first step towards the UN, although they do not (yet) officially belong to the UN staff.

A fourth case elaborates on the negotiation of power and scale in meetings. It shows how different forms of meetings and chance encounters structure the everyday work processes. The fifth and last example takes a closer look at social rank and circulation during people's leisure time. This applies, for instance, when (a selected group of) people meet to practice a humor-based form of equality and group-building or when taking a break from everyday work structures during lunch. All these examples underscore the importance of ritualized moments for the (in)formal culture of the organization. They illuminate moments of organizational power but also the employee's creative modes of behavior and narrative patterns to claim agency.

### 7.1.5 Homo UN's Skillful Rhetoric: Aligning Different Narratives

After exploring ritualized moments of the everyday culture, the next vignette—and the opening of Chapter 5—continues with the observations at the UN staff center in Turin. In September 2017, I was invited to observe a morning session of the JPO orientation program. The vignette thus outlines how the workshop aims to create common values among the newly assigned Junior Professional Officers (JPOs).

Chapter 5 introduces the corporate subject of the UN that I called *homo UN*. I constructed this social figure as a hermeneutical tool to understand, analyze and describe the impact of the UN's "corporate culture" on the specific (narrative) habitus encountered among UN professionals. After assessing the relevant literature on the conceptualization of the contemporary (employee-)self, I explain the formation of *homo UN*. I then address the pivotal aspects of the rhetoric skills (and skillful rhetoric) and, ultimately, the narrative habitus encountered among the interviewed UN workers. The narrative habitus (Frank 2010) builds upon Bourdieu's concept of *capital* (Bourdieu 1995; 1986b) and his findings about the power of language and the importance of rhetorical abilities (Bourdieu 1991). The ethnographic examples show that the ability to present the right story is as important in everyday encounters as it is in a job interview. Notably, the former is measurably influenced by the latter. While some informants stressed linearity in their narrative, other statements prove the morally-loaded idea of "doing good" as a dominant subject position. These narrative patterns can be understood as *affirmative narratives*. However, I also encountered *counter-stories*. These statements exemplify one form of narrative agency and a way to keep the individual story, for instance, when one informant underlined how persons like

her are underrepresented among UN staff in UN HQ duty stations. Or, as another informant did, emphasizing their personal narrative as opposed to a dominant UN narrative. I thus assert that my informants, despite adopting narrative patterns and reproducing the organizational narrative, keep their individual narrative agency. The latter may eventually lead to action by leaving the UN and trying to evade these structures and mechanisms.

I further assess explicitly and implicitly formulated requirements to which UN workers and especially candidates and potential future UN employees have to respond. Two aspects are central here: First their ability to capitalize resources and dispositions by *creating uniqueness*, affirming availability and constant readiness to move immediately as soon as a position is offered. The second aspect is linked to imaginations of meritocracy in the UN and narrative responses that I frame as *balanced modesty*. It is assumed that balancing these different requirements gradually leads to a particular habitus that allows individuals to make their career in the UN without the necessity of “talking against” it. I show that in order to get ahead on the UN career ladder, one needs to portray certain characteristics and adapt the narratives and the habitus of the *homo UN*.

### 7.1.6 Continuous Learning and a Meaningful Job: Grasping Privileged Precarities

Chapter Six’s vignette following the chapter on *homo UN* explores the experiences of an informant who successfully navigated their way through the “limbo” encountered by early career UN workers. After completing two internships and working under a series of consultancy contracts, this informant successfully passed the recruitment exam of the *Young Professional Programme*. Eventually, she started her position as a regular UN P staff. This ethnographic vignette exemplifies the narrative path of aligning the personal self to the *homo UN* expected to be performed in job interviews.

The last ethnographic chapter represents the synopsis. Hence, Chapter 6 returns to the initial problem of increasing job-insecurity that is affecting highly-skilled and well-trained professionals such as my informants at the UN. This chapter puts the efficiency of these contracting strategies in question. After discussing key literature on the issue of precarity and by contrasting the benefits (or privileges) enjoyed by full staff members with the job insecurity of non-staff personnel, this chapter explores the reason why such an increasing number of external contractors at the early stage of their career



seem to happily accept (insecure) working conditions and interpret this situation as a never-ceasing learning situation. Based on a vast corpus of literature addressing the technology of the self (Bröckling 2016; Rose 1998; Foucault 1988), I argue that these mechanisms are not at all contradictory. On the contrary, expectations of privilege, narrations of self-fulfillment and acceptance of precarious and insecure work are mutually enhancing dynamics. They are not contradictory but two sides of the coin. The following should not be overlooked: namely, that flexibility and insecurity accepted for (better) professional prospects and opportunities can lead to social precarization. This will be addressed in the epilogue.

## 7.2 Narratives of Early Career UN Workers in Times of Cognitive and Affect-based Capitalism

I mean I'm so privileged to be in the UN and especially paid by [country]. So, I really want to stay there, so I would still do what it takes to remain in this system.

*(Marie, JPO, Jan 11, 2017)*

I know that I've been lucky as well to have been able to insert myself into this environment. Also because I needed to have been privileged to some extent to start with to make it this far, I guess. But I also know where I come from. So, I'm not, I don't feel guilty for the life that I have because I know that I worked for every bit of it.

*(Henry McDonald, P3, July 15, 2016)*

That's why we are in the UN. I don't know what to say, it's just a (..) it is a (..) privilege, that's how I feel myself. It's a privilege, and it's a challenge, at the same time. And (..) But I believe in the [UN] system (laughs). I guess you have to believe also.

*(Fernanda, Director, Sept 13, 2017)*

The quotes above are given to summarize narratives on “being privileged” in the UN context. Yet, how to understand these different ideas of “privilege” in the UN context? These quotes illustrate how UN workers recognize and position themselves towards their own privileged position. By reflecting on each quote, I show that being a UN employee means to believe in the “privi-

lege” to work for the UN. The quotes allude to the notion that privilege is multi-faceted. In Chapter 6, I showed several quotes exemplifying the quasi-religious idea of being selected and chosen to “do good.” There is the idea that “with luck, we get this privilege”, a senior staff told me. The privilege, as another informant implied, entails responsibility. To keep the “privileged” position, as the first of the above-mentioned quote shows, it is necessary to “still do what it takes to remain in this system.” The idea of luck is contrasted with perspectives of earning the benefits after having worked hard for them, which shows a sense of deservingness. By referring to “[not coming] from a privileged position” another informant assured me, “I also know where I come from.” Finally, the third quote alludes to the moral implication of working at the UN and underscores the “belief” in the UN system.

By juxtaposing the notions of privilege and precarity, I argue throughout my book how allegedly opposed statuses (privileged and precarious) are not contradictory at all but rather mutually enhance their normative dynamics and narrative power. Together, they *echo* contemporary ideas according to which individuals at the beginning of their professional career in particular but, depending on the situation, also over the length of their lifetime have to accept any employment conditions even though for the most part these are precarious. In return, they are promised to be able to accumulate work experience and earn the privilege of being temporarily part of a powerful international institution and people.

This leads to the question of who puts themselves into a precarious position and for what reasons. Bearing in mind the *regime of work* entangled with the *regimes of mobility* (Glick-Schiller and Salazar 2013), UN workers, especially with non-EU/EFTA citizenship, are in more fragile positions. Without a work permit to look for jobs on the local labor markets, at least some of my informants (have to) accept insecure UN work if they want to or have to stay in the two cities for personal reasons, such as superior living standards, better health care systems or having partners and social circles who are living in the two cities. This effect is clearly not in the UN’s interest, an organization aiming to be represented by the biggest variety of diversity (particularly gender and geographical balance) among its staff. Although the UN is trying to diversify its staff, the narratives of its workers (permanent staff and non-staff personnel) show that this depends on various privileges and on the ability for people to enter a precarious UN position. The variety of diversity of its staff seems to be limited to gender and nationality (having staff from different countries), but other aspects such as class or socio-economic background—

hence the ability to take a precarious job—are neglected. According to Bourdieu's terms, the economic remuneration is changed due to the promise of accumulating more and more *cultural* and *social capital* and eventually being able to reduce this “deficit” on the job market. It is therefore not surprising at all that many early career professionals accept these insecure professional and thus also personal conditions in the hope of gaining cultural and social capital in order to succeed in the UN world. This seems to be a possible moment of personal agency. Hence, through Bourdieu's theory, we can understand UN workers' use of cultural and social capital, and highlight the importance of narratives in the creation of the self.

### 7.3 Outlook

This ethnographic study has raised important questions about the nature of employment at the UN. It was beneficial to follow the perspectives of early career professionals in order to assess the gravity of their situation but also their scope of agency.

In terms of directions for future ethnographic research, a specific focus on the political engagement and agency of consultants and interns would be fruitful. Particularly the political positioning of interns and consultants in Geneva would serve as an insightful example. As it was reported that the consultants, due to their workload, have less energy to politically organize, it is even the more surprising (or not) that interns who are in financially even more insecure situations, fight for their rights. This example confirms the hypothesis that interns find the strength to address their cause and call for attention for their precarious situation precisely because they have been pushed to their economic limit. Another valuable contribution would be to conduct follow-up interviews in a couple of years with people who did not get their contract extended to see where they are then. Their possible physical and social distance to the UN environment might also change people's attitudes towards the institution. It would also be interesting to see how their experience of being a precarious intern opened other doors in the public or private sector. A third possible area of future research would be to investigate why among early career UN workers there are still many women whereas in the mid-level positions there are suddenly fewer women. For higher positions a quota system enables the organization to reach gender parity. Here, I

let one of my informants speak. Malaika told me, “I work a lot with women as you know there’s also the whole gender issue because women advance (um) much less in the UN system. Usually get stuck at a P4 level and (um) so there’s also the question, you know, is it more just skills you need? Or what do you need?” Hence, here it would be worth evaluating how entangled structures of privilege and precarity impact the organizational setting in terms of gender representation.

As a final note, I want to draw attention to the following: In times where cognitive and emotional abilities are capitalized to deal with complex issues, in an organization that has been aiming for more than seven decades to better the world, contractual situations should be improved to guarantee more stability. Then, I assume, (young) highly-skilled UN workers will have to worry less about the sustainability of their own career and living situation. Consequently, they could invest more energy in their daily work. This, I believe, holds true not only for the UN. Yet the UN might serve as an example.

# Epilogue: “As soon as the opportunity comes.”

Thursday, May 7, 2019. It is about 3:30 p.m. and I am walking from the entrance gate over to the main building of the Palais des Nations. I know this path already from previous visits; and I feel that I’m getting more familiar with this space. It is where I will meet Arnold.<sup>1</sup> Since we were not able to meet in person for the interview, we agreed to catch up over a coffee once I was in Geneva again. Arnold is waiting for me at the entrance to the building. We walk towards the closest coffee corner; the area is flooded with light shining through the continuous window front. I can see the large green area that stretches over the hill and, far behind, Lake Geneva, whose banks merge into a small mountain range on the French side. It is a sunny day, but nonetheless it feels cold outside. After ordering two espressos, we agree to sit at one of the white tables, which do not seem to match the elegant interior very well but would be rather more suited to a cafeteria.

Arnold, whom I met briefly in 2017 during the JPO workshop in Turin, has been working as a JPO for a Geneva-based UN organization for almost two years by now. He tells me that his position cannot be extended. “In eight months, I will finish and I have to start to apply for jobs,” he says a bit worried and comments, “My supervisor wants to keep me but until now there were no concrete actions for another job.” He is almost sure that being male and European, it will be hard to get another position. “Just recently we received an email with new positions. For the two entry-level positions they hired women, for the two consultancies male candidates.” By trying to reduce the gender gap in UN workforce, Arnold explains, he feels that there is happening another form of what he describes as “discrimination.” He is aware of how bizarre this might sound and he struggles to find the correct words to express his despair and frustration. Belonging to the most represented group, he now directly experiences the effects of the new UN hiring strategy. “Indeed, there are many [French] in Geneva. Even if they are qualified, they do not get hired.” He seems to be highly indignant by witnessing how careers at the UN suddenly become viscous or even stop

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<sup>1</sup> I altered several details in Arnold’s biography to keep his identity undisclosed.

despite a supposedly perfect profile: “My former boss, for example, also [French] she was passed over two times. Once they hired a lady [from South America], the other time an [Asian] lady. And this despite of my former boss being expert of the open position; she wrote her Ph.D. [thesis] about exactly this topic.” Therefore, Arnold has no high hopes for being assigned to a new position. Instead, he is thinking of applying for a Ph.D. position, too, and partially work as a UN consultant in case the Ph.D. position is not (well-)paid. “Some stay consultants forever. It is decent money, you just have no social security,” he shrugs.

Now, Arnold is looking for another position, even “outside” the UN because he is convinced that “inside” there is no space for him. He says, “I have applied for the private sector but they do not even respond to me. I am doing research that is very particular. And the private sector does not like it.” He says that he likes working at the UN, but that he holds no hope for a solution that would bring him a position in the future. Arnold wants to stay in Switzerland since his partner just moved to Geneva from another European country to work in the marketing department of a local bank. After years of living apart, the couple who met during an exchange semester at a Spanish university now wants to live in one place. Arnold tells me that he is not willing to move like others who put their professional career first, “I have a friend who is here and his partner far away on another continent.” He would be unable to do that, he says.

He keeps on going back to the systematic being “passed over” persons like him suffer. This, just for belonging to the overrepresented categories; male, white and European. “Nobody talks about this issue,” he says stressing his support for the initiative but also highlighting the other side of the issue. The “discrimination” against young male Europeans is a taboo in the current reforms for more gender parity, he believes. “For many male colleagues at my age, it is the same. They also report that only females are hired. It’s highly political,” he says and questions the sustainability of the current recruitment strategy, “At the same time, I noted, the UN does not establish any sustainable structures or tenure tracks.” Of course, I think, I understand his point, yet, I think of Viviane, who as a young, female BPoC is “eye-catching,” as she told me. She certainly would not agree with Arnold since persons like her are underrepresented among UN workers. Having empathy for Arnold’s situation, I can see why he is visibly frustrated. It sounds more than cynical when he says, “The JPO program is a huge joke.” I ask, “Why so?” Arnold explains that the country which sponsored his position would send its young workforce abroad, however without lobbying for their positions as other countries sponsoring JPO positions did. He heard and observed that JPOs financed by another country “get financed for two years and they can be extended up to two years more.” What is more, if they are able to find funding

for one year, their country would pay the second one. He is certain that “this will be four years in total, then you get a foot into the organization.”

After approximately one hour, Arnold has to go back to his desk. When we walk toward the exit of the building, he tells me that he now is “working on his reputation” and busy with “getting noted.” He hopes to be able to win a consultancy position. I think that it is interesting that both Arnold and Viviane exemplified how UN employees wish not only “to get noted” beyond their appearances (ethnicity, race, gender, age), but also for their qualities and skills that show that they are able to adapt to *homo UN*. They both need to work on their reputation and want to be rewarded by being recognized as bodies and minds who fit into the UN.

At the beginning of 2020, we exchange emails. In the follow-up email I sent to all my informants in order to catch up with the latest events in their lives, I wrote to Arnold, “At the time of our Skype interview, you had just started as a JPO working for [organization]. When we met in May, you told me that your contract is going to end soon. How would you describe your current situation now?” On January 8, 2020, Arnold responds, “Not much has changed by the time unfortunately. My contract will end in less than a week and there is no certainty about my future here. In the best-case scenario, I will cover a colleague going on maternity leave, which will give me additional three months of contract. In the worst-case scenario, I’ll be out of business. While my agency is facing important financial constraints, the situation is largely due to my manager being unable to anticipate events and taking very late action to fix the issue.” His last sentence again underlines his frustration, “I don’t feel rewarded for my work and achievements in the past two years as JPO and I will leave the organization as soon as the opportunity comes.”

My second question aiming to sense the current personal situation of my informants, was whether the informant wants to share any changes in their personal life. To this question, Arnold replies, “Not really at the moment. Due to personal reasons, I will remain in any case in Geneva and I don’t plan to leave the place anytime soon. I’ve been very close to getting the ‘dream job’ at a private company about a month ago but it did not work out in the end. Needless to say, I am actively looking for a job and I will keep on trying.”

After reading Arnold’s response, it becomes even clearer that even a JPO position, promoted as the “entry ticket” to a UN career, puts the person under pressure with regard to “working on their reputation” and “getting noted,” as Arnold had phrased it when we met at the Palais des Nations. JPOs and other early career UN professionals have to hope that circumstances, both professional and private, will be fortunate for them to pursue a UN career.





# Abbreviations and Acronyms

Only the repeatedly mentioned acronyms are listed here. The headquarters of international organizations prominent in this study are noted in brackets.

|                 |  |
|-----------------|--|
| CCB             | (Interim) Consultants Coordinating Board (Geneva)  |
| CTBTO PrepCom   | Preparatory Commission for the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (Vienna) |
| DDG             | Deputy Director-General  |
| DG              | Director General   |
| ECOSOC          | Economic and Social Council  |
| EFTA            | European Free Trade Association  |
| EU              | European Union   |
| FAO             | Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (Rome)                             |
| FII             | Fair Internship Initiative (Geneva)  |
| GA              | General Assembly of the United Nations   |
| HR              | Human Resources (Management)   |
| IAEA            | International Atomic Energy Agency (Vienna)  |
| ICS             | International civil servant  |
| ICSC            | International Civil Service Commission (New York)  |
| IDC             | International development cooperation and humanitarian aid                                 |
| IMF             | International Monetary Fund (Washington D.C.)  |
| INGO            | International non-governmental organization  |
| IO              | International organization   |
| IOM             | International Organization for Migration   |
| ITU             | International Telecommunication Union (Geneva)   |
| JIU             | Joint Inspection Unit  |
| JPO             | Junior Professional Officer  |
| LoN/ the League | League of Nations  |

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|        |  |
|--------|--|
| MS     | Member States  |
| NGO    | Non-governmental organization  |
| NPT    | Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons                           |
| OHCHR  | Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (Geneva)     |
| PHF    | Personal History Form (equivalent to a professional résumé)                  |
| PPP    | Public-private partnership   |
| SDG    | Sustainable Development Goals  |
| SG     | Secretary General of the United Nations                                      |
| UN     | United Nations   |
| UNESCO | United Nations Educational and Cultural Organization (Paris)                 |
| UNHCR  | United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (Geneva)                       |
| UN HQ  | United Nations Headquarters Duty Station (New York, Geneva, Vienna, Nairobi) |
| UNJSPF | United Nations Joint Staff Pension Fund                                      |
| UNIDO  | United Nations Industrial Development Organization (Vienna)                  |
| UNOG   | United Nations Office at Geneva  |
| UNOOSA | United Nations Office for Outer Space Affairs (Vienna)                       |
| UNOV   | United Nations Office at Vienna  |
| UNSC   | United Nations Security Council  |
| UNSSC  | United Nations System Staff College (Turin)                                  |
| UNV    | United Nations Volunteer   |
| VIC    | Vienna International Center  |
| WBG    | World Bank Group (Washington D.C.)   |
| WIPO   | World Intellectual Property Organization (Geneva)                            |
| YPP    | Young Professional Programme   |

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# Annex

## Anonymization

Before recording the interviews, I assured the interviewees that their names, the positions, and organizations where they worked at the time of the interview, as well as the names of third persons and places will remain undisclosed. I offered my informant to turn the audio recorder off at any time they felt not comfortable in sharing all information officially. Several times they did ask me to and, by doing so, showed me that the information that they were about to share “off the record” is not meant to be quoted, not even anonymously.

Most of them welcomed this approach to not disclose their identity. In response to the follow-up request, they sent me a pseudonym. It is a fictitious name—first name, surname, or both—which is solely known by them and the ethnographer. It allowed them to masquerade as another person or create an alternative identity by ‘choosing’ a different gender or linguistic reference space. However, a few of my informants told me that they would like to be known by their real names. Others, in turn, did not receive or respond to my follow-up message. Whereas I used the actual names of the former, I did not disclose the identity of the latter: Either, I used a gender-neutral form for those informants who did not send me a preferred pseudonym. Or, in order to improve readability, I decided to unauthorizably choose a pseudonym for the few informants who did not answer me. The informants can reconstruct their quotes based on the date of the interview. While writing this book, I tried to hide all personal markers such as gender, age, ethnicity, and nationality to the best of my ability. Social markers, and the place of origin or work, for example, are only mentioned in the manuscript when explicitly mentioned by my fieldwork interlocutors, or if a social marker is significant for the analytical statement made in the text.

## Transcription

The interviews were transcribed with the transcription program *F5* and analyzed with the text analysis system *MAXQDA* that is generally used in social science. I transcribed the majority of the interviews, yet I received support from students. Audible sounds or interjections are marked in brackets, thus (laughter) or (um). Period (.) marks when a predicate is audibly finished (by stress or a pause); commas (,) are used when words or sentences are audibly separated, a forward slash (/) when the sentence or word was interrupted. For reader-friendly purposes, the transcription shown in this book follows the grammatical rules if it does not drastically alter the meaning of the quote; this includes question marks and exclamation marks. Alternatively, the grammatically correct form, the missing word, or the correct English expression, as well as necessary explanations given by the author, are noted in square brackets and marked by the author's initials, thus [missing word], and [explanation, LM]. Ellipsis is used in case of hesitation or a longer pause (...). Ellipsis in square brackets [...] marks the omitted part of the sentence in the quotation. When the interviewees stressed a specific word, or when they used code switching, it is marked in italics.

## List of Interviews

The table lists my informants following the chronological order of the interviews. It links the date of the interview with the pseudonym. In this way, informants who did not send me a pseudonym can find the corresponding quotations. Their names are highlighted in italics (*pseudonym*). I also add general information about their position in the UN staff hierarchy. However, to guarantee their anonymization, I will not disclose the city in which they live(d) nor the specific UN organization in which they work(ed) at the time of the interview.

| <i>No.</i> | <i>Date of interview</i> | <i>Pseudonym</i> | <i>Education</i>       | <i>Position at time of interview</i> | <i>Position by Feb 2020</i> | <i>Type of Interview</i> | <i>Duration of Interview</i> |
|------------|--------------------------|------------------|------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1          | Wed, April 27, 2016      | Emmanuel Snow    | MA, MA                 | P staff                              | IO (Foundation)             | Audio recorded           | 02:05:00 (after work)        |
| 2          | Mon, May 2, 2016         | Vanessa          | MA                     | International consultant             | End of contract             | Ad hoc protocol          | 02:45:00 (16:00 - 18:45)     |
| 3          | Thurs, May 19, 2016      | Eduardo          | BA                     | P                                    | Corporate/Private sector    | Audio recorded           | 02:11:00 (after work)        |
| 4          | Sat, May 21, 2016        | Jordan           | MA                     | P                                    | UN                          | Audio recorded           | 02:30:00 (12:00 - 14:30)     |
| 5          | Sun, May 22, 2016        | Erik             | MA (enrolled in Ph.D.) | P                                    | IO                          | Audio recorded           | 03:30:00 (10:30 - 13:30)     |
| 6          | Sun, May 22, 2016        | Teodoro Salas    | Ph.D.                  | P                                    | UN                          | Audio recorded           | 04:00:00 (18:30 - 22:30)     |
| 7          | Mon, May 23, 2016        | Kolibri          | MA                     | consultant                           | Corporate/Private sector    | Audio recorded           | 01:45:00 (after work)        |
| 8          | Wed, July 13, 2016       | James Mantha     | MA                     | P                                    | Corporate/Private sector    | Audio recorded           | 03:03:00 (18:30 - 21:30)     |
| 9          | Fri, July 15, 2016       | Henry McDonald   | MA, MA                 | P                                    | IO                          | Audio recorded           | 01:12:00 (afternoon)         |

| <i>No.</i> | <i>Date of interview</i> | <i>Pseudonym</i> | <i>Education</i>             | <i>Position at time of interview</i> | <i>Position by Feb 2020</i>  | <i>Type of Interview</i>                | <i>Duration of Interview</i> |
|------------|--------------------------|------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------------------|------------------------------|---|------------------------------|
| 10         | Mon, Dec 12, 2016        | Montse           | MA                           | P                                    | INGO                         | Audio recorded/<br>ad hoc protocol      | 01:30:00<br>(10:00 -11:30)   |
| 11         | Thurs, Dec 12, 2016      | Annabelle        | Ph.D.                        | P                                    | Corporate/<br>Private sector | Audio recorded                          | 01:43:00<br>(afternoon)      |
| 12         | Wed, Jan 11, 2017        | Marie            | MA                           | JPO                                  | UN                           | Audio recorded                          | 00:49:00<br>(afternoon)      |
| 13         | Thurs, Mar 2, 2017       | Ana              | MA<br>(enrolled<br>in Ph.D.) | YPP                                  | UN                           | Audio recorded                          | 01:32:00<br>(after work)     |
| 14         | Thurs, Aug 17, 2017      | Kahluit          | MA                           | Inter-national<br>Consultant         | UN                           | Audio recorded                          | 01:40:00<br>(19:00 – 20:40)  |
| 15         | Wed, Sept 13, 2017       | Fernanda         | Ph.D.                        | Director                             | UN                           | Audio recorded<br>(Expert<br>interview) | 00:53:29<br>11:00 -12:00     |
| 16         | Wed, Sept 15, 2017       | <i>Viviane</i>   | MA                           | JPO                                  | UN                           | Audio recorded                          | 01:04:00<br>(15:00 – 16:05)  |
| –          | Wed, Sept 27, 2017       | Tomas            | MA                           | Consultant                           | UN                           | Memory<br>protocol                      | 00:15:00<br>(late morning)   |



| No. | Date of interview           | Pseudonym      | Education | Position at time of interview | Position by Feb 2020 | Type of Interview                 | Duration of Interview     |
|-----|-----------------------------|----------------|-----------|-------------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------|
| 17  | Wed, Sept 27, 2017          | UNSSC Director | Ph.D.     | Director                      | UN                   | Audio recorded (Expert interview) | 01:31:08                  |
| 18  | Wed, Sept 27, 2017          | <i>Jane</i>    | Ph.D.     | Senior                        | UN                   | Audio recorded                    | 00:36:00                  |
| 19  | Wed, Sept 27, 2017          | Malaika        | Ph.D.     | Senior                        | UN                   | Audio recorded                    | 00:31:15                  |
| 20  | Thurs, Sept, 28, 2017       | Barcus         | MA        | Senior                        | UN                   | Audio recorded (Expert interview) | 00:54:00 (10:00 -11:00)   |
| 21  | Wed/Thurs, Sept 27/28, 2017 | <i>Daniel</i>  | MA        | P (ex-JPO)                    | UN                   | Memory protocol                   | Lunch time and after work |
| 22  | Thurs, Dec 28, 2017         | Carlo          | MA        | JPO                           | End of contract      | Audio recorded                    | 01:35:39 (09:00 -10:30)   |
| 23  | Mon, Jan 15, 2018           | <i>Justice</i> | MA        | JPO                           | UN                   | Audio recorded                    | 00:56:00 (14:00 -15:00)   |
| 24  | Mon, Jan 15, 2018           | <i>Robin</i>   | MA        | P                             | UN                   | Audio recorded                    | 01:30:55 (18:00 19:45)    |
| 25  | Fri, Mar 16, 2018           | Arnold         | MA        | JPO                           | End of contract      | Audio recorded                    | 01:05:16, Early evening   |



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