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Shachar, I.Y.; Hustinx, L.

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**Modalities of agency in a corporate volunteering program:
Cultivating a resource of neoliberal governmentality**

Itamar Y. Shachar

Department of Anthropology, University of Amsterdam

i.y.shachar@uva.nl

Lesley Hustinx

Department of Sociology, Ghent University

lesley.hustinx@ugent.be

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Abstract:

Recent scholarly discussions on agency relate the concept to privilege, affect and subject formation, while challenging its equation with resistance to structural limitations. This article utilizes these discussions in a new terrain of ethnographic exploration: the engagement of corporate volunteers with underprivileged youth, coordinated by a transnational nonprofit that relies on corporate sponsorship. Based on a multi-sited ethnographic study that followed these activities in the US, Belgium and Israel, the article describes how corporate volunteers and coordinators projected an individualized and optimistic agency onto the beneficiaries of their activity, while perceiving their own agency as limited despite their privileged position. The simultaneous use of these two contradictory notions of agency governs employees' engagement at work and their ideological adherence to corporate capitalism, making 'agency' a resource of neoliberal governmentality. These ethnographic insights contribute to explaining why corporations are increasingly interested in promoting volunteering as a salient Corporate Social Responsibility strategy.

Keywords:

Volunteering; Corporate Volunteering; Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR); Corporations; NGOs; Agency; Governmentality; Neoliberalism; Multi-Sited Ethnography

Introduction

On a sunny morning in March 2014, I joined a group of roughly 20 high school students and their teacher as they were entering the marketing site of a large Israeli real estate corporation.¹ They had just arrived in a van from their peripheral city to the more affluent urban area where the site was located. The marketing team working at the site was already waiting for the students; shortly after, the company's CEO and two of his deputies also arrived to the site. While some refreshments were served, I was chatting with the woman who invited me to join this activity – the volunteer coordinator of the Israeli branch of a transnational nonprofit I will name here 'Young Spirit' (YS).²

YS was established in 1987 by an American business person and operated at the time of the fieldwork in more than 18 US states and 11 countries. The organization operates educational programs in (semi-)public schools to develop entrepreneurial skills among youth identified as 'disadvantageous' or 'at-risk'. The YS group that visited the marketing site, for example, was composed of students who were classified during high school enrollment as having low chances of passing their matriculation exams, and were grouped into a special class aimed at assisting them in overcoming their academic difficulties. YS is extensively supported by several multinational corporations, including consultancy, high-tech and financial firms, as well as nationwide banks and local companies. In addition to financial donations, these companies often engage their employees as volunteers in YS educational activities. The corporate volunteers utilize their professional skills when serving as guest speakers or mentors to the youth on issues related to entrepreneurship and the business world, and sometimes help to organize special activities such as site visits; they often receive a permission from their employer to participate in these activities during working hours, but in other cases the company only coordinates the volunteering activities which are de facto

conducted outside working hours. While the activity I describe in this introduction took place in Israel, I also participated in YS activities in Belgium and in the US.

The site visit I describe here was quite unique due to the participation of the CEO, which led to excitement among the other employees present. The employees stood in front of the students, who gradually took seats in the white space of the marketing site. The Human Resources director of the company, who was responsible for coordinating the partnership with YS and had already met the students in previous activities, asked the teenagers to present themselves and briefly describe the business plans they had been working on as part of the YS educational program. Then, she presented to the students the CEO - a tall, white-*Ashkenazi*, middle-aged man, who opened his talk by directly addressing one of the students, a girl of *Mizrahi* origin:³

- You there! What is your dream? What would you like to be when you grow up?
- A surgeon!
- And what do you need to do to become a surgeon?
- Umm, I don't know...⁴

Following this brief interaction, the CEO embarked on a short speech:

In order to succeed in life, first of all you need a dream. You also need a bit of luck. But before that, you need to fit some basic requirements. If you want to become a surgeon, you need to study medicine, and for that you need to start making efforts from now, as you need to get excellent grades in your matriculation exams, with an average grade of around 150 points...

Here some students interfered to ask: But what is it? Can you achieve more than 100 points in your matriculation exams? The CEO seemed somewhat surprised and said in a lower tone that the teacher will explain the issue to them later, and elegantly changed the topic of the discussion. And indeed, in the Israeli education system students can achieve a grade higher than 100 points if they take extended courses. However, such courses were not part of these students' curriculum: in their study track, simply passing the matriculation exam was already considered a good achievement.

Following the CEO, the deputy executives and then the marketing agents gave short presentations. One agent had a unique manner of speaking, at once charismatic and provocative. The CEO guided him a bit: 'Maybe you can tell the students how you've reached the company, on your personal trajectory?' The agent responded:

Well, I was always a rebel. I cannot be a simple wage laborer, coming every day to the same office at the same time. It's a character. I even haven't done my matriculation exams. But hey – you shouldn't learn from me! I had a few business ventures, some failed, some succeeded and I sold them, and finally I became a marketing agent – which is really a great experience!

After the presentations, the executive team left the site while the marketing agents led the students to a tour outside the marketing center, at the construction site itself. I joined the tour, somewhat surprised that we did not meet or see any construction workers. As the tour came to an end, one of the agents was echoing to the students, while waving goodbye, what she perceived as the main message from that day: 'And don't forget – believe in yourself! Dream, make efforts, and then everything will be alright! I wish you lots of success!!!'

This optimistic message, constantly drilled into the students during that day, was expressed in a much less confident manner by the company's HR director when I interviewed

in her office a few weeks later: ‘You see kids [with such difficulties] that you say to yourself that if you’ve succeeded in leading even just two of them to a different track – it already gives you a very high satisfaction.’⁵ This director perceived her ability to generate changes as rather limited, similarly to many other corporate volunteers and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) officers I interviewed and conversed with during my fieldwork in the different sites. They often used expressions such as ‘we [the company] do what is possible [to do]’, sometimes adding – ‘within our limitations’. These interlocutors crafted two rather different perceptions regarding the capacity of individuals to act: they perceived their voluntary-based social involvement as highly limited in scope and effect, while constructing the transformation potential of their beneficiaries as almost unlimited. This contradictory construction of the capacity of the individual to act - what social scientists term *agency* - stands at the core of this article.

The article traces and analyzes this dual and simultaneous construction of agency, nurtured during the encounters in YS activities between privileged corporate volunteers and underprivileged youth. It examines the role of agency and its mobilization in the increasingly popular trend of ‘corporate volunteering’,⁶ which extends corporate activity to a sphere framed as ‘social’ and requires an active engagement of the employees in comparison to other CSR strategies. We commence the discussion by integrating some recent developments in the scholarly work on agency that will guide our analysis. The ethnographic analysis that follows begins by describing the ways in which corporate volunteers and professional coordinators perceived the agency of the beneficiaries of their activity: YS students. Then, we move to describe how the same actors perceived their own agency, and show its contradictory relation with the agency that was projected onto the beneficiaries. Based on showing how ‘agency’ is implicitly constructed in various modalities which are attributed and mobilized differentially, we claim that agency becomes a *resource of neoliberal governmentality*, which plays an

important role in corporate aspirations to mold and govern employees' subjectivities in a way that preserves their loyalty and engagement. Therefore, the exploration of agency and its effects constitutes an important aspect in explaining why corporate volunteering is becoming a subject for increasing interest by corporations and other powerful actors. In this way, the article contributes to contemporary discussions on agency, and uniquely links them with the body of literature on CSR and volunteering, while enhancing our understanding of contemporary corporate environments and neoliberal governmentality techniques.

Modalities of agency as a resource of neoliberal governmentality: Theoretical framework

The concept of *agency* became a 'key symbol' (Ortner, 1973) among social scientists, enabling them to describe certain modes of interaction between the individual - who becomes an 'agent' when possessing the virtue of the 'agency' - and her/his surrounding social constellations. Originating in classical articulations of the structure-agency debate (cf. Giddens, 1979), agency became 'a source of increasing strain and confusion in social thought' (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998: 962), leading to separate lines of discussion along paradigmatic, disciplinary and thematic divisions. Within the critical social science discourse, the prevailing conceptualization of agency equates it with resistance to established social orders (Dirks et al., 1994). In what could be interpreted as a 'tendency to romanticize resistance' (Abu-Lughod, 1990: 42), feminist and post-colonial scholars often constructed 'agency' as the individual's capacity to resist explicitly or implicitly oppression and social coercion, assuming that resistance incarnates 'real' interests and hidden aspirations that are derived from a realm within the individual which is not subjugated to 'the patterns that power inscribes' (Dirks et al., 1994: 18). Conforming with this tradition, ethnographic explorations of CSR have often also identified agency with resistance, for example when describing

laborers' resistance to regulations in their labor environments that were dictated by CSR policies (De Neve, 2014). Some scholarly works that highlighted volunteers as agents have also accepted as evident the equation of 'agency' with resistance to subjugation by potent structures or processes (Griffiths, 2016; Flores, 2014). However, it is surprising that despite the widespread construction of the volunteer as an autonomous subject, the scholarly scrutiny of the autonomous aspects of volunteering is limited (Haers and von Essen, 2015).

Rather than constructing another conceptualization of agency, this article focuses on how mundane notions of agency are articulated and mobilized. By exploring this through the case of corporate volunteering in YS, the article also contributes to a discussion on the relations between volunteering and agency. Although corporate volunteers and coordinators did not explicitly use the scholarly concept 'agency', they were often implicitly formulating mundane notions of agency by discussing the effect of social structures and constraints on their own acts as well as their effect on the program's students. The article brings to the fore these implicitly-constructed modalities of agency and analyzes them through an integration of three important developments in the scholarly work on agency: the recent poststructuralist challenge to the predominant conceptualization of agency; the exploration of the relations between agency and privilege; and the emerging attention to processes of attributing and utilizing agency.

First, Asad (2003) and Mahmood (2005) criticized the dichotomous character of the aforementioned discussions on agency that distinguishes modes of 'subjugation' to the hegemonic social order from modes of 'subversion' or 'resistance' that are perceived as exhibiting 'agency'. Mahmood called to replace such dichotomous approaches in exploring a variety of possible 'modalities of agency', maintaining that 'agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one *inhabits* norms' (2005: 15; emphasis in original). Mahmood's reformulation of agency has attracted much

scholarly attention (Bangstad, 2011) and inspired various ethnographic studies: from ethnographic inquiry of treatments in drug addicts (Kaye, 2013) to a study of pious women in Western Europe that demonstrated how submission and agency can be inter-related rather than contradictory (Bracke, 2008).

However, also this poststructuralist turn in the study of agency maintained a predominant ethnographic focus on the agency of marginalized or subjugated groups. Maxwell and Aggleton indicated that agency can also be ‘constituted through privilege’ (2013: 248) and that it is therefore crucial to explore empirically how privileged groups acquire their agentic capacities.⁷ Nenga (2011) showed that the relation between privilege and agency is particularly relevant in studying volunteering, which often involves encounters between volunteers who are privileged in terms of their class and race, and underprivileged beneficiaries. Her analysis of volunteers’ narratives showed how they develop agentic mechanisms to discursively apprehend these encounters and reconcile them within their broader views on society and its functioning. However, the studies that focused on the constitution of agency among privileged groups rarely considered Mahmood’s plea to think of the various modalities through which agency can be constituted.

A third critical development is the emerging scholarly attention to the ways in which agency is becoming a subject of articulation and mobilization, rather than a mere exhibited attribute. The traditional feminist and postcolonial equation of agency with resistance has been particularly ‘amenable to appropriation and incorporation within neoliberal development discourses’ (Wilson, 2013: 87); such development strategies focused on ‘survival rather than transformation, and of the individual, rather than the collective’ (Wilson, 2013: 86). Gershon showed that rather than appropriating existing conceptualizations of agency, neoliberal perspectives articulate agency in a distinctive manner, as an ability of the individual to perform ‘conscious choices that balance alliances, responsibility, and risk using a means-ends

calculus' (2011: 540). This ability becomes a discursive resource utilized in the neoliberal cultivation of subjects that are rendered to market operations.

Considering these discursive articulations and mobilizations of agency, it is important to remember that agency is 'further embedded, shaped, observed or experienced through affective structures' (Maxwell and Aggleton, 2013: 248), i.e. through organizational and institutional mechanisms that govern the embodied and emotional experiences of individuals. Kaye's (2013) ethnographic work demonstrated how cognitive-discursive and affective means are integrated within institutions, which emerged following neoliberal reforms, in order to foster particular types of agency among individuals given to their institutional influence or authority; in this way, he showed how broader neoliberal trends are manifested in everyday institutional settings through the mobilization of agency. DeGelder (2012) provided a somewhat different focus on how caregivers constructed ideal types of beneficiaries according to their perceived agency; these constructions served to mediate the caregivers-beneficiaries relations and enabled the first to govern the actions of the latter. Agency can therefore be constructed, through changing combinations of discursive and affective measures, in varying modalities that are attributed differentially to various actors in order to reinforce political trends, institutional control as well as hierarchical relations between individuals.

Our analysis attempts to integrate the three scholarly trends we have described. We build on Mahmood's recommendation to think in terms of various modalities of agency rather than accepting a unified conceptualization of agency as resistance. However, we demonstrate that modalities of agency are not only capacities that actors may possess or exhibit, but are also differentially articulated, attributed and fostered onto various actors. In this sense, we claim that agency can be analyzed as a resource that is modified and mobilized by actors, and that power and privilege are central factors in actors' ability to control and utilize this resource. When analyzing the encounter between privileged corporate volunteers to

underprivileged youth, we focus our empirical attention on the more privileged individuals within this terrain that are better equipped to mobilize their articulations of agency - YS employees, CSR officers in YS corporate partners, and the volunteers themselves.⁸ We show how these privileged actors articulate through their involvement with YS two modalities of agency that are differentially attributed to themselves and to the underprivileged youth, and at least one of them evades the dichotomy between resistance and subjugation.

Agency is a resource that appears as particularly useful in the augmentation of neoliberal governmentality. We perceive here 'governmentality' in the sense developed by Rose (1999), based on Foucault's later writings, as an ensemble of mechanisms through which various resources and techniques are mobilized to shape and direct the conduct of subjects. Scholars have identified 'culture' (Oakes, 2009) and 'expertise' (Johnson, 1993) as resources of governmentality, and we plea to also consider agency as such a resource of governmentality which is increasingly mobilized in the contemporary neoliberal context. We show that the modalities of agency that are articulated in the terrain of corporate volunteering are a particularly useful resource for molding employees' subjectivities according to corporate needs.

Our argument is based on insights from a multi-sited ethnographic study (Marcus, 1995; Hannerz, 2003) that included participant observation, interviews and document analysis across three different sites. Part of the study was conducted in the New York City-based headquarters of YS; two branches of YS were selected - in Belgium and Israel - due to their significant role in expanding YS and its corporate volunteering patterns. Three fieldwork phases were conducted between November 2013 and November 2014. In each location, extensive participant observation was conducted for a period of three to four months, which included participation in routine organizational settings and observations in activities that involve corporate volunteers. 74 in-depth interviews were conducted with corporate

volunteers who were engaged in YS activities, and with the corporate and nonprofit coordinators that facilitated their participation. A complementary collection of CSR reports, educational content, media items and other documents was also conducted. There were interesting contextual differences between the three main sites of research that were taken into account during the broader analytical process. However, we could also trace similar patterns across the different sites, which represented shared perspectives and rationales despite their diverse local translations, particularly regarding the dominant articulations of agency that are the focus of this article.⁹

Developing a ‘capacity to aspire’: The projected agency on beneficiaries

As described in the introduction, corporate volunteers made efforts to foster among YS students a belief in their ability to achieve individual mobility and success, if they would adhere to the entrepreneurial-inspired prescript that combines an optimistic attitude with dedicated work. In a sense, they attempted to foster in the students what Appadurai named ‘the capacity to aspire’ (2004): inspired by the capability approach (e.g., Sen, 1990), Appadurai maintained that ‘the capacity to aspire’ is one of the main lacks of people living in poverty. The perception that structural limitations are not all-encompassing, and therefore individuals are able to navigate through them, challenges the widespread sociological insight that ‘the combined force of objectified and embodied capital, the force of *class*, continues to differentiate employment histories’ (Atkinson, 2010:427; emphasis in original). In this section, we will explore the manifestations of this perception in the ways through which the main actors involved in YS activities have envisioned the agency and self-efficacy of the beneficiaries of their activity – the students who participated in the program.

Corporate volunteers, as well as coordinators, have very often framed ‘education’ during interviews as a principal method to nurture and realize the beneficiaries’ ability to overcome structural barriers:

I think that education is the best way that somebody can help themselves. So, umm, if you come from a disadvantaged background, you can still educate yourself, get a good job, start earning a salary, and create the life that *you* want for yourself.

And I believe that education is the beginning of that.

As Jakimow indicated, education enfolds ‘hope for [a] good life’ that nurtures a sense of agency: ‘enables one to remain “in the game”, to be an actor with a course of action’ (2016: 22). In our case, the hope that education enfolds enabled our interlocutors to nurture a sense of agency to their own (voluntary or professional) involvement in education, but also enabled to portray the individual students as agents to whom at least part of the responsibility for success (as well as for failure) can be delivered. This projection of agency was common to most respondents despite the increasing evidence that education cannot longer ‘fulfil its promise’ to serve ‘as a pathway to social mobility’ (Jakimow, 2016: 11), and despite the recognition of many respondents, often within the same interview, that education cannot deliver all responsibility to the youth: ‘we have a job to do in terms of how we educate these people’, as one volunteer noted.

One mechanism to mitigate this tension was to incarnate the possibility of success despite social constraints in the figures of some corporate volunteers, who were perceived by YS coordinators, as well as by themselves, as a role model for the youth. This was the perception of Anthony, a volunteer of color who reached a senior position in a Manhattan-based office of a multinational corporation:

My interest in helping the program is to change these new generations' pre-conception that they- they have it hard. When I think there's just enough opportunity for everybody [...] Well, for some of these kids, [those] in the Bronx, for example, whenever I tell them about my education, the fact that I went to Harvard for example, [...] they are like 'and you are from the Bronx?' type thing. So I'm like - yeah, and I try to speak to their level, you know like- I try to speak like somebody that is just around the corner, doing these cool things. So that's what I mean, like, about exposing, and making sure that they understand that the opportunities are equal for all. That all you have to do is kind of want it, you know? That's what I mean by- I don't want them to feel like they are short [of opportunities] just because they are in communities that are... impoverished.

Anthony was a prototype of the volunteer that YS coordinators were interested in. When briefing volunteers towards guest talks with students, coordinators often asked them to emphasize personal difficulties (such as growing up in a disadvantageous neighborhood or not succeeding in school) they had to overcome; this was the reason why the marketing agent who dropped out of school was invited to the site visit described in the introduction. Anthony's vision about 'exposure' as a panacea for the beneficiaries' excluded position was reiterated by a YS coordinator from the nonprofit's NYC office, who intermingled under the rubric of 'exposure' interpersonal communication, professional learning and an actual gaze:

A lot of them [the students] are... I think are surprised and excited to be in Times Square, be able to look out... through a nice building. So yeah, so I mean I think that's also something

we try to do, is provide students a lot of exposure, so I think that's one aspect of it, is having mentoring sessions at these companies, so that they can get a sense of what that professional environment looks like. And I think that's something that our mentors also provide. Maybe not directly, but indirectly... just, I'm sure, during their conversations, mentors share their experience of going to school, going to college and how they got in to where they've gotten and [...] it's part of what we try to do - exposure to professional environments. I've always thought that if you don't know something, it's... how can you strive to be that something, right? If you don't know what it's like and what it takes to get there.

This aspiration to 'expose' the students to alternative life trajectories was present in the typical YS activities that featured corporate volunteers: guest presentations and mentoring programs provided opportunities for interpersonal encounters and professional learning; sometimes the 'exposure' offered by volunteers was enhanced through an affective experience of visiting the corporate premises.

The 'exposure' facilitated by YS is also aimed to transform the ways in which inequality and its causes are understood by the beneficiaries. Respondents often indicated that inequality is not created through power differences between individuals and groups but largely conceived by individuals (the 'pre-conception that they have it hard'). This perception is presented at the opening of the YS course book in which all American students use, in a quote of an African-American oil entrepreneur: 'You are equal to anyone, but if you think you're not, you're not'. An Israeli YS coordinator claimed that at-risk youth often relate their social position to mechanisms of discrimination and inequality, and this perception should be

overcome in the process of their educational reformation. While some YS coordinators and volunteers, particularly in the US and Israel, did acknowledge that some inequalities exist along racial and other collective dividing lines, the consensual practice was to try and persuade the students that they should not consider themselves as encumbered by these inequalities but rather as autonomous agents that are capable of emancipating themselves through a combination of efforts with creativity, hard work with imagination and passion, careful investment with entrepreneurial risk.

Although these various capacities are rather contradictory, they all assign responsibility to the individual, who is expected to develop these capacities and exhibit agency. The meritocratic expectation for individual achievement was subsumed during the 1980s in the ‘neoliberal political rhetoric and public discourse’ (Littler 2013: 53). This rhetoric emphasizes ‘success as a feature of individual effort’, which leaves youth from lower classes with ‘few other explanations for their lack of success except for their own individual failings’ (Gonick, 2006: 17), preparing them to accept the neoliberal notion of ‘employability’ that frames unemployment ‘in individualistic and behavioural terms’ (Peck and Theodore, 2000: 729). This neoliberal discursive framework, which aligns and resignifies ideological notions such as individualism, meritocracy and employability, neglects historical and contemporary political processes, such as government’s role in shaping the labor market, and excludes collective forms of organization, assistance or attachment. As Eliasoph anticipated, this ‘unreflective focus on future hopeful potential’ (2011: 56) leaves the youth that is supposed to be empowered with a limited capacity to imagine alternative routes of action.

Fostering agency through affective spectacles

The optimist sense of individual agency and self-efficacy was nurtured among the youth not only through the verbal narratives that were transmitted to them, or through the ‘exposures’

arranged for them, but also ingrained in their bodies through the multi-sensual rituals arranged for them, particularly the YS competitions. In these competitions, students had to present their business plans, in the presence of an audience, to a team of judges composed mainly of corporate volunteers. The students were accompanied by their teachers, and often by corporate volunteers who served as their mentors. Up until their presentation, the teachers and mentors were reminding the students the embodied gestures they have been practicing during the YS course: speak in a clear and enthusiastic tone, exhibit emotional engagement (often framed as ‘passion’) and display a confident body language. Before and after the students’ presentations, optimistic messages (mainly regarding dreams, self-confidence, hard work and passion) were delivered from the stage by presenters and speakers, accompanied by a frequent hand clapping of the audience - and in the US also lively music and cheering calls from the audience. This affective spectacle was supposed to keep the students optimistic, despite – or maybe because of – the fact that exactly in these events students have to face the harsh reality of selection and failure.

One of these competitions was held in the premises of a start-up company in mid-Manhattan. Along with the many students, teachers and parents, a few dozens of young professionals were present, mostly young employees of the company hosting the event. Some of these young professionals were clapping or cheering almost automatically with the rest of the audience, while keeping their eyes on their smartphones, texting in between the cheering. However, young professionals who served as students’ mentors enthusiastically participated in the clapping and cheering, raising their chants whenever ‘their’ team of students was mentioned, particularly before and after ‘their’ team’s presentation. This shared affective experience of the volunteers and their students marked the height of the pedagogical mentoring process. Notwithstanding, this joint excitement even captured the volunteers who served as judges, as reflected by this Israeli bank manager:

It is very exciting to see them [the students] waiting for the results of the hard work they have done during several months. They are very very excited... and expect to receive the **recognition** for the work they have done. [...] we are usually dealing here with youth at risk, youth at the edges of society, and it is very exciting to see these guys, to see that with a helping hand you can change their life course, bring them to better places...

The affective experience of the competition has therefore reinforced also among the corporate volunteers the belief in the ability of YS students to adhere to an optimistic and individualistic agency.

In requiring students to exhibit optimism, determination and passion, YS competitions resembled another spectacle, which was analyzed by Biressi and Nunn (2014): a popular British reality show about young entrepreneurs.¹⁰ These capacities were deemed as necessary to fulfill the broader promise to increase students' employability (including of those who will not become entrepreneurs), while their lack was presented as the cause for a failure in fulfilling this promise – and not the growing precariousness of the labor market where 'employability' is increasingly becoming a 'fantasy' (Bloom, 2013) rather than a realistic aim. Indeed, Debord (1994[1967]) reminds us that the notion of agency that was projected onto the beneficiaries in our case should be conceived as a fantasy, as the spectacle is the 'omnipresent celebration of a choice already made in the sphere of production' (§6).

The ritual realm of the YS competition is therefore staged in the blurred area of a spectacle that mingles reality and fantasy, 'sacred' and 'secularized', and fosters (cf. Mahmood, 2005) particular modalities of agency among subjects. Similarly to arenas where 'governing through affect' is achieved through a combination of 'affective discourse' and 'embodied practices' (Rudnyckyj 2011: 71), the spectacle is a realm where affective

experiences are infused with discursive mobilizations to create a totalizing experience that will produce particular subjects. YS coordinators set up this experience in such a way that it will ingrain in the participant subjects a ‘capacity to aspire’: the ability to imagine and act towards an improved future for themselves. This capacity became an object that was oscillating between the students and the corporate volunteers, as indicated by this volunteer mentor, a NYC-based director in a multinational consultancy:

I got the enthusiasm of the kids, you know, very young but very smart [...] our [students’] team was a bunch of, an analogy of thoroughbred horses. All we needed to do was kind of point them in the right direction and help go along the way [...] I’ve been lucky enough in my career to have people that mentored and coached me, through various parts of my career, and, you know these are young students that are looking for very similar things.

The shared experience of the volunteers with the students has thus led to a reinforcement of an aspirational subjecthood among the students but also among the corporate volunteers.

It should be noted that while Debord views the spectacle as simply reinforcing the passivity of the modern industrialist society of his time, our case study showed how in the late capitalist environment, in which YS operates, the spectacle is often staged as an alleged participatory terrain that appears to induce agency rather than passivity. YS spectacles conjoin broader trends of deploying agency in the governmentality techniques of powerful institutions through a glorifying discourse of empowerment (cf. Cruikshank, 1999). The popular and prescriptive study of Prahalad (2004) regarding ‘the fortune at the bottom of the pyramid’ has inspired numerous development schemes that have focused on encouraging empowerment and inclusion through entrepreneurship; often, they were initiated by corporations, framed as part of their CSR efforts while serving corporations’ expansionist strategies to new markets

(Schwittay, 2011). These development technologies are now increasingly experimented also in spaces and populations within ‘developed’ countries that are portrayed as ‘marginalized’, through programs such as YS. The promise for social inclusion through entrepreneurship is common in both spheres of development experimentation, as well as the common mechanisms of ‘shift[ing] attention from the failure (and profound inequities) of the economic structure in which their targets exercise limited economic agency’ (Rajak and Dolan, 2016: 527). In this way, programs of education for entrepreneurship such as YS are ‘also about selling pedagogic “product” and, especially, a particular [referring to neoliberal] version of the economy’ (McCafferty, 2010: :555). Nonprofit coordinators, CSR officers, teachers and corporate volunteers are key actors in assembling these programs together and maintain their emancipatory promise that largely remains unfulfilled. By nurturing this unfulfilled promise, coordinators and volunteers reinforce their belief in the neoliberal view of entrepreneurship as the sole panacea for society ills, hereby also reinforcing its hegemony. We thus rejoin Debord by concluding that hegemony is reproduced rather than challenged in YS spectacles and activities, albeit that the neoliberal version of the spectacle compels the subject to exhibit agency rather than passivity.

‘Even if you can help one student’: A progressive modality of agency among corporate volunteers

Agency is constructed and mobilized not only in relation to YS beneficiaries: corporate volunteers and YS coordinators also perceived their own agency in particular ways, which could also be mobilized to particular aims. Conforming to the perception of agency that was projected towards the beneficiaries, some corporate volunteers also positioned their own agency within narratives that emphasize individual determination and choice. They often did

that by describing their involvement in corporate volunteering as fitting within a life trajectory scattered with acts of volunteering and giving:

I didn't start to volunteer when I arrived to the bank, neither when I was adult. While I was still a minor I started volunteering. I always felt that I received from God, and it is appropriate to give back a bit to others, a bit of what I received. [...] that's how I grew up, so it's something personal.

Being conducted out of an individual's free will and informed decision appears as a defining aspect of 'volunteering', both in scholarly definitions of the concept (Haski-Leventhal, 2009) as well as in popular perceptions of the phenomenon that were expressed in surveys (Handy et al., 2000) or in-depth interviews (von Essen, 2014). In this way, volunteering is considered as an expression of agency by an autonomous subject that reaffirms some of the epistemological foundations of secularized modernity (cf. Haers and von Essen, 2015), which appears to be neatly compatible with the individualized and meritocratic notion of agency that was celebrated in YS activities. As depicted in the ethnographic account of Muehlebach, volunteering is constructed as a chosen and autonomous act that is contextualized within broader epistemologies:

By proclaiming ourselves [participants in a volunteers' training class] to be distinct and coherent agents and choosing subjects, our lives were thought to fit into a purposeful trajectory and telos that would ultimately result in volunteering—an act that itself was once again imagined to be the result of unmediated, autonomous choice (2012: 125).

However, some of our interlocutors described their volunteer involvement not as a ‘purposeful trajectory’ but as almost incidental: ‘In the company’s mailing list there was simply an appeal [for volunteers], our company is in touch with [YS] for several years already, but they disseminated it like any other volunteering option, and then I became part of it.’ The fantasy of an autonomous voluntary subject is exposed in such cases as a process that is highly mediated by ‘third parties’ (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2010) which can shape and govern individual determinations. This raises questions regarding the nature of ‘choice’ and ‘voluntarism’ in this context, and how to conceptualize ‘agency’ in it.

While many corporate volunteers depicted the mobilizing competitions in a highly enthusiast manner, they were more hesitant when engaged in reflection on the potential of their own activity to transform society: ‘I mean it’s fairly limited, but, yeah, even if you can help one student somehow it’s still worthwhile, I guess, the... the investment.’ Other volunteers tended to assess the same limited influence in a more pessimist tone: ‘It’s a drop in an ocean. I think it’s... it’s obviously helpful, it’s better than doing nothing... it probably helps them. Is it going to make a big difference? [sighs loudly] I... I’m a bit pessimistic.’ This perception was even reiterated by YS coordinators: ‘The impact [of YS programs], I’m sure is minimal, right, when you take into account multi-trillion dollar economy, but... but for those young people it definitely makes an impact, makes a difference, I think.’ According to the common view of these actors, a radical change was seen as too difficult to be accomplished, and by some simply as undesired, and the consensus that emerged was to focus on limited and gradual changes. This was also the type of change promised by YS as an organization, thus squarely resonating institutional and individual worldviews.

‘Within our limitations’

The progress towards the limited changes that our interlocutors aspired to achieve was typically summarized by them, as indicated in the introduction, as ‘we do what is possible [to do] [...] within our limitations’. Those limitations appeared as varied in type and significance, according to various interlocutors. For some corporate volunteers the main limitation was the number of hours that one can spend outside the office for volunteering activities, while the CSR officers also took into account broader organizational considerations of allocating human and financial resources. But oftentimes these limitations remained rather vague, belonging to a domain of business calculations that our interlocutors were more hesitant to share. One director in a multinational firm described in detail during an interview the time and resources he invests in his group of mentees every year. Responding to my comment ‘I wonder if kids in the other groups were not a bit jealous that [the kids mentored by you and your team] have such mentors’, he said:

You know, it’s a good point, sometimes I wonder... if I shouldn’t coach an individual team, if I should just figure out a way to connect with all of them. You know, almost like a rotating mentor, but that’s too hard, it’s just, I couldn’t do it physically, because it’s just too much to do.

But for him, the improved positions of ‘his mentees’ was not something that seemed unjust in any way as their success was filtered through a seemingly neutral competition: ‘because the truth is, it is a competition’. Often, the number of student groups largely exceeded the number of corporate volunteers who were interested to serve as mentors, creating inequalities between students with and without mentors. Volunteers and coordinators have justified the shortage of mentors by perceiving it as a temporary phase that will be surmounted when the giving and volunteering scope will grow as ‘a kind of snowball that will gather more people who will

volunteer for that' until it could reach 'as many [schools and students] as possible'. Other coordinators and volunteers, however, were less optimistic, such as this American YS coordinator:

...one volunteer for each student and that volunteer will give all his time and you know, but obviously that's not going to happen and so there is kind of always that need there, and so a lot of my job is balancing programmatic needs and what our students want and what's comfortable for our students and what's not too taxing on our teachers with what meets the corporate need...

The resources that can be offered by companies and their volunteers were thus perceived as rather limited in nature, and the way to divide them is not a universal logic of institutions such as the welfare state, but through fragmented and unclear criteria which were somewhat balanced through the mediation of a YS coordinator.

Our interlocutors rarely engaged in exploring possible ways to overcome the limitations they described. This was in contrast with the tendency described by Muehlebach, whose Italian interlocutors clung to the Gramscian duality of being 'aware of larger structural forces while at the same time exhibiting the desire to be an agentive rather than an apathetic subject' (Muehlebach, 2012: 184). Collective political commitments and imaginaries have somewhat persisted in the rapid processes of neoliberalization that Italy has been going through and shaped Muehlebach's interlocutors' sense of agency. Our interlocutors often lacked such political histories, and their engagement in promoting the individualized and optimistic logic of entrepreneurship led them to marginalize the power of structural limitations. They rather resembled the American volunteers and civic activists described by Eliasoph (1998), who tended to refrain from issues that were perceived as potentially contentious and from confronting powerful actors such as corporations or the federal state. A

minority of our interlocutors who had engaged in more collective experiments in social change often expressed feelings of ineffectiveness and disappointment, like the following Israeli corporate volunteer:

These aren't things that we can do something about, help in something. Besides, the social protest we were part of, and we went to stand there in the city square - it also didn't help.¹¹ [...] Everything fell apart. The politicians made them fall apart. [...] Speaking of protests, I assume that I don't see that in Israel they [will achieve] anything.

By 'avoiding politics' (Eliasoph, 1998) and engaging in corporate volunteering, this volunteer was able to uphold some sense of capability to have an even minor influence on social processes: 'In the company we will continue specifically what we can do here. What depends on me, on the company – that I don't have a problem to do. [...what concerns bigger problems,] we will leave it to the politicians'. Eliasoph (1998) indicates that this avoidance from confronting the root causes to the 'social problems' that volunteers and civic activists are attempting to 'fix' is what paradoxically helps them to persist in their activity. This avoidance is also useful for nonprofit employees, who remain engaged in their work by sustaining a 'social change consensus' (Lashaw, 2013: 517), but also a sense of efficacy (Lashaw, 2010) and hope (Lashaw, 2008).

The progressive modality of agency as a resource

The Sisyphean aspiration to repair social ills while unchallenging the social processes that lead to them cannot be easily classified in the dichotomous distinction between conformity and resistance, but it should be considered as part of a repertoire of agency modalities

(following Mahmood, 2005) that can be adopted by the various actors, such as (corporate or regular) volunteers or professional workers, who are active in the realm of social programs. We therefore term the way in which our interlocutors interpreted the possibility of changes in society to occur, and the possibility of themselves and other people to contribute to such change, as a ‘progressive modality of agency’. It is a modality of agency that portrays agents not as radical transformers but as working towards limited changes and gradual advancements of individuals, in line with progressivists’ ideals of achieving social changes through education and empowerment (cf. Eliasoph, 2011; Lashaw 2013). To maintain such a notion of agency among actors and the beneficiaries of their activity, this modality neglects a questioning of social hierarchies and marginalizes radical attempts to challenge them. Among our interlocutors who aspired for reform, even if this neglect was sometimes caused by disappointment from previous engagements in such attempts, it was often mainly caused by an ideological adherence to the neoliberal emphasis on individual meritocracy, which was also projected onto the beneficiaries. Not only the target of intervention (the beneficiaries) is perceived through an individualistic perspective, but also those who intervene: the various reiterations of the idea of ‘I do what I can’, whether among corporate volunteers or CSR officers (sometimes transformed into ‘we’ when referring to the company, which is still perceived as an individual, atomized entity), naturalized the perception that even an activity aimed at changing society is a matter of individual initiative and activity.

The progressive modality of agency is also used in the recruitment and retention of volunteers. One YS coordinator described how she crafts representations of progressive agency that could be communicated to the corporate volunteers:

So really using anecdotes and stories like that to get them to show, you know, even if it’s only a shift in how a kid answered one question around their business plan [...] and exploit and to like -

oh, look at this big, you know like, if we have that times a million, which they imagine is happening in the YS class, then they could see how this like different result or different kid is at the end of the year. So you just like, paint a picture in that sense, to make them feel like they're at least a part of that difference.

By making the volunteers feel as agents, the YS coordinator hopes to contribute to their retention, enrolling them (cf. Callon, 1986) into a long-term commitment to the ongoing project she is responsible for maintaining. Therefore, the nurturing of this progressive modality of agency among the various actors involved seems to be a central component in retaining the logic and functionality of the domain of corporate volunteering.

But more than that, the progressive modality of agency also assists in keeping employees comfortable not only with the limited actions they see themselves as capable of doing, but also with their somewhat privileged position in the labor market:

I came up in a... I wouldn't say low income background, but uh... the thing is, I was very aware of poverty, and that's one of the things that... I think one of the environments that I'm very comfortable in, is working with people, you know... from low income backgrounds, because my thing is I try to help people get to the next level and try to help them realize the potential that they have within them.

This combination of the optimistic agency projected to the youth along with the limited, progressive agency that corporate volunteers narrate in relation to themselves, assists them to emotionally accept and ideologically justify the fact that they are already at 'the next level' while acknowledging that the students they work with have much lower chances of getting there. The positive aspects of this double perception of agency, which emphasizes the positive

future of others and focuses on the positive impact that a very specific voluntary contribution of one individual can make, resonates strongly with the ‘current explosion of political and business interest in happiness’ (Davies, 2015: 10) and in inducing positive thinking (Ehrenreich, 2009). This explosion assists in addressing employers’ and policy makers’ anxiousness regarding ‘the lack of enthusiasm and activity’ (Davies, 2015: 56) that seems to be expanding among workers in late capitalist societies, exactly as corporate functioning becomes increasingly dependent on a cadre of highly-qualified and engaged professionals who are committed to the operations of the corporate world and adhere to its capitalist ideology (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005[1999]). Such positive approaches nurture the modalities of agency we traced, which are conjoined to make employees feel emotionally and ethically comfortable in relation to their professional position and conduct.

Concluding remarks

Various perceptions and articulations of ‘agency’ can be traced in the domain of ‘corporate volunteering’. Our ethnographic exploration revealed two contradictory yet inextricably intertwined modalities of agency that were articulated by corporate volunteers and coordinators: an individualistic-meritocratic agency in the domain of economy and employment that is projected to the beneficiaries of the volunteering activity, and a limited, progressive modality of agency regarding wider socio-political processes adopted by the volunteers and coordinators themselves. These contradictory notions of agency were somewhat mitigated through various aspects of YS work, and their co-existence held the volunteering schemes designed by YS in place. Moreover, these articulations of agency through YS volunteering activities made this engagement attractive for corporations, which are increasingly interested in techniques for retaining employees’ engagement and loyalty to the firm and to the capitalist ideology more broadly. These techniques maintain employees’

adherence to the range of actions and social imaginaries considered legitimate within the confines of the corporate world, and are particularly useful in the case of employees who are more ‘concerned’ or ‘aware’ of ‘social issues’, which are often – as many CSR officers testify – those who volunteer the most. Such employees are particularly prone to dissidence, and molding their sense of agency is important in maintaining their docility. In this sense, when ‘institutions seek to foster particular types of agency’ (Kaye, 2013: 210) it is not only to maintain a governmental control over underprivileged and possibly dissenting groups, but also to assert the continuous productive engagement of individuals in privileged positions.

Through this discussion, our article contributed to the scholarly work on agency by showing how some of its recent developments could be integrated in the analytical process, and demonstrating the relevance of the discussions on agency to the scholarly analysis of volunteering and CSR. While previous studies often focused on how volunteers, care-givers or educators, perceive their own agency *or* the agency of their beneficiaries, we demonstrated how both perceptions can be inextricably intertwined. We showed that this intertwining is what enables to use agency as a resource of governmentality. The possibility to utilize this resource through corporate volunteering activities indicates that the proliferation of these activities is related to growing corporate aspirations to enhance their techniques of governing employees’ conduct and subjectivity. Alongside our contribution to these debates, we hope that this article could also encourage those working beyond scholarly circles to imagine and construct modalities of agency that could mitigate the tension between structural limitations and the necessity of optimism, and could possibly open up prospects of emancipation that are not captivated by neoliberal hegemony.

Endnotes

¹ The fieldwork was conducted by the first author, and therefore notes from the field are written in first person singular. The analysis and writing were conducted by both authors, and we therefore use first person plural in the rest of the text.

² To ensure anonymity, we use pseudonyms when referring to organizations and individuals, and some identifying details may be obscured.

³ *Ashkenazim* are Jews of European origin, who are over-represented among Israel's economic, political and cultural elites. *Mizrahim* are Jews of North-African and Middle-Eastern decent, who populate Israel's geo-political periphery, lower-achieving study tracks and lower positions in the labor market. Mizrahi youth are often the implicit object of nonprofit work and empowerment programs (including YS), while the field of volunteering and its management is dominated by Ashkenazi privilege (Shachar, 2014).

⁴ Quotes from volunteering activities are based on field notes taken during and soon after the occurrence of the events.

⁵ Interviews held in Israel were conducted in Hebrew, and quotes were translated to English by the first author. Interviews in Belgium and the US were conducted mostly in English. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Light editing of the quotes (omitting hesitations and half words) has been conducted, while leaving the original style of speech and most grammatical mistakes unedited.

⁶ Also termed as 'employee volunteering' or 'employer-supported volunteering'.

⁷ Such empirical contributions compose Maxwell and Aggleton's edited volume (2013).

⁸ Considering our research focus, we opted not to include an analysis of how the youth perceived their own agency or the agency of other actors. Youth notions and manifestations of

agency are already widely discussed among sociologists of youth (for a review: Coffey and Farrugia, 2014), often reiterating the dichotomous character of the broader discussion on agency.

⁹ A notably different perception regarding the beneficiaries' agency was articulated through an additional educational program that was developed by the Israeli YS office. This program was operated only in Israel among interested schools, in the year that followed the YS program. The program discussed with the students some of the social structures that determine their social positions, and ways that can be used to (at least partially) challenge them. Further elaboration regarding the characteristics of this separate program and the reasons for its development only in Israel is beyond the scope of this article. However, it should be noted that the involvement of corporate volunteers in this additional program was limited to particular activities, in which the volunteers mostly articulated the individualistic and optimistic notion of agency that we describe in the first analytical section of this article, and the coordinators seemed to approvingly accept it. More complex perceptions of agency were discussed with the students in other moments of this program, by teachers and coordinators who were interested in doing so.

¹⁰ And indeed, examples from reality shows were indicated by several respondents, mainly corporate volunteers, as a source of inspiration.

¹¹ The respondent refers here to the wide social protests that shook Israel in the summer of 2011.

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Author Biographies

Itamar Y. Shachar is a Marie Curie postdoctoral fellow at the Department of Anthropology, University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands. He received his PhD from the Department of Sociology at Ghent University, Belgium. His major research interest is the public rise of the notion of ‘volunteering’ and its political utilizations.

Lesley Hustinx is an associate professor at the Department of Sociology at Ghent University, Belgium. Her major research interests include societal transitions and their consequences for the condition and nature of citizenship and citizen-based solidarity, focusing in particular on the study of formal volunteering.