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Arrival Brokers and Commercial Infrastructuring for and With Migrant Newcomers in Dortmund, Germany

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Abstract

Current research underlines the important role of arrival infrastructures in urban spaces in enabling and shaping migrants' arrival. These include arrival brokers, individuals who help newcomers access resources. As yet, we have little knowledge on brokers' informal and commercial practices in the context of arrival, especially in European cities, whereby brokers unsettle common "distinctions between 'state' and 'market,' as well as 'formal' and 'informal'" (Lindquist, 2012, p. 75). This article aims to contribute to our understanding of arrival brokers by shedding light on commercial brokering in an arrival area in Dortmund, Germany, looking at the relations between brokers and newcomer clients. The study is based on ethnographic research, including one year of participant observation in a broker's shop, and interviews with both brokers and newcomers. Covering both perspectives, this article analyses how commercial arrival brokering shapes newcomers' access to resources. The findings offer new insights into arrival brokers' multiple facets of in/formal and commercial infrastructuring. The article shows how brokers' accessibility depends on spatial, social, financial, and temporal factors. It is relational both within the local context of service provision and through setting the conditions governing resource access. Arrival brokers can influence newcomers' arrival processes by enabling, channelling (and sometimes blocking) resource access while also offering opportunities for newcomers to circumvent and compensate for other—more formal—forms of support. Commercial brokering evolves as a practice between brokers and newcomers within, parallel to, and beyond the support provided by more formal institutions.

Keywords

arrival brokers; arrival infrastructure; commercial; in/formality; migration

1. Introduction

To introduce the topic of commercial arrival infrastructuring, this article opens with a vignette from the ethnographic fieldwork on which it is based:

> 4 October 2021, early afternoon. It's my first day volunteering at Karim's shop for my research, a copy shop in Dortmund's Nordstadt. Karim's shop is no normal copy shop: In addition to copies, people can pay money for support with paperwork and other advice. After completing a child benefit application for a Spanish man and writing a letter to a Romanian woman's insurance company, I got talking to a man who turned out to be Ghanaian. He asked me if I could arrange an appointment for him at the foreigners' office. He had only recently moved to Dortmund from another German city and his residence permit had expired more than a month ago. Since he did not have internet access, I used my phone to arrange an appointment for him. I then wanted to print out the confirmation, but he was unable to pay for that. I asked him to come back later with the money to pick up the printout. I was under the impression that I should only help those able to pay. Later, I had a very bad conscience after learning that, although Karim usually charges a fee for his services and copies, he also serves clients for free if they don't have enough money. However, it was not only my inappropriate behaviour (that hopefully did not have any negative consequences) that made this encounter noteworthy: The man showed me a letter indicating that a council-run advice centre had previously tried to get him an appointment. Why would he come to the copy shop rather than go to the more formal and non-commercial counselling centre?

In recent years, scholars have increasingly analysed the importance of urban space(s) for integration, discussing the role of established and emerging arrival neighbourhoods for migrants' arrival and potential settlement (Bovo, 2020; El-Kayed et al., 2020; Fawaz, 2017; Hans et al., 2019). The concept of arrival infrastructures takes this research one step further, allowing a micro-perspective on "those parts of the urban fabric within which newcomers become entangled upon arrival and where their future spatial and social mobilities are produced as much as negotiated" (Meeus et al., 2019, p. 1). Arrival infrastructures are understood in terms of their function for newcomers, implying that ordinary spaces like shops and train stations can also act as arrival hubs (Bovo, 2020; Meeus et al., 2019; Wessendorf, 2022). This perspective of arrival infrastructures puts an emphasis on in/formal urban spaces which are often excluded in the more prominent studies on migrants' support by social networks or state(-funded) integration structures. Expanding this notion, this article provides a better understanding of "who the actors involved in these [arrival] spaces are and how they act and interact" (Bovo, 2020, p. 29). It focuses on arrival brokers such as Karim from the introducing vignette and their role in shaping migrant newcomers' arrival in a new socio-spatial setting, taking a specific look at commercial brokering practices.

Representing prominent components of migration infrastructures (Lindquist et al., 2012), brokers have only recently gained attention in the study of arrival infrastructures, more specifically in the European context (Hanhörster & Wessendorf, 2020; Hans, 2023). Arrival brokers are understood as "individuals who take on an instrumental role in newcomers' settlement" (Hanhörster & Wessendorf, 2020, p. 4). Although many anthropological studies engage with brokers and their role in blurring our understanding of "distinctions between 'state' and 'market,' as well as 'formal' and 'informal'" (Lindquist, 2012, p. 75), only a few studies focus on brokering in (European) arrival contexts. Commercial practices in particular have attracted little attention so far—an interesting fact given that the concept of arrival infrastructures is rooted in work on "migration infrastructures" where commercial infrastructures are understood as an important dimension of

how migration is facilitated and channelled (Xiang & Lindquist, 2014). Responding to this gap, the article connects the concept of arrival infrastructures with current studies on brokering in the context of migration and access to basic resources within European welfare systems. It provides empirical evidence on arrival brokers' commercial support practices and their role for migrant newcomers in an arrival area in Germany, asking how commercial arrival brokering takes place and how it shapes newcomers' access to resources.

The article starts by reviewing literature on arrival infrastructures, (arrival) brokers, and commercial brokering practices, followed by a presentation of the methods and case study. The empirical section shows how in/formal commercial brokering takes place, focusing on brokers' accessibility and their impact on newcomers' access to resources. The conclusion sums up my findings, linking them back to the debate on in/formal arrival infrastructures in the context of today's welfare and integration regimes.

2. In/Formal Arrival Infrastructures, Brokers, and Commercial Support for Migrant Newcomers

An increasing body of literature deals with informal practices, actors, institutions, and spaces at the intersection of migration and urban development and planning (Darling, 2017; Fawaz, 2017). Darling (2017) suggests that "a concern with urban informality enables a valorization of incremental and often highly tactical practices [of migrants]" (p. 189). At the same time, there is increasing recognition of the contribution of informal non-state or non-state-funded actors in facilitating access to welfare and social rights (Nordensvärd & Ketola, 2024; Phillimore et al., 2021). This takes place in the paradoxical context of neoliberalism and welfare austerity on the one hand (Koch & James, 2022), and increasing bureaucratization and regulation in the context of integration and access to welfare benefits on the other (Swyngedouw, 2019; Voivozeanu & Lafleur, 2023). Which practices and actors are considered informal and by whom is a product and expression of the "ever-shifting urban relationship between the legal and the illegal, legitimate and illegitimate, authorized and unauthorized" (Roy, 2011, p. 233). The focus on arrival brokers as informal actors is thus considered as a starting point in this article, grounded in the empirical observation that brokers are (a) non-state-funded actors who are (b) considered informal by stakeholders within the more formal sphere of support provision and integration governance. I use the term in/formal (Biehl, 2022) to account for the informal–formal relationships that are expressed and constructed through regulations and discourses but also through brokers' and newcomers' practices. The following section introduces the concept of arrival infrastructures, before engaging with existing studies on (arrival) brokers.

2.1. Arrival Infrastructures

The concept of arrival infrastructures is part of a larger infrastructural turn in research on migration and arrival, emphasising the context shaping people's multi-directional spatial and social mobilities. It builds on Xiang and Lindquist's (2014) notion of "migration infrastructure [as] the systematically interlinked technologies, institutions, and actors that facilitate and condition mobility" (p. 122). Understanding migrants' arrival not as an end but as a starting point, the notion of arrival infrastructure puts a focus on the various infrastructures, spaces, media, and people that come into play upon arrival. As such, they "select, give direction to, and retain or accelerate certain migratory subjects" (Meeus et al., 2019, p. 15). Using the infrastructural perspective allows us to better understand the non-/inclusivity of certain spaces and their inclusive or exclusive effects (El-Kayed & Keskinkılıc, 2023; Felder et al., 2020).

The study of arrival infrastructures expands our recognition and knowledge of urban in/formalities in the context of arrival. It "allows for a critical as well as transformative engagement with the position of the state in the management of migration" (Meeus et al., 2019, p. 2). As such, formal actors and spaces with their regulations and normativities are seen next to, in a continuum with, and in their relation to other, more informal actors and spaces. The interplay of different structures in a spatial context is also described as an "ecosystem" (Greater London Authority, 2021, as cited in Wessendorf & Gembus, 2024, p. 2827), although the emergence of arrival infrastructures is not as "natural" as the biological term might suggest. For instance, Schillebeeckx et al. (2019) discuss how arrival infrastructures are "not only the result of community dynamics, but of a combination of reciprocity within communities, state-based redistribution, and market exchange" (p. 149), and thus dependent on the local constellations of urban, welfare, and integration regimes. Newcomers are often conceived as users of infrastructures and their agency and active role in co-producing arrival infrastructures has gained little attention so far (Wajsberg & Schapendonk, 2022). Wajsberg and Schapendonk (2022) therefore propose focusing on infrastructuring practices. As we will see, in the context of commercial brokering, this implies taking broker and client practices into account as part of and co-constituting arrival infrastructures.

2.2. (Arrival) Brokers

Arrival brokers are conceptualised as "individuals who take on an instrumental role in newcomers' settlement" (Hanhörster & Wessendorf, 2020, p. 4), a concept based on an understanding of a broker as a "specific type of middleman, mediator, or intermediary" (Lindquist, 2015, p. 870). Backed by a long history in anthropological research (for an overview see James, 2011; Lindquist, 2015), scholars are renewing their interest in brokering in the context of international migration and neoliberal transformation (Elcioglu & Shams, 2023; Lindquist, 2012; Lindquist et al., 2012). Migration brokers are prominent figures in the study of migration infrastructures connecting social, regulatory, and commercial domains. Although their brokering also includes support in destination countries (Jones & Sha, 2020; Wee et al., 2018; Zack & Landau, 2022), relatively little work on migration in/to the Global North includes this perspective.

Brokers are characterised by their translating, bridging, connecting, and transforming roles (Ho & Ting, 2021; Hönke & Müller, 2018; Lindquist, 2015), with their practices evolving in the context of gaps between different social spheres and between different actors and resources. In the context of (im)migration, they bridge spatial, social, and cultural gaps to make various aspects of migration and arrival easier. Hans (2023) has shown how arrival brokers serve as "informal information nodes" (p. 786) for newcomers, filling gaps in the more formal provision of support. Many are members of the same group that they are supporting, with some scholars describing them as "ethnic brokers" (e.g., Voivozeanu & Lafleur, 2023). They may be part of a broader organisational context (Hans, 2023; Tuckett, 2018; see also the literature on volunteering, e.g., Ambrosini & Artero, 2023), but their understanding as brokers highlights their informal practices beyond this—more formal—context. While benefiting from their structural position "from within" (Bräuchler et al., 2021), for example through arrival-specific knowledge (Hans, 2023), they may also be subject to the same barriers and restrictions they previously faced, leading them to use brokering as a way of gaining a foothold in society themselves through the acquisition of social and symbolic but also financial capital (Tuckett, 2018).

2.3. Commercial Brokering

Whereas commercial brokering has not yet been studied to any great extent in the context of arrival infrastructures, it is often implicit in the study of international migration. As such, migration brokers are mostly understood as recruiters in the context of labour migration (Deshingkar, 2019; Lindquist et al., 2012), sometimes also as smugglers (Alkan, 2021; Faist, 2014), or both (Jones & Sha, 2020). Brokering is also conceptualised as a migration industry (Cranston et al., 2018; Schapendonk, 2018). So far, conceptualisations of brokers in the context of arrival infrastructures focus on those offering their services for free, with few empirical insights existing on commercial brokering practices (Hans, 2023; Wessendorf, 2021). However, various studies show how brokers are also getting paid by migrants to find them jobs (Alkan, 2021) and housing (Bernt et al., 2021; Parsloe, 2022), and helping them gain access to a legal residence status and social security through communicating with the relevant immigration (Tuckett, 2018) and welfare authorities (Ratzmann & Heindlmaier, 2022; Voivozeanu & Lafleur, 2023). Looking at these brokering activities through the lens of arrival means acknowledging brokers' important role in providing access to fundamental societal resources against the backdrop of the transformation of European welfare and integration regimes. Voivozeanu and Lafleur (2023) even speak of a "brokerage industry" (p. 729) evolving not only in a context of austerity but also of ongoing bureaucratisation and state attempts to control migration and access to welfare benefits.

Literature on migration, welfare, and immigration brokers hints at important aspects associated with brokers' ambivalent role, especially when it comes to commercial support practices: Scholars ascribe a moral ambivalence to (commercial) brokers, either denigrating brokers as exploitative or acclaiming them for their creative mediation (cf. James, 2011; Tuckett, 2018). Scholars also perceive brokers ambivalently, referring to their work as il/legal or il/licit depending on the field of operation (spatial or social mobility) and the perspective (the state or migrants; Alkan, 2021). Less research has been done on brokers' impact on migrants' arrival and their agency in this process (cf. Deshingkar, 2019). Wee et al. (2018) show how migration brokers serving domestic workers in Singapore are able to create both "chutes and ladders," resulting in upward social mobility but also new vulnerabilities, and ultimately new and often unpredictable conditions for migrants' resource access. In their study of Romanian migrant workers in Germany, Voivozeanu and Lafleur (2023) found that precarious migrants were especially dependent on brokers to access welfare benefits. Yet there is a lack of empirical studies on commercial brokering in (European) urban arrival areas focusing on brokers' practices, their socio-spatial embeddedness, and their interrelation with and role for newcomers.

3. Researching Commercial Arrival Brokering in Dortmund-Nordstadt

The insights in this article are based on a larger study of arrival infrastructures in established arrival neighbourhoods, including 13 months of ethnographic research conducted in Dortmund-Nordstadt. Dortmund is a city with around 600,000 inhabitants located in the post-industrial Ruhr region in Western Germany. Due to its industrial heritage, the city has been shaped by migration. This is specifically the case in Nordstadt, an inner-city working-class district that traditionally represents the first place of residence for many immigrants coming to Dortmund. Scholars and public authorities alike acknowledge Nordstadt's important function as an arrival neighbourhood (Gerten et al., 2023; Kurtenbach, 2015; Staubach, 2014). Now home to 10% of Dortmund's population, more than half of its inhabitants have a foreign nationality.

In line with developments in many other European cities, immigration has further diversified the population in recent years, with non-EU nationals (e.g., from Syria, Ukraine, Somalia, Morocco) and EU citizens (e.g., from Bulgaria, Romania, Spain) moving into the area. These recent newcomers form a heterogeneous group with regard to their legal status, nationalities, socio-economic status, and educational and religious backgrounds.

The area offers relatively accessible and affordable housing and features a dense landscape of formal and informal arrival infrastructures. Both the city administration and a very active civil society comprised of migrant-run organisations and other non-governmental and welfare organisations play an active role in shaping arrival infrastructures (Kurtenbach & Rosenberger, 2021; Neßler et al., 2024). As part of this, an overall strategy for new arrivals, especially for EU migrants, is in place to initiate and coordinate projects for improving social inclusion in various fields such as access to welfare, education, and housing. Alongside these efforts of formal actors, scholars highlight the continuing importance—albeit little recognised by the public authorities—of informal and often migrant-led support for newcomers (Hans, 2023).

With a view to better understanding the different practices of brokers and clients as well as their thinking and motives, the research relied mainly on participant observation and interviews. Once or twice a week, I joined Karim, a broker, in his high-street shop to observe and participate in shop activities as a part-time volunteer. Karim agreed to host me after I stumbled across his shop while looking for phone credit and found out that he and his team also offered support services for dealing with red tape and other things. Everyone working in the shop knew about my research and we also shared common reflections about what was going on in the shop. I conducted semi-structured and ethnographic interviews with eight arrival brokers, three of whom mentioned charging clients for their support services. While Karim and one other broker spoke openly about their commercial practices, others were more reticent. I am thus aware that my "insider" perspective on brokers' practices is limited and does not include more exploitative practices.

To gain a more holistic view of brokers' practices and their relevance for newcomers to Dortmund, I further conducted 34 semi-structured and many more informal interviews with migrant newcomers living in or frequenting the neighbourhood. To broaden my knowledge of the context in which commercial arrival brokers operate and to get to know a variety of newcomer groups, I was involved in a more formal, socio-educational neighbourhood centre and "hung out" in other public and semi-public spaces in the area. Since much of the institutional and organisational landscape was set up in the context of EU and refugee migration since 2014/2015, the research focused on migrant newcomers with an international migration history who had arrived in Dortmund in the last decade. I met some of my interviewees in Karim's shop, others in more formal settings in other institutions in Nordstadt or via snowball sampling. Interviews took place face-to-face and were conducted in (often a mix of) German, Spanish, French, English, Arabic, Soninke, and Romani. Some interlocutors acted as "community interpreters" helping me with establishing interview contacts, facilitating multilingual interviews, and discussing interview results.

Nineteen interviewees used the services of commercial brokers. The majority were EU citizens or family members of EU citizens and socio-economically dependent on welfare benefits. Most directly mentioned commercial support, whereas others would only talk about this aspect after being specifically asked. This suggests that commercial brokering might be underestimated in studies on arrival and settlement because the commodification of support might not always be explicitly mentioned. Although having just moved to Dortmund myself and still struggling with some similar problems as my interviewees (e.g., finding childcare),

my situation differed from that of my interlocutors. As a *white* German working in the academic field, I did not encounter the same challenges and was not reliant on commercial brokering. Ethical approval for the study was gained from the Research Institute for Regional and Urban Development in Dortmund. Based on written or verbal consent by all interviewees, interviews were recorded, transcribed, and pseudonymised. Pseudonyms were chosen by either the interviewee or myself. Interview transcripts and field notes were coded with the help of qualitative data analysis software and analysed in an iterative process informed by grounded theory.

4. Arrival Brokers and Their Commercial Infrastructuring for and With Migrant Newcomers

Brokers play an important role in helping newcomers in Dortmund-Nordstadt gain access to goods, services, and information. Commercial brokering is conducted by a variety of actors, ranging from ad-hoc brokers to officially registered businesses. Although they are seen as informal actors and their practice of charging money for support was condemned by more formal actors such as municipal representatives, their legal status was not necessarily informal: One broker ran a registered business offering assistance with citizenship and vehicle red tape. Other than him, I was unable to check brokers' businesses' formal status, though it became clear that commercial brokering practices often complemented other formal services such as translation. I therefore consider arrival brokers and their commercial practices as both formal and informal, as their businesses' legal status varies and might be only one aspect next to their operational logic and perception and outcomes of support.

When looking at a broker's motives, it is impossible to separate help from profit. "Our passion is to help people"—a slogan on a broker's business card (see Figure 1) points to this ambivalence. Shopkeeper Karim was driven by the social and religious motive to improve people's situations, while at the same time needing to ensure that his shop kept running and that he and his employees were able to earn a living (at least partially) with the fees charged for their services. This twin motivation is embedded in their own structurally weak position: Most brokers whom I spoke with (though not all) had personal arrival experience and reported helping other migrants as one of their motives for support services (see also Hans, 2023). Although Karim had previously worked in a refugee camp and acquired useful additional skills as well as new clients there, he had no social worker qualifications, barring him from a formal job in the social sector. As such, brokers can be seen as both "product[s] and producer[s]" (Tuckett, 2018) of past, present, and future arrival infrastructures.

Brokers' services encompass paid support for immigration matters (such as arranging visas), for the initial arrival (finding housing, registering with authorities, etc.), and for ongoing issues that both newcomers and established residents face (such as translations, accompanying people to authorities, and bureaucratic paperwork). Though differing in their legal, social, educational, and national backgrounds, the majority of my interviewees had arrived to Dortmund in the legal context of EU migration (mostly from Spain). Others had arrived to join their families, as students or as refugees, after having been granted asylum somewhere else in Germany. Most of them were dependent on welfare benefits, which not only often went hand in hand with precarious living situations but also with a lot of paperwork. Whereas some of the interviewed newcomer clients had arrived via a broker and directly utilised their services, others found and stayed with brokers because of their relational accessibility.

Figure 1. Business card of a commercial broker.

4.1. Brokers' Relational Accessibility

Brokers in Dortmund-Nordstadt are especially accessible to newcomers in spatial, social, financial, and temporal ways. Firstly, brokers' locations and embeddedness in the urban space play a crucial role. Many operate in arrival neighbourhoods, more specifically close to or in places frequented by newcomers for shopping, socialising, or other daily activities. Some newcomer interviewees found out by chance that a person or shop nearby offered support on a commercial basis, including individuals with no prior contacts in Dortmund. Brokers were also digitally accessible. Although Karim was more oriented towards local people from Nordstadt, people from other districts of Dortmund and even the surrounding cities and other parts of Germany and beyond would contact him. Through their social media presence and well-known phone numbers, brokers were able to establish contacts with migrants more easily, sometimes even before they left their country of origin, especially when visa procedures and the first steps were arranged from there. This demonstrates that the dividing line between migration and arrival brokers is blurry.

Secondly, accessibility is not only spatial but also social. My interviewees described how they were directed to a commercial broker by acquaintances or people they met in (semi-)public spaces. The high-street location of Karim's shop and its reputation among both recently arrived and established clients made it accessible for members of a whole range of social and ethnic groups. Most brokers were well embedded in social (migrant) and often co-ethnic networks. For example, a substantial share of Karim's clients had links with Karim's home country, Morocco, but also other (ascribed) linguistic, religious, or geographic similarities and shared identities (e.g., language, religion, etc.) played a role. Brokers' own "arrival-specific knowledge" (Hans, 2023, p. 381) and their positionality allow newcomers to get more culturally-sensitive treatment.

Thirdly, accessibility is also conditioned by financial aspects. Price scales for brokering services differ greatly. Depending on the service and the scarcity of the brokered resource, but also on a broker's perception of a client's deservingness, prices vary greatly. Some interviewees reported having had to pay several thousand euros for the initial "arrival package." They spoke of some brokers overcharging, while others offered fair prices. Money excluded some people both financially and morally, when people were not able or willing to pay a (certain) price for a service. However, prices were also adapted to clients' financial and social circumstances. As already mentioned in the vignette introducing this article, the prices charged by Karim were usually small (up to 5 euros). Karim also made exceptions and prices were negotiable. Abdallah, for

instance, was not charged anything for a whole range of support services due to his child being disabled. Another example of how commercial services are rendered accessible to newcomers was expressed by my interviewee Latifa: On telling her broker that she didn't have the requested 5,000 euros, he replied:

> No problem, just give me 1,000 euros for now. I'll fill out all the documents for the job centre for you. And when you get the money from the job centre, you can pay me back 500 euros a month.

This form of debt, similar to "fly now, pay later" in migration brokerage (Seiger, 2021), shows how prices take account of the formal welfare system.

Lastly, brokers' accessibility has a temporal component. Constituting an alternative to more formal non-commercial support, people turn to commercial services to receive prompt and flexible support. Karim for example opened his shop every day of the week and, additionally, was contacted by phone at all hours by people needing help. Many interviewees who also knew civil society organisations regularly used brokers' services because they did not need to arrange appointments with them. Such as Sara who, despite working in civil society organisations and schools every day, preferred going to Karim's shop with her paperwork. She would appreciate his flexibility and ability to quickly resolve her problems. Brokers would also be available for time-consuming support: For example, Karim regularly closes his shop to accompany clients to appointments, e.g., at the job centre or foreigners' office. This is possible due to his more informal operational logic allowing "off-the-record" support. On the other hand, this also entails lower reliability: Clients and I were often kept waiting for Karim outside the shop. Brokers set the conditions for their support. As we will see in the next section, newcomer clients are in many respects reliant on brokers and the quality of their services, while at the same time using brokers as a way to circumvent and compensate for other—more formal—forms of support.

4.2. Commercial Arrival Brokering and Its Multiple Effects on Newcomers' Access to Resources

To facilitate resource access, brokers react to their customers' needs by operating in and connecting different fields. Malika, one of my newcomer interviewees, stated that "if you have money, you can get everything you want." Brokers' services cover not only the support available at civil society organisations, e.g., with paperwork, but also services in fields that are not or only rarely covered by more formal service provision. For example, brokers might help clients facing legal restrictions to find a job or support them in finding a flat before or directly upon arrival, i.e., at a time when formal assistance is not (yet) accessible. Rachida told me why a broker (*Simsar* in Arabic) was necessary for successful arrival:

> As we didn't have a flat, we were not registered. Yet without being registered, it wasn't possible to get work, because you can't work here without registration…. So, we obviously needed a *Simsar*, right from the start.

By offering "all-inclusive packages," brokers enable newcomers to quickly gain relative stability: Brokers' clients get registered with the municipality, gain regular employment and rental contracts, and become members of the social welfare system. The combination of different services and the depths people take to afford them highlight how newcomers are relying on brokers, but also how brokers can enable upward social mobility a priori. This requires not only profound knowledge of relevant institutions and procedures but also

the construction of relationships of trust with those working in the respective organisations and institutions. Many brokers are in contact with interpreters, landlords and housing companies, employment agencies, and clerks at local institutions, such as the schools' department or foreigners' office. Karim, for example, knew the names and phone numbers of some of these individuals and would often start calls with a short chat. Such direct contacts with formal and informal actors allowed him to quickly service his clients' needs and argue in their favour.

But brokers' specific networks and competencies also channel people into specific situations. Most interviewees had found housing in Nordstadt and many worked as pickers in logistics (men) or as cleaners (women). Many reported bad housing and working conditions and a lack of proficient support in dealing with paperwork. This led to further problems, for instance with landlords and public authorities, as well as negative effects on people's health. Depending on brokers' networks and competencies, commodification may thus negatively impact the result of a service. This is especially true when profit takes precedence over help. Some interviewees reported services being recorded as completed, even though the results were not up to scratch. Rachida, for example, paid a broker to find a place in a kindergarten for her child, but after two trials, his support work stopped. She even suspected that he had gone specifically to the kindergartens in question in the knowledge that they were full to avoid further efforts. Others reported hidden costs. Some brokers also tended to monopolise their positions by not sharing information on other support structures with their clients. There were various examples of how brokers benefitted from their clients' weak positions and lack of knowledge, especially when newcomers had few pre-existing social networks, few (German) language skills, and no knowledge of more formal organisations.

However, newcomers are not only victims or passive users. In Karim's shop, clients negotiated about the speed and price of almost every service. Rachida, after she had found a kindergarten on her own, felt that her broker owed her a service and requested him to support her with other issues. Newcomers' position as paying clients seemed to differ from their position as users of a civil society organisation. Commercial brokering, in this regard, is not only an infrastructuring practice for newcomers, but it is co-created with newcomers. This is further amplified by the fact that some newcomers opt for brokers instead of civil society organisations or other uncommercial support although they offer similar support. While this highlights brokers' relational accessibility vis-à-vis other support structures, it also shows newcomers' agency, although limited, in choosing a certain infrastructure. Newcomers use brokers as small windows of opportunity and thus co-create brokers as a commercial infrastructure.

5. Conclusion

This article aimed to expand our knowledge of urban in/formalities in the context of migrant arrival. Shedding light on the work of arrival brokers in Dortmund-Nordstadt (Germany), it contributes to the debate on arrival infrastructures. The article establishes a connection between the notion of arrival brokers and infrastructures, building on literature on brokers and their commercial practices in a range of migration- and arrival-related contexts. It contributes to a better understanding of arrival infrastructures as an assemblage of different actors, spaces, media, and technologies, including newcomers themselves. Through using the perspective of both brokers and newcomers, the article shows how commercial brokering functions as an infrastructuring practice transcending formal–informal binaries.

Brokers' accessibility is contingent upon a range of social, spatial, financial, and temporal factors. Brokers' own positionality and their embeddedness in migrant networks allow them to cater for newcomers within different social networks. The location of brokers in long-established arrival areas makes them accessible to a wider range of clients, including newcomers without preexisting contacts. Their digital presence blurs the line between migration and arrival brokers, partly facilitating both pre- and post-arrival support. It also contributes to their temporal accessibility because brokers are not only available on-site but also online. They offer ad-hoc, yet possibly time-consuming services. As alternatives to more formal but temporally constrained support structures (e.g., including those where appointments need to be arranged), their flexibility may also lead to others having to wait. Fees for support services may exclude clients, but may also include others when their financial situations and reliance on welfare benefits are taken into account. In sum, brokers' accessibility is relational because the conditions set by brokers develop in relation to newcomers as clients. They create both in- and exclusions and can only be understood within the context of the local provision of arrival infrastructures.

Brokers' ambivalent effects on migrants' arrival—enabling, channelling, and possibly blocking resource access—can be described as "chutes and ladders" (Wee et al., 2018). Catering to their clients' needs and resources, brokers can provide newcomers with access to different fields relevant to their initial and ongoing arrival. Migrant newcomers are to a high degree dependent on brokers' competencies and networks as well as on the degree of their profit or altruistic orientation. However, newcomers are not only victims or passive users in this regard. My empirical material shows how newcomers sometimes prefer commercial instead of non-commercial support. Their (limited) choices highlight brokers' relational accessibility when municipal structures, civil society organisations, or social networks are not accessible or certain services are not available. Through opting for brokers, newcomers co-create a commercial infrastructure as a way of circumventing more formal pathways to support, representing an alternative that they could keep on going to without the need to arrange an appointment, wait, and register. As such, commercial arrival brokering is not only an infrastructuring practice for newcomers but also an act of "'minor' critiques" (Darling, 2017, p. 189) by newcomers, showing where formal structures are not flexible, efficient, and accessible enough.

Arrival brokers operate between the formal and the informal—in terms of their official status, the spaces they use, the people they connect with, and the outcomes they produce. As such, they form part of a support provision infrastructure within, parallel to, and beyond the one provided by state(-funded) institutions. They facilitate newcomers' access to basic resources, such as housing and welfare benefits. In the same vein, they facilitate the city administration's communication with newcomers and thus draw our attention to the role of the state (Meeus et al., 2019). Although arrival brokers' relations with more formal institutions need to be further analysed, the commodification and informalisation of support for newcomers point to the reliance on informal mediation within the realm of the welfare state. This article calls for a reflection on the role of state institutions and civil society organisations in dealing with informal brokers and their contribution to newcomers' social inclusion. While acknowledging brokers' important function, the study reveals ways in which more formal structures could better cater to the needs of different newcomers. To what extent the (local) state is able or willing to decommodify this emerging "brokerage industry" (Voivozeanu & Lafleur, 2023, p. 729) depends not only on the provision of the requisite infrastructures and their accessibility but also on its ability to reduce the barriers that create the need for brokers' extensive and intense support in today's welfare and integration regimes.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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