

# Chapter 9

## Partnering for Hope: Agentic Narrative Practices Shaping a World Worth Living in



Sally Morgan

**Abstract** People seeking asylum in Australia remain subject to restrictive policies and punitive government practices, constraining their opportunities to live well. In this chapter, I focus on conversations that took place within the early stages of a critical participatory action research (CPAR) project involving members of the asylum-seeker owned Hope Co-operative. I posit a hybrid theoretical lens locating human subjectivity and agency in practice, layering the theory of practice architectures, Stetsenko’s transformative activist stance, and Emirbayer and Mische’s temporally embedded agency with past, future, and present orientations. Drawing on conversations between eight Hope Co-Operative asylum-seeking members and me, I trace some of these conversations’ *cultural-discursive*, *material-economic*, and *social-political* arrangements. I identify three types of talking—mapping solidarities, reminiscing and talking-up—and discuss these particular types of talking as agentic narrative practice comprising people’s mutual becoming. The study speaks to how particular relational arrangements and types of talking might counter systemic exclusion of people seeking asylum through the inherent radical agency of iterative and dialogic self- and world-making in practice.

**Keywords** Asylum seekers · Agency · Critical praxis · Talk · Agentic narrative practices

### Introduction

“Frail and fallible though it may be, all we have, and all we will ever have, is the conversation” (Kemmis, McTaggart & Nixon, 2014a, 2014b, p. 129).

“I’m learning from our conversation, and actually I’m very excited. I’m looking forward to the next steps” (Milad, 2020).

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S. Morgan (✉)  
Monash University, Clayton VIC, Australia  
e-mail: [Sally.Morgan@monash.edu](mailto:Sally.Morgan@monash.edu)

Around 30,000 people who fled their homes for safety arrived by boat in Australia during 2012–2013. They are among more than 25 million asylum seekers worldwide. Their search for refuge coincides with a global trend towards securitisation of the state and the demise of many nations' commitment to the 1951 Refugee Convention (Betts & Collier, 2017). Those who reached Australia between 13 August 2012 and 1 January 2014 are referred to as the 'legacy caseload' by the Australian government (Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law, 2019) and are subject to policies designed to deter others from seeking asylum in Australia. These policies drive protracted refugee status determination processes, the barring of applications for permanent residency, and visa conditions that significantly restrict their social, economic, and educational participation. International research has found students who are asylum seekers or refugees with temporary protection to be "super-disadvantaged" (Lambrechts, 2020). In Australia, scholars deem them as subject to a "deliberate political tactic [that] ... manufactures precarity" (Van Kooy & Bowman, 2019, p. 695) and to comprise "one of the most maligned and demonised populations in contemporary Australian politics" (Vogl & Methven, 2020, p. 62).

In 2019, a small co-operative—the Hope Co-Op—was registered in the Australian state of Victoria, mostly comprised of tertiary students in the legacy caseload and a small number of Australian citizens, including me. All but one of its almost 20 founding members had graduated from an asylum-seeker specific program at St Bede's school<sup>1</sup> within the previous four years. I had been their final secondary class teacher and had initiated a pathway program to try to address the barriers these young people faced in accessing decent work and higher education opportunities. After this program closed down, I sought other avenues through which to continue to facilitate educational access for people seeking asylum. At the end of 2018, eleven tertiary students of asylum-seeker background, with myself and three other Australian educators, founded the Hope Co-Op, which aims to support people of asylum-seeker backgrounds into and through higher education (Hope Co-Operative, 2018).

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<sup>1</sup> St Bede's is an alternative school in Melbourne. In response to mainstream educational exclusion of young adult asylum seekers, from 2014 to 2017 it initiated a Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning program, focussed on English learning, negotiated curriculum and inclusive community. This program entailed daily shared meals, community connections, camps and excursions, and an integrated curriculum taught by the same teacher and youth-worker for 80% of the time. Currently, 21 of Hope Co-Op's 55 asylum-seeking members were St Bede's students, 16 of these having been in my final secondary year class for at least one year. As such, the relationships and communicative practices prioritised at St Bede's have significantly helped to shape the Hope Co-Op, and the study discussed below.

Hope Co-Op's vision is for "full access to socio-economic participation and inclusion of people who have sought asylum in Australia, through equal and well-supported education, employment opportunities and holistic settlement outcomes." Its practical mission is "to help asylum-seeker background students to achieve sustainable education and employment outcomes" (Hope Co-Operative, 2018). The Co-Op currently has 70 members, 57 of whom are currently enrolled or recently graduated tertiary students in Australian universities, all of whom are still living the experience of seeking a safe and secure life in a country they can call home.

In 2020, 26 Hope Co-Op members began a critical participatory action research (CPAR) project, connected to my doctoral studies, called Partnering for Hope. This chapter draws on conversations that occurred within the context of that project. In the initial sections of the chapter, I introduce three of the young people involved, and describe the project's historical context and my role in it. I then summarise what the project entailed, including the methodological implications of ethical practice concerns. The chapter then provides an overview of the theory of practice architectures (Kemmis et al., 2014a, 2014b) and of two related conceptualisations of agency: Stetsenko's (2019a, 2019b, 2020) and Emirbayer and Mische's (1998). I entwine these into a hybrid theoretical lens, before discussing some excerpts of conversations with young people who participated in the project. This discussion is in three sections, focusing on talk that (1) maps solidary connections that enable agency, (2) reminisces about past shared experiences and (3) talks-up people's own future oriented agency. I argue for an understanding of human agency as located in practices and for the ontological significance of this understanding in terms of human beings' mutual shaping of themselves and their world.

## Living Well? Constraints on the Legacy Caseload

The concept of living well is only realised in daily practices that human beings participate in. One way to define living well is in terms of what people—who are *doing* the living—are seeking in their lives. In terms of people who are seeking *asylum*, the opportunity to live safely as equal and contributing human beings is the basic condition under which they can live well (United Nations High Commission for Refugees [UNHCR], 2018). Furthermore, being subject to punitive deterrence policies (Van Kooy & Bowman, 2019) is in stark contrast to being able to live well.

People in the legacy caseload live under restrictive conditions that, research shows, damage their wellbeing. They face multiple barriers in accessing tertiary education (Dunwoodie et al., 2020), are kept in limbo regarding their long-term safety and security (Hirsch & Maylea, 2016), must re-assert their claims for protection every three to five years even after they are determined to be genuine refugees, and have no rights to family reunion (UNHCR, 2018). They live under a strict Code of Conduct that provides exceptional grounds for authorities to re-detain them and potentially deport them to the countries they fled (Vogl & Methven, 2020). These arrangements

constrain their opportunities for building a good life. They also constrain opportunities for citizens to act in a morally informed way, or according to their conscience: for example, for educators to teach according to a morally informed and socially just pedagogy. Kemmis (2019, p. 95) defines critical praxis as “acting for the good for humankind, but also interrogating and transforming existing ways of doing things that currently have untoward consequences”. Restrictive and exclusionary conditions imposed on people in the legacy caseload constrain individuals, whether citizens or people seeking asylum, from living well and contributing to a world worth living in. As such, these restrictive and exclusionary conditions provide a provocation for practices that critique and counter their impacts.

## **Participants: The People Experiencing the Constraints of Australian Policies**

I aim to locate this discussion in primary relation to particular “people’s bodies and biographies” (Kemmis et al., 2014a, 2014b, p. 77). This aim is in recognition that people seeking asylum are often essentialised within heavily politicised landscapes (Fox et al., 2020) and in recognition of human wholeness and the diversity of people with whom I am researching. I experienced Partnering for Hope participants as often funny, warm and interesting, often strong and determined, and sometimes as challenging, sad or feeling defeated by systemic injustice. I selected these particular three young people not for their biographical details—all the young people in this project, while unique, have experienced similarly difficult histories—but for the sense of individuality that Abbas, Aliah, and Salar’s words convey.

Abbas arrived in Australia as an unaccompanied minor. Like him, his siblings fled Afghanistan and now live as permanent refugees in various countries around the world. Abbas lived for several years in a regional town in Victoria where he made many strong connections. He later moved to Melbourne to enrol at St Bede’s school, then gained a two-year traineeship as a regional fire-fighter. He has been in Australia for nine years and is still waiting for the government to assess his asylum claim. The following exchange occurred between us on WhatsApp and is typical of Abbas’ sense of humour and determination:

Sally: [4:44 pm, 11/08/2020] I was wondering if you would each choose a research-name that you would like me to use for you. Please send me a message with the name you want.

Abbas: [4:51 pm, 11/08/2020] How about ‘Action for tomorrow’ or, ‘Battle for tomorrow’?

Aliah grew up as a refugee in Iran. With no educational rights and a constant threat of deportation, she was home-schooled by a neighbour. When her family returned to Afghanistan, looking for a safer life, as a Hazara girl she was under threat if she attended school. After fleeing again, travelling by boat to Australia at fourteen years old, she was detained on Christmas Island and then in a detention centre in remote outback Australia. Finally in Melbourne, she commenced Year 10 and went on to

gain a rare asylum-seeker scholarship to a prestigious university in 2017. She works to support her parents and her pharmaceutical studies. She explains:

I need to TALK to people... they just came to the pharmacy [for] advice about their cough, or their sneezing... and yeah, I need to like make connection with them, talk to them, like ask them "What happened? What did you experience?"... [These questions] make me more connected with people. I feel like I am part of this community, it doesn't matter who, which colour, which language, which accent they have. They need my help and advice. It makes me feel much better, like I am a useful person to this community.

I don't ask them about their visa, look at their race, their level of English, but I look at what their symptoms are and what they need. I do not want to act like people I faced in my life. I have faced a lot of racism and discrimination. I have faced a lot of humiliation and I do not want to be that sort of person.

Salar completed Year 12 twice: once in Pakistan, which he fled days before his final exams, and again at St Bede's school in Melbourne. While searching for an Australian university entrance score, he was offered a scholarship into Year 10 by a private school, after which his depression increased. Thanks to advocacy with a nearby university, he gained an Engineering scholarship and in Semester One, gained 95%. Here, he explains his curiosity, connectedness, and active lifestyle.

Salar: I am adventurous, yeah... I *became* adventurous. Now I go camping, I go fishing, I go hiking. Like everywhere, literally. I've got a few friends with whom I go fishing a lot, and a group of friends that I go camping with and a group of friends that I cycling with. And they're [all] different friends. [laughter]

Sally: Wow! Were you always that adventurous as a child?

Salar: Ummm, not really. I used to go cycling, but ... I wasn't THIS adventurous. Like I am now. And plus, I watched a lot of YouTube videos as well. You know how I started spear fishing? Well, I was watching YouTube videos and I thought 'Oh well, I want to do this one day'. And then the next year, I bought myself the gear, a spear gun and wetsuits... and then the next year I was in the water! Yeah. [laughter]

Sally: And could you swim before you had swimming lessons at St Bede's?

Salar: Not really, nah. When I was in Indonesia, I drowned in the swimming pool!... [So] for the first days, when I went out, my mum, my dad, they didn't let me to go, you know. It was too dangerous. Yeah. Well, we do the rock jumping as well, the cliff jumping and they tell us not to do that! That's a real Aussie thing, you know, that cliff jumping!

As well as the range of liveliness and seriousness across these three snapshots, they encapsulate a sense of self that was changing in response to their lived experiences of seeking asylum. Each articulates their own counter-cultural becoming: Abbas as an action hero, humorous and ready to battle for tomorrow; Aliah as a worker for social justice deliberately counteracting discrimination and humiliation for herself and her community, and Salar as an adventurer irrepressibly embedding himself across a wide range of social and physical landscapes. These snapshots offer glimpses of Abbas, Aliah, and Salar's embodied ordinariness, made remarkable in part by the very arrangements designed to make a deterrent example of the lives of people in the legacy caseload.

The Partnering for Hope CPAR project involved 21 participants seeking asylum, including Abbas, Aliah, and Salar, and six Australian citizens. Of these, 20 had requested Australia's protection nine years prior to writing. Only one, arriving by plane, has gained permanent protection, with nine so far being granted temporary protection. Another 11 are still waiting for resolution of their refugee status, through determination processes deemed as lacking procedural fairness and reliable judgments (UNHCR, 2018). Before taking up an analysis of excerpts of conversations that took place during the Partnering for Hope project with Abbas, Aliah, and Salar (above) and another five participants—Milad, Kalim, Ali, Reza, and Ali Sina—I lay out a hybrid theoretical framework for considering talk as agentic practice.

## **A Hybrid Theoretical Lens: The Theory of Practice Architectures and Agency as Practice**

My intent in this chapter is to trace evidence of arrangements that enable agency in the lives and accounts of the young people involved in the Partnering for Hope project. This tracing, I argue, is best served by adopting an analytical lens made up of the theory of practice architectures (Kemmis et al., 2014a, 2014b) and two differing but—as I contend below—complimentary accounts of agency.

### ***Theory of Practice Architectures***

The theory of practice architectures (Kemmis et al., 2014a) is useful in generating a critical account of social reality. A theory of practice architectures (TPA) account focuses firstly on *what happens* in practices and “the ways in which people encounter one another in interaction as it happens” (Kemmis et al., 2017, p. 251), elaborated in the first paragraph below. Secondly—critically—a theory of practice architectures account focuses on how particular arrangements hold practices in place within three-dimensional “intersubjective” space of particular sites, elaborated in the second paragraph below.

Firstly, the theory of practice architectures can be used to describe and understand a practice, conceptualised as sayings, doings, and relatings hanging together, and to trace three dimensions of arrangements that pre-figure that practice, enabling and/or constraining it in ways specific to the site in which it happens. These arrangements are described in the theory of practice architectures as resources—or lack of resources—of various types that shape the sayings, doings, and relatings comprising a practice (Kemmis et al., 2014a, p. 32). The three dimensions are designated as cultural-discursive (resources such as discourse, language, beliefs and policies), material-economic (resources such as staffing, money, material objects and buildings), and social-political arrangements (resources involving power and solidarity, such as rules

and organisational roles, relationships, human connections, and loyalties) (Kemmis et al., 2014a). These dimensions are understood as only and always bundled together, only separable theoretically in order to describe and understand a practice and its arrangements, but as inseparable in social reality.

Secondly, the theory of practice architectures can and is designed to be used to generate informed transformative action—or to enable praxis (Kemmis & Grootenboer, 2008)—through clarifying how arrangements might be *changed* in order to enable more socially just practices. In other words, if human beings are indeed not only made by history, but also make history (Marx, 1999, as cited in Kemmis & Smith, 2008), then the theory of practice architectures can be used to understand which practice-changing-practices might help to make history as we *want* it to be made. Or to direct our living—our sayings, our doings, our relating—towards a world that we believe is more worth living in. The theory of practice architectures is not a values-neutral conceptualisation of how practices work, but rather, as Kemmis (2019, p. vii) puts it, “not just to understand the world, but to help save it”. The theory of practice architectures’s concern with critical praxis aims to simultaneously politicise and humanise practice (Mahon et al., 2017), making it an appropriate and potentially transformative tool for people involved in Partnering for Hope, most being people seeking asylum and all being people seeking justice.

### *Agency as Practice*

The social exclusions that constitute the super-disadvantage asylum seekers face are infused with a deficit discourse (Dunwoodie et al., 2020). Research in this context, then, ethically necessitates a focus on agency. To this end, I propose a hybrid theoretical lens, drawing on the theory of practice architectures, and on two practice-related conceptualisations of agency: firstly, Stetsenko’s (2020, p. 74) “transformative activist stance”, and secondly, Emirbayer and Mische’s (1998, p. 963) account of agency as “a temporally embedded process of social engagement”.

The theory of practice architectures, although not focused on practitioners so much as practices, draws attention to how people develop through and inhere in their sayings, doings, and relating. As Kemmis (2019, p. 33) contends “I am a confluence of practices ... in interaction with other minds... with the material world ... with communities ... in webs of relationships of power and solidarity”. From a theory of practice architectures’ perspective, the human self—as a confluence of practices—is pre-figured by bundled-together and person-shaping arrangements. These include the materiality of places, other people’s practice-shaping-practices and our own historical practices (for example, experiences, habits, self-narratives, construction of beliefs, nurturing of loyalties) which shape practices as they happen “in the breaking wave of the present” (Kemmis, 2019, p. 87). This notion of human beingness in practice has profound implications for the understanding and enabling of agency. Kemmis and Grootenboer (2008, p. 38) argue that “as human beings and especially as *persons* with *human agency*, we are constituted through our relationship

with others—culturally, socially and economically...and in this sense, those others are part of us and we are a part of them”. This account points to human agency as ontologically relational/intersubjective.

Similarly, although independently of the theory of practice architectures, Stetsenko (2019a) echoes this perspective, articulating an even more radical self- and world-making agency, also located in practices. She conceptualises “human development ...as fully immersed in collaborative practices and constituted by agentic contributions to these practices” (p. 735). Further, she articulates the radically agentic mutuality of people in practices and what the theory of practice architectures calls arrangements as “about us being shaped (and more strongly, realized) by ways in which we shape the shaping (realizing) of us by the social forces of the world” (2020, p. 74). Her further claim is that “most critically, the *agentive self* is not the result of these processes but rather *the very process itself*—the making of the world and ourselves out of the world-making us” (p. 74, emphasis added). Stetsenko, then, takes the notion of human identity as ontologically wrapped up in practices to an even more radical point.

The ontological implications of this practice-architectures-transformative-activist-stance are significant for conceptualising the nature of human beings and the nature of agency. It is a stance with particular relevance for understanding practices of people who are super-disadvantaged and often viewed in deficit terms. However, to my mind this stance does not provide a fine-grained enough account to explain how agency happens *in* or *as* particular practices. I turn, then, to Emirbayer and Mische’s (1998) account of agency to add a third layer to my hybrid theoretical lens.

Emirbayer and Mische (1998) argue for agency as comprised of three enmeshed but distinct orientations, towards the past, the future, and the present. They explain agency as:

*A temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its “iterational” or habitual aspect) but also oriented toward the future (as a “projective” capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a “practical-evaluative” capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment).”* (p. 963, emphasis added)

Stetsenko (2019a) holds Emirbayer and Mische’s (1998) conception as wrongly characterising agency as a mere capacity. She critiques their explanation as infused with a “residue of passivity” (2019a, p. 1) and thereby, assuming by default a disempowered human self, separate from and subject to a world beyond and different to human practices, and which humans can only encounter and respond to. While I share her objection to agency as a capacity, I still read Emirbayer and Mische’s (1998) albeit less radical account of agency as offering a tool for critical analyses of practices and as aligning with a transformative stance. They focus on:

The reconstructive, (self-) transformative potentialities of human agency [which] interpenetrates with and impacts upon the temporal-relational contexts of action... [They further describe agency as] a pre-eminently dialogic and communicative process, which unfolds in perpetual interaction with the social universe... the temporal-relational contexts within which [people] are embedded. (pp. 1012–13)



These words posit agency as practical, interactive, relational, and reconstructive of the world. They embolden me to proffer a slight adaptation of Emirbayer and Mische's definition of agency, informed by Stetsenko's (2019a) critique. This adaptation focuses on the aspects of their account of agency that define it as constituted by practice, rather than as a capacity. Using mostly their words, agency, then, can be understood as:

a temporally embedded process of social engagement [shaped] by the *past* [in practices of] selective reactivation... of past patterns of thought and action, as routinely incorporated in practical activity...

but also oriented toward the *future* (as imaginative generation ...of possible future trajectories of action, in which received structures of thought and action may be creatively reconfigured in relation to actors' hopes, fears, and desires for the future)...

and toward the *present* (as [contextualisation of] past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment) entailing the making of] practical and normative judgements among alternative possible trajectories of action. (adapted from Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 971)

This shift—from a *capacity* to imagine or contextualise, to a *practice* of imagining, of creatively reconfiguring and of making judgements—offers an analytical lens for tracing these orientations of agency-as-practice. I argue it reflects the practice-leaning aspects of Emirbayer and Mische's thinking and maintains a more radical conception of agency without abandoning the finer-grained insight they offer into how agency happens.

In the remainder of the chapter, I use this hybrid analytical lens to interpret talk between me and others as co-participants in Partnering for Hope. I call this talk *agentic narrative practice* by which I mean talk that in itself comprises self- and world-shaping narrativising (Cavarero & Roncalli, 2015). I undertake a detailed analysis of some excerpts of conversation transcripts, examining evidence of social practice *as* agency, with an orientation towards the past, the future, and the present. I also trace some of the cultural-discursive, material-economic, and social-political arrangements that shape this agentic narrative practice.

## Partnering for Hope: A Critical Participatory Action Project

As explained in this chapter's introduction, the site of the Partnering for Hope project is the Hope Co-Op, a community organisation established through a "bottom-up approach" (Jungblut et al., 2018, p. 329) by people who are largely members of Australia's legacy caseload.

Given the super-disadvantage these people face (Lambrechts, 2020), including their need for sustainable educational access, research with them has particular ethical and methodological implications, including that of long-term commitment to the field and to authentic relationships (Fox et al., 2020; Pittaway & Bartolomei, 2013). The pre-existing relationships I have with many Hope Co-Op members, which include

my involvement in many of their educational or employment pathways, demand constant reflexivity and ethical critique. They carry unavoidable risks of coercion arising from substantial power differences, and limitations associated with potential smoothing of the data and analyses (Webster & Mertova, 2007), by both myself and other participants. As one participant, Reza, reminded me “You know, Sally, [we] might just tell you what [we] think you want to hear!”. His comment is one example of conversations in which these risks and limitations were explicitly problematised, and conversely, of the honesty (about dishonesty) that longer term relationships might enable.

Embarking on a project with tangible benefits planned, generated, and enjoyed by its participants was ethically imperative for this study and best served by adopting a Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR) methodology (Fine, 2016; Kemmis et al., 2014a, 2014b). This approach comprises “practice-changing practice, [and] a self-reflective process by which [participants] remake their practice for themselves” (Kemmis et al., 2014a, 2014b, p. 26). Moreover, it enables participants to co-create action projects with the aim of practically contributing to a world more worth living in.

Space limitations preclude descriptions of the enterprises that were the co-designed actions within the Partnering for Hope project.<sup>2</sup> However, here I explore some fine details of the talking we did within wide ranging one-to-one conversations that comprised CPAR early design-focused activities.

## Arrangements for Talking

While the discussion below focuses particularly on sayings, these were just one element of the conversations. Talking, as a practice, is not only sayings, but is also comprised by enmeshed doings and relatings, all hanging together in a particular site. That is, sayings hang in practice with the physicality of conversational doings (such as sitting in a warm or cold room at a computer, or in a vehicle pulled over by the side of the road using the Zoom app on a smartphone) and the conversational relatings (including affective elements) between us as co-participants.

Like all practices, the talking which provided the excerpts discussed below was enmeshed with the web of arrangements that pre-figured and shaped them. The talking is also practice that is ontologically inseparable from Hope Co-Op as a site. This site is pre-figured by historical arrangements comprised by St Bede’s and subsequent founding of the Hope Co-Op, including the future-oriented cultural-discursive arrangements formed by its founding vision and mission statements. It is talking also shaped by the arrangements of the CPAR project, which incorporate a focus on possibilities for future collaborative action.

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<sup>2</sup> The Partnering for Hope CPAR project will be further described and discussed in a range of forthcoming publications, including my upcoming doctoral thesis, journal articles, a Hope Co-Op book entitled *The Shape of Hope*, and diverse publications associated with the World Worth Living In project (for example, website, podcasts and social media posts).

Other arrangements that shaped the talking include Melbourne's prolonged COVID-19 lockdown during 2020, the use of Zoom software and technological enablements such as laptop computers, internet access, and people's capabilities. These arrangements intersected with numerous others comprising the political context of the 'legacy caseload' and contributed to a conglomeration of arrangements that pre-figured—but did not determine—our conversations.

Another key social-political arrangement of these conversations was authentic and ongoing relationships. These relationships remain and frame the discussion below. In this discussion I use the hybrid theoretical lens proposed earlier to understand particular talking as exemplifying 'agentic narrative practice'. I explore this talking to understand how it (1) positioned agency within solidarities, (2) re-iterated connections through reminiscing and (3) generated agency through what I refer to as 'talking-up' collaborative possibilities.

### ***Agency in Solidarities: “Without Any Connection, We Can't Do Anything”. (Ali)***

A key theme emerging in Partnering for Hope conversations was of agency inhering in solidarity networks. Below, I examine excerpts of Ali Sina's talk of solidarities rooted in shared immigration detention experiences, Abbas and Kalim's accounts of solidarities grounded in St Bede's school, and Ali's depiction of ordinary relational practice as conditioning human agency.

When I asked Ali Sina about his social connections, he talked about the people with whom he experienced mandatory detention:

Those people who I've been with in detention centre, we were always together. You know, except those 7 or 8 hours sleep time, most of the time we have been together. We have been playing together, we've been eating together, we've been doing a lot of stuff together... sports, fun, playing, soccer, everything we've been doing together! ... we know each other's habit. We know what kind of person this person is. And you know... I always feel good when I interact with them, when I catch up with them. Because I know they are the people, you know, like we have come from the same start point in Australia. We started together. (Ali Sina)

Here he embeds his solidarity with these people in the shared practices wherein they have “been together...like a family for a year and a half” (Ali Sina). His re-telling evokes and reiterates this solidarity: “they are the people...We started together”. This solidarity is temporally embedded (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998), flowing from the intimacy of shared past practices within enforced detention, to “always feel[ing] good when interact[ing] with them” to the present happening of our conversation, where his re-telling weaves further solidarity beyond his personal thoughts, shaping a present practice whereby I, in conversation with him, also 'know': “And you know...I always feel good... when I catch up with them”.

Abbas also revives past connections in re-telling his very peopled memories of enrolling at St Bede's school. He reveals an enduring sense of enjoyment in remembering staff, in remembering unexpectedly meeting people he knew from detention (Salar and Jawad), and in longterm friendship (with Ali Sina).

Abbas: I got to St Bede's [to enrol], and then... who was there? Jen was there! And I can't quite remember...

Sally: Jo maybe? David?

Abbas: You know, you know, that woman? She was all the time in that office...??

Sally: Hmmmm... Coral? Rachael?

Abbas: Yeah...? Who was our teacher who went to Adelaide....?

Sally: Oh! Patsy!

Abbas: Yes! Patsy! She was there too. And yeah, so they did my enrolment, and I think they said, "Come back next week?!" ...I can't remember exactly, but then I went, and I came back, and I saw Salar and Jawad! [laughter] They enrolled too! And then I brought back Ali Sina with myself and I introduced Ali Sina!

The people Abbas mentions here are all Hope Co-Op members and my ex-students. The sayings involved in this brief co-constructed recount, including the saying of people's names, strengthen our mutual solidarities in that moment. Further, given St Bede's defining ethos of radically inclusive education, in highlighting his recruitment of Ali Sina, Abbas also aligns himself with this ethos. Viewed through Stetsenko's (2019b) transformative activist stance lens, Abbas' re-telling these past practices, and inviting me to contribute to the re-telling, constitutes agentic and self-constituting practice in the present.

I turn now to Ali, who alongside Reza, another Hope Co-Op member, has been working fulltime for four years at the company where he completed a traineeship through St Bede's. He explains:

I make a good connection with everyone, I believe. When I have lunch with Reza, other guys, always other guys, you can ask Reza, when I'm sitting in the kitchen, always people are waving at me. [laughter] To say hi! You know, I try to be friendly with other guys... they know me as, like not joker, but...good person! I try to be very friendly with other guys. I know this is a workplace but without any connection we can't do anything. (Ali)

Here Ali connects me into his relational network, not only referring to Reza, who we both know well, but also suggesting that I "can ask Reza", assuming our mutual participation in a network of living relational practices (Edward-Groves et al., 2010). He focusses on relatings between him and "other guys, always other guys", and their reciprocal effort to "wave at me...to say hi!". He explicitly links social connectedness and agency, articulating routine relational practice—sayings ("to say hi!"), doings ("sitting in the kitchen") and relatings ("try to be very friendly") bundled together in practice—as a condition of agency, whereby "without any connection we can't do anything".

Similarly, Kalim speaks of solitary relationships as intrinsic to agency and as able to counter the exclusionary impacts of government discourse:

I never like *felt* like ... being in this county I never felt like, um ...? Apart from what government said, but I never felt from the community, I never felt, like ... excluded. Because I have lots of people that support me. (Kalim)

He also evidences his own agency as arranged by solitary connections—social-political arrangements of practice—threaded through with relational effect:

You know? Like, [people who] *know* me, and I know them. When you have that kind of relationship, like, um, then you feel like you can, you know, you can *do* things! (Kalim)

Kalim's "feel[ing] like you can do things" speaks to the self- and world- making practice of imagining future possibilities. While feelings might not be commonly understood as self- or world-making, I posit that they are ontologically shaped-by and shaping-of practices. As such, feelings are also involved in agency-in-practice.

Kalim further elaborates how his and others' agency is enmeshed with solidarity formed by particular kinds of relatings:

St Bede's was different... It was not just about our studies. It was about welcoming people from different backgrounds, and respecting each other's customs and beliefs and thoughts ... I would see everyone not just being as teacher-students. But being like close, you know, like listening to each other. We were given opportunities to prove ourselves that we can do something. And most of the people, they did, you know. (Kalim)

Like Ali Sina, Abbas and Ali above, Kalim here depicts particular kinds of solidarities shaping spaces of opportunity for people to "do something". This "something" people were enabled to do is to "prove"—to evidence, to substantiate—themselves through the adoption of their own educational practices that carried them into future and ongoing shaping of themselves and the world.

This account of these conversations speaks to the theory of practice architectures' social-political dimension of arrangements, whereby particular sorts of solitary relationships characterised by practices such as "welcoming... respecting ... being close... listening" (Kalim) and "making good connection" (Ali), constitute conditions of agency-in-practice.

### ***Reminiscence–Re-Telling as Agentic Narrative Practice***

A further theme emerging from analysis of Partnering for Hope conversations is that of the agency inhering the narrative practice of reminiscing. This reminiscing constituted a shared practice of reaffirming the emotional and practical significance of past experiences, through the sayings transcribed below. There are also relatings intertwined with these sayings, evident in the emotion, warmth, and enthusiasm permeating the talk.

When I asked Abbas about times of significant connection for him, he talked about a soccer competition he had helped initiate four years before. He also connected the

story with a number of other people that we both still know, some of whom are part of this study.

Abbas: The soccer! Oh, it was so good! I really liked it. I think I was the only person who was really excited about it and enthusiastic [at the start]. We started it! Yeah! Like we started it!

Sally: I remember! I remember putting the announcements over on a Wednesday afternoon.

Abbas: I remember one time, I was there... Ahwaz was there. I think Ali Sina and the other guy... I forgot his name; he was from Yemen... You would remember him... Ebby! Yeah!... That day, there were only four people!

Later, Abbas talked more broadly about his time at St Bede's:

Abbas: Oh, it was SO good! I remember it still.

Sally: Yeah!! Remember the dinners, the lunches...?

Abbas: Yeah! Everything! Everything about St Bede's was fun! Yeah. Memorable! I can say that.

Sally: Yeah, for me too.

Through such reminiscing, interviews that were formally arranged for research purposes served additional and informal relational purposes, reifying our connection in the present through the talk's orientation towards the past.

The sayings involved in another conversation, with Milad, can also be seen through Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) lens of past (iterational), future (projective), and present (practical-evaluative) orientations of agency. Our reminiscing—bringing to mind thoughts and actions we had engaged in the past—is entwined with imagining future possibilities:

Sally: So, if you get [that job], where will you live?

Milad: I will live in Leyton.

Sally: Oh yeah, you could visit Tallangoori [outdoor education centre]!

Milad: Oh, yeah, I remember you saying it was close to there... Yeah, I'm probably going to go there for the weekend. I... we had a really good time. Like, I always remember Tallangoori. Like I always want to go again.

Sally: Hey, remember "Wake up baby, wake up"?

Milad: [laughter] You know, the memories... you know I'll never forget that. Especially that four days that we went from school. That was actually really really good!

Sally: Yeah. It was amazing, wasn't it?! [poignant tone]

Milad: Yeah. That was good, yeah.

Sally: It was you and Ali, yeah, going around waking us all up in the morning?

Milad: No, first of all, themselves, the people working there. They were like, waking us up, And I was like, can we do that too? And they're like, yeah go for it! And they gave it [the guitar] to us. Ali, myself, and someone else too. I can't remember, but it was really fun!

This conversation was energetic and emotionally rich. Like Abbas' concerted efforts to remember exactly who was involved in the soccer competition, Milad and my shared re-telling entailed fine details: "they're like, 'yeah, go for it! And they gave it to us", and "Hey, remember 'Wake up, baby...'"? and recalling particular people: "Ali, myself and someone else too".

These reminiscences, as talking, did not belong to Abbas or Milad only as individuals: they were *our* memories, relived in the mutual re-telling within our conversations. As sayings, they hung together with relatings as they happened were infused with our aligned and interplaying emotions. They not only reflect but *comprise* the agency that, in Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) terms, is in part oriented towards past habits of social engagement.

Understood through a theory of practice architectures lens, these reminiscences are an agentic narrative practice enabled by the social-political dimension of practice architectures of long-term relationships. Moreover, our shared past experiences were also, of course, embodied. They happened in particular places, enabled by particular material-economic arrangements embedded as part of schools, outdoor education centres and indoor soccer competitions, such as public address (PA) systems, buses, staffing, football clubs, soccer balls, trees, tents, and guitars. Our mutual re-telling of enjoyable experiences agentially carried our past practices into current ones, reproduced as sayings (Kemmis et al., 2014a, 2014b). This re-telling, as a practice in itself, is not an example of participating in something that already exists but rather, in its happeningness (Kemmis et al., 2014a, 2014b), is an example of Milad, Abbas, and me co-creating ourselves, and our present world in our practices (Stetsenko, 2020). Re-telling and reminiscing comprise then, one clear example of agentic narrative practice.

### ***Talking-Up: Sayings for Transformative Future Practice (Praxis)***

This section focuses on what I call 'talking-up' as a third example of agentic-narrative-practice. Talking-up, I argue, acts as a practice that shapes people's own and each other's future praxis. Here I examine 'talking-up' as demonstrating people's awareness of how relationships and future-oriented agency are enmeshed—not in terms of a *capacity* to imagine alternative possibilities, but rather a *practice* of imagining alternative possibilities. Talking-up is, I suggest, the saying together, the agentic narrative practice, that in itself contributes to making a world more worth living in. More than that, these conversations are threaded through with a radical conceptualisation of agency as commingling past, present, and future orientations of social engagement (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998) that are simultaneously self- and world-making in practice (Stetsenko, 2019a, 2019b).

Firstly, I return to Aliah, first introduced in Sect. 1.2, who had attended a high school where there were no other asylum-seeking students. Through a Hope Co-Op

weekend trip to the beach prior to our conversation, she had made contact with other young asylum seekers and talks here about the impact of these solidary relationships on her self-identity and agency.

That journey we had [to the beach]... it was a very good experience. And it was a good connection with asylum seekers, like Milad, or like Ali and Asha, because I didn't know that that they're doing an amazing job in Fire Fighting. It was very good to know that people who came into this country as an asylum-seeker are now helping society. And it gives me like a kind of feeling much better about *my* status. We are not always a disgrace for the Australian community! (Aliah)

Making connections like this with asylum seekers gives us a better sense of identity. And makes us to be more confident and to walk forward and to make progress. And prove to the Australian community and the government that we can be helpful...we can do something good in this community. (Aliah)

Aliah's talk here drew energy from past experiences and solidarities forward into her current feeling about herself and so positioned herself as agentic within the broader community. She cast her agency as flowing from relationality in the past, through to relationality in the future. Put another way, her agency flowed over time from the collective to the individual and back out to the collective. Further, her talking-up was not just talking *about* her own thinking; her talking-up comprised agentic self-narrativising practice in itself. Thus, in talking about the world, Aliah reframed and remade herself in the world. Moreover, like Kalim's sayings mentioned earlier, Aliah's talking-up consciously remade the world counter to the dominant public discursive construction (or making) of asylum seekers as a 'disgrace'.

Another example of this talking-up, practised by Abbas, is not only about the sayings it entails; it also has an important affective element. He spoke energetically about the emerging plans of his advocacy action group, talking-up his enthusiasm for the impacts of future collaboration.

Abbas: Ok... I mean... I mean... I really like this! I really like to see the outcome! Ha! ...Ha!...

Sally: Yeah!

Abbas: I mean, I know, Sally, I know the outcome is gonna be good. But I'm more excited, I'm *very* excited about the *outcome*. I mean... I don't know who else is participating, but if more people are participating and if more people are showing interest, it's gonna be good.

In a separate conversation about the same action project, Milad talked-up the same plans, connecting them to the relational networks comprised by Hope Co-Op and by the various regional government work-centres in which he, Abbas, and another man, Asha, were employed.

I think that will be great! There's nothing to stop us. Like I was saying, from work, from my side, we've got Asha as well. Like every time I ask for something, [my colleagues and bosses] have been very supportive for me. I think that will be really good, from my side, from Rothendon, from Dorrigo.<sup>3</sup> (Milad)

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<sup>3</sup> Rothendon and Dorrigo are regional work-centres.



Here Milad talked-up the power of connection with other people and other work-centres, to the point where his talking-up served to conjure-up, inspire, breathe life into future possibilities. The energy and enthusiastic effect of his talk was such that he viewed potential barriers as ‘nothing’, grounding his confidence in past relational experience of support.

The practice of talking-up examined here, in conversations with Aliah, Abbas, and Milad, further illustrates the relationally conditioned agency discussed in the previous sections. This talking-up as an agentic narrative practice oriented Aliah’s, Abbas’ and Milad’s past experiences and future possibilities towards their practice-woven and agentially self-weaving present. They talked-up their own selves and the world as inextricably relational and pregnant with purpose. In doing so they agentially projected the world as more worth living in, for themselves, and others.

## Conclusion

The conversations drawn on in this chapter were shaped by historical and ongoing relationships and by collaborative action projects planned for the future. I have argued that all these conversations constituted and enacted what I call agentic narrative practice. I have also posited a hybridised theoretical lens that layers Stetsenko’s (2020) transformative agentic stance, Emirbayer and Mische’s (1998) conception of agency as entailing past (iterational), future (projective) and present (practical-evaluative) orientations, and a practice architectures account of all practice as enabled and constrained by complex but changeable pre-figuring arrangements (Kemmis et al., 2014a, 2014b). This hybrid theorisation is intended to generate an understanding of these conversations that contributes to a broader notion of human agency as comprised by practices. In this chapter, I have focused on how agency inheres in and is generated and experienced through solidary relationships, and how practices of reminiscing about past shared experiences, and of talking-up future collaborative action are ontologically significant as self- and world-shaping agentic narrative practices.

Understanding agentic narrative practices as they happen in particular sites speaks to the ethical and methodological concerns of critical praxis, for both research and practice, in the areas of forced migration, educational equity, and beyond. The accounts provided in this chapter posit agentic narrative practice wherein people shape and nourish the connections that weave the world by simultaneously, in talk, connecting themselves to each other and to particular storied places. Put more personally, as conversations happen, we connect to each other and to places precisely by and in our mutual practice of re-telling and talking-up. Insofar as these narrative practices comprise our mutual becoming, they also comprise the inherent radical agency of iterative and dialogic world-making in practice. This reflects Stetsenko’s (2020, p. 74) account of human subjectivity that, ontologically, is involved with the world through a “dynamic and perpetual flow of being-shaped-by-shaping-what-is-shaping-us”. My conclusion here is that agentic narrative practice comprises a

particular and pivotal plexus of this immanent co-creation. As human beings, we contribute to making ourselves, contribute to making the world, and change both through our agentic narrative practice.

These findings offer insight into how a world worth living in—a world we want, a world we hope for—inheres in our own agency-as-practice. This insight has implications for how this world worth living in might be further enabled in other sites. Ali Sina, Abbas, Ali, Kalim, Aliah, and Milad demonstrate agentic narrative practice that runs counter to deficit notions of displacement, disruption, passivity, and exclusion commonly associated with asylum-seekers (Dunwoodie et al., 2020). Rather, their agentic narrative practice at once draws on past solidarities and anticipates and generates future solidarities with particular people in actual places. Precisely through this solidarity, their agentic narrative practice enlivens notions of dynamic capacity, emplacement, continuity, activity, and belonging.

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**Sally Morgan** is a PhD researcher at Monash University. Her research has grown from five years of involvement in educational pathways initiatives with asylum-seeker background students. Sally is Secretary of the HOPE Co-Op, run by and for asylum-seeker tertiary students in Melbourne. Sally’s interest is in how people shape their own and others’ solidarity and agency. She is committed to critical participatory action research as a tool of critical praxis and to working for increased access to and support within higher education for people of refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds.

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