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Money In-between the Fields: Performances and Expectations

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Abstract

Based on the sketches of the ethnographic fieldwork I undertook in Lebanon and Jordan in 2018–2019, this article hopes to shed light on the ethical questions about earning and spending involved in between the institutional field and the field site. It traverses from the "dance" of hospitality in which multiple social expectations are in action and require constant negotiation, to the talks of money in which the research relationship and its "give and take" dynamic and inequality stand out among the multiple social relations and entangled expectations. Essentially, the article examines the performance I made in the research relationship in order to meet the multiple, and at times conflicting, expectations produced in both the "field" and our academic "field".

Keywords

research ethics – knowledge production – fieldwork relationships – ethnographic fieldwork – refugee studies

Introduction

The article examines the sketches documented during the fieldwork for my doctoral research on refugee students' experiences and responses in accessing higher education in Lebanon and Jordan (2018–2019). It traverses from the "dance" of hospitality in which multiple social expectations are in action and require constant negotiation, to the talks of money in which the research relationship and its "give and take" dynamic and inequality stand out among

the multiple social relations and entangled expectations. "Lies" and "awkwardness" about money emerged as a result of the multiple, and at times conflicting, expectations produced in both the "field" and our academic "field".[1] I focus on my own performance in the research relationship in order to understand our academic "backstage" and think about what good and ethical research could be like.

I still remember those moments back in Taiwan: when adults receiving gifts from others or at a restaurant counter paying the bill for the big family gathering, they would do this dance of one rejecting to receive, one insisting to give or to pay, rejecting, insisting, rejecting, insisting until one accepts being treated or the other gives up on giving. I have learned how to do this dance and to pick the role—lead or follow—according to a quick contemplation of our relationships and the comparison between the dancing partner's age, position, salary, general living situation and mine. Growing into an adult, I would pull out my wallet even if I knew it was the other's role to pay. "This is on me," I would say upfront to a younger person before we dine. It had always been quite clear to me which role to pick, and the steps were always fairly smooth. During the fieldwork for my doctoral project, I was, however, not able to do this dance as well with my interlocutors. I had a hard time figuring out which role to play, which relationship was there amongst all the relationships we contemplated the moment the bill arrived, when a decision had to be made.

What added to the complexity was the 'researcher-researched' relationship. The asymmetric power relationship in knowledge production between the researcher and the research participants was evident from the beginning as the research, an individually funded graduate project, did not set out and had not become a collaborative, co-producing endeavour. Meeting the younger university students while they were research participants from whom I gain knowledge and information, shouldn't I pay for the costs that occurred during our times together?

The unequal relationship is rigid in this sense. Kyoko Shinozaki, a then-PhD student from Japan studying in Germany reflects on her multiple positionalities in her project working with Filipino migrant workers. She questions such rigidness of the relationship with interlocutors in the field:

> To what extent do the differences embedded in larger global structures of social inequality determine 'researcher-researched' power relationships?

1 Birgit Poopuu and Karijn van den Berg, "Becoming Fluent in Fieldwork: (Un)learning What Is Good/Ethical/Responsible Fieldwork," *Political Anthropological Research on International Social Sciences* (*PARISS*) 2 (2) (2021): 236–60.

> How *rigid* are these boundaries? In other words, once boundaries are drawn, do they remain?[2]

Shinozaki suggests that a researcher's multiple positionalities, once reflected, show dynamic processes of boundaries being negotiated, drawn and redrawn in a social situation. If the field relationships are not as rigid, then the difficulty I found performing my part of "the dance" during the fieldwork would make sense. The situation where giving and receiving are staged could reveal the process of defining, negotiating and making sense of the relationships we have in the field.

The consideration of transactions in a research relationship can be considered a classical anthropological topic of "give and take".[3] As I was in debt with the information, knowledge, time and hospitality the participants gave, I sought ways to compensate, in a more immediate sense, by paying for a meal or a coffee when we met and making myself useful by offering a language exchange or helping with their coursework. This consideration was often entangled with other situational transactions and expectations, as what follows will show. On the other hand, money, incentives, and compensations continue to be a subject of debate in research employing clinical trials[4] or laboratory experiments;[5] however, qualitative research such as ethnography, of which methods rely on social relationships and rapport building, the matter of money is rarely discussed beyond the ticked box of non-financial compensation for participants in the ethical review form. Throughout my ethnographic fieldwork in Lebanon and Jordan, I often found myself hesitating about what was appropriate to do or to say in transactional situations or when the topic of earning and spending was brought up.

My research project engages with the field of Migration and Refugee Studies. The concepts of hospitality and host-guest relationships have become more central in the field's discussions on the dynamics between refugees and

2 Kyoko Shinozaki, "Transnational dynamics in researching migrants: self-reflexivity and boundary-drawing in fieldwork," *Ethnic and Racial Studies: Methodologies on the Move: The Transnational Turn in Empirical Migration Research* 35 (10) (2012): 1819.

3 Marcel Mauss, *The gift: The form and reason for exchange in archaic societies* (2002).

4 For example, Takafira Mduluza et al., "Study participants incentives, compensation and reimbursement in resource-constrained settings," *BMC Medical Ethics* 14 (1) (2013): S4; David M. Swanson and Rebecca A. Betensky, "Research participant compensation: A matter of statistical inference as well as ethics," *Contemporary Clinical Trials* 45 (2015).

5 For example, Johannes Abeler and Daniele Nosenzo, "Self-selection into laboratory experiments: pro-social motives versus monetary incentives," *Experimental Economics* 18 (2) (2015): 159–214.

host communities.[6] However, we often forget, as Estella Carpi highlights, the phenomenon of refugees offering hospitality to "international guests" or "outside communities" including researchers and practitioners.[7] The phenomenon arises as more academic disciplines encourage ethnographic methods and emphasise observations of "the everyday" which require researchers to visit homes and to be guests. The question that has been asked is: why do refugees host others? Carpi critically reflects that by asking such a question, researchers are "explor[ing] refugees as performers" and "focus[ing] less on our own performance as an international guest in the context where we might not share the same culture of hosting." That is, as researchers, far from being "authentic", we are enmeshed in the complex social web and therefore constantly stage performances to fulfil expectations required in a situation.

While unveiling the implicit meaning of researchers' own practices is central to ethnography's reflexive approach, I find the lens of theatre or dramaturgy helps to discern my own performances and expectations in situations encountered in the fieldwork. Researchers often aim to understand participants' implicit meaning by learning their cultural or interpersonal script. They seek to see the "backstage" of the staging appearances and performances.[8] However, as Carpi and Marlene de Laine also suggest: while we try to unveil the implicit meanings in others' performances, "this does not seem to have been applied to researcher conduct in the field".[9] This lack of reflection on researchers' performance misses the opportunity to understand our academic "backstage" and to think further about what good and ethical research could be like.

Their critical examinations remind me of being a frequent guest of the interlocutors and the performances I have made during the fieldwork in order to avoid tensions as a guest-researcher. Through exploring those moments, I hope to think more deeply about the performance I made about money and spending in the institutional field and the field site. In what follows, I try first to elaborate the above-mentioned difficulty of the "dance" in which host-guest interactions further complicate the researcher-participant relationships. From there, I proceed with an analysis of situations where I explained my source of income and the unavoidable awkwardness of bringing up the matter of money.

6 For example, the Refugee Hosts project: https://refugeehosts.org/2018/10/31/hospitality-and-hostility-towards-migrants-global-perspectives-an-introduction/.

7 Estella Carpi, "Hospitality as a "phenomenological economy': international guests among MENA's refugees," in *Refugee Hosts International Conference* (UCL, London). The presentation is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jsbYREHQyG8 (5:59:00).

8 Marlene de Laine, *Fieldwork, Participation and Practice: Ethics and Dilemmas in Qualitative Research* (London, 2000), 38.

9 Marlene de Laine, 48.

The questions I have: How do I perform and why do I perform as a researcher regarding earning, paying, spending and speaking about them?

"I Can't Let You Pay": Being a Guest in a Research Relationship

Sarah and her family had to move to Lebanon in 2013 because of the uprising (see Hamadmad[10]) and subsequent conflicts in their home country Syria. After we met during a university event in early November 2018 in Beirut, Lebanon, I paid a visit to Sarah's family and had a group interview with her and one of her colleagues. The third time we met, it was Sarah who had to stay over in the apartment I rented for the duration of the fieldwork in the city. Because of the financial constraints, Sarah's family settled in a mountain area away from Beirut where she and her sisters studied. Sarah had to commute up to two hours each way to attend classes. At the end of November, a business project competition in which she participated was in full swing and she had to attend a meeting until late while having an exam at 8 am in the morning. She asked me if she could stay over at my place. That was the first time (after one ethnographic project and the then-ongoing fieldwork), I realised, as I was writing my fieldnotes, that I hosted a participant, who had perhaps become more of a friend during the period. Retrospectively, I realise how I have been a guest in other people's homes. Such a situational host-guest relationship is often only touched upon in the acknowledgement section and forgotten in the contemplation of our positionalities in the field.

During one of my visits to Sarah's home, I joined Sarah and her two younger sisters on their way home from university and school:

> We got off the bus when we reached the entrance of the road to the village. There was a taxi parking in front of the bus stop (a blue hut). We waited at the stop for a while. I was wondering why they didn't get into the taxi. I asked Sarah why they didn't take the taxi, and she said, "He will take from us 3000 [$2] each, we are four—3000, 3000, 3000, 3000—that would be too much, we can't pay that much every time". So, the strategy was to wait until someone would be willing to take us on for a free ride. We waited for about half an hour, and then the younger sister suggested

10 Hamadmad argues that the truthful term to use to describe the events happened in 2011 in Syria should be "uprising" rather than "civil war", "conflict", "crisis" or "war". See Dima Hamadmad, "Objective Enough to Tell the Truth," *Refugee Hosts* (https://refugeehosts.org/2020/01/21/objective-enough-to-tell-the-truth-2/, 2020).

> that we walk, but Maram said that it would be impossible, it would be too long, and that it would take more than an hour. I checked the map on my phone, it would take 1.5 hours to walk. And then I suggested taking the taxi, "if you let me pay, we can take the taxi" since the taxi was just in front of us. Sarah turned me down "I can't let you pay." There were also some other people using the same method, waiting for a free ride. Three more buses from Beirut have passed by and we were still waiting, that'd be an hour and a half. Sarah told me, every day is like this. She normally waits for about half an hour. "But we have no luck today." We stared at each driver that passed by driving towards the village, hoping someone would stop. […] Finally, a man driving alone gestured to take us. We got into the car.
>
> FIELDNOTE, 13 DECEMBER 2019

While I could not assume it was because of Sarah's position as a host that my gesture of paying was rejected, my guesthood, a role I came to perform and was trying to do well, had not allowed me to insist on using the means of transportation (the taxi) I would otherwise use under such conditions. The host-guest relationship in this particular situation was entangled with other relationships between us. "The dance" was rather unfamiliar—being a guest assumed a role of receiving, not offering. Being older, having more monetary resources, or being a researcher became less relevant in such a context. What stands out behind this hesitation seems to be my desire to perform the guesthood well: to let the assumed "customs" in the situation take the lead and relegate the potential issues of money that may interfere with the guest-host relationship.

Sarah's family stayed in the base level of a three-story mountain villa—which Sarah would describe as "a garage" that they rented from a wealthy family who only came during summertime. I should mention that Sarah's family used to be comfortable back in Syria and the situation in Lebanon had been a dramatic change for them in terms of financial resources. Sarah told me during my visit, "We are afraid you're not comfortable. Because we are not comfortable ourselves, how can you feel comfortable?" She explained further, "This place is very different from what we lived in Syria." Sarah and I had been each other's guests, but at her turn of being a host, she had to explicitly excuse the (less comfortable) place.

A similar episode happened again during the second phase of the fieldwork in Jordan. As the project aims to understand the students' "everyday", I had planned to visit students' homes on a regular basis. During a stay in the participant Nadir's family's house in February 2019, in the evening as we were having tea, Nadir's mother asked about my parents. I showed them a recent photo of

my family and relatives sitting on a sofa as they gathered for the New Year. She turned to Nadir and said, "The house is pretty with furniture … and she came here staying with us."

Both Sarah and Nadir's families experienced a dramatic change in terms of financial resources and social positions. Their understanding and expectations about my social position invite comparison and shame. When the comparison was being pointed out and confronted, I often did not know how to react appropriately.

"Who Pays You?": the Urge to Disguise

Investigating the hopes and expectations in the everyday lives of the displaced Syrians who seek higher education opportunities, I attended to and asked questions about the interlocutors' finances and budgeting. Very often, the same questions would be returned to me: "who pays the bills for you?" and sometimes "how much?" after the initial question.

I am funded by the University of Birmingham with a monthly allowance of around £1200 ($1500). During the fieldwork in Lebanon, I rented a room in a shared flat and was paying $450 monthly all-inclusive; in Jordan, I rented a studio, paying 200 JD ($280) plus gas and electricity ($30). In both countries, I normally use public transportation to meet the interlocutors—vans, buses or shared taxis, which normally cost no more than 3 dollars per ride. In Jordan, in some situations, I used services like Uber or Careem and I would spend up to 10 dollars on a long-distance ride.

In ethnographic fieldwork, the researcher, the participant-observer would try to manage one's impression and perform appropriately in others' social world in order to gain access.[11] However, being transparent and honest about the "out-of-research self" not only could reduce the mental fatigue of having to perform, in-depth information and new perspectives would also arise from genuine engagement.[12] While being fairly transparent about my personal life—relationships and family for example, with the matters of my financial status and habits of spending, I sometimes found myself struggling to mutter out the truth. (And why can I be honest here and now, not there and then?).

At the time we met, Sarah was in her second year studying at a university in Beirut, with a scholarship designated to help Syrian students access higher

11 Marlene de Laine, 39.

12 Delmos J. Jones, "Culture Fatigue: The Results of Role-Playing in Anthropological Research," *Anthropological Quarterly* 46 (1) (1973): 30–37.

education. She was receiving a $200 monthly stipend during term time. This would mean, as she told me, $150 for the household expenses, and the rest of the $50 to spend on her everyday commute. However, during the time we met, she had not received the stipend for three months. Sarah's father was working as a concierge at the time and staying in the building where he worked, away from home. She explained, three years ago, when the family financial situation got worse and was unable to pay rent, they moved to the current accommodation through the help of a friend of her father's.

During my first visit, after I explained my project to the mother and the sisters, Sarah asked, "would that help us?" She then told me how they used to receive coupons for supermarket items from the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) for two years, and that was good for living expenses. After it stopped, Sarah described that the situation hasn't been good.

Other than transportation, according to Sarah's mother, for electricity, water and internet, it's around 150,000 LL ($100) each month. "Do you know who can help us? Which organisation can help?" she asked me. After a few exchanges, she asked how I support myself. I told her I have a scholarship. "How much?" They asked and I answered, "1000 dollars". I lied about the amount of my scholarship because I was afraid of making the contrast with their situation more apparent. The mother commented "I wish I could have 1000 dollars a month!" I see the enquiries of Sarah's mother about possible ways of gaining organisational support and my income the negotiation of the give-and-take dynamics in the researcher-researched relationship that was out of balance.

In Jordan, after my first visit with a local contact to the family of Nour who's in her 11th grade in a local high school, I decided to visit alone for the second time. It was a small town on the outskirts of Mafraq city. I called Nour's mother for directions from the city centre. I took a shared van to their place with about 1 dinar ($1.4). During the visit, Nour's mom told me that Nour's older sister (19), who is hearing impaired, hadn't been able to go to school in the Mafraq centre where there is a special class. "Because coming and going, the transportation is too expensive," she said. When Nour was working on her English homework after she showed me her textbooks, the older sister gestured to me, meaning that, as her mom translated, "in Syria, I studied. I want to study here but here there's nothing [no opportunity]." "Too bad, she wants to study too," her mom said. At some point, Nour's mom asked me, "who pays for you?" and "how much?" I instinctively told the same lie of being paid $1000. "What's that in dinar?" an aunt sitting aside me asked. I was hoping this conversation could end as soon as possible. I mumbled. "I don't know… the dinars are stronger." "500 dinars?" She asked. I said, "more than 500," and the conversation somehow finished before she worked out an exact number in dinars.

After lunch, Nour's mother asked me where I am going to stay for the night, I told her in Mafraq city. "But after *al-Asr* (the afternoon prayer), there's no bus," she said. I asked whether they know any driver who could take me to the city. "Yes, you can request a car." They knew some people to call. As Nour's father was searching for the number, he asked, "but it's 5 dinars, no problem?" I hesitated, not because of the fare, but because a quick "yes" would sound as if 5 dinars don't matter a lot. I then told them if there was still a van running, I would take it. It would be better since the place I was going to stay was close to the stop. They asked their son to look out for the van outside for me. After a while, it was obvious that there was no van running. Repeatedly, Nour's father asked, "5 dinars, no problem?" In English, he emphasis ed the question several times: "No problem??" I said yes, no problem. Before I left, the dad asked me why I didn't go to the Mafraq city centre or to Amman for participants. I sensed that I probably had disturbed them and decided not to visit again without an invitation. I also regret not taking off the price label on the *barazek* (sesame biscuit) I got as a visiting gift. It was more than 3 dinars.

While stating where the research fund comes from seems standard in terms of ethics and transparency, answering the question of "how much" has become a delicate matter, especially when the interlocutors' financial situation was clearly in peril. Seemingly personal matters, answering questions on spending and the actual spending behaviours in front of the interlocutors emerged as an ethical concern. The concern demands more than just to act with extra sensitivity, or to master the culturally appropriate ways to speak about money. Indeed, while my visits and questions have expected the interlocutors to reveal their material conditions, I was trying to lie about my comparative wealth and trying not to be questioned. I was afraid not to be liked as a guest. I was afraid of being turned away, rejected, and seeing doors shut in front of me. What was at stake was the chance to more future visits and further access to conversations with them. The contradiction between a series of expectations produced the "lie" and the "awkwardness" about money. As I staged my performances, I was trying to fulfil the expectations of being a good guest and a friend, of avoiding conflicts, of being successful in accessing data while being aware of the inequalities of the research relationships.

Afterthoughts: Host-Guest Relationship and the Research Economy

As the participatory element of ethnographic methods requires, a large part of the fieldwork depended on the establishment and maintenance of such

host-guest relationships. As a guest, I tried to be well-behaved, entertaining and useful for the hosts—this sometimes means helping with English homework, exam preparation, bringing a pair of chopsticks and having a laugh, and accompanying them to visit their friends and neighbours. However, I wonder whether the research relationship and the economy behind it could continue to be maintained by these seemingly light-hearted moments of welcoming and guesting that in reality involve great emotional efforts, vulnerabilities, and the futures of the relationships.

By the economy of research, I refer to Lisa Tilley's "points of commodification" where the participants' knowledge is seen as crude data to be processed into "real" knowledge.[13] Rivera Cusicanqui, referring to the postcolonial discourse of North America, suggests that the political economy of knowledge is not only the "economy of ideas" itself, but also the "economy of salaries, perks, and privileges that certifies value through the granting of diplomas, scholarships, and master's degrees and through teaching and publishing opportunities."[14] The episodes above reflect the moments where the "give-and-take" dynamics were out of balance and required negotiations, and perhaps also reflect the larger extractive dynamics of knowledge production. When the matters of money are made explicit, the abstract value of money makes different situations comparable, thus the inequality more apparent.

A series of questions emerged from the sketches throughout the paper. How can we be prepared and be trained to talk openly about things related to money with interlocutors especially when the disparity of financial situation is expected? Should we rethink questions of compensation in addition to the ways of 'giving back'? Could a research relationship be fairly negotiated in terms of what to give and what to take, and how much?

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13 Lisa Tilley, "Resisting Piratic Method by Doing Research Otherwise," *Sociology* 51 (1) (2017): 27–42.

14 Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, "Ch'ixinakax utxiwa:A Reflection on the Practices and Discourses of Decolonization," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 111 (1) (2012): 102–03.

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