

## Negotiating Asymmetries: The (De)Thematization of Giving and Receiving in Ethnographic Relationships in Forced Migration Research

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**Key words:**

ethnography;  
relationship; gift  
exchange; shame;  
refugees;  
migration;  
reflexivity

**Abstract:** In this article, I address the genesis and shape of my ethnographic doctoral project on processes of social participation among young male refugees from Syria. I focus on the shaping of my own relationship with the refugees participating in my fieldwork. On the one hand, using a reflexive approach, I reconstruct the mechanisms through which the relational approach is constituted as a key aspect of fieldwork that follows its own logic. On the other hand, based on excerpts from the empirical material, I outline the characteristics of the relational dynamics of a particular case, which I treat, following Marcel MAUSS (1990 [1925]), as a relationship of gift exchange: as an example of giving and receiving. Drawing on the obligation to reciprocate a gift, the mixing of person and thing in exchanging gifts, the creation of debt, and the temporal aspect of a gift, I disclose situations in which I experienced shame. The presented case may be indicative of what takes place in constellations involving volunteers and young refugees, as well as in the professional work relationships of educational staff.

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## 1. Introduction

In this text, I reconstruct from an ethnographic perspective how I arrived at the specific subject of my field research. I refer to the context of my ongoing doctoral project on social participation processes among young Syrian refugees. In this project, my own relationship with two of the field participants emerged as a primary "sensitizing concept" (BLUMER, 1969, p.147). In the following, I aim to clarify questions around how the analytical focus on the relational dimension was constituted and what empirical form it took. Such a self-thematization seems relevant to me given that, in the background we are dealing with here—i.e., an informal client-helper relationship—a constellation is invoked that is regularly found in both voluntary and professional work with refugees (SUTTER, 2019). Despite their relevance, methodological approaches to understand these dynamics from inside out are rare. [1]

The initial observation that in ethnography the relationships between field researchers and field participants are important is banal. It can be located in the tradition of ethnological cultural analyses (HÄBERLEIN, 2014; STODULKA, 2014), but also appears in classics such as "Street Corner Society" (WHYTE, 1993 [1943]). Ethnography is always ethnography of one's own relationship(s). However, I assume that this circumstance is functionalized to varying degrees. In the tradition of ethnopschoanalysis, it becomes the object *par excellence* (DEVEREUX, 1984 [1967]; NADIG, 1992), just as "Relational Ethnographies" (SIMON, 2012) are characterized by an explicit relational focus (see also GERGEN & GERGEN, 2002). In many places, however, relationships are also a means to an end. In the context of field access processes, they function as a gateway to ethnographic research and then to other foci of analysis. The relational dimension becomes a central foil for reflection on the conditions of one's own field research and acquires particular significance in the construction of ethnographic texts. Since the writing-culture debates (CLIFFORD & MARCUS, 1986; see also BERG & FUCHS, 1993), this has been discussed from the perspective that the research relationship is embedded in the history of hegemonic power relations. The impetus provided by this insight has been enormous, as can be seen in its stimulation of a plurality of ethnographic narratives going beyond classical depersonalized authority (ATKINSON, 1990; GOBO & MOLLE, 2017; VAN MAANEN, 1988) or, exemplarily, in the establishment of autoethnography (ELLIS, ADAMS & BOCHNER, 2010) as an ethnographic text genre in its own right (THOMAS, 2019). Along the same lines, many attempts have been made to address research ethics in ethnography.<sup>1</sup> The demand in this context, that is, to meet the Other at the eye level, poses an epistemological dilemma, which is typically dealt with by participatory approaches (BERGOLD & THOMAS, 2012; WHYTE, 1991) and collaborative methodologies (BIELER et al., 2021; LASSITER, 2005), without, however, being simply resolved (FLICK & HEROLD, 2021). As a rule, ethnographic research remains—in my opinion legitimately so—subordinate to the interest of the professional

1 Beverly SKEGGS (2001) recommended a research ethic based on "reciprocity, honesty, accountability, responsibility, equality in order to treat participants of ethnography with respect ... and to establish the intention of non-exploitation" (p.433).

researcher, without being able to transcend the subject-object relationship as such (SPECK, 2021).<sup>2</sup> [2]

The elaboration of the relational dimension in the field research presented here also remains subordinate to my epistemological interest. However, the relational dimension is neither merely a reflexive partial object of my analysis nor an a priori category of analysis, but *the* interest of the entire ethnographic endeavor, emerging from the preceding processes of negotiation in the field. My thematization of "relationship" is thus less about critically and reflexively following the dynamics and subject positioning encountered in the ethnographic research relationship (which should be a given anyway), but rather focuses on the ethnographic analysis of relationship, of which I myself have become a part. The following explanations are based on the idea that the relational approach did not establish itself in my project to find something out, but rather that it represents a field specificity that in turn imposed itself as an object of analysis. [3]

I am writing this text from the first-person perspective, taking my cue from STRECK, UNTERKOFLE and REINECKE-TERNER's (2013) suggestion of a confessional stance for field researchers, as well as recent impulses toward reflexive writing in ethnography (NIERMANN, 2020; SCHINDLER & SCHÄFER, 2021) and migration research (DIETERICH & NIESWAND, 2020). Based on this approach, I will first describe some of the conditions under which the relational focus was constituted in my doctoral project (Section 2). This will be followed by an insight into my relational dynamics with a field participant in Section 3, where I outline essential dimensions of this relationship using three types of ethnographic data. In Section 4, I further condense the typifications I have developed into a preliminary shape of the relationship. In Section 5, I summarize my analyses against the background of their relevance, as described above. [4]

## 2. Development Dynamics and Inherent Logics of the Field

In the chronology of my project, the momentum of the personal relationships that would become the main focus began from an initial group situation. In this section, I first describe in Section 2.1 how the latter was constituted from at least three central points of view: my group membership was linked to masculinity, routinized through participation in field practices, and my group status was secured by my capacity to provide support as a member of the German majority society. Subsequently, in my field, a certain kind of personal relationship became so strongly independent that the group focus in my doctoral project was no longer tenable. In Section 2.2., I describe how the logics of this dynamic consisted, among other things, of a personal history and were mediated by habitual class membership. [5]

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2 A selective opening of the ethnographic research design at points of elicitation and evaluation or even in the form of multilogical writing (MOHAMMED, MUHAMMED, ZALEWSKI & THOMAS, 2019) can then be understood as a participatory offer. However, this does not necessarily touch the (asymmetrical) constellation of relationships in ethnographic research.

## 2.1 From the group ...

I began my project in spring 2018 to investigate how participation processes among unaccompanied refugee adolescents from Syria materialize in their everyday lives in the long term. To investigate this question, I decided a priori to make a realist-objectifying ethnography (VAN MAANEN, 1988) of a migrant milieu. I was able to draw on an already established field approach from a participatory research project in which I had worked the year before (SAUER, THOMAS & ZALEWSKI, 2019; THOMAS, SAUER & ZALEWSKI, 2018; ZALEWSKI, 2022). I therefore spent the initial period in my field nosing around in an East German high-rise housing estate, where my field contacts lived together in an eight-member clique of Syrian neighbors. I thought it would be useful to make a longitudinal ethnographic inventory of this group, along the lines of MacLEOD (2009 [1987]).<sup>3</sup> [6]

The practices of this group were highly gendered. My own masculinity was a primary enabling condition allowing me to attain membership. In particular, regular shisha smoking sessions took place in different apartments, where the mode of collective "hanging out" was central.<sup>4</sup> I actively participated in the discussions that arose during shisha smoking. HITZLER and EISEWICHT (2020) spoke in this regard of the necessity of a practical everyday treatment of one's own research topic, which can only succeed "if one participates in what the people one is interested in are doing" (p.43)<sup>5</sup>. Following PFADENHAUER (2005), I conducted passionate-engaged observational participation in the group. My "engagement that went beyond situational presence" (HITZLER & EISEWICHT, 2020, p.44) consisted mainly of helping people with personal practical life issues when these were brought to me; this role as a helper solidified my position in the group. My approach thus moved close to WACQUANT's body-sense based approach to doing sociology:

"Sociology must endeavor to clasp and reconstitute this carnal dimension of existence, [...]. To accomplish that, there is nothing better than initiatory immersion and even moral and sensual conversion to the cosmos under investigation, construed as a technique of observation and analysis that, on the express condition that it be theoretically armed, makes it possible for the sociologist to appropriate in and through practice the cognitive, aesthetic, ethical, and conative schemata that those who inhabit that cosmos engage in their everyday deeds" (2004 [2001], pp.vii-viii). [7]

In the context of my "conversion" to the group, becoming aware of my own emotional reactions was helpful, not least to prevent a detached going-native. Given that ethnographers themselves become the medium of their own analysis, I increasingly saw myself as a kind of ethnographic sensor and elevated precisely

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3 In his classic ethnographic study "Ain't No Making It," MacLEOD followed the trajectories of two groups of adolescents and young men in the context of poverty and racism in the USA. He used a longitudinal analytic perspective and returned to the groups eight years after beginning his project to interview the same individuals again.

4 We also often cooked together, went shopping, and played cards.

5 All translations from non-English texts are mine.

those emotional "countertransferences" to my field in the sense of DEVEREUX (1984 [1967]) as primary data sources for my research.<sup>6</sup> [8]

## 2.2 ... to the personal relationship

My analytical focus on "group" became increasingly precarious in the second year of my fieldwork. In the early 2020s, there was ultimately a shift in the social form in my project from the group to the personal relationship between two people. With my ethnographic stance outlined above, I had actively created relational offers that were strongly reciprocated in two cases. This is perhaps explained by the fact that I had underestimated a personal history: I had originally been introduced to the group by the cousins Mervan and Enis,<sup>7</sup> who had fled to Germany from the Kurdish part of northern Syria. I knew both of them since the summer of 2016, and we were connected by our intensive cooperation on a previous research project when they were still minors and were living in a residential facility run by the German child and youth welfare system.<sup>8</sup> Mervan (born 1999) was the younger and, while more reserved, was very intelligent and inquisitive. He was particularly responsive to my offers of relationships and support. For him, I fulfilled to a certain extent the function of a big brother when I entered the field. The extroverted Enis (born 1998), on the other hand, was strongly oriented towards life experiences and much more independent overall than Mervan. He did not need my assistance at any point. When he found a permanent job during my first year in the field, we lost track of each other. [9]

Mervan's best friend in the residential house was Musa (born 1993). Musa came from a large Syrian city from an educated upper-middle-class family.<sup>9</sup> The family owned two houses that were destroyed in the war. His father had lived in Canada for a long time for work, and his older siblings were all studying. He had come to Germany as an adult and had previously lived in a collective accommodation center. Mervan looked up to him. Without anticipating the specific relationship dynamics that emerged with Musa, which I will detail in the following Section, it is important to note the following: Musa was driven by strong ambitions to make strategic progress on his biographical path in Germany. Soon, "hanging out" together in the group was no longer as important to him as spending time alone with me to have private discussions about his plans in Germany. Due to his class situation—being from a well-situated urban family and equipped with a Syrian A-level equivalent with a specialization in humanities—he was also able to follow my

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6 Accordingly, I gave a lot of space to affective-physical states in my research diaries and protocols. In order to take them seriously as an important datum, I also made use of professional ethnographic supervision (BONZ, EISCH-ANGUS, HAMM & SÜLZLE, 2017).

7 Except for my own, all first names are synonyms in order to protect the identities of the people involved. Similarly, times and places relating to personal data are slightly modified.

8 I met Mervan and Enis for an interview as part of the preliminary study for the research project. Collaboration in this participatory research project consisted, among other things, of me spending some time staying in their child and youth welfare facility in spring 2017. It was not until a year later that I entered the field independently.

9 The knowledge of Musa's personal (family) background, which I narratively integrate at this point, comes from the various ero-epic dialogues (GIRTLER, 2001) I had with him personally.

PhD project in detail and take a greater interest in it. The smaller age difference between us (I was born in 1988) also created a certain eye level. [10]

At first, I could not admit to myself that my milieu ethnography could only be sustained by resisting the emerging relational dynamics with Mervan and Musa. They insisted on their own right, and I thus threatened to work against an inherent logic of the field if I did not take them sufficiently into account. For a long time, I had been polishing an exposé on the group approach, with which I was satisfied only after almost two years of painstaking theoretical work. Therefore, when the original idea of a classical milieu ethnography threatened to become obsolete, there was a strong sense of loss on my part. I was only able to overcome it through two external influences. Firstly, during presentations of my initial results in a colloquium with my academic supervisor in January 2020, she noticed how much I repeatedly argued for the relational dimension. She suggested that I pursue this more consistently. In addition, my supervision group, which works in the ethnopschoanalytic tradition,<sup>10</sup> motivated me to take personal relationships seriously in my ethnography. MORGENTHALER (1984) gave an important impulse to such an ethnographic approach in his time. According to him, "the scientific" no longer lay in working through a prefabricated research plan "on the object of study," but "in the authenticity of the information about the emotional exchange between representatives of different cultures" (p.16). I was able to follow this approach—away from ethnographic research of the others towards an ethnography of the relationship between them and myself—after a crisis phase in my project. [11]

### **3. From the Definition of the Situation to the Definition of the Relationship**

In my doctoral project, I aim to work through both relationships (i.e., with Mervan and Musa), including their subsequent contrast. However, because of the strong work-in-progress nature of the project and the given brevity of this text, I have chosen to present only one case here, that of Musa. This case challenged me more to reflect on my own position as a researcher and—following the invoked debate dictum—to "speak of myself." Along three types of empirical material from my project, I will fan out specific aspects of my relational dynamics with Musa. First, using the example of a thick description of our meetings in his apartment, I will point to the dynamics whereby Musa functionalized our relationship (Section 3.1). Second, using an excerpt from an observation protocol, I then focus on the aspect of dependency (Section 3.2). In the final step, I draw on dialogue interview material to develop insights into how this relationship produced a sense of shame (on my part), which was based on a form of functionalization that tended to be dethematized (Section 3.3). [12]

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<sup>10</sup> I have been a permanent member of this group, led by Jochen BONZ, since the beginning of 2019.

### 3.1 Functionalization and complementary role

The relationship between Musa and I began on the white faux leather couch in his room. He asked me to sit there the first time I visited him alone in his apartment in September 2018, at 11am. Little did I know at the time that I would remain seated there without moving until 5pm before leaving; similar scenarios would repeat frequently over the next six months. [13]

A typical "couch situation" was introduced by Musa with a little euphemism. He had "a quick question, please, Ingmar." On the first day it was: "Can you write my application?" Before there was even a chance to settle into the situation with some small talk, Musa took hold on me. There was no time for me to arrive in peace. Musa talked very fast and sometimes got lost, as if he was afraid he would not have enough time to tell me or ask about everything he thought was important, even though that's exactly what we had on the couch: lots of time. Musa always took my words seriously. He made a point to discuss his progress in Germany together with me on the couch. Each of our meetings was connected with a concrete request on his part. We spent whole days on his couch that winter in the following way. I usually arrived in the course of the morning. The first thing we had was black tea, while Musa introduced the pressing issue that he needed to discuss. What happened on the couch followed certain unwritten rules, suggesting an analogy with the psychotherapy couch. Namely, we met there in a recurring rhythm, about every one or two weeks. The initial sequences were similar in that Musa told me, without being asked, what was on his mind and what he had recently experienced. I listened to him before he involved me in a concrete concern. On the couch, we revised his CV several times, scouted out regional internships and apprenticeships, wrote applications, and exchanged verbal information in response to his many questions on training, studies, and jobs in Germany, in a steady flow of conversation. Musa always made this time on the couch as pleasant as possible, so for a long time I did not even notice that we were often in fact doing work. From the beginning, however, I noticed that towards the end of the meetings—and sometimes earlier—I was afflicted by attacks of fatigue, which at the time I associated mainly with uneventfulness:

"I sat for five hours in a row in the same place on the couch in Musa's apartment. I chatted, always had something to drink and was showered with hospitality without ever being 'allowed' to give a hand. After a while, the hanging-out and doing nothing seemed to me to go on for a very long time. I noticed how tired I was and, in all honesty, from time to time I felt like having a nap on his couch" (field note, September 12, 2018). [14]

Considering how much actually happened on the couch, I now understand my exhaustion as a physical reaction to Musa's functionalization of my person. Because of my privileged position as part of the German majority society, he attributed to me the knowledge that could help him on his way in Germany. On the couch, I served as a resource for him and became his central helper and companion as he began his life in Germany. Musa was initially heavily dependent on help regarding the various work and training modalities. I not only felt his

helplessness and impatience, they were at times also transferred to me. Thus, it was not the idleness, but being forced into a helpless role and being used that caused me exhaustion. [15]

Musa's plan to use me to clarify pressing issues in his life was effective, in that these issues were given their space on the couch. Musa thus had a lot of agency in terms of how we spent our time together. Within the framework of our relationship, he literally prescribed the time we spent together on the couch. This created a specific kind of client-helper relationship between us, which was determined by Musa's high agency. I can better understand this dynamic in retrospect according to the ideas of DEVEREUX (1984 [1967]), who described the phenomenon of taking on a "complementary role" in the ethnographic research relationship as the "wish to gratify it by complementary behavior" (p.241). This refers to those reactions in the field that were "insidiously foisted upon him [the ethnographer] by his subjects [field contacts], which he then unwittingly implements in terms of his personality makeup" (p.234). Musa accordingly placed me on his couch and I took on the helper role he ascribed to me to secure the relationship with him. [16]

### **3.2 Dependency as a balancing act**

One particular aspect of the counseling situation between Musa and I was that I always struggled to get out of it, as the following observation illustrates:

"I spent the day on Musa's couch and in the evening got 'stuck' there smoking shisha. The train back to my town leaves hourly from the main railway station. I really have to take the last train at 12.19 am. Since there are not any more buses going to the station at this time, I have to walk. I ask Musa how long it would take, and he responds that I can relax, he often walks there and it is only 20 minutes. Since this seems very short to me somehow, I check via Google Maps. On Google Maps, the trip is supposed to take 40 minutes on foot. Musa says that this is not right. I tell him that I would like, nonetheless, to get going around 11.30. Musa then jokes that I could always sleep at his place. When I finally get up, Musa tells me to wait, since he would like to accompany me. It is 11.41 when we finally leave the house. Per Musa's 20-minute hypothesis, we should still easily be at the train station on time, 18 minutes before departure. An icy wind is blowing against us outside. My jacket is half-open due to a splint I am wearing on my right arm that does not fit into the jacket sleeve. My shoulder bag is hanging from my left shoulder and, at the same time, I am holding my jacket closed with my left arm as best I can, so that as little cold gets in as possible. Musa notices after a while that I am having quite a bit of trouble and offers to take the bag. This is a relief. But I still feel somewhat disheveled: outdoors at night in a strange place, wandering with an injured arm through bitter cold in a kind of ghost town in which I do not know my way around, but have instead to place my complete trust in Musa. I first look at the time again shortly after we have crossed a river and I recognize the city center again. It is 12.03. My train leaves in 16 minutes and there is still no railway station anywhere in sight. Judging by my vague feeling, we have only reached the halfway point to the station. I thus intuitively begin walking at a much faster pace right away. Musa must have noticed, since he immediately



says to me that we will certainly catch the train. The streets seem to go on forever now. I look at the time again; the train station is still nowhere in sight. It is already 10 past 12. I now see a real danger that he could quite possibly have completely underestimated and made a major miscalculation of the time. We are now walking really fast and I am wondering when we will have to start running. It is 12.13—6 minutes left. The railway station absolutely has to come into sight at the end of the street now. Finally, after going around another curve, we see the lights of the railway station, which Musa matter-of-factly confirms at once: 'That's the railway station.' I can see that my train has not yet pulled in. I have just made it. Musa has probably not noticed my sometimes really intense inner turmoil much at all. He now tells me very calmly: 'You have time.' As he does, my train pulls in. We say goodbye and I again pick up my pace briefly, in order to scurry into my train, greatly relieved" (transcript excerpt, November 28, 2018). [17]

Whether unconsciously or consciously, that night Musa almost sabotaged my departure. I felt strong nervousness on the icy walk, which I understand as a further consequence of my functionalization by Musa: during the walk together, paradigmatic expression is given to how my complementary role resulted in a dependent position. This dependency shows itself in the material in the form of my constant struggle for distance and in the awareness of my own limits. Precisely because Musa's need for me to make myself available was so great, I was careful not to overstretch my complementary role. I allowed for partial dependence on Musa in principle, but only to a certain extent. In the end, I made sure that I got my train on time. At this point, I experienced our encounter as a challenge in which I had to balance the different resources I was pouring into the relationship. [18]

It is equally clear that our relational events at this point were driven by interpersonal needs for relatedness and closeness. Musa embodied them by referring to the naturalness of friends spending the night together. As already reconstructed in the course of my complementary role, I did not respond to this to the same extent, but retreated to the functionally distanced side of our relationship. What is interesting about this is that, in addition to excessive closeness, excessive functionality could become threatening for me in the context of our relationship. This reveals a central ambivalence of our relationship, which further unfolds in the following section. [19]

### 3.3 Shame, or (de)thematized functionalization

There was an easily overlooked counterpart to Musa's functionalization of me, in which I benefited significantly from him: my PhD research project, the "book" I was writing. It can be argued that our relationship is partly based on this reciprocity. Thus, our project became based to a similar extent on his pursuit of social status and my pursuit of my doctoral degree. For both of us, this was about (re)advancement in society, in which we could help each other. More precisely, this balance is weighed in my favor, because the idea of my research had been there first. Thus, my self-interest was a part and condition of our relationship from the beginning. Of course, this had the potential to increasingly recede into the background as time went on and new interpersonal needs and dynamics emerged. Nonetheless, it is important to note this structural asymmetry and actively address my functionalization of Musa for my research project. To acknowledge it reflexively is to protect oneself from the danger of ultimately obscuring it. BREIDENSTEIN, HIRSCHAUER, KALTHOFF and NIESWAND (2015) dealt with the fact that field participants' functionalization is often dethematized by field researchers as follows:

"Especially in longer research projects, more intimate forms of social relationships usually emerge. But it is the fate of ethnographers to have to play an often exhausting double knowledge game and to always use these relationships in the sense of gaining social scientific knowledge. Against this background, [ethnographers] [...] seem to react by often tending to reinterpret their informant relationships as friendships, thus concealing the instrumental moment of ethnography. This also seems to be a form of working through the moral scruples of the field researchers. [...] This conflict is mitigated less by friendly reinterpretation of the report than by the fact that ethnographers are also often profitable for the interests of their informants. In this sense, research ethics questions should be asked about possible forms of reciprocity rather than burdening fieldwork with strong moral claims. What can the ethnographer herself give?" (p.69) [20]

The instrumental aspect of my research came up in the context of our relationship. What was special about this was that the thematization of our relationship was initiated by the field participant Musa and not by me as the researcher:<sup>11</sup>

"Musa: What do you think, yes, what do you think about me? I am as work? Or I'm pal? Or I'm, yeah, this is important for me. Really.

Ingmar: Well, yeah. Well, like Mervan.

Musa: Yeah, Mervan, what do you think about Mervan?

Ingmar: (5 seconds pause) Actually like you too, you are already somehow, we meet often and we have fun together. And at the same time I'm also, well not doing my work, but I find it's like this, I'm also writing a book about it. So, it's probably both things.

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<sup>11</sup> Throughout our relationship, Musa insisted that we communicate exclusively in German. The following are my translations.

Musa: I know, that's very important for me.

Ingmar: So, on the one hand, we're pals and we also help one another, I find.

Musa: Yeah (laughs)

Ingmar: So, for instance, I also help you

Musa: Yeah (laughs)

Ingmar: with writing applications and meeting new people and we have fun playing ping-pong

Musa: Yeah

Ingmar: and smoking shisha. And you also help me to write my book. That's how I see it sometimes.

Musa: Yes, that's why it's important for me ...

Ingmar: So, how do you see it with me? (smiling)

Musa: Me?

Ingmar: Yes, what do you think about me?

Musa: I think YOU, it's very simple. You're good pal for me now.

Ingmar: Cool.

Musa: Really. You're good pal and you're, this is really not a compliment (becoming serious), you're, how is it called? You're friendly? Friendly man. Good man. So-many-things man. (laughs, then both laugh) You understand? That's my opinion. I don't have to, I don't like saying it this way, but you're good pal for me and you have good thinking. This is also very important for me. And that's all. Yes.

Ingmar: Okay, yes. That's good. (laughs, then both laugh)" (interview excerpt, November 28, 2018). [21]

It was Musa who explicitly called for our relationship to be defined here. His initiative surprised and strongly challenged me. In the helper role, I felt on safe ground as long as it was not overstretched, but as someone who was conducting research for his PhD, I was strongly unsettled. As soon as the research aspect was foregrounded in our relationship, I felt a diffuse emotional discomfort, which I would like to interpret at this point as shame (the subsequent transition of this shame to feelings connoting guilt was fluid).<sup>12</sup> [22]

Following NECKEL (1991), I am primarily referring to a social shame that is conveyed through a perceived discrepancy between one's actual and desired ideals. I saw myself as the "so-many-things man" in every respect, struggling to shoulder a lot at once: I wanted to be a big brother and close, loyal pal to Musa, while also being a German citizen who knew about things on the ground and could answer his questions effectively. On the other hand, there were the ideals of the (methodologically and ethically) correct researcher who could confidently answer to his scientific community and its standards. Last but not least, I was the doctoral student who was always litigating with his project and had to bear witness to his progress in his supervisor's colloquium.

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<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, the following simple analytical separation seems to me very instructive: "Guilt arises in the transgression of prohibitions, shame in the non-fulfilment of one's own ideals" (NECKEL, 1991, p.51).

"In this context, the sense of shame has the function of serving as an inwardly directed control of adherence to value patterns. Through the self-reflexive feeling of shame, individuals evaluate and control themselves in their actions with the help of their own personal instance, which is present even when external controls are absent" (p.199). [23]

I often felt I could not live up to my value standards at the same time. In the documented conversation I probably felt that I could not fully be the loyal pal when at the same time it was salient that I was there to make progress with my work. "Shame is a moral feeling" (p.201), which made the transition to implicit feelings of guilt fluid. These feelings consisted mainly in the discrepancy between my idea of having a friendly, eye-level relationship with Musa and the as-is aspect, i.e., I was at the same time involving him in my research (which I would not usually do with friends). [24]

The social feelings of shame and guilt resulting from this ambiguous situation drove me to hide behind or cling to the "book," which gave me security. The book was the central factor in my "Methodological impression management" (GENGLER & EZZELL, 2018), i.e., part of "how to present yourself and your research project to participants and gatekeepers in the field" (HITZLER & EISEWICHT, 2020, p.42). The following much-noted passage from WHYTE's "Street Corner Society" is relevant here:

"As I began hanging about Cornerville, I found that I needed an explanation for myself and for my study. As long as I was with Doc [WHYTE's gatekeeper and key informant in the field] and vouched for by him, no one asked me who I was or what I was doing. When I circulated in other groups or even among the Nortons [street gang headed by Doc] without him, it was obvious that they were curious about me. I began with a rather elaborate explanation. I was studying the social history of Cornerville – but I had a new angle. Instead of working from the past up to the present, I was seeking to get a thorough knowledge of present conditions and then work from present to past. I was quite pleased with this explanation at the time, but nobody else seemed to care for it. I gave the explanation on only two occasions, and each time, when I had finished, there was an awkward silence. No one, myself included, knew what to say. While this explanation had at least the virtue of covering everything that I might eventually want to do in the district, it was apparently too involved to mean anything to Cornerville people. I soon found that people were developing their own explanation about me: I was writing a book about Cornerville. This might seem entirely too vague an explanation, and yet it sufficed. I found that my acceptance in the district depended on the personal relationships I developed far more than upon any explanations I might give. Whether it was a good thing to write a book about Cornerville depended entirely on people's opinions of me personally. If I was all right, then my project was all right; if I was no good, then no amount of explanation could convince them that the book was a good idea" (1993 [1943], pp.300). [25]

WHYTE's argument about personal relationships, on which I too could have relied, was, however, unable to completely remove my shame. Driven by this shame, I rather evaded Musa's original question about our relationship. I chose

an indirect way of answering it by referring to my relationship with Mervan. Intuitively, I felt led to actually justify my wayward research in terms of reciprocity by pointing out to Musa all that I did for him. As a result, I also returned the question of our relationship to him. Musa ultimately mitigated some of my inner tension by defining the term "pal" for us, thus providing a framing for our relationship, to my great relief. [26]

The "book" created confusion and contributed to a fundamental need for clarification as to the nature of our relationship. However, it was not I who took the initiative, but Musa, which amounted to a structural variation and irritation of the conventional gaze in ethnography: It made me uncomfortable as a researcher, precisely because this variation is not necessarily envisaged in the classical form of ethnographic fieldwork. A one-sided objectification scheme, which consists only of researchers seeing and recognizing the participants in the field, who are seen by them—like a work of art and its viewers—was turned upside down here by Musa. He returned my gaze and saw me as an ethnographer who suddenly felt observed in his actions (see also BREUER, 2011).<sup>13</sup> It was not I who asked, "Who are you for me?" Instead, Musa asked me this question, studied me, and not only saw me but rather threatened to see through me. I suppose that this is where the core of my shame and insecurity came from. [27]

#### **4. An Example of Giving and Receiving!?**

In this section, I would like to further theoretically frame the relationship dimensions elaborated earlier and make the following proposal for a preliminary shape of our relationship. Following MAUSS (1966 [1925]), I would like to discuss it as gift exchange—as an example of giving and receiving. Accordingly, Musa and I made a pact, which consisted of me doing my research with his help, while I helped him on the couch with his new life in Germany. I justify this below in terms of the obligation to reciprocate a gift, the mixing of person and thing in gift exchange, the creation of debt, and the temporality of a gift. [28]

The high intensity of our interpersonal relationship was found especially in the use value it possessed—in the sense that each of us could extract a great deal from it for our own personal gain. My gift to Musa was redeemed on the couch. Musa's gift to me was his help in writing my PhD "book." This exchange of gifts created a special bond between us. If one considers the relation between these forms of help, there is an obligation to reciprocate the gift of the other according to MAUSS. Musa's willingness to help me with my project can therefore also be understood as him wanting to give something back to me for helping him on the couch, and also as his encouragement for me to write a good book:

"Musa: You have to write, successful book. Successful book. I mean write good, good book. You understand what I mean?"

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<sup>13</sup> I am also thinking here of the formula "the other talks back"—a circumstance BREUER (2011) problematized in the context of a potentially conflictual retransfer of scientific results back into the field.

Ingmar: Yes, a good one. Of course, I want to write a good book. An interesting book.  
Musa: (laughs a little, speaks softly) That's alright" (interview excerpt, November 28, 2018). [29]

Musa trusted me with my book project, just as I surrendered to him on the couch. We saw and acknowledged each other's personal paths, both aimed at social advancement and status acquisition. For this, we took each other by the hand, so to speak, i.e., we also took possession of each other to some extent. In this regard, MAUSS spoke of "melange"—a mixture of person and gift; it exists at the point where "to give something is to give a part of oneself" (p.10). Since "the recipient is in a state of dependence upon the donor" (p.58), the result can be a temporary loss of oneself, as I have worked out in the above excerpt relating to the walk to the train station at night. The taking possession of the other person would then already be inscribed in the exchange of gifts. According to MAUSS, "in giving [...] a man gives himself, and he does so because he owes himself [...] to others" (p.45). This opens up a new perspective on the feelings of shame I described. According to MAUSS's view, it would be "the disproportionality, the excess of any gift over its reception, which opens up the possibility, the guilt, and the compulsion to give another in return" (DÄRMANN 2010, p.25). It is important to note that my research is still unfinished at the time these material excerpts are being presented here. Thus, the redemption or the materiality of the gift—the book—is still to occur in the future. DÄRMANN went on to write that it is "the temporal span and tension between gift and counter-gift [that] opens up the risk of non-repayment" (p.25). This may have further fueled my uncertainty. BOURDIEU made similar comments in this regard:

"The gift is expressed in the language of obligation. It is obligatory, it creates obligations, it obliges; it sets up a legitimate domination. Among other reasons, this is because it brings in the factor of time, by constituting the interval between gift and counter-gift [...] as a *collective expectation* of the counter-gift or gratitude" (2000 [1997], p.198). [30]

## 5. Conclusion

With this text, I have tried to trace how successful relationship-building took on a central role in my research field, i.e., participation processes among young refugees in Germany. In doing so, I made sure to assume that the relational approach turned out to be a central field specificity and consequently asserted itself against my a priori dictum of a milieu study. At the time of writing this article, the aforementioned book on my relations with Musa and Mervan is being written. Thus, in conclusion, the chronology of my research project is as follows:

- Summer 2016: I interviewed Mervan and Enis as a student assistant as part of a preliminary study for a participatory research project.
- Spring 2017: I interned at Mervan and Enis' residential child and youth care facility as part of the participatory research project.

- Spring 2018: I started an independent ethnographic milieu study with the aim of obtaining a PhD in the residential settlement where Mervan and Enis had moved. On site, I got to know Musa.
- Autumn 2018: I took a seat on Musa's couch alone for the first time.
- Summer 2019: I registered my project for doctoral studies at the University of Kassel (supervised by Prof. Dr. Ulrike KISSMANN).
- Autumn 2019: I finished the exposé of the milieu study after several cycles of revision.
- Spring 2020: I decided on the relationship approach and dropped the milieu study.
- Summer 2020: I received a doctoral scholarship from the Hans Böckler Foundation.
- Autumn 2020: I began writing the book about my relationship with Mervan and Musa (I aim to finish this by summer 2023).
- Autumn 2021: I submitted the original German version of this text to the [FQS debate](#). [31]

Finally, I would also like to explore a tentative generalization of the case I have considered. I have understood the relationship with Musa in a MAUSSian framework as an example of giving and receiving. As a cultural practice, this exchange of gifts is a mode of manufacturing a relationship. We gave our things "not only in our own name, out of self-interest," but also "on behalf of and as representatives of our own society" (DÄRMANN, 2010, p.22). My relationship with Musa can thus point to what happens elsewhere between such representatives: in volunteer and activist helper constellations with refugees (FLEISCHMANN & STEINHILPER, 2017; HUKÉ, 2021) as well as in the professional working relationships of pedagogical specialists (SCHMITT, 2020; WIENFORTH, 2019). Underlying both is the danger of paternalism (ZALEWSKI, 2017), which makes the reference to Musa's agency all the more important to me. The definition of our relationship was in large part provided by Musa. It was precisely the case that the ongoing negotiation of the relationship was essentially driven by him as a field participant and not by me as a researcher. As shown, instrumentality can be part of such a close relationship (and thus also a potential source of manifold conflicts and entanglements); it should be acknowledged rather than ignored. Within the framework of mutual functionalization, the open thematization of the relationship can then function as an important reassurance of it. [32]

The ideal of meeting at eye level continues to be worthy of reflection for me. It became clear to me that it was above all my very own (Western) desire for reciprocity that I carried into the relationship with Musa; this opened up diverse points of contact to experience shame on my part, always when I perceived that this ideal of mine threatened to topple. MRUCK and BREUER (2003) long ago drew attention to the difficulty of speaking about oneself in the social sciences. It took a lot for me to write publicly about those unpleasant aspects of my relationship, my own projections and shame. This also seems relevant to me against the background that—as NECKEL put it following SCHEFF (1988)—"the

presentation of shame [...] is subject to a cultural taboo, shame itself can therefore become a further source of shame" (NECKEL, 1991, p.204). [33]

At the same time, enduring discomfort and looking more closely exposed MAUSS's theoretical approach, which made these feelings more workable and understandable to me, and thus less unpleasant. As has been pointed out, by creating dependencies and appropriations the exchange of gifts can obstruct the ideal of unconditional eye level in many places. As a process of exchange that "at once binds [people] together and keeps them separate" (1966 [1925], p.71), it symbolizes negotiating and enduring asymmetries:

"The function of the exchange of gifts is to establish a relationship between societies, persons and individuals who are strangers to each other, and that is to open up an intermediate space. [...] The gift is the inter-subjective, inter-generative, inter-cultural and international practice of living together separately. Gift exchange does not endow seamless and intimate relationships. Rather, the practices and institutions of gifting set and maintain an 'actio in distans'; they create a force of attraction and repulsion" (DÄRMANN, 2010, p.24). [34]

Perhaps Musa and I were and are just that—close and alien to each other at the same time. With the gradual disclosure of my shame and the understanding of the relational dynamics that follow on from it, it is no longer threatening for me that our relationship in its intensity probably only became possible within the framework of my PhD project, and thus remains temporary. This resonates with a simple sentence from MAUSS (1966 [1925], p.37): "People fraternize but at the same time remain strangers." [35]

In conclusion, it remains to be stated that the exchange of gifts does not dissolve the tendency of interpersonal relationships to be incomplete. While I was able to use this idea to deconstruct the dynamics of functionalization, dependency, and shame, it fell short when it came to focusing more on the nonfunctional parts of our relationship. MAUSS explicitly designed his gift theory as a nonutilitarian practice to reveal forms of "corporate solidarity" (MOEBIUS, 2006, p.89). Nevertheless, it could not approach the realm of "reciprocal experience[s] of loving care" (HONNETH, 1994, p.153), which is based less on contract than on unconditionality: our mutual sympathy, the good wishes and sincere sharing of each other's lives—the side of two trusted "pals." Thus, for my "book" I am currently looking for further possibilities to triangulate theoretical perspectives. [36]



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## Citation

Zalewski, Ingmar (2023). Negotiating asymmetries: The (de)thematization of giving and receiving in ethnographic relationships in forced migration research [36 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 23(1), Art. 8, <http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/fqs-23.1.3832>.