An Exploration of Practical Reflexivity:
Navigating Categories in Research Encounters

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Abstract: In this article I explore the potential of practical reflexivity of handling categories applied by social researchers, drawing on my ongoing doctoral project in which I employ a qualitative ethnographic approach. By integrating various ways of perceiving reflexivity, including migration studies, research on intimate relationships, and feminist theory, I demonstrate ways to view research settings as encounters that enable dialogue and an atmosphere of listening. Two categories, *Afghan* and *marriage*, which emerged as significantly multifaceted in my doctoral project serve as examples for this exploration of practical reflexivity. I illustrate the impact of individuals' perception of being seen as Afghan in a broader societal and political context, and I show the opportunity to reflect on the category of marriage during interview settings using dialogue with interlocutors. By establishing practical ways to incorporate reflexivity, I contribute to the growing research field of intimate relationships in a migration context, where a critical stance towards categories is infrequently employed. This also contributes to the field of applied reflexivity in migration studies. I argue that an unreflexive use of categories may lead to the reproduction of discriminatory practices and Eurocentrism, and that scholars, especially when working with marginalized groups, must assume the responsibility of questioning categories often taken for granted.

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1. Introduction

"Afghans won't tell you private stories!" (Robert[1], January 2020)

I first met Robert in Austria in January 2020, when he was initially introduced to me as an Iranian student named Ruhullah who could potentially assist me in establishing connections with Afghans. I was curious to meet him, and we arranged for a time in a bar to speak over a drink. However, after he told me his name was Robert, and I seemingly could not hide my initial confusion, he quickly explained that his Persian name was constantly mispronounced, and he decided to give himself a more Western one. After probing me about what I knew about Afghanistan and Afghan people, Robert told me that he was from Afghanistan himself, a child of Afghan parents who grew up in Iran. Evaluating who he can tell what about his life seemed to be a relevant topic for Robert, especially when it came to questions on ethnicity and intimate stories. His statement above, in which he referred to being cautious in divulging private details and noting that interviewees might make up stories they think researchers want to hear, stayed with me throughout the research process. [1]

In the realm of qualitative social research, fieldwork exposes researchers to numerous encounters with research participants. They share their narratives, experiences, challenges, and aspirations, while scholars are tasked with critically analyzing these encounters and stories as well as their own impact on research settings and relationships. To make sense of the gathered information, researchers employ scientific tools, such as concepts and categories, to facilitate comprehension and contextualization. Categories help to make sense of the world and serve as a point of orientation in academic research, but also in everyday communication, politics, and the media. In social life, categories that are used all the time are rarely questioned, as they are tools for unconsciously navigating everyday life (ALEJANDRO, 2021, p.4). However, there is a difference between common-sense everyday categories and analytical ones. Common-sense categories tend to essentialize and naturalize, specifically when it comes to categorizing people into groups (BRUBAKER, 2002). Although social researchers use categories for grouping data based on shared features to make complex lived realities intelligible, it is the task of analysts of the social world to break with the "seemingly obvious" (p.166) and question applied categories. [2]

In migration studies, applied reflexivity towards categories is not prevalent, particularly in studies focused on intimate relationships. Even when pursued, this often leads to the unintentional reproduction of essentialized ideas, as observed by MORET, ANDRIKOPOULOS and DAHINDEN (2021). Here, I understand reflexivity as the act of "distancing one's research from well-established ideas while developing alternative ones" (DAHINDEN, FISCHER & MENET, 2020, p.2). I use the term *applied reflexivity* to refer to the practice of reflecting on and challenging one's own use of categories through the course of field research,

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1   In this article, pseudonyms are used for research participants. To protect them, information that is not necessary for the context of this article will not be shared. Informed consent was obtained prior to each meeting.

analysis, and writing. Although applied reflexivity is particularly crucial when working with vulnerable or marginalized groups to avoid perpetuating hegemonic power relations, explicit guidance on how to implement it in a practical research setting is lacking. In this paper, I address the deficiency of practical reflexivity, drawing on my ongoing qualitative ethnographic doctoral research, and consider a critical reflexive approach to the use of categories within the broader context of social science's responsibility to its stakeholders. The aim of my research is to develop a reflexive feminist approach (KIGUWA, 2019) to examining intimacies in a migration context by applying participant-centered qualitative methods. In this approach, meeting interlocutors is understood as an encounter (AHMED, 2000) instead of as a source of information. [3]

In what follows, I introduce the background and methodology of the research this article is based on (Section 2). Subsequently, I outline the two approaches that guide my research: Constructivist/reflexive grounded theory methodology (GTM) (BREUER & ROTH, 2003; BREUER, MUCKEL & DIERIS, 2019; CHARMAZ, 2001, 2011) and AHMED's analysis of strange encounters (2000) (Section 3). Next, I contextualize my research within reflexive migration studies and research concerned with intimate relationships, demonstrate three different approaches to practical reflexivity, and indicate my contribution to the field of practical reflexivity (Section 4). In the subsequent section, I show two ways of applying practical reflexivity to the examples of the categories *Afghan* and *marriage* (Section 5). In doing so, I illustrate the impact of individuals' perception of being seen as *Afghan* in a broader societal and political context, where the category is laden with negative perceptions that the interlocutors are aware of and try to navigate using their own understanding and experiences. Second, I demonstrate the opportunity to reflect on a different category, *marriage*, during interview settings with research participants using a dialogue with interlocutors to gain a deeper understanding of how the category is understood and interpreted. I provide empirical examples of how I negotiated categories in research settings and how research participants utilized and manipulated these categories for their own purposes. Finally, my exploration of practical reflexivity is discussed in the concluding section (Section 6). [4]

2. Background and Methodology

This article is based on my ongoing doctoral research project which examines the intersections of intimacies, migration, and gender through the life experiences of individuals in these contexts. To collect data, I employed a combination of ethnographic methods and narrative interviews (KÜSTERS, 2009) with digital techniques such as audio instant messaging (KAUFMANN & PEIL, 2020), including WhatsApp messages, and mobile-communicative methods like walking during a conversation (LEE & INGOLD, 2020). The flexibility of switching between formal research methods such as interviews and informal mobile methods allowed me to meet the needs of my research participants and adapt to COVID-19 restrictions during my research period which lasted from March 2018 to June

2021.[2] For instance, discussing traumatic flight experiences was easier while sitting by the river and watching flowing water than in a closed room. Employing a life story approach was particularly useful in understanding the interactions between political/societal circumstances and individual perceptions (KÖTTIG, MÜLLER-BOTSCH & SCHIEBEL, 2011, §10). [5]

My findings for this article rely on multiple encounters with nine research participants—men and women aged 18-45 years old, who self-identified as Afghans and lived in Austria at the time of my research. Of these interactions, one interview was conducted through a translator in Farsi, while all other conversations, interviews, and messages were held in German with only the participant and me present. I met all research participants through mutual acquaintances. This established some trust and familiarity. At the same time, I ensured that they were not connected with one another and lived in different areas of Austria to maintain their privacy. The focus was on building a relationship of trust with research participants which involved meeting them several times and staying in contact. For me, it also included having solid knowledge about Afghan history, the challenges of Afghans in various places, and learning Farsi—as the most common language spoken by Afghans—to a level where I could at least say a few words. Furthermore, assisting interlocutors with bureaucratic tasks and translations was an integral part of the reciprocal research relationship. [6]

As talking about private life stories, especially the topic of intimate relationships, requires a level of rapport with the researcher, I also shared something about myself at the beginning of the research relationship, i.e., that I was a 30+ German woman who had lived in Austria for almost 15 years and was in a committed relationship with a partner. As I will illustrate in the findings section below, conversations about various relationship models and my own experiences with them were brought up by research participants. However, it was crucial for me not to present any ideal form of relationship in Austria, which was occasionally sought by interlocutors, but instead, to provide a platform for the negotiation of diverse viewpoints on this topic. This aim was occasionally challenging for me, particularly when confronted with traditional patriarchal family structures and the expectations that male research participants often had for (Afghan) women. Nevertheless, by striking a balance between listening and responding to inquiries but not imposing my own opinions, I discovered that this approach was beneficial for negotiating mutual understandings during research encounters of, for instance, the concept of marriage. Keeping the research relationship in mind, I outline the approach that guided me in examining these understandings in the subsequent section. [7]

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2   This timeframe included research pauses due to social distancing rules and lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. Research Approach

In my research, I utilize the perspective of constructivist/reflexive GTM (BREUER & ROTH, 2003; BREUER et al., 2019; CHARMAZ, 2001, 2011) and AHMED's analysis of strange encounters (2000). The constructivist/reflexive GTM approach enables me to consider the situatedness of knowledge (production) and understand how research settings are shaped by larger conditions (CHARMAZ, 2011, p.362). Knowledge is not only constructed by the social world but by the researcher as well (BREUER & ROTH, 2003, §11), and this perspective acknowledges the co-construction of knowledge through interactions (§7; see also CHARMAZ, 2011, p.366) in which "[...] the knower and the known form a dialectic unit" (BREUER & ROTH, 2003, §1). In her work on applying GTM to social justice research, CHARMAZ has also highlighted the capacity of qualitative research to shed light on social inequities (2011, p.359) which is a crucial aspect of my research. The advantages of utilizing constructivist GTM include the rejection of objectivity, identification of researchers' generalizations, questioning of researchers' and participants' positionality, and an emphasis on reflexivity. Furthermore, it incorporates concepts such as power and privilege while remaining mindful of diversity and variation (p.360). [8]

The second approach I rely on is AHMED's exploration of "strange encounters" (2000, p.4). Her work offers valuable perspectives on the production of *otherness* through her emphasis on "becoming, hybridity, and inbetweenness" (p.13). AHMED criticized the postcolonial concept of the *post* and highlighted the importance of considering the shifting conditions of encounters in the reproduction of the *other*. She viewed encounters as social meetings between people who do not know each other well and emphasized the significance of surprise and unpredictability in these interactions. AHMED's critique of ethnography's role in reproducing strangers and contributing to exoticization, generalizations, and stereotypes underscored the challenges of conventional ethnography and the potential of feminist ethnographic approaches to mitigate some of these issues. Her theoretical framework helps me analyze the (re)production of *otherness* within research settings and through the narratives of my interlocutors. It enables a focus on the interaction between the researcher and research participants, their joint questioning of categories, and our responsibilities as researchers. [9]

In line with constructivist/reflexive GTM, AHMED asked how history or power relations may determine encounters in order to illustrate the situational and complex relationships that may be part of such research encounters. Both approaches further highlighted the responsibility of researchers not to contribute to the production of *otherness* or to create "a new 'community of strangers'" (p.6). Combining the concepts of reflexivity regarding research processes as inherent in constructivist/reflexive GTM (BREUER et al., 2019; CHARMAZ 2011) with AHMED's concept of "strange encounters" (2000) allows me to take a closer look at the constructed meanings of categories and their negotiation in social encounters (research settings). It further helps me to gain a better understanding

of inherent power structures, historical and personal experiences and the production of *otherness* through categories. [10]

In the following section, I provide a contextualization of my contribution within the broader field of migration and relationship research. This includes a discussion of general reflexivity and its application specifically to reflexive categories. By doing so, I aim to establish a foundation for my exploration of practical reflexivity as it relates to these categories. [11]

4. Framework and Context: Reflexivity and Reflexive Categories in Migration and Relationship Research

The purpose of this section is first, to outline existing reflexivity approaches that inform my work and situate my research within them. This contains migration studies as the overarching theme, and relationship research as a largely unconnected subfield. Second, in order to demonstrate practical reflexivity, I will illustrate three different ways of applying it to categories and their use for my exploration of these categories. [12]

4.1 An exploration of reflexive approaches in migration and relationship research

While the history of reflexivity in social science goes back to some of the earliest ethnographies, contemporary approaches founded in concerns around uneven power relations and embedded ideologies emerged from feminist theory and cultural studies as the "reflexive turn" beginning in the 1980s. Much work has been done to theoretically criticize and explore the meanings and power of social categories since the reflexive turn began (BRUBAKER, 2002; MALKKI, 1992). Among the most significant writings of this period were CLIFFORD and MARCUS' "Writing culture" debate (1986), SPIVAK's essay "Can the subaltern speak?" (1994) and ABU-LUGHOD's "Writing against culture" (1991). These works firmly asserted the necessity of questioning who was being researched and written about and by whom, the power relations implied by this arrangement, and the potential negative impacts of such research. In doing so, they made reflexivity an indispensable part of research that is concerned with *culture*. [13]

Feminist researchers have significantly contributed to this kind of critical thinking by questioning positionality, researcher-researched relationships, intersectionality, and the development of collaborative research methods. Furthermore, questions of power dynamics, postcoloniality, and the impacts that research might have on communities or individuals are a crucial part of feminist research approaches (HARAWAY, 1988; HARDING, 1987; HESSE-BIBER & YAISER, 2004). However, profound reflexivity was not found in dominant research discourses shaped by positivism, such as migration studies, until the 2000s (SCHINKEL, 2018). [14]

Since then, discussions on reflexivity have evolved repeatedly (CARLING, ERDAL & EZATTI, 2014; GANGA & SCOTT, 2006; GILLESPIE, HOWARTH &

CORNISH, 2012; NIESWAND & DROTBOHM, 2014; SHINOZAKI, 2021; WIMMER & GLICK SCHILLER, 2002) and are nowadays an integral part of migration studies. A call has been made to increase awareness of the broader implications and potential applications of our research (NIESWAND & DROTBOHM, 2014, p.5). Most recently, scholars concerned with reflexivity in qualitative migration studies have addressed topics such as perceiving research as a place of negotiation and flexible positionality (MORALLI, 2023; NOWICKA & RYAN, 2015; PALAGANAS, SANCHEZ, MOLINTAS & CARICATIVO, 2017), developing participatory research techniques to tackle the question of knowledge production as well as benefits that come out of the research (FIORITO, 2023), and engaging with the role of emotions at every stage of research (GENOVA & ZONTINI, 2023). Thus, a collaborative approach to interviews, informal meetings, and research interactions is gaining popularity as an effective and mutually beneficial method of information exchange. [15]

One of the enduring and persistent issues that has been debated for over 20 years in migration studies is the question of Eurocentricity, including the production of knowledge through the lens of Western nation states (DAHINDEN, CAMENISCH & STÜNZI, 2022). A critical area where hegemonic power dynamics and Eurocentrism are unintentionally reproduced is in the categories that researchers create, use, and encounter. These processes of reproducing hegemonic power relations are not limited to obvious migration categories such as refugee, migrant, or ethnicity, as I will demonstrate in this article. They also apply to categorizing types of relationships. [16]

Since the early 2000s, there has been a growing research field concerned with intimate relationships linked to questions of *culture*, mobility, and ethnic belonging, which I laid out in an earlier paper (RÖHM, 2020). Currently, researchers within a European/Western focus are open to various types of relationships/families and changing ideals of imagined and lived intimacies. A strong focus in this research area is on questions of individualization, choice, and communication (GIDDENS, 1993, p.10). However, in cases where these ideals do not seem relevant, such as in relationships that are not based on romantic love but on other forms of commitment, researchers and readers often assumed moral failure of either the relationship or its participants (BONJOUR & DE HART, 2013). Despite much anthropological research on various kinds of marriages, partnerships, and models of families around the world (DONNAN & MAGOWAN, 2010; HIRSCH & WARDLOW, 2006), sociologists researching intimate relationships seem to have difficulties in overcoming Eurocentric ideals and ways of thinking about relationships and applying reflexivity in this regard (GILLIES, 2003). This is especially the case when it comes to research on relationships not founded in European/Western ideals. [17]

Although there is a growing research field on queer relationships in a migration context (AKIN, 2017; BAYRAMOĞLU & LÜNENBORG, 2018), the reflexivity applied in these studies is rarely included in research on non-queer relationships. As MORET et. al have stated, although much of the newly developing research in the field of intimate relationships in migration contexts (e.g., cross-border

marriage, transnational marriages etc.) aimed to challenge processes of exclusion, *othering* and racialization, it often resulted in the opposite, thus constructing "a field of research that parallels political debates on the regulation of marriage migration" (2021, p.326). Furthermore, as scholars in the field of intimate relationships in a migration context know, relationship categories are directly linked to questions such as residence permits or family reunification, it is necessary to acknowledge that these relationship categories are also used to describe the *us* and the *other* in public and political discourses (STRASSER, KRALER, BONJOUR & BILGER, 2009). For example, this is the case when political and public discourses place Muslim migrants in hierarchies according to their desirability based on gender and relationship status with the single male at the bottom (YURDAKUL & KORTEWEG, 2021). In this context, single specifically means unmarried; non-marital intimate relationships seem to be out of sight in migration policy, as well as in research about intimate relationships in a migration context. As MORET et al. argued in their consideration of cross-border marriage: "[...] the issues that are scrutinized and the ways they are framed are inevitably affected by states' concerns and priorities. The consequence is we often inadvertently reinforce boundaries, particular forms of exclusion and hierarchies and contribute to the reification of state categories [...]" (2021, p.326). [18]

With the potential problematic impact of categories in mind, the topic of reflexivity ought to be inevitable in qualitative research. In the following section, I present three distinct approaches to practical reflexivity and demonstrate their pragmatic nature and usefulness for my own research. [19]

4.2 Examples of practical reflexivity and problematization of categories in qualitative social research

In this section, I discuss three approaches to practical reflexivity and/or the problematization of categories, connect them, and contrast them with my own contributions to the field. Unlike theoretical considerations of categories, the focus here will be on practical advice and guidelines or, in other words, practical reflexivity. [20]

GILLESPIE et al. have argued that categories are inherently on the move, "(1) perspectival, (2) historical, (3) disrupted by the movement of people, and (4) reconstitutive of the phenomena they seek to describe" (2012, p.392). They suggested ways to engage with each of these characteristics such as understanding the perspective from which a category is used, being aware of its historical evolution, focusing on people moving between categories, and considering the consequences of reproducing critical categories without empirical relevance (pp.392-396). Moreover, GILLESPIE et al. demonstrated the four identified problems with the category of *culture* and emphasized the paradox of ubiquitous scholarly critiques of categories as oversimplifications and homogenizations, while simultaneously observing frequent unreflective use of categories by social researchers in practice (p.399). [21]

Building on the work of GILLESPIE et al., DAHINDEN et al. further established ways of practically engaging with categorizations in the field of migration studies (2020, p.10). They specifically focused on two of the four identified characteristics of categories proposed by GILLESPIE et al. (2012), namely the perspectival and performative aspects. By employing a three-stage research approach (defining research participants, accessing research participants, and conducting interviews), they endeavored to treat fixed categories as empirical questions and highlight the complexity and multifaceted nature of the categories used (DAHINDEN et al., 2020, p.8). In the process of identifying individuals who did not belong to a sociological group (a specific category), the researchers have noted they encountered difficulties in locating such individuals initially. Nevertheless, they mentioned the approach ultimately led to the de-essentialization of interlocutors' ethnic belonging (p.10). During interviews, they highlighted the potential of negotiating categories and suggested the use of open research questions, mitigating the impact of pre-conceived connotations and notions into the interview setting (p.11). [22]

Finally, ALEJANDRO (2021) problematized the use of categories throughout the research process including in the presentation of results. She argued that it is crucial to consider linguistic reflexivity when examining language as a system of communication which extends beyond explicit words and conscious thought. This includes unconscious and implicit aspects such as connotations, which can be uncovered and analyzed through specific methodologies (p.2). She described problematization aligned "with different epistemological paradigms that either approach reflexivity as an emancipatory endeavour or a way to identify unconscious biases" (p.4). ALEJANDRO criticized existing practical frameworks for primarily focusing on "other people's use of language rather than our own use of language" and proposed a three-stage research method for the problematization of categories. These stages include recognizing critical junctures, identifying potential categorical problems, and reconstructing alternatives. ALEJANDRO's distinctive contribution is a practical guide illustrating how to proceed with research when identifying problematic categories which she also exemplified based on her research. This reflexive approach stands out in its clarification of how to employ and modify existing categories. [23]

The three approaches presented have the shared objective of critically examining use and implications of social categories in research. They all highlight the significance of reflexivity in research, recognizing the complexities and power dynamics embedded in the use of categories. While GILLESPIE et al. (2012) used a more theoretical approach, they stressed the need for practical reflexivity with different foci and emphasized the identification of problems to understand the fluidity and complexities of categories, while DAHINDEN et al. (2020) focused on migration studies, illustrating the challenge of categories based on empirical examples of their research. ALEJANDRO (2021), based on a practical research project, guided readers through thinking about categories' implications and practical solutions in a more general way. [24]

Although the agency of research participants has been mentioned, little attention has been paid to how collaborative reflexivity through interaction between researcher and research participant can be implemented in research settings. Building on the scholarship discussed above, I believe that viewing research settings such as interviews as encounters (NOWICKA & RYAN, 2015) can further extend them. Drawing on my own research, I propose adding the human elements of conducting interviews, which inevitably result in certain interview *mistakes*, such as asking biased questions. As researchers, it is crucial to view these mistakes as opportunities for self-reflexivity, questioning one's own assumptions, and engaging in a reflective dialogue with our research participants. Moreover, as researchers (have to) think in categories, it is crucial to question these and explore what they might mean to interlocutors. As ALEJANDRO (2021) in her article on the problematization of categories highlighted, there is a need for linguistic reflexivity, focusing on the use of language (categories) and its impact on knowledge production through qualitative research projects. In the following sections, I address this gap further in an interdisciplinary field, applying it in a transnational migration setting. In what follows, I will demonstrate how interactive, reflexive knowledge production can lead to a nuanced understanding of specific categories. [25]

5. Findings: Problematization of Categories and its Reflexivity in Practice

In researching migration and specifically the conditions of Afghan migrants in Austria, many questions arose when it came to identifying relevant categories. I problematize the categories *Afghan* and *marriage* building on ALEJANDRO's approach to linguistic reflexivity (2021) and subsequently demonstrate two kinds of practical reflexivity in the examples of my research, inspired by the three approaches discussed above. By reflecting on the category *Afghan*, the focus turns to the broader political and societal usage of the category and its impact on individuals' perception of being seen as Afghan. Meanwhile, using the category *marriage*, I demonstrate the potential in reflecting on a category during interview settings together with research participants. [26]

5.1 Problematizing the category *Afghan*

> "I'm from Afghanistan, but I was actually born in Iran and grew up there. I've never seen Afghanistan. But because my father and mother are from Afghanistan, I'm supposed to say I'm from Afghanistan" (Ela, June 2020).

The notion of being from Afghanistan, identifying as Afghan, or having Afghan origins was a profoundly intricate matter, deeply emotional, and significant for all my research participants. Despite the multifaceted nature of this issue, there is an observable, uncritical use of the term Afghan in public, societal, and scholarly discourse. In this section, I will first problematize the categorization of Afghans in general and specifically within an Austrian context. Secondly, I will illustrate the consequences of essentialized categories on individuals' sense of identity and how they are perceived, while also exploring alternative approaches that scholars

may adopt. In this example, practical reflexivity refers first to a problematization, meaning a profound contextualization, of the category *Afghan* in scholarly, political and societal usage, and second, to an exploration of the meaning of the category shared by research participants. [27]

In Austria, Afghan refugees constitute one of the largest refugee groups, with approximately 47,000 individuals with Afghan citizenship registered in the country (STATISTIK AUSTRIA, 2023). Conducting research with Afghans and raising awareness of their migration to European countries holds major relevance for several reasons. Decades of conflict have continually pushed generations of Afghans to be mobile, leaving their home countries to seek safety (CRAWLEY & KAYTAZ, 2022). Those who left Afghanistan had to find ways to live in changing or precarious living situations in unfamiliar societies and faced numerous challenges. Afghans have faced compelling reasons to leave their homeland, including enduring war, persistent security challenges, and limited reconstruction success post-international intervention, exacerbated by the recent return of the Taliban. In addition, living conditions in neighboring countries, such as Iran and Pakistan, have also become increasingly hostile (p.7; see also DONINI, MONSUTTI & SCALETTARIS, 2016, p.4). However, European politics and media often question the legitimacy of their reasons for seeking asylum (SKODO, 2017) and draw attention to Afghan *otherness* in comparison to European *culture*. [28]

What complicates the problem of a generalized portrayal of *the* Afghans is the distinct diversity of Afghanistan's population (CRAWLEY & KAYTAZ, 2022; DONINI et al., 2016; MONSUTTI, 2021). Afghanistan is a multiethnic country with diverse people and regions. Those who identify themselves as Afghans are not necessarily born in Afghanistan, nor even are their parents. Neither do they all speak the same language, have the same religion, live or have lived in the same regions of the world, or are treated the same way in or outside of Afghanistan. As MONSUTTI has stated, "a factor more unifying than their geographical or tribal origin is the long experience they [Afghan migrants] all have of mobility" (2021, p.98). The individuals encountered in European countries also exhibit this diversity; however, media reports in Austria and other European countries contributed to a highly generalized public perception of *the* Afghans.[3] The portrayal of refugees as unwanted or second-class individuals tends to create a stereotypical image of them (CRAWLEY & KAYTAZ, 2022, p.5; DE CONINCK, 2023). Additionally, rising populist narratives and politics in Europe fuel anti-migration discourses in society (QUIE & HAKIMI, 2020, p.7). Moreover, rising xenophobia, racism, and especially Islamophobia (SEZGIN, 2019) and anti-refugee hate (SCHÄFER & SCHADAUER, 2019) are observable throughout Europe, including Austria. On the one hand, refugee stereotypes and the politically charged anti-immigrant environment create the pressure to adjust into mainstream society as quick as possible. On the other hand, there are further relevant kinds of belonging, e.g., to a specific ethnic group or nationality, and there may even be pressure from one's own ethnic group to not integrate into

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3   https://www.vienna.at/afghanen-in-oesterreich-belastet-schlechter-ruf/7178313 [Accessed June 7, 2023].

European society too much (KERCKEM, PUTTE & STEVENS, 2014). Here, a dilemma of negotiation emerges (FISCHER, 2017). [29]

People from Afghanistan in Austria are often imagined as monolithic, and the lack of familiarity many Austrians have with Afghans allows far-right and anti-immigrant groups to project powerful images onto them, such as the idea that they are a threat to security, or to Austrian women. Here, arguments pointing at culturally different understandings of intimate relationships are used in public discourse to legitimate societal exclusion. The importance of reflexivity is especially pronounced when working with marginalized and underrepresented groups (ALDRIDGE, 2014). Moreover, in my research, I especially consider the observable emphasis on cultural differences in media, politics, and academic research between the West and the *oriental* other (KRÖHNERT-OTHMAN, 2014). This problematic representation has a significant impact on individual perceptions, negotiations, and self-presentations regarding the category *Afghan*, which I explore in the following section, illustrating its importance in scholarly reflexivity. This includes how research participants interacted with the category *Afghan* in various research contexts, such as interviews, informal conversations, and WhatsApp messages. [30]

5.2 Reflecting on the category *Afghan* in research practice

When beginning life story interviews, the initial prompt I opened with was always something along the lines of "tell me about your life from the beginning until today." This quickly led to narratives about being asked where they were from and about the experiences interviewees had when confronted with this question. Based on these conversations as well as a subsequent audio message inquiry to participants about their experiences regarding the question "Where are you from?," I was able to develop a more thorough understanding of how this question elicited similar reactions. Usually, at the beginning of ethnographic research, researchers do not tell research participants the extent of knowledge they have already acquired. However, in my research, I found it beneficial to adopt a different approach by sharing my existing knowledge about Afghan *culture*, the country, and its people. At some point, most of my interlocutors asked about my background knowledge, which helped open the conversation because "I already had some insights," for example, about the multiethnic character of Afghan society. This is particularly relevant because—as one research participant pointed out, how they answered the question "Where are you from?" is "always dependent on the person who asks it" (Mielad, December 2020), due to experiences with negative and discriminatory attitudes. It is crucial to acknowledge that, despite being a researcher, I am not neutral to interlocutors—I bring my background, appearance, personality and shared information about me into the research setting. In this way, research settings unfold as encounters which "[...] are not simply in the present: each encounter reopens past encounters" (AHMED, 2000, p.8). [31]

For my interlocutors, positioning themselves as Afghan in a discourse on Afghanistan and Afghan people contained many different, sometimes

contradictory factors such as the justification for asylum, the negation of negative images and generalizations, and also national pride and commitment to their country of birth. In other words, they were also responding to ongoing discourses they were aware of in Austria, and not simply my questions. All of my interlocutors asserted at some point that they were not part of the "Afghan community," did not want to be associated with being Afghan or they avoided mentioning to others their Afghan history at all. This demarcation stands in a seemingly contradictory relationship with a personal pride in being Afghan and having mostly strong bonds with Afghan family members and traditions. The ways that participants navigated and negotiated these categories is central to what AHMED described as "becoming, hybridity, and inbetweenness" (p.13). [32]

Samir, for example, on the one hand repeatedly emphasized that he has had nearly no contact with Afghans in Austria, but on the other hand told me a lot about events and social gatherings he attended with Afghans exclusively. The following example shows the negotiation of the category *Afghan* based on the stories of another research participant in my project. Ayla, whom I met with on several occasions, continually mentioned her concerns about a one-sided picture of Afghanistan.

> "You know, everyone thinks Afghan culture is very bad. And is like the Taliban, or earlier, like the Mujahedin. These dogmatic groups, Islamic groups, or radical Islam" (Ayla, December 2020). [33]

However, she pointed out her positive memories too.

> "Many of my friends here will say, 'Afghanistan is a bad country. The people there are all like this', blah blah blah. I could not say that. I had many friends there, family. I have many good memories too. We have many bad things there, but we do good things together" (Ayla, March 2020). [34]

Although she always stressed the consequences of war, the lack of women's rights, or educational difficulties in our conversations, it appeared to be very relevant for her to demonstrate Afghanistan's cultural diversity and positive sides. As she discussed life in Afghanistan, she often showed me pictures of Afghan people and landscapes or sent me videos on Facebook, as if to reiterate the points she had made during our encounters. In addition, in the conversation from which the above excerpt was taken, she pointed to pictures on her phone as we spoke. It becomes clear how she navigated between her own struggle in identifying as Afghan and the external ascriptions. Asking research participants about their experiences with the question of "Where are you from?" illustrated various strategies, from not answering to explaining or confronting people with this question's impact. However, what appears to be a shared reaction is the concern of being generalized, associated with a negative image about Afghans, and consequently being perceived as a bad person as a result.

> "That Afghans are the ones who are always there for bad things. That they're always causing problems and raping people and stealing things. I think they have these

ideas about Afghans. And also, very, very often they have the idea that we don't know anything. They simply think that there's nothing there in Afghanistan or Iran" (Arman, June 2021). [35]

For most of my interlocutors, the question of where they come from is an ongoing story of explanations, justifications, and experiences of discrimination. However, to be associated with backwardness, a low level of education and generally negative social characteristics is not only limited to the European context. As many Afghans share a long story of forced mobility and being perceived as refugees, they are often exposed to discrimination throughout their lives. Referring to his childhood, Arman described why he would never identify as Iranian, although he was born and raised in Iran.

"Because Afghans have never been accepted in Iran. There have been generations of them for years, but they are always called Afghans. Not in the sense that you come from Afghanistan. In a different way. It's meant in a racist way" (Arman, December 2020). [36]

Arman used to be called Afghan in everyday life in Iran not only referring to his or his parents' descent, but as a category that is used to justify discriminatory practices, such as restricted access to education, housing, or accessing specific public spheres (MOINIPOUR, 2017, pp.825-826). My approach involved giving research participants the space to introduce the category *Afghan* into the discussion when it was relevant to them and ensuring that their interpretations of this category were heard. Additionally, I spontaneously incorporated different methods during meetings to explore the topic of being perceived or self-identified as Afghan, such as the use of phone pictures. The various challenges that research participants mentioned in relation to being Afghan highlights the need for scholars to establish a more comprehensive understanding of this category. In my research, it became evident that the category *Afghan* is not only used by strict discourses on *integration* matters or media images but also in social interaction to construct *otherness*. The reflexive use of *Afghan* as a category regarding the unit of analysis or data interpretation is highly relevant to avoid contributing to exclusionary practices. [37]

To this end, I suggest using the term *people from Afghanistan* instead of *Afghan*, as this would allow for a broader and more inclusive perspective. It is important to note that the term *people from* does not automatically confer citizenship, but it does provide a way to encompass the diversity of individuals within this group. In my research, I have shown that public perceptions of a particular category can significantly influence individual negotiations regarding their own identity and self-representation. Therefore, it is crucial to create a space for multifaceted, performative understandings of ethnic categories and to recognize marginalized groups as knowledgeable agents who can contribute to the co-production of knowledge. [38]

5.3 Problematizing the category *marriage*

In the following section, I illustrate another way of practical reflexivity toward categories by demonstrating the negotiation of relationship types. Using the example of the category *marriage*, I will show how this approach contributes to countering Eurocentric categories and raising awareness of their unreflexive use in migration and relationship research. To begin, I will problematize the category *marriage* in a broader context, following ALEJANDRO's methodological suggestion by asking: "Could the categories I routinely use to conduct my research represent a problem that I was not aware of and that I should therefore formulate as such in order to address it?" (2021, p.5) Subsequently in the next sub-section I demonstrate practical reflexivity by the collaborative negotiation of intimate relationship categories between an interlocutor and me. [39]

The category *marriage* is interesting to explore from two distinct perspectives. First, in academic research on intimate relationships, scholars typically concentrate on a specific type of relationship such as non-marital relationships, marriages, queer/heterosexual relationships, open relationships, sexual relationships, and friendships, to name a few. Marriage is likely the most extensively studied relationship type in social sciences, particularly in relation to migration. Research on topics such as marriage migration, migrant families, and transnational marriages is a rapidly growing field, especially considering the close link between state regulations on family reunification in European countries and marriage (BECK-GERNSHEIM, 2007; HOOGHIEMSTRA, 2001; MORET et al., 2021). Researchers studying in this area, among others, have illustrated the culturalization of difference with regard to the areas of marriage and family in order to justify anti-migration policies. A problem arises, however, when researchers remain unreflexive about these topics, as they may unintentionally reinforce exclusionary practices and state categories (MORET et al., 2021, p.326; STRASSER et al., 2009). [40]

Categories and labels that researchers use to classify and compartmentalize findings may limit their understanding of the diversity of intimate relationships and their societal context. It is important to recognize that ideas and relationships evolve and change over time and throughout life. Therefore, in my research I aim to be as inclusive as possible in terms of the types of relationships I examine, while primarily focusing on intimate relationships narrated by interlocutors through their life stories. Marriage emerged less as a specific type of relationship that I had selected for examination but rather as an important framework and starting point for negotiating and understanding different types of relationships. In particular, I highlight the significance of using an open and flexible definition of intimate relationships, including but not limited to marriage, especially when conducting research in intercultural contexts. [41]

Marriage is considered a social institution, particularly in relation to the use of sexual *othering* to further political goals, which is not a novel concept as colonizing nations have long employed it (STOLER, 1989). From a Eurocentric perspective, the contemporary ideal of marriage encompasses specific elements,

such as romantic love, free choice, and individual fulfillment (GIDDENS, 1993; GUTH, 2009; MORGAN, 2011). Compared to relationships or marriages that lack these characteristics, these elements can be seen as indicators of living a morally *right* intimate relationship (BONJOUR & DE HART, 2013; STRASSER et al., 2009). Categories established by state authorities such as marriage of convenience or arranged marriage, are in this regard at odds with the state's own ideal of a good and acceptable marriage (MORET et al., 2021, p.332). Although family configurations change and multiple types of family and relationship structures are recognized in Western European nation-states (MORGAN, 2011), legislation pressures immigrants to conform to the most traditional type of family, reducing it to a biological family, and not acknowledging cohabitation and other types of partnerships (MOROKVASIC-MÜLLER, 2014, p.171). Thus, questions on gender equality and openness to various types of relationships, including non-heterosexual ones, can serve as a useful tool for political agendas to depict Muslim migrants as backward and uncivilized (BONJOUR & DE HART, 2013). [42]

The traditional type of marriage only encompasses heterosexual marital relationships, as homosexual marital relationships are not legal in Afghanistan or in the surrounding countries (KELLER, 2022). Although researchers in an Afghan context have shown changes and transformations in marriage practices (SMITH, 2009), family formations (ABBASI-SHAVAZI, SADEGHI, MAHMOUDIAN & JAMSHIDIHA, 2012), and shifting gender roles (HOODFAR, 2004) amid migration and mobility, marriage remains the only means of establishing an official and socially recognized relationship. Therefore, it is misleading to equate the only possible type of relationship with the only desirable one. [43]

5.4 Reflecting on the category *marriage* in research practice

Below I will demonstrate practical reflexivity in showing how the category *marriage* evolved during research settings and how it helps to contribute to diverse categories instead of reinforcing hierarchical dichotomies of *us* and *them*. Although I focused on intimate relationships from the beginning, I decided to follow an ethnographic life story approach to be as open-minded as possible and have the basis to contextualize relationship stories adequately. By encouraging life stories, I aimed to give research participants the opportunity to introduce the topic of relationships whenever it was important to them and present it in a framework that was not biased from the researcher's perspective. In the following section, empirical examples are used to illustrate my approach. [44]

I met Samir for the first time on an extremely hot summer day in 2020 after being introduced virtually by a mutual friend. He had arrived in Austria a few years prior, coming from a very rural and strict Pashtun area located in the borderlands of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Now in his thirties, he resided in Austria with his wife and children, after initially arriving alone. Upon sitting on a bench in a public square, Samir immediately started talking before I was able to ask any questions. Since this first meeting was intended to get to know each other, engage in small talk, tell him more about my research, and build trust, I was surprised by his initial openness. However, ethnographic research is exactly about these unexpected

moments. Eventually, I obtained his consent to begin recording our conversation, so that I could fully capture his detailed stories and focus on listening. Samir was telling me about the way he and his wife were led to marriage by their parents without getting to know each other before. [45]

Still feeling a bit overwhelmed by the unexpectedly open interview and the burning sun, I did not think much about the question I responded with: "Did falling in love play a role for you and your wife?" In retrospect, I would have asked about this topic in a different way, thought about how best to frame it, or whether we had a shared meaning of "love." However, interview mistakes happen and, in this case, my question led to a discussion about the meaning of "love" in a marital relationship. Responding to my question, he asked me back "Do you mean this *romance* and so on?," clearly indicating that he was not sure of what I aimed at with my question. As soon as I uttered the question, I realized the need to reflect on my own Eurocentric assumptions and the diverse understandings of love and its role in relationships. In an attempt to clarify my meaning, I replied, "Yeah, the way people talk about it with fluttering heart and stuff," laughing a bit clumsily. He responded by saying,

> "I don't know exactly love, like that, there are people, for example, who killed themselves for love. There are many stories. We don't have anything like that. For instance, in India, there are many people who love each other, and when they can't be together, they kill themselves. But I think with us, it's not love. It's a normal life that we have. Not this love. So much romance, let's go like this or like this (imitates touching hands). If we go, I go there, and she goes there (indicates a distance and laughs). We do have sex. But not much romance. Because it is very exhausting for her, the kids, and for me too [...]" (Samir, July 2020). [46]

Initially, Samir distanced himself from "love like that," which suggests that there was a form of love in his relationship. He acknowledged that there were other ways of love in couple relationships, as depicted e.g., in Bollywood movies, but he regarded them as extraordinary, dramatic, and work intensive in everyday life. Obviously, the way romantic love is illustrated in Bollywood movies—emotionally charged, breaking with moral and normative frameworks—shaped Samir's perceptions and valuation of romantic love as an aspect of a relationship or marriage that he does not have the capacity and energy for. He therefore categorized his own life and marriage as "a normal life" in contrast to the extraordinary marriage that includes romantic love. He demonstrated this contrast between the normal and complicated by using physical gestures to depict their separation, indicating a lack of constant togetherness or romantic gestures. For him, a normal marriage was not necessarily connected to romantic love and expectations that come with it. Overall, Samir's interpretation of love in his marriage emphasized a practical and less intense approach where a form of love, despite romantic love, seemed to be a part of their everyday life but is not as all-consuming or characterized by constant romantic gestures. With growing confidence that Samir would be more forthcoming about this topic if the question did not pertain to his own relationship, I posed the question, "What do you think about people marrying for love?" Samir responded:

> "That is very, very good. That would be very good for me. Back then. I can't say what it would be like now. Maybe we would have had many expectations of each other that we don't have now. At that time, I wished for this. The way it is now for me and for my wife, we are not important to us; the children are important. We do everything for the children. Whether she likes me, or I like her, none of that matters, but we raise the children together. We have never asked or thought about what we are or what we think. That is not as important as the children. When you talk about this, you get into a completely different subject, and you can't focus on the children" (Samir, July 2020). [47]

In this example, marriage is viewed as a suitable framework for raising children and fulfilling the tasks of the family project. Love or romance, which Samir equated with falling in love, would be a potential hindrance to a successful marriage. Although he retrospectively thought it could have been good to marry for love, he also doubted that it would have led to the same outcome in terms of the family. Practically, falling in love and marriage are two different parts of Samir's life. As he told me later, falling in love was something Samir experienced outside of his marriage when he was already in Austria while his family was still in Afghanistan. The relationship with an Austrian woman helped him to learn German and feel at home. However, in this case "being programmed"—as he stated it—in a patriarchal Afghan way, he struggled to manage his jealousy which led to the end of this relationship. [48]

In this conversation, the discussion of relationship types took an unexpected turn when Samir revealed that he had the impression that most people in Austria live in open relationships—that is, in his view, openly having more than one (sexual) partner. This topic arose when he asked me about my experiences with jealousy and if it bothered me if I had multiple sexual partners while my partner did the same. My first inner reaction was confusion when he told me half-jokingly that women should have more than one man but, "Well, only in Afghanistan they are not allowed." Only later, during a walk together, I understood where this assumption came from. He relayed two sexual/romantic experiences with Austrian women, both within an open, liberal, and sexually diverse social sphere. At least one of these women had a relationship with another man. Samir enjoyed the encounters with these women in Austria with a lot of curiosity. However, it resulted in a generalized picture of Austrian women which he strongly contrasted with women in Afghanistan who would face hard punishments (up to the death penalty) if they had been involved in a sexual relationship with a person other than their husbands. His comparison of two extreme forms of sexual restriction/openness—the only relationship types he had experienced until then—made him return to what he had known all his life, and confused him at the same time. In our conversation, we both got to know new perspectives and questioned our own. It is crucial to reflect on the experiences and the information we gather as individuals as this becomes the benchmark we compare ourselves to and perceive as the norm, whether it is an open relationship, romantic love as the foundation for marriage, or marriage as the framework for a family. [49]

To examine the meaning of being in a relationship in Austria, Samir's perspective on marriage and the common assumptions we both held about relationships were decisive in furthering my own understanding of how Samir was using the category *marriage*. New perceptions challenged existing assumptions. By using research encounters to negotiate these normative assumptions, mutually exchange experiences and exploration of diverse understandings, it is possible to gain a reflexive understanding of relationship categories. With my research, I demonstrate that the unique aspect of the encounters with Samir was ultimately negotiating together—asking each other questions, questioning assumptions in conversation, being surprised, and still taking an honest interest in the other person's assessment. By taking a step towards the other person, sharing information, and asking for opinions, which in turn are put up for debate, an open dialogue and a back and forth can be established. With this research approach, social researchers might be able to take their responsibility seriously and contribute to a dialogue instead of strengthening cultural hierarchies of *us* and the *other*—especially when it comes to "understandings of sexuality [that] can be uncritically Eurocentric, where the point of departure is a modern/colonial understanding of the 'individual' self" (HARCOURT & ICAZA, 2014, p.133). [50]

6. Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that social researchers must assume responsibility for knowledge production and question categories instead of reproducing seemingly obvious shared meanings. As I illustrated, reproducing without questioning categories can lead to unwanted reinforcement of discriminatory practices towards migrants in a European context and contribute to the culturalization of differences (MORET et. al., 2021). I brought together approaches from migration studies, research on intimate relationships, and feminist theory, and demonstrated an approach that views research settings as encounters (AHMED, 2000) which enable dialogue and an atmosphere of mutual listening. By aiming to challenge the hierarchal power structure of a formal interview process, where the interviewer has complete control over the direction of the conversation and does not allow any deviations or counterquestions from the pre-established procedure, a conversation on equal footing can be established, enabling participants to engage in a reciprocal exchange of ideas. The potential for this exchange can open new viewpoints on the research subject and facilitate reciprocal comprehension. It can also offer an opportunity for research participants to voice their inquiries, thereby limiting misinterpretations. With my approach of practical reflexivity, I therefore contribute to the emerging field of collaborative research approaches as outlined in the framework section. [51]

Building on existing work on reflexivity towards categories in social science, I expanded on ALEJANDRO's (2021) approach to linguistic reflexivity by applying it in a transnational migration setting, demonstrating how it brings to the forefront the relevance of reflexivity when working in migration studies. Questioning how categories are understood, negotiated, transformed, and translated into the communities I worked with not only opens up new ways of understanding these categories, but also the communities with which the research is concerned.

Drawing on my research on intimate relationships in a migration context, I demonstrate the societal and scholarly impact of using categories of ethnicity and intimacy unreflexively and illustrated two different practices of reflexivity towards categories. In doing so, I contribute on the one hand to the discussion of reflexivity in migration studies, specifically regarding knowledge production and the responsibility researchers hold. On the other hand, I show how flexible research methods, meeting the needs of research participants, and an open understanding of relationship categories, especially in migration contexts, each serve as a basis for the exploration of diverse meanings and an understanding of unquestioned Eurocentric relationship types. [52]

In times of rising anti-migration discourses and xenophobia across Europe and globally in Western/European countries, I also contribute to a needed discourse in research methods to produce knowledge that counters the strengthening of cultural difference, especially in migration studies settings. To perceive information gathered in formalized interview settings as objective and neutral reinforces assumed meanings instead of letting research participants tell their own stories. Informed by AHMED's understanding of "strange encounters" (2000) and a constructivist/reflexive GTM approach (CHARMAZ, 2011; BREUER et al., 2019), I have shown that reflexive approaches are best utilized when explored and negotiated together with research participants. [53]

Acknowledgments

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