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Reflexive Reciprocity Under an Ethics of Care: Reflections from the Field For Refugee Studies

Abstract

By bringing reflexivity and reciprocity into conceptual dialogue in a discussion about the ethical framework of care in research, this article discusses how ‘reflexive reciprocity’ can be a research tool in migration studies. Taking reciprocity— the dynamics of giving and receiving— as an aspect contextually bound to the refugee experience, I propose that a relationship of giving and receiving helps undermine the inevitable power asymmetries in knowledge production. Reciprocity becomes all the more essential when researching refugee communities where narratives are prompted in a way that mirrors how refugees are elicited to give information within mechanisms of refugee governance, where they narrate their neediness, perform their vulnerability and justify their deservingness in return for legal and humanitarian protection in traumatic processes that can be a distortion of the norms of reciprocity. This article invites researchers to address reciprocity in research, premised on the idea that an ethical framework of care should go beyond paying lip service to protect vulnerable and marginalised participants. Reflecting on my case study research with Syrian refugee women in Turkey, Ankara, I argue that reflexive reciprocity is both a tool for more rigorous data collection in a qualitative inquiry and a practical application of an ethical framework of care. In exploring instances where I could link reflexivity to action-oriented reciprocity through ‘everyday acts of caring’, I demonstrate that reflexive reciprocity can somewhat balance out the extractive nature of research and thereby contribute to the ongoing discussion about the ‘reflexive turn’ in migration studies.

Keywords: reflexivity, refugee women, ethics of care, reciprocity, relational ethics

1. Introduction

The foundational concern of reflexivity, which seeks to address the power hierarchies in the production of knowledge, becomes markedly more critical when we consider the migration field generally and refugee studies specifically. The nature of refugee studies with its policy-oriented origins (Castles 2004) that takes for granted ethnic and nation-state categories (Wimmer and Schiller 2003; Amelina and Faist 2014) to ‘migrantise’ refugees (Bakewell 2010; Dahinden, 2016) have had to contend with calls from critical migration scholars to gear research towards redistribution of power and mitigation of inequalities between the researcher and the participant while addressing the potential of scholarship to extenuate the harm caused to vulnerable communities.

While the reflexive turn (Amelina 2021) in migration studies has produced a reformulation of several taken-for-granted notions on migrants and an awareness of how researchers are embedded in the political economy of knowledge (refer to papers by Singleton, Dodevska and Bartels et al. in this special issue), there is need to discuss how we can move beyond this awareness and activate our potential to be ethically present for the participants of our research agenda. This entails an understanding that the research we produce serves policies with hidden agendas (Castles 2004) and also an affirmation of the critical axiology that is claimed by most of the research in refugee studies with a deliberate stance of ethical care as has been long posited by feminist researchers. For refugee studies, this becomes crucial as the principal participants of our research are over-researched subjects (Sukarich and Tannock 2013) who are already under processes of surveillance and

confrontations (Erel 2007) from ‘no-academic’ actors creating a fragile environment of mistrust and fatigue that can negatively shape scholarly data (Parkinson 2022) and produce ethical dilemmas that researchers are ill-equipped to traverse.

The purpose of this article is twofold. First, I aim to bring reflexivity and reciprocity into conceptual dialogue under an overarching discussion about incorporating an ethical framework of care in researching refugee communities. An ethical framework that privileges care and seeks to establish it through reflexivity will position researchers to approach the participants more humanely. It de-emphasises the imposed categories of vulnerabilities that create hierarchies of deservingness and seeks to purposefully extend care as everyday social acts of kindness and thoughtfulness. While acknowledging Gilligan’s (1993) differentiation of feminist and feminine ethics of care, I seek to explore care as a political action in research contexts, which is perhaps more in line with Tronto’s (2020) four dimensions of care: caring about (commitment to the good of others); caring for (action to promote the good of others); caregiving (specific acts to promote the good of particular people); and care-receiving (engaging in reciprocal relationships of care with familiar others).

Drawing on this, I conceive of an ethical framework of care that pays attention to situational specificity and relational engagements and hold that ethical caring should prioritise the ways which would benefit the individual or group who are in the specific research context of refugeehood and relate to them with compassion (Wiles, 2012). As well articulated by Clark Kazak (2023:1156), researchers approaching vulnerable communities such as refugees and asylum seekers must attend to the unequal power relationships “embedded in systemic histories and structures of oppression,” shaping research encounters and requiring a specific set of situational awareness and ethics. Additionally, inevitable relational practices emerge because researchers necessarily go beyond simply gathering, collecting and representing data to account for our social reality. In the process, we are also “intervening in and interacting with data, casting our lots with some ways of life and not others and putting our subjectivity on the line”(Doucet 2018: 380). Research practices of listening to what is important to participants, ‘leaving some stones unturned’ and ‘not prying’ (Malkki 1995: 51) and deploying dialogical relationships as framed by ‘friendship as method’ approaches (Ellis 2007; Owton and Allen-Collinson 2014) can all make up the corpus of relational research practices. Relational ethics recognises the social interdependency that shapes research and seeks to take epistemic responsibility for the consequences of such knowledge production in the form of an ethical framework of care. Different scholars have touched upon various themes that crop up when they consider relational ethics in refugee contexts: issues of balancing research objectives with instances of refugee vulnerability and agency (Bilotta 2021), issues of maintaining the autonomy of refugees, especially concerning the complications stemming from a static understanding of consent (Hugman et al. 2011) issues of representation of refugees that seek to move beyond harm minimisation towards an obligation of mutual benefit (Chowdhury 2023; Mackenzie et al. 2007) and concerns about researcher self-care that encompasses duties of care extended to interpreters, translators and research assistants (Clark-Kazak 2023). I see care as necessary for and predicated on interdependencies and relationality both at an interpersonal and societal level. As such, I emulate the calls from scholars such as Clark-Kazak (2023:1153), writing explicitly for the forced migration context, who proposes that research emphasises relationality, proactiveness and affect.

The second aim of the article is to think through how relationality, proactiveness and affect prompted me to pursue a different set of reciprocal actions than those exemplified by Clark-Kazak (2023) and to

retrospectively consider the potential and challenges of reciprocity in the field by presenting two instances of reciprocity that occurred during my doctoral research and how reflexivity can mitigate pitfalls. Here, I am also seeking to demonstrate that enacting reciprocity with the uncomfortable awareness of the extractive nature of research does not intervene in or contradict the process of knowledge production. Taking seriously Amelina's (2021) warning that research practices also contribute to *migranticising* configurations, I aim to discuss how we can radically reimagine research so that the process centres the people we study. Reflecting on my fieldwork, I seek to challenge established norms which privilege detachment in research and suggest that we, as researchers, step away from mimicking the detachment of policymakers to maintain the status quo between the researcher and the participants.

The structure of this article unfolds in five parts. The following section offers a literature review on reflexivity and reciprocity and how it can be understood under an ethical framework of care or ethics of care. The third section provides an overview of my research, paying attention to the precarity of refugeehood as experienced by the participants of my study and establishing how reciprocity emerges as crucial to them. The fourth section presents two vignettes of reciprocal instances, followed by a conclusion that echoes the call in this special issue to scholars in migration research to engage in epistemic justice when research is embedded in and structured by societal power relations.

2. The missing link in reflexivity: ethical framework of care

Taking epistemic responsibility seriously as required within a framework of care would be difficult or near impossible without reflexivity, the self-conscious admission that our social position shapes the knowledge we produce, subsequently stimulating a preoccupation with its epistemological and ontological implications (Bilotta 2021; D'cruz et al. 2007; Guillemin and Gillam 2004; Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). In migration studies, burgeoning literature which centres the categories of ethnicity and nationality corresponding to the insider/outsider dichotomy (Carling et al. 2014; Irgil 2021; Nowicka and Cieslik 2014; Schmidt 2007; Voloder and Kirpitchenko 2016) indicates how much *migrantisation* also impacts the reflexive exercises of researchers. The paradigmatic works of endogenous reflexivity by scholars such as Wimmer and Schiller (2003), Dahinden (2016), Dahinden et al. (2021) and Amelina and Faist (2014) are important in widening the scope of reflexivity from its singular focus on the researcher to a wider consideration of the context that that we are embedded in as researchers and how this expands and constrains our epistemological creativity and ontological possibilities. Doucet (2008) indicates the expanse that can be covered through such reflexivity, from research motives that “emerge on the backs of haunting ghosts” (75) from our past to the multi-layers of the “oral, audible, physical, emotional, textual embodied” (83) interaction we can have with the participants, to the consideration of how the knowledge we produce can become an object that can reinforce or contest social realities as it used by, scholars, policymakers, migrants and the public.

The wielding of reflexivity also comes with its concerns about researchers feeling the weight of the “deconstruction of deconstructions where all meaning gets lost” (Finlay 2002: 226) or questions about the systemic challenges stemming from the lack of training or accepted standards to evaluate (Lynch 2000) and lack of value ascribed to ‘subjectivity, ambivalence, partial and multiple meanings, and the constructed nature of knowledge (Probst and Berenson 2014: 45). These are important pushback that needs to be tackled amongst the

proponents of reflexivity, especially at the threshold of the ‘reflexive turn’ that seeks to enrich migration studies by expanding epistemological and ontological issues (Amelina 2021; Nieswand and Drotbohm 2014).

For the present discussion, I want to highlight how reflexivity that prompts awareness of one’s subjectivity and extends to the questions of epistemology and ontology must also consider its salience for the axiology of research. I am embracing a definition of reflexivity that extends its self-critical gaze beyond the epistemological and ontological concerns and overrides the tendency to privilege the production of knowledge and the abstraction of ethical principles and their relegation as a fringe component of research inquiry (Hesse-Biber, 2013; Miller et al., 2012). That is, reflexivity shouldn’t only serve the research agenda. Absent serious consideration as to why and to whose benefit we do research, refugee studies risk incorporating reflexivity only as much as it supports research outputs. Pursuing radical care in response to deepening reflexivity brings the questions of access, harm prevention, the autonomy of participation and reciprocity to the centre of research rather than maintaining them as ancillary matters. At this stage, reciprocity emerges as an important tool in the ethical framework of care.

Both qualitative and quantitative research have given some thought to incorporating exchange into their research engagements. A narrow definition of reciprocity limits it to the compensatory approaches where participants are incentivised through monetary provisions normalised within quantitative surveys (von Vacano 2019). However, scholars engaged with reciprocity within reflexive, relational and caring frameworks highlight it as a dynamic process that characterises the relationship of the researcher and the interlocutor. Active participation is often forwarded as an important research innovation that pursues reciprocity as a core principle, paying attention to how different groups can lay a claim to the research agenda, including interlocutors and the communities that are researched with multiple actors collaboratively adding value and benefit to the research and the community itself (Hugman et al. 2011). For those discussing reciprocity outside of active participation research, it is seen as being closely intertwined with issues of respect, agency and autonomy of the research participants (Bilotta, 2021). For Clark-Kazak (2023:1153), reciprocal relationships allow us to incorporate relationality into radical care ethics by refocusing our priorities towards “caring *with* others whereby we are amplifying, uplifting and working *in solidarity*”. Similarly, indigenous methods approach reciprocity as a critical ontological principle pursued within an indigenous theoretical framework to fulfil the researcher’s responsibility to offer transformative healing (Chilisa, 2009).

While many consider the reciprocal relationship closely tied to the co-production of knowledge, my concern is extending care into the moment of research. In addition to the problems of agency, autonomy, consent and representation, as well as self-care for the stakeholders, I want to explore how reciprocal action can be an everyday relational and solidarity response of care addressing the research context of precarity in refugeehood prompted by a reflexive positioning that seeks to utilise privilege and convert it into allyship. This reflects how reciprocity is contextually bound to the experience of refugeehood. The complex and nuanced context of refugeehood shaping the vulnerability of refugee interlocutors prompts their agentic giving and receiving amongst themselves as a way of communal survival. Research encounters should emulate and participate in the embedded reciprocity in refugee communities.

These attempts would not be without complications. Trainor and Bouchard (2013) warned of the dangers of the paternalistic attitudes that emerge when reciprocity is brought to bear during the research process. Similarly, Bilotta (2021) and Clark-Kazak (2023) highlighted the dangers of presuming a universal definition of

care and reciprocity and cautioned researchers to be culturally sensitive. Hemmings (2012) also argues against over-reliance on empathy as a relational resource precisely because they see the reciprocal aspect of empathy as not conducive. Receivers of empathy might not want to reciprocate, especially when that expectation is levied in an environment where their social reality is embedded in power disparities. I will argue that due to the inescapably extractive nature of research, especially in refugee contexts, the onus of reciprocity is already on us with our initial entry as a researcher. From then on, engaging in purposeful reflexive reciprocity should become part of our research practice to moderate the pitfalls of overreaching in our desire to care. Exercises such as ‘kitchen-top reflexivity’ as proposed by Kohl and McCutcheon (2015), where scholars tease out the tensions and paradoxes of their research relationships through everyday talk with other scholars at the kitchen table, might be useful if we expand this idea of everyday talk to include research participants so that our attempts at reciprocity are genuinely impactful and actualising solidarity (Perujo 2019; Siegl 2019).

3. Research topic and empirical background

The puzzle underpinning my doctoral research stemmed from my observation of the predominance of refugee women in the humanitarian field in Turkey. Therefore, the overarching research question focused a critical look at the gendered nature of the humanitarian field and how it mediated the strategies of refugee women. My point of departure was that humanitarian enactment delineated the inclusion of some refugees and the exclusion of others through a gendered logic, which meant that refugee women were my key interlocutors. Taking the case of Syrian refugee women in the capital city of Ankara, Turkey, I observed humanitarian encounters between refugee women and aid organisations and argued that their gendered reception prompted novel strategies that challenged their gendered and racialised othering. As the humanitarian field was a key site of observation, my own presence in the site also needed analysis. During the active process of researching, I didn’t have a set plan on how I would analyse my involvement, as it was through the research process that I came to my awareness of research as fundamentally insufficient as a mode of refugee emancipation. The process of writing up this manuscript is my belated attempt to make sense of my own embeddedness in the object of my research analysis.

Although my research journey began with preliminary data collection in 2019 in a single district in the municipality of Altındağ, home to most Syrian refugee families in Ankara, I already had been active in the area as a civic volunteer, informally organising with refugees and other civic-minded volunteers, including citizens, migrants and international students. Our activities included informal aid distribution trips, visits to families, advocating for them at schools, hospitals and social service offices and tutoring students. These visits carried out consistently since 2015, meant that I became very familiar with many members of the refugee community and developed friendships with them. While the larger dissertation project comprised 20 in-depth and semi-structured interviews coupled with participant observation in two aid distribution sites, this article draws on the recollections of my excursions into what would become my field and the data collected through 17 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with refugees alone, augmented by the extensive fieldnotes and voice recordings I took during the data collection stage and the countless conversations had with the people of the neighbourhood and during participant observations at two aid distribution sites. My interlocutors were almost exclusively refugee women except for the one refugee man who insisted on participation upon learning that I was also researching the subject of refugees while volunteering. Paying attention to diversity, I chose the participants through snowball sampling. To ensure confidentiality, the participants were told to refer me to multiple other

potential participants and were not informed of whom I finally contacted. As they introduced me to others, it often appeared that my engagements as a volunteer or friend were foregrounded before my position as a researcher. Interviews were held in homes and usually lasted around 5 hours on average as conversations continued through teas and lunches. My questions involved the topic of aid pursuit, their perception of aid workers, the details of their encounters, their perception of the Turkish hosts and their interactions with them as neighbours. Even though my position as a civic volunteer also made me part of what I was studying when prompted, many participating women identified me as ‘one of their own’, framing the assistance they reach through me much as they frame assistance they receive through family and friends.

Being a woman and a foreigner in Turkey meant that I was relatable on the basis of our gender and shared experience of being racialised by others. As a practising Muslim, I was comfortable with practices of Muslim decorum and religious obligations, and this prompted my Muslim participants to explicate faith-based aspects of their refugeehood experiences comfortably. My access to information through already established networks, because I was studying Turkish refugee regimes, meant that I could give and verify information for the families as they faced the almost insurmountable task of making sense of the ever-changing policy landscape and the uneven implementation of policies. For example, on several instances, even prior to my entry as a researcher, I confirmed through my networks with established aid organisations whether women can register for the vital cash transfer card (Kızılaykart) as the head of the household in the place of a man. In other instances, I directed them to organisations that could help them relocate to friendlier cities in Turkey as the urban conditions in Ankara became unbearable. Networks of immigrants in Turkey provided material support for my informal tutoring sessions in 2015, which gave way to trips accompanying refugee mothers to district schools to assist them in registering students for the schools. Weekly visits with my non-Syrian Arab-speaking friends to the neighbourhoods became sociable as we organised a women’s sewing project, where mothers came to spend an hour or two with their youngest children, hosted by one of the women each week. In these meet-ups, I was never present as a researcher but rather as an organiser. My accompanying friends, who were also university students, would later be hired as Arab-to-English translators during the interview stage. Our experience of prior collaboration to facilitate fluid communication during our social and civic engagements provided a methodological ease that greatly enhanced my work when we began data collection. In this way, I transformed from being a civic-minded volunteer to a friend to the community before I even approached them as a researcher, a privileged position in many ways.

I was well aware of the benefits of my privileges as a volunteer and had some notion of how it could translate to strengths during the research process. While my civic volunteerism remained separate from my research and existed in its own right, I frame the specific actions I carried out after starting my research as my imperfect attempts at reciprocity. These attempts were imperfect because I didn’t have any set plan for incorporating reflexivity and had no conceptualisation of an ethics of care, so my nebulous need to address the power disparity in the research process was ad hoc.

It is only in a retrospective light that I came to identify instances of failures, and only through discussions with mentors and colleagues did I come to see them as reflexive gaps. While I was a racialised other in Turkey, I was also a foreigner to the Syrian culture in many ways. I came from a geography far from them, and my language and cultural understandings, despite being Muslim, were limiting. For example, paying social visits, which I will argue are important rites of reciprocity towards refugee women, were also moments that

were pushing refugee men out of the house or locking them in their rooms so that the women can have the space for themselves to carry out hosting duties. A retrospective analysis of my notes and reflections also indicated my eagerness to discuss their humanitarian condition in a political light. However, this is a luxury I could afford to indulge in, whereas refugee women were far more concerned with the day-to-day prospects of keeping their families well-fed and stretching their finances to cover rents and bills. In accompanying refugee women to aid organisations, their marginalisation became more apparent, as I was able to navigate spaces they couldn't and make appeals that they couldn't. Difficult instances where I, as a researcher, could advocate for my refugee participant but not for the refugees who were not participants indicated my position of privilege and the limits of how much I could extend it to the refugee community.

The material conditions of refugeehood amongst the refugees also mediated how the relationship between the researcher and participants played out in Ankara. Syrians in Turkey are provided with temporary protection under the differentiated protection system for asylum seekers. This legislative temporariness has produced significant precarity for the Syrian refugees (Baban et al., 2017; Biehl, 2015; Soykan, 2012; Yıldız & Uzgören, 2016), particularly burdening the Syrian refugee women (Baklacioğlu, 2017; Kutlu, 2020; Ozkaleli, 2021; Author 2022). The systemically enforced dependency on aid and the weakness of the social services Syrian refugees receive also need juxtaposition with the urban aspect of their refugeehood. The four districts of Altındağ are each at different stages of urban renewal and, thus, different stages of urban squalor, with many refugee families surviving in these slum areas due to the cheap rent. While some districts were better off, others have long been stigmatised as poverty-stricken and a hotbed of crime. The arrival of Syrian refugees, attracted by the cheap rent and the proximity of the neighbourhoods to industries employing informal labour, has added to the stigmatisation. The urban renewal projects, which increased in scope and speed, have recently been accompanied by policies levying a 'foreigners quota' on some of the neighbourhoods, invalidating the registration of refugee families if they rented in these neighbourhoods and further exacerbating the unhousing of refugee families (Author forthcoming). Thus, many of the participants in this study were under the stress of having to constantly move from house to house as the landscape itself transformed. This meant that refugee families could not embed into networks that would keep them in the loop about getting what from where, with some families being wholly in the dark about most aid organisations. The urban renewal project produced particular conditions in the locality that induced further precarity and estranged them from dependable sources of humanitarian assistance, which meant that the presence of civic actors such as myself became a source of aid. This dependency on aid from under-regulated sources can also add to the vulnerabilities of refugee families, especially refugee women who are exposed to gendered exploitation (Author forthcoming).

4. Retrospective reflections on incorporating reciprocity as a tool of ethical care

Instances of reflexive reciprocity under a framework of care, as I established in early sections of this article, emphasise relationality and require rooting the methodology in the social context of research. Such reciprocity can emerge from the interpersonal interactions between the researcher and the participant, requiring the researcher to dip into their ability to conduct contextual reasoning. My experience in the field pushes me to argue that reflexive reciprocity entails that we decenter knowledge production and instead centre the people we study. It draws from the understanding that 'fieldwork is personal, emotional and identity work' (Coffey, 1991:1). It expands the purview of reflexivity beyond a methodological and theoretical tool that is interwoven

into the data we mine and how it is interpreted by us and reported by us in our privileged position as scholars. By introducing reflexivity in a reciprocal relationship, we can prevent it from being a rote performance that adheres to the script provided by ethics committees. Instead, we can make reflexivity actionable and meaningful for the participants during the moment of research.

As I highlighted above, this conceptualisation of reflexive reciprocity was not developed much when I actually conducted my research and only emerged through retrospective reflection and discussions with my advisors and peers. Thus, the instances that I have highlighted below contain the mistakes of not having a fully fleshed-out plan for reflexive reciprocity. I take to heart the admission by feminist geographer Rose (1997), who wrote on the necessity of exploring our reflexive failures transparently and hope that the below accounts are a similar exercise.

4.1. Hospitality: making social visits prior to beginning the data collection

Hospitality amongst refugee families, especially amongst the Syrian community, was an important concept that has drawn scholarly attention. As Rottmann and Nimer (2021) identified in the case of Syrian women in Istanbul, hospitality emerged as a homemaking practice for refugee women as they struggled with the disruption brought to their lives through displacement and rootlessness. In their account, the hospitality practices of Syrian women become a strategic tool for them to negotiate their inclusion and challenge their exclusion. Similarly, Hultin et al. (2022) argued that host/guest relations are a way of claiming agency and boundary-making for refugees experiencing precarity. Such theorisation of refugee women's hospitality practices resonates well with my experience of hospitality with Syrian women. My first interactions with my participants were in my role as a volunteer, visiting to check up on families and discussing the state of their needs and organising to provide for these needs, which often prevented it from being a social visit. It mirrors the tendencies of visits by aid agents who come to collect information and verify vulnerabilities to make decisions about aid distribution. The dynamics of my visits changed, however, when I engaged with my participants in a more sociable way, visiting to catch up with news and observe rituals of hospitality, enjoying the teas and the Syrian coffees that they were delighted to introduce me to, discussing the recipes for the Syrian cookies that they make and responding to questions about my country, my family and my wellbeing. This was further augmented by the women's sewing project that I had initiated prior to my data collection, which became boisterous events of women socialising amongst themselves with their children playing together, providing them with a creative and social outlet. In these events, I became further embedded within the community as the women came to pay me no special attention, and I became a normalised fixture in their social meet-ups.

Such social meetings during which hospitality was placed front and centre occurred without much reflexive thought and were carried out before I requested the participation of several of the women in my study. The impact of these interactions was evident in the difference between my research interviews with women I have had social visits with and those participants who were added through snowball methods. In the former, it allowed the refugee women the experience of socialising with me, which removed the strain of narrating refugeehood to me. 'I have been curious about this so much, about what kind of questions you can ask, but since I know it is you, I wasn't anxious about this; it is not an interview after all', one of the interviewees shared. Her curiosity about what questions I could ask conveyed her feeling that I was already familiar with her situation, making a separate interview unwarranted. However, the discussion revealed much about my participants that I

did not know from just socialising as it probed into the affective aspects of refugeehood and elicited tense narrations of fleeing conflict and encounters with marginalisation in their neighbourhood and the humanitarian field. These themes were alluded to with far less brevity during our social visits, with the interview serving to reveal the full tapestry of their experiences.

In contrast, refugee women with whom I did not have prior social interactions were naturally far more reserved and required more time to reach important moments of revelation. They treated the interview far more like an interview accounting for their vulnerability, grouping me with the aid agents to whom they felt compelled to narrate their plight. True to the arguments of Hultin and colleagues (2022) where they indicated, hospitality as a relationally enacted practice, breaks in the interview occurred when I responded in my position as a guest. For example, in one instance, I realised that I had forgotten to bring out the box of pastries that I had bought, which is an integral part of the hospitality rites in the Turkish context. Having remembered it only upon seeing the pastries brought in by my interviewee, I brought out my box and shared how I felt about its observance in the Turkish context. Recognising that I was attempting to play the role of a guest rather than an inspector, my interviewee happily took on the part of a host, immediately bringing a noticeable change to how she was responding, with longer and more descriptive sentences in the important topic that followed which was how she engaged with her Turkish neighbours. Her responses became more animated as she attempted to be more engaging. She went through her phone to show me text messages she had received from her neighbour, which she couldn't understand. She was more open to my offers to help mediate with her neighbour, accompanying me to her neighbour, where I confirmed that the messages were because there was a need to change the modem they shared in two apartments, which had become worn out. Involving me in this mundane issue indicated that I had broken a barrier, and my position had shifted from an authoritative expert who was intimidating to one who was amenable to their requests for help – a far more social and reciprocal role.

To draw hospitality as a social capital into the design of research as a means of a reciprocal relationship with refugee women is not a process without difficulties. It is dependent on stimulating social intimacy, as is also highlighted by Cirstea and Pescink (in this special issue). As I indicated earlier, my social visits before initialising any data collection were well received and made for more straightforward dialogue later, but in some instances, it arrested the movement of the men of the households. Situational constraints meant that I could not have this social relationship with all the participants, and genuinely authentic instances were with those with whom I have interacted for years. This is a rare privilege and might not be possible for each refugee researcher, especially when researchers often visit countries on short research stays. I have connected many such researchers from abroad to refugee families in Ankara for interviews.

However, my observations of how disruptive these brief meetings were in the daily lives of families were one of the most significant impetus for me to attempt social visits before formal data collection. Data collection meetings for two hours would still produce the same attempts at hospitality from the refugee family if they occur in their homes, but it would fail to hit the notes of reciprocal relations. Their entry and exit leave much to be desired by refugee participants who have entertained them and have then been quickly left to their devices. To prevent this uncomfortable process, the bare minimum that reflexive researchers can do is engage with participants in at least one brief introductory social visit before they come back for a drawn-out interview. Such social visits can be made into a group event where participants are invited to attend at their convenience to socialise with each other as much as with the researcher. This addresses the issue of whether refugees are having

to sacrifice far too much of their time as well as their resources. It can also allow the researcher to take the hosting role, which can reverse the duties of hospitality to benefit the refugee participants. In my case, my attempts to host participants were rebuffed on each occasion, ostensibly because they wished to share Syrian cuisine with me, but in retrospect, I realised that issues of child and elder care were also key motivators.

Incorporating hospitality in some form or another would require the researcher to balance their research time and resources and be attuned to their participants' needs. The situational and contextual aspects come to bear firmly in such endeavours. Here I believe that we need to address the systemic limitation to care in research due to the process of funding and institutional bureaucracy. A starting point that can pave the way for expanding research practices to include such activities of care is to acknowledge that as researchers in refugee studies, we participate in 'doing migration' as a social practice, as Amelina (2021) described. Research that does not have time and space for reciprocity has come to be the 'routinised practices of doing migration' (ibid: 3) . In challenging this routine, there is potential for research to produce discursive knowledge beyond the 'distinct social order of migration' (ibid). More importantly, in breaking free of the routines of migration research that privileges the research and the researcher, we can convert the reflexivity from a cognitive process into action that serves refugees in practical ways.

4.2. Responding to the material needs of refugee participants

Like most vulnerable communities, refugees are located in a position lacking resources and power, exposed to immense poverty, inequality, and marginalisation, which they are often agentive in addressing. The dilemma in providing financial benefit for research groups such as refugees might be that the economic benefit incentivises them to participate and that research participation thus becomes a source of funds for them, which might expose them to exploitation. This is largely the concern of ethics committees wary of research providing undue inducement of participation in high-risk clinical research (Emanuel 2004). While monetary payment and in-kind services are part of the repertoire in qualitative studies (Trainor & Bouchard, 2013), concerns about whether there might be undue influence and coercion do not exist. I argue that in the cases of researching vulnerable communities such as refugees, there is a necessity to be open to a discussion on how we can engage in material reciprocity.

During my research, the chance to respond to the material needs of refugees arose as the pandemic unfolded in 2020. I had already begun preliminary data collection in the later months of 2019 and had expected to return to the field with a re-calibrated research design in early 2020. Instead, the world faced the unprecedented event of lockdowns - due to a once-in-a-lifetime pandemic. Refugees in Ankara experienced the pandemic as a slow catastrophe as their support systems were shut down abruptly, and government agencies and aid organisations became out of reach as they grappled with the logistics of transferring their work online. The districts included in my study were isolated even before the pandemic. This isolation deepened during lockdowns, disproportionately affecting refugees. Information on the lockdown and the pandemic was poorly communicated, even amongst the Turkish public, inducing mass panic. While the public managed their adaptation to the lockdowns, refugee communities trailed behind in their marginalisation, unable to adapt to new conditions, barring them from shops, schools and hospitals.

On this score, I was able to activate myself to be of reciprocal service to the refugee community. The lockdown engineered a massive shift in buying groceries online and led to the rise of home deliveries, but

members of the refugee community informed me that refugee families were unable to access the internet or delivery services were not extended to the geographical areas that they were living in, neglected as it was in the midst of its urban renewal. This prompted my network of friends and me to support refugees by connecting them with WiFi packages and empowering Syrian shopkeepers who ran informal grocery stores to deliver their goods to needy families. While we could not address several unique needs, we managed to ensure that most of the families who requested day-to-day food, household goods, and hygiene products had access to them. We maintained a stream of funding for the first quarter of the pandemic year directly to two or three Syrian-run shops that knew the neighbourhood and families intimately, who would then deliver the products we paid for. This involvement with a communal response to an emergency did not require that I incorporate reflections on the privileged position I enjoyed, allowing me to direct funds and information upon request. Instead, it demanded that I deploy my position of privilege and access to resources and enact generosity with my time and resources, not as a personal virtue but as a process of seeking “openness to others” (Diprose 2012).

How much of this is research work? I will argue that my research substantially benefitted due to my active involvement and communication with refugee families. While I was prepared to visit only two districts of the municipality, due to the assistance I directed to families in two adjacent districts, I could expand my research sites into those districts when I resumed research in 2021. More importantly, I could reciprocate materially in return for what I received from the community. Even the participants who did not benefit directly from our assistance drive in 2020 knew friends or a family who benefitted, a fact which they recognised. “I feel like I am meeting a long-lost cousin,” one refugee participant shared upon meeting me for the first time, having heard of my assistance to her extended family. I believe that this close engagement has the benefit of communicating to the participants that, as a researcher, I cared about them. This practice needs to be broadly adopted so that vulnerable participants feel empowered by having allies. Researcher-participant relationships are often one of undeniable hierarchy, but by demonstrating that a researcher’s position of hierarchy can be utilised for the material benefit of the participant in the moment of research, we can share the benefits of our position. While we might be inclined to question whether this demonstration of our privilege might discomfort refugees, I would argue that it becomes a discussion that concerns the researcher far more than the participant or the community in need.

A more pertinent question is whether such engagements lead refugee participants to falsely believe that they can benefit from giving an interview, resulting in undue inducement, as discussed above. Navigating this likely possibility requires us to be transparent with the participants on what we can and cannot do. This, in turn, requires a clear plan with scope for flexibility within our research design, where we outline how we can offer material help and the limitations of the assistance we can provide. Again, interpersonal interactions with the refugee community where we are purposefully seeking to see how we can reciprocate can allow for the plan to be adjusted for the context.

Another pitfall to avoid is an authoritative inclination to speak over the participants and dictate their needs. I grappled with this as I was in an intermediary position of compiling a list of needy families and their needs, which directed how much funds could be drawn out from our network of well-wishers. In retrospect, my concerns about whether one family was receiving more than the other and whether we could stretch our financial flow were unnecessary as the community was aware of their duty of care to each other. If the communication between me, my network, the Syrian shopkeepers and the refugee families was intense, then it

was more so within the community. Refugee families whose very survival depends on supporting each other did not need a researcher to paternalistically guide them in sharing resources. Later in my research, I would come to uncover the deft ability of refugees to gauge the needs of their communities and how they embed themselves in the humanitarian field to direct the flow of assistance, which they often feel is misdirected when their knowledge and inputs about their community are ignored. Highlighting this, a refugee woman said, ‘These aid organisations collect so much aid in our name and promise to deliver it to people in need amongst us but don’t know who is really in need’. What she was alluding to was not the general poverty of refugee families but the construction of the hierarchies of the most deserving that often misdirect necessary aid.

5. Conclusion

This article discussed the benefits of implementing an ethical framework of care in the field of migration studies, particularly refugee studies. This insight was developed by retroactively reflecting on my experience with refugee participants in Ankara, Turkey, who were interviewed about their interactions in the Turkish humanitarian field for my doctoral research. I argued that an ethical stance in our reflexivity would encourage us to incorporate reciprocity into the core of our research design. Here, the focus of reflexivity isn't on interrogating positionalities and identities in terms of how they impact the epistemology and ontology of research. Much like Hemmings (2012), I find “feminist reflexivity...[that] prioritises feminist activity over identity and belonging” to be more compelling. I aim to bring it to bear more on the axiology of research increasingly framed as critical and geared towards social justice. This prompts a dialogue about how reflexivity can be usefully connected to the ethical framework of care. I echo the arguments of Edwards and Mauthner (2002), who advocates for us to move beyond the procedural aspects of ethics and adopt an ethical stance that requires us to flex our interpersonal and relational skills to gauge the contextual and situational aspect of the research. I argue that reflexivity should not only be a cognitive practice, but through reciprocity, it can be actionable, lending to the radical care envisioned by Clark Kazak (2023). Introducing reflexivity to this formulation of reciprocity means that we are observing and acknowledging our position as a researcher and actively exploring how we can positively impact the here and the now of research.

Research, particularly refugee research, is often mired in how we can benefit refugees through policy impact at a distant later date. This can be a way of avoiding our duty of care to them in the moment of our research, as we intervene in their lives of precarity and liminality. I highlight feminist warnings against claiming universality or benefits in our research findings. Instead, we should refrain from giving lip service to changing the world and discuss ways to be ethically present in our research site, where we can immediately impact refugee families, the neighbourhood or the community. Through the two instances of reciprocity that I carried out in my research work, I demonstrate that it can be done.

However, I know various factors can limit academic studies, beginning with time, protocol, distance and funding (See Dodevska, Bartels et al. in this issue). My doctoral research has been my first research experience to date, and I am fully aware that the same conditions cannot be replicated going forward. I will neither have the guarantee of time through which I can foster *caring* research relationships relying on hospitality rites nor will I always be able to tap into a network of donors to facilitate material support. In lieu of answering the question of what happens going forward, I want to share some developments that have occurred since I began thinking about and writing this manuscript. A way to apply the knowledge I gained is to reimagine how I

design research so that there is space for participants and I am allowed to practice dual reflexivities: reflexivity in how our positionalities shape our research and reflexivity in being ethically present and extending our care to our participants. Holding steadfast to this line of thought in my recent application for funding, I argued for the time and resources that I would need to engage not only with my research participants and the community as an act of ethical care but also the financial leeway to support the community in a way that they deem fit and to compensate the translators and/or contract researchers I hope would work with me. I refrained from taking the label of activist researchers as they align their approach far more with participatory methodologies (Reinharz & Davidman, 1992); however, I reiterated their call for us to maintain open and transparent communications with participants as universally applicable in researching and emphasised the need for us to respond to the extractive nature of research which places the onus of reciprocity on us. I conveyed my argument that any purposeful ethical framework of care should begin with analysing the situational specificities and potentials for relational engagements that can be iteratively expanded as we continue research. I am happy to say that my application was successful, and I look forward to conducting a research designed with an entrenched ethical framework of care that incorporates reflexive reciprocity.

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Notes

1. While I am following the academic custom in referring to the Syrians in Turkey as refugees, the reality is that the Turkish state does not recognise them as refugees with associated rights, as Turkey limits the implementation of the Geneva Convention geographically.

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