Research Funding and Passport Hierarchies: Power Asymmetries in Multi-Sited Ethnographies in Migration Studies

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the asymmetrical power relations between researchers and the researched in the context of multi-sited ethnographies on undocumented migration. Drawing on ethnographic research conducted along migration trajectories linking Afghanistan to Germany in Iran, Turkey, Greece and the so-called Balkan route between 2018 and 2022, the article critically engages with two issues that contribute to the enactment of asymmetrical power relations between migrants and researchers: First, it demonstrates how passport hierarchies determine researchers' very capacity to conduct multi-sited research and to follow their research interlocutors across borders, privileging those with passports that allow visa-free entry to multiple countries. Second, it highlights how the unequal distribution of research funding determines who can afford to conduct multi-sited research, and how this affects the financial value attached to the time spent by researchers and research interlocutors. Subsequently, it shows how undocumented migrants can – even under highly deprived and precarious conditions – renegotiate these asymmetrical power relations through practices of hosting researchers on their own terms. In this way, the article contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the ethical, power-related and financial challenges present in conducting transnational, multi-sited ethnographies in migration studies.

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INTRODUCTION

On 10 occasions I entered a new country while conducting field research on undocumented migration trajectories from Afghanistan to Germany, and on 10 occasions my burgundy-red German passport allowed me to cross national state borders without much hassle. In each of the 10 countries I entered, I revisited interlocutors who risked their lives to cross the same borders to seek asylum in the European Union. In no other area of research are passports and research funding as much a marker of difference as in the study of undocumented migration, where interlocutors may have neither valid visas nor sufficient financial resources; and in no other research method are passports and funding as fundamental a prerequisite as in transnational multi-sited ethnographies.

Multi-sited ethnographies (Marcus 1995) have become a widely used method in migration studies, particularly in research that critically investigates migration trajectories in their entire length (Belloni 2019; Khosravi 2010). So far, little attention has been paid to what makes this form of research possible. In this article, I ask how researchers' passports and funding, as preconditions for conducting multi-sited ethnographic research, contribute to the enactment of asymmetrical power relations between researchers and their (undocumented) migrant interlocutors and how the latter are, nevertheless, able to renegotiate these power asymmetries. To engage with these questions, I draw on data collected during a multi-sited ethnography of migration trajectories on the route between Afghanistan and Germany, conducted between 2018 and 2021. In this way, the article contributes to discussions on ethical questions implicated by the often-ignored requirements that must be met to be able to conduct multi-sited research in the first place. Multi-sited research is characterised by highly asymmetrical power relations, which arise not only from the intersections of race, gender and class but, in migration studies, especially from nationality. For researchers studying transnational migration, their own citizenship becomes fundamental to their professional mobility and determines their very ability to 'follow the people' (Marcus 1995) – in this case migrants – across international borders. Although researchers often work under precarious conditions, especially in the early stages of their career, in migration studies they are nevertheless privileged in economic terms compared with their research interlocutors, such as undocumented migrants. However, as I illustrate in this article, the latter prove to be able to renegotiate the asymmetrical power relations that are implicated by these passport hierarchies and the unequal distribution of financial resources by hosting researchers during their stays at different research sites.

The research informing this article initially focused on moral economies surrounding the issues of borrowing money and gift-giving between migrants who wish to cross highly militarised borders. In this context, inequalities and power asymmetries related to financial matters and mobility were a constant topic. In this article, I examine the relationship between researchers and interlocutors (undocumented migrants) through the lens of economic transactions. While engaging with the economy of moral norms and values surrounding researcher–researched relations (Fassin 2009), the article is motivated by an empirical conundrum: transnational migration and critical border studies scholars increasingly rely on multi-sited ethnography as a method. However, multi-sited research is a method with an inherent inequality as it depends on a 'powerful' passport and considerable financial resources provided by research funding, which is often only available within academic systems of

affluent countries in the 'global North'. The aim of this article is thus to examine the asymmetrical relationships in the researcher–participant dyad through the role of passport hierarchies and research funding, on the one hand. Conversely, on the other hand, it also illustrates the interlocutors' ability to exercise agency through acts of hospitality, as hosting the researcher allows them – even under highly precarious living conditions and scarce resources – to renegotiate roles and hierarchies, even if only momentarily.

The ethnographic reflections presented in this article originate from my doctoral studies on the trajectories of undocumented migrants from Afghanistan to Germany. Between 2018 and 2021, I conducted research in Iran, Turkey, Greece, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Germany. Through recorded interviews with 66 migrants from Afghanistan at different stages of their migration trajectories, I explored the role of social relations and economic transactions (Pool 2021). All research interviews were conducted in Farsi.[1] Prior to becoming a researcher, I had volunteered as a Farsi-English translator in Greece and Germany. As a white female researcher with a German passport and from a large research institute, I entered the various research sites from a clear position of privilege and financial power. I had safe access to the research sites, which fundamentally differentiated me from my research interlocutors. In contrast, the interlocutors participating in this project – undocumented migrants from Afghanistan – were particularly vulnerable to a European asylum system that operates through the fortification of borders (Monsutti 2018).

The article is structured as follows. First, a literature review positions the article within critiques of multi-sited research arising within the field of migration studies and related ethical issues in a postcolonial world. Subsequently, by discussing the role of passports, I show how multi-sited ethnographies resemble a method that is only accessible to researchers who are considered privileged. Building on the discussion of passport hierarchies, the subsequent section analyses the impact of research funding, such as salaries and travel grants, on the relationship between researchers and their interlocutors. It illustrates how researchers obtain funding for their research while extracting data and knowledge from highly precarious and marginalised research subjects. The final section concludes with a discussion of interlocutors' practices of hosting researchers during multi-sited ethnographies as a way of renegotiating the asymmetrical power relations and exercising agency.

MOBILE METHODS, MULTIPLE SITES AND RESEARCH ETHICS

To understand the ethical issues inherent in multi-sited migration research, I draw on two interlinked bodies of literature on ethics: ethics in ethnography, especially concerning marginalised migrant communities, and ethics in multi-sited ethnographies.

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1 I conducted the research interviews in Farsi. To stay as close as possible to the original Farsi version, the recorded interviews were then transcribed and I coded in their original Farsi version using MaxQDA. I translated the respective quotes from Farsi into English only during the final language check before submitting the thesis and article. I took notes in German, Farsi and English.

MOBILE MIGRATION RESEARCH: CONDUCTING MULTI-SITED ETHNOGRAPHIES

Since the 'mobility turn' of the 2000s, which incorporated movement in the study of migration, the fluid realities of categories of passage, process as well as standstill, became the subject of extensive scrutiny in the social sciences (Büscher & Urry 2009; Sheller & Urry 2006; Urry 2007). The mobility turn was linked to the critique of methodological nationalism (Wimmer & Glick Schiller 2002). Researchers aimed to capture transnational corridors that enable mobility and cause immobility along migration trajectories (Achilli 2018; Andersson 2014; Baird 2017; Belloni 2019; Brigden 2016; Khosravi 2010; Monsutti 2004; Schapendonk 2012a). A range of new methods, able to capture movement, became incorporated in migration studies, and multi-sited ethnography, among others, become widely used in research on migration (im) mobilities. Migration is an inherently mobile practice. Therefore, migration research is grounded in at least a bi-local approach that pursues the 'established ideal to "be there" at both points of departure and points of arrival' (Hannerz 2003: 202).

The linearity that characterises most bi-local regular migration is diluted in undocumented migration, as the routes consist of multiple sites. Thus, trajectories are best understood as 'non-linear, circular, seasonal, multi-directional, repetitive and ambiguous' (Mainwaring & Brigden 2016: 250). Despite this complexity, migration research frequently prioritises research on the country of origin or destination, sidelining the routes and trajectories themselves. Nevertheless, migration routes are not merely passages of movement but can also be a developmental period from which it is possible to understand the social condition that shapes migration and migrants' view of their trajectories (BenEzer & Zetter 2014: 302). Multi-sited ethnography seeks to capture this transformative experience. It aims to move beyond national boundaries, incorporating both the country of origin and destination through the transnational connections between them, thereby tracing how localities shape migration outcomes (FitzGerald 2006: 2).

Belloni (2019: 18) conceptualises this migratory corridor as more than a physical route because it operates as a symbolic imaginative network able to link families, friends and co-nationals in separate locations. Through this corridor, communicative technologies facilitate the exchange of not only ideas and desires but also aspirations. To fully grasp and comprehend the corridor, she argues that it is crucial to capture the interactions between these different sites within a multi-sited ethnography (Belloni 2019: 19).

Since the method of multi-sited ethnography avoids the singular view of the nation-state on migration and has the potential to bring out the voices and perspectives of people on the move, it is widely applied in critical and reflexive migration research (Andersson 2014; Belloni 2019; Fontanari 2019; Tazzioli 2014). Multi-sited ethnography incorporates mobilities in the research methodology. For researchers, moving along migration trajectories with research participants can be a lens through which to see and understand migration and power hierarchies through borders beyond singular, static or solidifying impressions within one space. In the field of migration and border studies, Schapendonk (2012b) and Schapendonk and Steel (2014) demonstrate the use of mobility as a method for understanding migration trajectories and as a way of conducting research over long temporal and spatial frames.

Despite its advantages, mobility should be critically evaluated as a method, as it can reinforce researchers' privileges and contribute to the othering of mobile people (Boas et al. 2022). In a rare reflection on coming to terms with the impact of one's work, Schapendonk, for instance, openly expresses his own discomfort with the development and dissemination of multi-sited ethnography (Aparna, Schapendonk & Merlín-Escorza 2020: 111). Beyond this, Ghassan Hage (2005) has criticised the method's superficial multi-sitedness, arguing that ethnography cannot and should not create an artificial separation between sites that are, in fact, connected. Hage moreover recognises the impracticality of trying to distinguish between the different branches of an imagined community tied to and torn between different localities.

Moreover, researchers' nationalities, and hence passports, determine who can produce what kind of research and who has access to resources (Ortbals & Rincker 2009). The value attached to passports varies widely, as they are closely linked to a state's historical continuities, political manoeuvrings and geostrategic position in the international system. More importantly, in today's world, they can enable or restrict the crossing of borders (Torpey 2000). Harpaz (2021) speaks of global passport hierarchies to categorise the power and impact that passports have on individuals' lives. States regulate visa costs on the basis of nationality and passport, thus determining the cost of crossing borders (Recchi et al. 2021).

RESEARCH ETHICS IN ETHNOGRAPHIES

When research is conducted with vulnerable communities or in conflict or post-conflict situations, the requirements for good scientific practice, the 'do no harm' principle, and ethical codes become heightened, as the consequences of research can be unpredictable (Kostovicova & Knott 2022). Ethnography is viewed particularly critically, as Bejarano et al. (2019: 7) wrote: '[t]o collect its data, ethnography relies on the disparities of power, position and access inherent in the fieldwork relationships, disparities that reflect the logics and structures of earlier colonial formations.' Ethnographers have become more reflexive about their own practices and recognise the method's colonial origins (Bhambra & Holmwood 2021; Tuhiwai Smith 2012).

The continuing influence and impact of colonial legacies on relations between states that impact people's mobility set the stage for a critical analysis of the role of passports in multi-sited research. As the academic system often reinforces knowledge hierarchies, postcolonial approaches have attempted to challenge them (Sidaway 1992; Sikes 2013; Taha 2018; Thambinathan & Kinsella 2021; Tikly & Bond 2013). Tuhiwai Smith (2012), for example, argues that decolonising research must deliberate over all dimensions of 'taking'. However, academic practices are geared towards the accumulation of knowledge, thus representing a form of *taking*, as part of building an academic career (Coddington 2016; Limes-Taylor Henderson & Esposito 2019). Reflecting on their ethnographies with marginalised communities, Limes-Taylor Henderson and Esposito (2019) note that basing academic careers on the lives of others creates a power imbalance that is difficult to navigate. Additionally, migration studies have been criticised for perpetuating colonial power hierarchies (Collins 2022). In those critiques, methodological questions of researchers' subjectivities and their ability to speak in the name of their research interlocutors are deeply entangled with questions of citizenship and (access to) rights. The reflexive turn in migration studies (Dahinden 2016) has served as an augmented criticism and a call for more critical and postcolonial approaches to migration studies (Tudor 2018). Bass, Córdoba &

Teunissen (2020: 147) extend their call to examine the 'imperial eye' of academia in relation to the coloniality of migration studies. These critiques in the field of migration studies are linked to overall calls to decolonize research practices, such as expressed by Tuhiwai Smith (2012: 44), who calls out researchers for '(Re)searching through Imperial Eyes'.

Research on forced migration is inherently asymmetrical, as most of the power rests with the researchers (Clark-Kazak 2021; Krause 2017; Lammers 2007; Perry 2011). These power asymmetries arise through 'political rights, economic positions, psychosocial positions, gender and other social and cultural factors' (Hynes 2003: 13). Therefore, the principle of 'do no harm' guiding ethnographic research does not sufficiently grasp these asymmetries (Hugman, Pittaway & Bartolomei 2011; Jacobsen & Landau 2003; van Liempt & Bilger 2012). Instead, the research itself must alleviate conditions of oppression and be translated into improving policies (Bakewell 2008) without being subservient to the guidelines set by policymakers (Stierl 2022).

Research funding channels knowledge production and thus the attention of academic discourses, especially when determining who can remain within the occupational academic system. On a micro level, for instance, Kolar Aparna et al. describe the unequal financial reimbursement received by co-authors for the same work, determined merely by employment arrangements with their university (Aparna, Schapendonk & Merlín-Escorza 2020: 112). On a macro level, funding opportunities in Europe and North America are plenty – also owing to policy interests in migration research – leading to a higher quantity of published migration research (Amelung, Scheel & van Reekum 2024; Bass, Córdoba & Teunissen 2020; Paul & Yeoh 2020). Yet, while this is nothing new, the role of research funding – the money researchers receive to conduct their research, and the money interlocutors spend to host researchers – has received too little attention. Conducting transnational ethnographic research with undocumented migrants raises ethical issues and moral questions relevant for the epistemic community of migration scholars. This is because the method requires immense pre-existing privileges among researchers, such as a passport and access to research funding.

By addressing such power imbalances in multi-sited ethnographies on migration, this article contributes to the discussion on ethics in transnational research. The examples of passport hierarchies and access to visas, together with unequal distribution of research funding, illustrate how these disparities shape fieldwork. My multi-sited ethnography highlights how the imbalances between researchers and research interlocutors extend beyond the ethical principle of 'do no harm' and calls instead for a critical examination of the privileges that can underlie research in transnational migration contexts.

PASSPORT HIERARCHIES AND RESEARCH FUNDING

Multi-sited ethnography is often valued as a method in critical and reflexive migration research for amplifying the voices and perspectives of vulnerable migrants, as well as contributing to their empowerment. However, as I discuss below, conducting a multi-sited ethnography hinges on privileges, such as passports, which enable traveling across borders and research funds to cover logistical expenses. These factors are material prerequisites that create disparities between researchers and research interlocutors, particularly if the latter are undocumented migrants. The asymmetrical power relations and potentially extractive research practices they facilitate may be

exacerbated when research participants generously contribute to the research: For example, research interlocutors sometimes host researchers or organise their travel logistics in environments that may be challenging for the researcher. At the same time, as I argue in the final part of the discussion, hosting a researcher can sometimes be a way for interlocutors to invert these asymmetrical power relations by providing researchers with the initial opportunity to be present.

PASSPORT HIERARCHIES

To illustrate the power dynamics embedded in global passport hierarchies, I begin with a vignette from my field research:

> *As we sit in her family's one-room house in Tehran, Parnia explains the consequences of being born in Iran to undocumented Afghan migrants. For her, the worst consequence is not having a passport. To escape the increasingly violent xenophobia against Afghans in Iran, she wants to migrate to the EU. But to get a visa she would need a passport, and to get a passport she would first have to go to Afghanistan to register her birth certificate. Even if she managed to obtain a passport, she sighs, 'it would only be an Afghan passport.'* (Field notes October 2018)

At the time of my field research in Tehran in 2018, the Afghan passport would have given 19-year-old Parnia visa-free access to only four countries. This is in stark contrast to my own German passport – one of the passports that gives its holders access to most countries in the world, and also enabled my visits to Parnia's home in Iran.

Multi-sited migration research hinges on passports. They determine which forms of mobility are possible. For those with passports that are considered of 'high' value globally, legal migration for work or study is a normalised option. For those with passports from countries regarded as 'low' in the passport ranking, obtaining a visa may be impossible, leaving holders with undocumented migration as their only option. For researchers, passports determine what access to the research field is viable.

Passport hierarchies do not just influence migration; they also shape the research field itself. Since the ability to travel is a prerequisite for conducting multi-sited transnational research, this method is predominantly accessible to those with privileged passports. A focus on the passport reveals the colonial legacies that still impinge on migration scholarship. Researchers' nationalities determine who can produce what kind of research (Ortbals & Rincker 2009). Scholars who only possess an Afghan passport produce fundamentally important research on the digital spheres of migration trajectories (Abbasi & Monsutti 2023), on living conditions in Afghanistan before departure or in Iran, and on living conditions in destination countries (Torfa, Almohamed & Birner 2021). However, the limitations imposed by global passport hierarchies restrict their movement, preventing them from travelling freely between countries in a short time and with minimal restrictions, as I was privileged to do. A multi-sited ethnography would therefore not be a possible method for them. This disparity results in a loss of research insights and rigorous perspectives that are essential to migration studies. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the auto-ethnography '*Illegal*' *Traveller* by Shahram Khosravi (2010), who himself crossed borders undocumented from Iran to Sweden to seek asylum. In his book, Khosravi describes how he crossed borders by establishing social and economic interactions

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with fellow migrants and smugglers, and how these interactions shifted depending on the countries in which he was located.

My research unfolded in the context of these passport hierarchies. As the interlocutors were mobile, I followed them as a researcher (De León 2015), although I never accompanied them on the actual border crossing. As Jason De León (2015: 12) writes, border crossings can become extremely dangerous for interlocutors, as border guards may resort to greater violence in the presence of witnesses. Instead, I took a different route at each of the border crossings and only revisited interlocutors in the next country after they decided to share their location details. Thus, I would rejoin the group via the official border crossing on my German passport.

Passports were a recurring theme in conversations throughout the multi-sited ethnographic research, highlighting the pervasive influence of these hierarchies. Leila, whom I was allowed to accompany on large parts of her undocumented migration trajectory to Germany in Iran, Turkey and Greece, explained her goal of reaching safety. As a persecuted Hazara[2] in Afghanistan, a single woman who had been the victim of domestic violence, and an Afghan national in Iran, she was seeking asylum in Germany. When I asked her if she ever wanted to go back to her family, she replied: 'Yes, I want to return for sure, but I don't want to go back without success, but with a passport, legally' (field notes, January 2019). For her, obtaining a passport was a sign of permanence and an expression of her success to then be allowed to legally remain in a country.

In the researcher–interlocutor relationship, the possession of a powerful passport becomes a defining factor of one's positionality. At the time of the research, my German passport was considered the strongest in the world, allowing visa-free or visa-on-arrival access to 135 countries (Passport Index 2021). In contrast, the Afghan passport was considered the least powerful, allowing visa-free access to only four countries in the world (Ibid.). Methodologically, I was able to conduct a multi-sited ethnography because I could move between countries, which often left me with feelings of ambiguity and guilt. Germany was the desired destination for most of my interlocutors, thus having German citizenship was undoubtedly advantageous. My questions pertaining to my research often prompted questions in return about German culture, language, political events or the legal system. I tried to strike a balance between answering these questions to the best of my knowledge and likewise contextualising my privileged position. It should be noted that my interlocutors were keen to talk and to contribute to a 'German research project'. They expressed a willingness to inform 'the German people' about their trajectories. During the interviews, interlocutors wanted to talk about the injustices they had experienced and their reasons for seeking asylum so that people in their aspired destination country would know about their perilous situation. The global passport hierarchy thus not only facilitated my visa-free movement between countries but also drew upon and reinforced an imagined hierarchy that positioned me, as a German scholar, at a higher level. Consequently, my interlocutors expected that I had the capability to transmit knowledge to a 'powerful' state.

2 Hazara form one of the largest ethnic groups in Afghanistan and are mainly Farsi-speaking. The persecution of Hazara has lasted for over two centuries but has become systematic under the Taliban's reign, prompting legal scholars and international human rights organisations to increasingly investigate it as genocide (Hakimi 2023).

FUNDING FOR RESEARCH MOBILITY

Relationships within a research project are, also inherently, economic relationships. Researchers receive grants, fellowships and employment contracts to carry out their research. Entire facilitation structures exist to prepare and support researchers for their field research through funding and stipends. These funding schemes and fellowships for social science research often mean that researchers based in the USA and Europe are being paid to collect, and at times extract, data from less privileged individuals, such as undocumented migrants. Knowledge is then produced from this collected data and the knowledge production process fortified (Coddington 2016; Limes-Taylor Henderson & Esposito 2019). The way knowledge is produced raises questions about who has the right to produce what kind of knowledge about others' lives.

The question of money is thus omnipresent in academic research. Conducting a multi-sited ethnography is expensive, as logistics and accommodation accumulate. Research funding earmarked for travel grants introduces a further financial dimension to the researcher–participant dyad for transnational research. As Viviana Zelizer (2011: 90) notes, 'Earmarking integrates practices and cognitive categories', thereby making visible the economic transactions that underlie research activities. Money that is earmarked for travel grants must be spent on airfares, accommodation and daily expenses intended for meals. Recording these precise funds makes the economic transaction between researchers and interlocutors visible. Each day spent in the field carries a calculated financial value, attaching monetary cost to the very act of conducting research.

When researchers enter the field, a fine web of financial ties already exists between them and their interlocutors. Their conversations, however, serendipitously they may unfold in the field, have already been anticipated and set out in the research proposals, case selections and pre-determined semi-structured interview guidelines. Planning, ultimately shaped by the funding that made the project possible in the first place, is rooted in this anticipated research relationship. There is a financial incentive to conduct research and to gain access through the interlocutors. Each interview carried out is based on an initial expectation, outlined in the funding proposals. As Miller and Dingwall remind us, all interviews are fostered situations that take place in a realm of power, as they are a 'deliberately created opportunity to talk about something that the interviewer is interested in' (Miller & Dingwall 1997: 59).

In most cases, when researchers conduct interviews, they have received money in the form of a salary or grant funding as reimbursement for the time and efforts invested, but the research interlocutors gain little from participating. For me, conducting interviews was the performance of my job, for which I received a monthly salary as a doctoral researcher, while those on the other side simply rewarded me with their own precious time without any financial compensation. Drawing on his research in the Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya and reflecting on his privileges as a white researcher, Neil Bilotta quotes one interviewee who clearly articulated the disparity between the financial gains for international researchers and the absence of monetary rewards for those who are being researched:

> The researchers get the information from us and type it in books. I don't think they share it with concerned people. Instead, they write some books and make personal use off of those books. And, after making the books, they make money with the ideas we gave them. So, they write a book

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> and sell the book and make money off of our stories. [laughter] (RYP13). (Bilotta 2019: 143)

The centrality of money in the production of knowledge is highlighted in Bilotta's interview. While none of the interlocutors in my research criticised the link between my presence and conducting research in terms of research funding as money I earned, I was aware of this predicament. Throughout the research, I was regularly praised by interlocutors for spending 'precious time' as a highly educated woman with them in their role as refugees. This expression made me uncomfortable, both in the context of my readings of postcolonial continuities in sociology and research in general (Tuhiwai Smith 2012) and, beyond that, because I was doing my job, for which I was being paid.

The financial disparities between researchers and their interlocutors become particularly pronounced in transnational contexts. My interlocutors regularly asked me about salaries in Europe, including my own. As a doctoral researcher, I was earning roughly 1500 euros a month. My answer provoked two reactions. On the one hand, interlocutors compared it with the income they had heard about from others who had already reached Europe, and thus showed me a kind of pity for earning so little. On the other, even though as a doctoral researcher I earned less than the median income in Germany, in direct comparison my salary was far beyond any form of financial support or money they could earn along the trajectory. This disparity raises critical ethical questions regarding the need for financial compensation of research participants for their input in research projects.

For decades there have been debates about whether interlocutors in qualitative research should be compensated for their contribution to research data (Hammett & Sporton 2012). Using the precariousness of early career researchers as a starting point for a feminist political economy, Warnock, MacNeil Taylor and Horton (2022) argue that researchers should pay their interlocutors. However, such a proposal assumes that all research interlocutors and migrants are underprivileged. Mustonen's (2024) article in this same issue challenges this one-sided assumption and forces us to think about more nuanced answers to the question. Her interlocutors in Cairo were wealthy and occupied powerful positions, thus complicating an initial presupposed financial hierarchy attached to interlocutors in migration studies.

Recognising these different relationships *between* researchers and their interlocutors, in the next section I return to my fieldwork and illustrate what kinds of intellectual contributions but also financial investments my interlocutors made to contribute to my research. I consider it important to reflect on the field presence of the researcher, in this case my own, because it can become an additional financial burden for the interlocutors. Despite my insistence on paying back the costs resulting from my field presence, my interlocutors repeatedly insisted on hosting me for free. I argue that at the heart of this behaviour, on the interlocutors' part, was both the creation and establishment of dignity and the renegotiation of positions in a field characterised by power asymmetries.

EXERCISING AGENCY AS A HOST: RENEGOTIATING POWER ASYMMETRIES

> *Khaja makes a wonderful iftar meal for us: beautifully draped salad shirazi, qabuli, cinnamon lamb sauce and for dessert big plates of cucumbers, apples and honeydew melons. The food is absolutely delicious, but I get*

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> *a little nauseous when I think about the cost. Last week the family didn't even have the 20 euros needed for their son's vaccination.* (Field notes, May 2019).

This ethnographic vignette might sound familiar to researchers who have the privilege of conducting research with communities that are socioeconomically disadvantaged but willing to share their time, home and food. In such an ethnographic setting, shared meals with researchers indicate deepened trust on the interlocutor's side and are thus important for the researcher. When researchers are being hosted by their interlocutors, research relationships are renegotiated and can become inverted. Hosting researchers can be a way for interlocutors to renegotiate asymmetrical power relations and gain agency, as being a host is a position of power. Interlocutors actively and deliberately decide that they want to open their homes, set their tables and offer their insights to the researchers. Recognising this foregrounds the interlocutors' agency.

The same applies to research funding provided by universities or institutions for accommodation. In ethnographic research, however, when researchers stay with interlocutors, it can be difficult for the researchers to pay in 'hard' monetary currency for the space allocated to them during their visit. The precise allocation of money earmarked for a night's stay contrasted with the blanket and mattress offered by my interlocutors. When I tried to offer money in exchange for the night, explaining that it was part of the research budget, my hosts had the feeling of being degraded to a hotel.

Marcus (1995: 99–104) raised three key concerns about multi-sited ethnographies. First, the practical challenge for researchers of entering numerous field sites in a short time; second, that by moving around, researchers would overlook everyday face-to-face communication; and third, that subaltern voices would be eclipsed by more visible and powerful actors. Addressing these three concerns helps to highlight the agency of my interlocutors during my multi-sited ethnography on the trajectory from Afghanistan to Western Europe. As I was increasingly dependent on their advice on various practical issues, my interlocutors gained more agency. For example, I was dependent on their country-specific advice, geographical knowledge and behavioural guidance on the different transnational sites. Alongside the concerns often raised regarding the ways in which researchers appropriate interlocutors' knowledge, multi-sited ethnography with the same research interlocutors can be seen as offering spaces of increased agency for the interlocutors, who in this way shape the overall research process. Because the researcher moves along the route to stay with the same interlocutors, the interlocutors gain a good understanding of the research project. My interlocutors evaluated me as a researcher and decided case by case in different circumstances to what extent they would trust me. When they were on the move, the research interlocutors decided whether they wanted to share their new location with me.

The multi-sited ethnography expanded the temporal scope by establishing continuous research relationships that were no longer bound by location and could therefore persist over time even when people had physically moved on. My frequent returns as a researcher and guest throughout the different trajectories deepened the interlocutors' understanding of the research project. It also allowed an analysis of the entire trajectory, which spanned three periods: before departure, during the route and

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on arrival at the destination. Throughout this process and within each of the different periods, new invitations were issued, reciprocated and redefined. This meant that the interlocutors decided for themselves how comfortable they felt in each place and to what extent they felt able to share parts of their lives with me.

As interlocutors' everyday face-to-face communication increasingly shifted to the digital sphere, interactions with family members and friends in their places of origin became transnational. This shift in communication methods along and through the changing distances can also be transferred to the spatial dynamics between interlocutors and researchers. Schapendonk (2012a; 2018) calls this 'tracking' a trajectory ethnography. Together, multi-sited and trajectory ethnographies help researchers to stay in contact with respondents via social media, phone calls or email, allowing continuity until they reconnect with or rejoin them at a later stage in the trajectory (McAdam-Otto & Nimführ 2021; Schapendonk & Steel 2014). In my research, this approach enabled interlocutors to decide how and when they would reach me even during periods of absence, shaping my awareness of their movements through different spaces and over the years of research by sharing pictures, emojis, memes and other information they deemed relevant.

Contrary to Marcus (1995: 101), it was my interlocutors who guided and directed the route of this research. Because I was mobile and could follow the interlocutors to different sites, the same interlocutors remained constantly at the centre of my research. They arrived and inhabited the places before me. As the researcher, I relied on their guidance and consultation to navigate these sites, which highlights their agency and expertise in shaping the research process. This stands in stark contrast to traditional research on undocumented migration, which is often limited to a specific location and may involve greater reliance on intermediaries, such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or state officials, to facilitate connections between researchers and interlocutors. These intermediated approaches can potentially limit the interlocutors' agency and constrain the self-determination of research participation. Here, however, to use Marcus's term, the 'subaltern voices' were those who remained at the centre through the multi-sited, transnational and longitudinal research. They were the ones who decided whether and how to lead me through critical geographical and conceptual sites. Their guidance extended beyond physical movement to include invitations to spend time together, to accommodation and, in some instances, as the opening vignette shows, to enjoy lavish meals. These were acts of hosting that existed even in times of scarcity and shaped and enabled this research.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I illustrate how passports and research funding function as preconditions for conducting multi-sited transnational research and how these preconditions shape and reinforce not only (im)mobilities but also asymmetrical power relations between researchers and their (migrant) interlocutors. In the field of migration studies, these mechanisms serve not only to enable the movement of researchers across borders but also to perpetuate processes of exclusion. I have offered a critical reflection on the practice of conducting transnational research, examining how mobility as a method builds on and fortifies pre-existing disparities between researchers and the researched. Through a discussion of my own multi-sited ethnography on undocumented migrations, I have further shown how mobility as a method marks

researchers' inherent privileges in relation to their interlocutors. This analysis of the prerequisites for multi-sited ethnographies links the necessity of recognising borders and locations in migration research with the power dynamics that determine who is able to research these transnational cross-border connections and who is not.

In this way, the article contributes to discussions in critical and reflexive migration studies on mobile methods and multi-sited research in migration studies (Boas et al. 2020; Dahinden 2016; Hage 2005). By focusing on two tangible objectives, passports and research funding, I illustrate how the production of knowledge in transnational migration studies through multi-sited research methods is intertwined with the reproduction of hierarchies and asymmetrical power relations along citizenship and national belonging. These insights call for a more critical engagement by researchers conducting multi-sited ethnography in migration studies.

The discussion on researchers' privileges is complemented by a discussion on hosting arrangements during multi-sited ethnographies, which shifts the perspective to interlocutors' agency. I argue that entering multiple transnational sites and revisiting interlocutors at those sites establishes roles in which researchers become dependent guests, while interlocutors assume the role of hosts and agents. Hosting becomes not merely a logistical arrangement but also a practice of dignity and agency. The interlocutors determine the framework of encounters and accumulate social capital, while researchers can be seen as becoming indebted to them. In this way, interlocutors reshape the transnational research process, redefining power relations as the researcher becomes a dependent guest while navigating entry into new sites. Ultimately, interlocutors thus become the agents who determine the outcome of the multi-sited ethnography.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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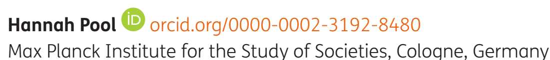
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