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Research Note:

Interpersonal Relationships in Research: Balancing Reciprocity and Emergencies

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While conducting research in sub-Saharan Africa, I live with a host family within the community I study. My attempts at giving back thus play out through both my long-term research and through more immediate, everyday interactions. To navigate giving back in my interpersonal relationships I use flexible principles and exceptions that are shaped by both my position as an outside researcher studying public health and environmental science, and, most importantly, as a friend, colleague, and houseguest.

While conducting fieldwork I stay with a family that graciously feeds, houses, and shepherds me through everything from learning the art of killing scorpions to cleaning clothes by hand washing. I have stayed with the same host family on multiple trips, for over a year in total, and we talk regularly when I am in the United States. Not only have my hosts taught me practical matters that make my living situation comfortable, but they also share with me their way of life, the concerns and challenges they face, and their community’s history and successes. Living with this family has profoundly shaped my research interests and my ethnographic understanding of the area where I work, influencing my research questions and the way I go about asking them. Living within the community also uniquely positions me to consider giving back in more immediate

instances, particularly because I have a different set of resources at my disposal than most community members.

Upon first going to live within this community, external guidelines shaped my outlook on when and what to give back. These guidelines, prepared by the organization that arranged my homestay, permitted no gifts for my host family. A situation where people shower the community with gifts can end up compromising outsiders' positionality as peers and collaborators, and creating an unsustainable set of expectations; this was to be avoided. The organization wished to foster a community ethic to truly engage the community and to avoid scenarios where community participation is purchased with "sitting fees" and outsiders present the opportunity for charity ahead of collaboration. Over time, I have tried to hold to the sentiment of these guidelines as I filter instances where I might give back less by these clear principles and more through a dynamic, situational process.

When I first arrived to live with my host family, the limit on gift giving meant that I held back and learned the cultural context. As I benefit hugely from my relationships with my host family members, following the prohibition on gifts proved difficult. As I became more familiar with cultural norms, however, I tried to provide only gifts on par with what could be reciprocated, although the family with which I live and our neighbors virtually never ask me for money or gifts. I class the medicine (largely bandages and ibuprofen) and food I have supplied as commensurate to the care and meals given to me. When I go to town, I bring back something small for the neighborhood grandmothers, as others do. While often not perfectly calculated—an incident in which I supplied many children with lollipops and a time when I was slow to assist with dental care spring to mind—starting small and focusing on reciprocity and norms proved palliative for my conscience.

The biggest gift given to my host family came from my biological parents in the form of secondary school fees for my host sister. While this sponsorship represents a large sum of money, it hardly feels off balance with what my host family provides for me. My host sister herself has shepherded me through life, and her parents play an integral role in my education. I can look back and neatly categorize this gift as reciprocal. Yet, when the opportunity to rally my parents in support of my host sister's education arose, it hardly fit within a well-structured set of guidelines, be they my own or an organization's.

The somewhat haphazard way I process gift-giving decisions couples uneasily with the notion that a little money, which I hold so tightfistedly as to avoid excessive gift-giving, could make a big difference to a friend. Yet, to begin to personally address these broad challenges of economic poverty is overwhelming and I am well practiced at turning down requests for school and medical fees. Navigating my advantages, the ways in which they translate into privilege and, more importantly, the arrogance that lets me decide which requests and people are worthwhile remains deeply challenging.

Just as I decide when to give or withhold gifts, I consider what advice to dispense. My coursework in environmental science and public health often discusses the tenets of sustainability and behavioral change. I consider these ideas as I shape my research questions, but not in my interpersonal relationships. My training and role as a student

sometimes positions me to believe that I know a great deal about what is good for people and their community. Yet, I try to keep public health messages out of my relationship with my host family. While I can share my knowledge, I have steered clear of taking up campaigns of hand-washing, shoe-wearing, and the like. Avoidance of these topics often seems the easy option—lecturing people in their own home is condescending. Yet, protecting them is also patronizing. In the moments I find myself feeling a feverish child or eyeing an infected cut before urging parents to take a child to a clinic, it can be hard to find any middle ground between intentionally turning a blind eye and asserting my opinion as if I know what is best. As my relationships lie within some bounds of reciprocity, I try to understand the circumstances in which my hosts live and avoid second-guessing their behaviors and decisions. The balance still remains deeply situational, and rife with steps to the wrong side of the line.

Ultimately, my rules aimed at egalitarian interactions and mutual respect are a coping mechanism. More difficult to reconcile is that, despite friendship, my host family and I remain unequal in many respects. No matter how often I visit or how long I stay, I retain the option to leave, be it for a warm shower or for better healthcare. I have more money and access to resources and luxuries. Living within the community and sharing housing, food, and camaraderie masks the depth of my resource access while at the same time positioning me to understand the depth of challenges others face. Though I do not lie, about the price of a plane ticket or that I am going on a vacation, convenient omissions mask the extent of our financial inequality. That the ease with which I could offer financial assistance often seems unrealized heightens my guilt. I soothe this inequality in our relationship by learning to deal with what is an uncomfortable difference and focusing on the many things in our relationship that are reciprocal. In coping, I recognize and appreciate the many gifts my hosts give me and try to repay them on roughly equal terms.

Emergencies uniquely upset this carefully trodden balance of reciprocity. The circumstances of life in a rural community serviced by a small clinic means that emergencies arise too often and the costs of healthcare and hospitals' demands for payment before treatment are regular challenges. I have struggled with how to deal with emergencies, and on several occasions I have reached deep into my pocket to support individual emergencies. Initially, I feared that providing funds would open a floodgate to everyone with a medical problem. More often than not, rather than hoping to also get funds, community members felt sympathetic—feeling not only bad for the person suffering an emergency, but bad over my concern. I realized that many others would also have funded treatment if they too had money available, and, remarkably, this means of assistance has never resulted in follow-up requests.

Despite an obvious need to access healthcare, the ostensibly straightforward gains of helping in emergencies are often tempered. Providing assistance in emergencies has never resulted in a clearly positive outcome, as illustrated in the following example. When a friend fell ill with abdominal pain, the clinic suspected an ectopic pregnancy. This condition is a surgical emergency; if an ultrasound confirmed the diagnosis, money would also be needed immediately to proceed with the operation. With the money I

provided, the woman made the long journey to the district hospital, which houses the region's only ultrasound machine. As the only ultrasound technician was out at a funeral that day, the patient was rushed into surgery for what turned out not to be an ectopic pregnancy. Rather, the problem was an infection, treatable with antibiotics. She was, in fact, pregnant and over the next several months lost considerable weight, miscarried, and required a blood transfusion for severe anemia—a spiral set in motion by severe infection, and unnecessary surgery. While these health problems are not fully resolved, treatment remains a priority for her supportive family. My friends continue to express deep gratitude for my limited role in providing support in this instance, a gratitude that reflects my participation in a shared concern more than for a positive outcome.

My response to emergencies remains unsustainable and questionably beneficial. Without the structures in place—medical facilities, thorough follow-up—an influx of financial resources hardly foretells a positive outcome. Yet, I have come to terms with the unsustainability of this type of emergency response. I can make a financial contribution that alleviates not only an immediate discomfort at seeing others in pain, but also the deeper disquiet of the injustice of our unequal circumstances. In many ways these contributions come too late—yet they reflect a common humanity that puts us all, in one way, on equal ground.

Conducting research within a community, in my case, means navigating personal relationships marked by sharply unfair differences. Even my positionality in writing this piece and sharing vignettes from my friends' lives is ethically complex. Adhering to the strict protocol that guides my research efforts often seems far simpler than navigating the dynamic ethical code that governs my interpersonal relationships. Although I would have liked to develop clear guidelines about the ways I can best give back, often my responses are situational and improvised, guided flexibly by a few basic principles. I have best broached interpersonal relationships by grappling with uncomfortable inequality, casting aside preoccupations with sustainability, and proceeding with reasoned sympathy and reciprocity. I realize I am unlikely to find right answers, common ground, or relief from guilt; instead, I navigate the trade-offs involved as I face them.

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