

RETHINKING THE ROLE OF PAYMENTS IN RESEARCH

Reflections Towards a Collaborative Ethnographic Approach

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Abstract

Navigating payments in ethnographic research provides insights into social dynamics within ethnographic research contexts. Drawing from research with financially vulnerable queer male sex workers in Nairobi, Kenya, this article explores the meanings of money, privilege, and reciprocity within this specific socio-cultural setting. Reflecting on my position as a researcher from the Global North, it acknowledges privileges and addresses academic vulnerabilities resulting from unconventional research practices. By examining the roles of payments and reciprocity in research relationships, this article calls for reassessment of payment norms when engaging with economically marginalized communities. It highlights challenges in discussing these matters openly in academic circles and advocates for increased transparency and dialogue about financial aspects of fieldwork with interlocutors. The shift towards mutual collaboration outlined in this article fosters balanced reciprocity, ultimately facilitating the co-production of socially relevant anthropological knowledge aimed at promoting social justice and transformation for marginalized communities.

Keywords: *payments, fieldwork, ethnography, positionality, reciprocity, co-creation*

On a sunny afternoon in July 2022, I visit the sex worker organization (SLO) I conduct my research with in Nairobi again after two years of absence due to the COVID-19 pandemic. People welcome me enthusiastically, and I receive a lot of hugs. After sharing how I am doing, some of them ask me if I brought them something. One of them, Jimi, says “Lise, I’m hungry, please buy me lunch”. While I interact with a core group of around 30 men, Jimi has been among my long-term contacts, actively involved in my research since the beginning. Although not entirely truthful, I inform him that I can’t due to not carrying cash. While a pang of guilt accompanies my lie, I decide to say so, knowing that I did not bring enough cash to provide lunch for everyone present. After having chatted with people for a while, I say I have to leave. Jimi asks me if he can escort me out. Of course, I say, since I like his gesture. Yet, despite my genuine appreciation, a subtle thought lingers in the back of my mind—wondering whether he might expect something in return for his escort, though I’m reluctant to admit such thoughts.

As we walk away from the rest of the group, another member named Baruch joins us. I don’t know him yet. He inquires about my activities. When I tell him about my future plans to conduct research on queer entrepreneurship in Nairobi, he expresses his interest. Additionally, he asks me “how can the [sex worker] community benefit from this research?” I tell him that my

previous research with sex workers showed that many of them are entrepreneurial, and that this is something I would like to explore further. I add that I think this can benefit the community since it will show the many development organizations the SLO engages with the need to go beyond providing services to sex workers aimed at sexual health only. He says he likes the idea and shares that he knows some queers who ventured into such businesses, for instance someone who started a barber shop and someone else who sells clothes. We agree that we will explore the city over the next days to connect with various queer-led businesses.

As our conversation unfolds, Jimi proposes to take me to their new “joint”, which is a place where members of the SLO hang out. Since I don’t want to stop my conversation with Baruch, I affirm his suggestion. While walking to the joint, when we pass a liquor store, Jimi and one of his friends attempt to persuade me into purchasing alcohol for them. “It’s just 700 KES” Jimi says. “You could buy it now, and we will drink it tonight”. His friend chimes in: “We could drink it right away.” Given my awareness of both individuals’ struggles with alcohol, I develop a sense of discomfort and quickly make up my mind. I tell him I will not buy alcohol for them but can buy them lunch if they want. Jimi agrees and we walk to the restaurant.

Once we arrive at the joint, I see seven other community members sitting there. Uncertain what to do, I find a seat along them. Almost immediately one of them assures me: “Don’t worry, mine is only 100.” Jimi’s friend joins me and remarks: “I’ve ordered for 300, so I can take some home tonight. I need a good meal because of my medicines.” Following suit, the remaining eight individuals proceed to place their own food orders. While this is exactly what I was afraid would happen, in my mind I surrender and laugh about the situation I got myself into once again. And when I see the bill, I am relieved to find that I brought enough cash to cover the entire costs.

After our meal, Jimi accompanies me to a car. Along the way, a woman seated beside her food stall says something to Jimi in Sheng, an urban dialect commonly spoken in Nairobi. He responds, and they both burst into laughter. Later, Jimi tells me that she jokingly asked him to request me to buy her a soda, playfully stating: “You know, when these people see a white person, they see money.” Given my light (“white”) skin tone, I am not surprised. My interlocutors frequently note that my skin colour is associated with affluence, leading to certain expectations regarding what I might provide, such as drinks, food, or money for transportation. Reflecting on my experiences in the past hour, I feel that they validate this observation. With these thoughts and experiences in mind, I look at Jimi and say: “I know, but isn’t it somewhat similar for you guys?” He chuckles but also responds seriously, “Noooo, Lise, this is different; what we have is friendship.” Jimi referring to me as a friend warms my heart and elicits a smile. Simultaneously, I recognize that it took me a long time to come to terms with the meaning of this “friendship”, especially considering the significant role money and payments play within it.

Introduction

As the opening vignette illustrates, money is an undercurrent in my long-term collaborative research with queer male sex workers in Nairobi. While it has never been my primary research topic, it has significantly influenced my interactions in the field and my research relationships more generally.

My research with queer male sex workers in Nairobi started as my PhD project in 2018, focusing on knowledge politics in development partnerships in the official development aid (ODA) system (Woensdregt 2024). The participants in this research identify as both queer and sex workers, identities that are (implicitly) criminalized in the Kenyan context. They live within an environment of economic instability, compelling them to engage in daily economic activities outside of sex work to meet their basic needs. Although the income they typically generate is sufficient for day-to-day survival, it often falls short of covering larger expenditures such as unexpected medical bills. This puts them in the lower (but not lowest) tiers of economic stratifications in Nairobi, along with at least 75 % of the city's population.

Throughout the research process, I have been highly conscious of and reflexive about my positionalities, privileges, and subjectivities vis-à-vis the people I work with. As a researcher from the Global North studying the position of financially vulnerable Kenyan sex workers in the ODA system, it was clear from the outset that I was navigating a context of stark material inequalities. I was highly conscious of the economic differences and the ways in which privilege and marginalization manifest due to intersections of factors including race, class, and geographical location. The opening vignette illustrates how this sensitivity towards issues of positionality, privilege, and difference was not only a vital part of my approach to engaged research but was also repeatedly—sometimes explicitly, often implicitly—expected of me by the sex workers I met during my research. Baruch's question about how the sex worker community can benefit from my research exemplifies this expectation.

Reciprocity, or the dynamics of “giving and receiving”, is a central element in the forging and maintenance of human relations and one of the most important concepts in anthropology (De Regt 2019). Reciprocity as a practice of mutual exchange in fieldwork mitigates the imbalances of power, enabling us to conduct research “with” rather than “on” our participants and to be considerate of the ways in which research engages and benefits them (Pillow 2003). However, discussions of reciprocity have primarily focused on its social and emotional dimensions, with much less attention given to its financial aspects (von Vacano 2019).

In this article, I delve deeper into the complex intersections of money and reciprocity within research relationships marked by material inequalities. My focus is on both the direct and indirect payments researchers make to their interlocutors, and how this can contribute to fostering reciprocal relationships. Such an enhanced understanding is crucial, given that the current lack of discourse disproportionately affects the emotions and actions of scholars conducting fieldwork in contexts of material inequalities. Von Vacano (2019) argues that young scholars, in particular, express feelings of insecurity and uncertainty, grappling with the appropriateness of their actions. Similarly, Lücking (2019) describes how researchers were taken aback, frustrated, and annoyed by their interlocutors' expectations of material support, especially from individuals with whom they have developed close relationships with in the field. The combination of feelings of disillusionment, disappointment, and surprise makes establishing reciprocity a challenging undertaking, highlighting the need for more insight and guidance on this matter.

How can material differences between researchers and interlocutors be bridged, rather than leading to an impasse (Nagar and Geiger 2007), to foster ethical and reflexive research practices that benefit marginalized communities? Furthermore, what insights can we gain from

anthropologists who employ participatory research methods and Community-led Research and Action (CLRA) (see Woensdregt, Rwigi, and van Stapele 2023) to co-create knowledge with communities and collaboratively work towards social change? These are the central questions I aim to address in this article, drawing from my extensive ethnographic and increasingly collaborative research with queer male sex workers in Nairobi, Kenya. I do so with specific focus on the relationships between relatively affluent researchers based in the Global North conducting research with financially vulnerable communities located in the Global South, since this is the position from which I am writing.

The contribution of this article is threefold. Firstly, by critically examining the current discourse surrounding payments to interlocutors within contexts of inequality, it delves into the potential of payments to address inequalities in fieldwork settings and how this might impact anthropological knowledge production. Secondly, by discussing how payments to interlocutors have strengthened my research relationships, it offers the possibility of exploring alternative forms of reciprocity diverging from conventional practices. Simultaneously, it challenges dominant perspectives that view payments in research relationships as taboo. Thirdly, drawing from participatory and CLRA methods, it demonstrates how shifting towards mutual collaboration in research cultivates feelings of increased mutuality and a sense of relatedness and intimate connection that allows my interlocutors and me to build solidarities across our differences in terms of privileges and material inequalities.

The next section begins by addressing the taboo nature of payments in anthropological research. I will then explain how these perceptions impacted my emotional experiences while conducting research with queer sex workers, aligning with the focus of this special issue on examining how researchers' vulnerabilities shape ethnographic knowledge production. Following this, I will illustrate how these emotional insights prompted me to explore alternative forms of reciprocity, concluding with a reflecting on how my evolving approach to collaboration with interlocutors enables me to provide more direct support and care in the context of my research.

Payments as a Dirty Word in Relation to Research Relationships

While reciprocity is a fundamental concept in anthropology, researchers often set clear boundaries regarding financial matters. In debates on field ethics, paying informants for interviews is considered inappropriate, as this may compromise the perceived objectivity of the data. Such payments are frequently framed as akin to "paying for information" and are often considered taboo, contributing to the commodification of data (Colvin 2014). There is a concern that "hiring" respondents could disrupt the field, disadvantaging students and researchers with limited funding (Das and Parry 1983). Additionally, it is implicitly assumed that financial incentives might compromise the quality and authenticity of the collected data. From the perspective of interlocutors, scholars worry that offering money to respondents could lead to increased financial expectations and blur the lines between motivation, voluntariness, and consent (Bungay et al. 2022). From the perspective of researchers, sharing information about their own financial situation is avoided, as this may highlight the often stark material inequal-

ities between researcher and researched (De Regt 2019). As a result of such assumptions, Cheng (2022) concludes that anthropologists rarely discuss the role of money in the field, despite the likelihood that “every researcher who has done fieldwork has a story of money to tell...” (Cheng 2022, 17).

Specifically, regarding reciprocity, direct payments are often viewed as impersonal or inappropriate. Such payments are sometimes interpreted as a form of pay-off or as a gesture of sympathy towards the interlocutor’s living conditions (Lücking 2017). It is suggested that these payments can undermine the personal nature of the ethnographic research relationship, introducing a market logic into the research process. This can lead to what Graeber (2001, 221) refers to as “closed reciprocity”. While open reciprocity is believed to foster emotional and social bonds of ongoing commitment, “closed reciprocity” is thought to result in the termination of social relationships through meticulously calculated forms of monetary compensation (Graeber 2001, 220). Consequently, it is argued, that offering direct payments runs the risk of depersonalizing the relationship and perpetuating power imbalances, thereby reinforcing hierarchies between researchers and subjects.

Following the disciplinary scepticism surrounding direct payments to interlocutors, anthropologists often resort to alternative approaches to “giving back”, to mitigate the inequality between researchers and researched. These approaches may include providing emotional or practical support, recognition, advocacy, labour, and tangible goods such as food or gift cards (Colvin 2014; Lücking 2017). Von Vacano (2019), who conducted research in a context of material inequalities in Indonesia, argues that such alternative efforts to “give back” in research relationships often reflect an idealistic, anti-market bias. The author suggests that while these efforts are well-intentioned, they contribute to the de-economization of research relationships and may not always align with the actual needs of interlocutors. I recognize this in my own research context. Despite being welcomed by the sex workers, from their perspective, these alternatives fall short. They frequently expressed desires to direct financial compensation, as this often makes a more immediate and tangible difference in their lives.

In this article, I call for the unsettling of dominant perspectives that perceive direct payments in ethnographic research as something to be avoided. In developing this argument, I follow anthropologists who theorize how payments can positively shape their research relationships, ethnographic experiences, and anthropological knowledge production more generally. These scholars highlight the functional role of payments in building and maintaining bonds of trust. For example, Cheng (2022) explores interactions with migrant women engaged in sex work and demonstrates how direct payments can facilitate access to the time, space, and experiences of interlocutors. Similarly, Cajas and Perez (2017) describe payments as a strategy for initiating, maintaining, nurturing, and restoring relationships with their interlocutors. De Regt (2019) reflects on the meaning of money in her friendship with a key interlocutor in her research in Yemen, concluding that her financial transactions contributed to their friendship, imbuing it with material significance. Drawing from this body of work, I aim to further problematize the prevailing disciplinary approach to conceptualizing and handling payments in the context of anthropological research. I advocate for the recognition of direct payments as a legitimate and integral component of the research process.

Conducting Research With Queer Male Sex Workers in Nairobi

As briefly stated in the introduction, I have been conducting long-term ethnographic research with a sex worker-led organization (SLO) in Nairobi, Kenya, since 2018. My research heavily relies on participant observation, which has enabled me to build relationships with a core group of around 30 men. In 2018, I also took part in 20 CLRA sessions, during which ten community researchers frequently discussed their everyday lived realities, including sex workers' understanding of and relationships with money. Since I live in Amsterdam, The Netherlands, beyond designated periods of fieldwork, I maintain contact with some of the men through WhatsApp. This allows me to do fieldwork in an online space (Postill and Pink 2012).

The theoretical discussion above highlighted the contentious nature of directly paying participants in research. However, globally, compensating sex workers for their participation in research is widely accepted and even considered an ethical obligation. This practice is grounded in the belief that reimbursement acknowledges the value of sex workers' time and knowledge while helping to offset any potential loss of income incurred during their involvement in research (Reed et al. 2014). Compensating interlocutors is not only part of ethical sex work research, but also something the men in my research consistently demand from me and others.

As part of the SLO, the sex workers in my research frequently interact with researchers and development workers within the framework of ODA system, participating in activities such as workshops or interviews. In exchange for their involvement, sex workers demand allowances and reimbursements, commonly referred to as "stipends" and "transport money". These amounts, typically ranging between 500 and 2000 KES, significantly contribute to their monthly income. In 2018, Cashmama, one of my interlocutors, explained why he expects such compensation: "If they call me... they will pay. Because they have called me, and maybe I had other things to do, so they will pay me for my lunch and transport as well." Drawing from his rationale, I have always compensated participants for their involvement in formal research activities such as interviews and workshops. While this practice familiarized me with directly paying interlocutors, it did not eliminate other concerns and dilemmas regarding money, particularly those arising outside of specific research settings and times.

As I illustrated in the opening vignette, the material inequalities between my interlocutors and me undoubtedly created expectations regarding what I could provide financially. Over the years, I frequently received requests for support, ranging from small needs like lunch, as described above, to significant needs such as hospital bills, bail costs, and rent. In the beginning of my research, each time I received such requests, a knot would form in my stomach, generating anxiety and leaving me uncertain about how to proceed. The requests were typically for modest amounts, so it wasn't a matter of lacking funds. Instead, I felt uncomfortable. Having internalized the disciplinary scepticism towards paying participants, I worried that giving money to some but not to others would disrupt my access to this group. I feared that not responding to interlocutors' requests would sabotage my relationship with them altogether, even though I wanted to stay in touch with them.

Since I understood that money in the context of fieldwork was considered a taboo, I hesitated to discuss this issue with other academics apart from my supervisors. I feared how other researchers would perceive me, and worried that those unfamiliar with the specific context

would view me as compensating participants for information, potentially undermining the authenticity of my access. Unfortunately, some interactions with colleagues substantiated these concerns.

For example, during a summer school focused on fieldwork challenges, I shared my dilemmas related to paying interlocutors for their time and efforts. One student responded with disapproval, accusing me of creating an expectation of payment that could disadvantage less privileged researchers. On another instance, a colleague simplistically suggested that my work was “very easy” because it revolved around compensating respondents. Another academic who similarly worked in an East-African country remained more neutral in her response. While she acknowledged her own experiences, she deemed the subject too intricate to address in her writings. Such encounters made me feel academically vulnerable and hesitant to further share and discuss this issue with others.

Looking back, I realize that I could have sought for information and allies in places I had not considered at the time. However, faced with the silence surrounding this topic, I initially responded by distancing myself from financial requests, often politely ignoring or feigning an inability to pay, reflecting the scenario described in the opening vignette. As my research progressed, however, I felt increasingly uncomfortable with this approach. Restricting my financial support to official research activities while neglecting other urgent needs of my interlocutors mirrored the detachment I often observed among researchers, policy makers, and development workers within the ODA system—something I had criticized for perpetuating a hierarchical status quo between both parties (Woensdregt 2024). I desired a different type of relationship with my interlocutors, one that diverged from their usual interactions with the ODA system. I also perceived our relationships as distinct because they were characterized by their prolonged duration and the blending of personal and professional boundaries. I recognized the imperative to address and proactively manage my emotions regarding payments and sought to develop strategies fostering a more constructive engagement with this issue for both myself and my interlocutors. Discussing this matter with my interlocutors strongly contributed to this position, and I will elaborate on this below.

Can We Talk About Money?

Yaro and I had gotten to know each other in 2018. In 2021, I supported him financially after he experienced a homophobic attack, paying his rent for several months. When he moved back to his village during the COVID-19 pandemic, we continued to talk over Zoom, often on his initiative. Several times, he asked me for financial support afterward. Each time he asked me for money, I could not help but feel disappointed, since it felt like he used our conversations to gain extra money. Interestingly, I had no problem paying for his rent after he experienced the attack. Reflecting on this, it is probably because the situation was extremely urgent, a matter of life and death, which extended our personal relationships. Contrastingly, being asked for a payment after an informal conversation triggered disappointment, as I thought we were developing a personal relationship. Being asked for money challenged my desire to have a relationship based on mutual interest and affection (see also De Regt 2019).

One day, during a discussion about the CLRA research project we conducted and our respective roles within it—I as the facilitator and he as a community-researcher—we touched upon matters of representation. I expressed my occasional insecurity about accurately representing the community in my writings, given the differences between us. His response was, “You stand out exceptionally yes. We always have the notion that whites have money”. While this wasn’t precisely what I had meant, I saw it as an opportunity to discuss the financial aspects of my research relationships with interlocutors. Seeing it as a conversation opener, I asked him:

Can we talk about money? I don’t like to be seen as someone who has money. Of course, I know I have more money than most people in the community, but I don’t like it. It makes me cautious. Are people actually interested or is it only because they think I have more money?

Reflecting on my words, I now recognize a sense of awkwardness and naivety in my approach. I understand that I oversimplified the complexities of research relationships by reducing interlocutors to a binary framework of either being interested in me or “my money”. My words reveal the struggle I experienced in reconciling the material and emotional dimensions inherent in research relationships. They also hint at an assumed equality in my relationship with interlocutors, failing to account for the inherent uneven distribution of resources between myself and my interlocutors that understandably fuel expectations regarding what I can provide to them. Yaro’s answer to my question reflects these expectations:

I think it depends from person to person. It depends on someone’s mindset or their abilities. When I see a white person, let me talk about myself. When I see Lise, I ask myself what opportunity can she offer me because I have the skills, I can apply and make my own money [if I would only have the financial opportunity to do so].

The way Yaro describes how he sees me corresponds to what Chege (2017) termed “family friends” in the context of male beach workers on the Kenyan coast. A family friend in this context is a special friend who holds a special place within the beach workers’ social networks, grounded on stereotypes that the men and their communities hold about *muzungu*, the Swahili term for “foreigner”, which is often used to refer to white people. Mzungus are considered essentially wealthy, understanding, and generous. By seeking family friends, the men in Chege’s study seek to establish economically motivated friendships with foreign tourists, which she understands as livelihood strategies in a context of limited hope.

Whereas Chege’s idea of family friends is rooted in relationships between beach workers and a foreigner, payment requests are also embedded in the Kenyan socio-cultural monetary practice of *ku-toanisha*. Van Stapele (2019) describes how in Kenya, a substantial portion of social interactions is underpinned by monetary transactions. In relationships, the act of giving money is deemed proof of emotional commitment from one person who is more well-off to another. The monetary practice of *toanisha* is widespread among Kenyans and connotes a practice in which one person persuades another to give them a small amount of money to spend on food, drinks, transport, *khat*, and other small items. In general, this practice is associated with relationships between men and women and plays into dominant gender norms of

the male provider and female dependent. However, it can also intersect with class positions and age, allowing some men to also *toanisha* fellow men and even women who are considered older, wealthier and/or otherwise more powerful (see also van Stapele 2019). Applying this to my research context helped me to see that my interlocutors *toanisha* people they consider more wealthy all the time, both foreigners and Kenyans. For example, interlocutors have regular clients they call upon when they are in need of money. In addition, they call upon friends and fellow sex workers in their social networks who are deemed wealthier, even if only momentarily. I started to see that from my interlocutors' perspective, forming a socio-financial connection with me and others entails gaining access not only to financial resources but also to other benefits rooted in social capital, such as networks and opportunities that might otherwise be challenging to attain. Understanding this practice helped me recognize that by asking me to make specific payments, interlocutors strategically positioned themselves vis-à-vis me as a wealthier person to access resources that can help them accomplish short-and long-term goals.

Balancing Reciprocity

Throughout the process of gaining an improved understanding of the role payments play in my research and its relationships, I realized that for a long time, my focus was primarily on how others perceived me rather than on understanding their perspective. I neglected to consider my own position and failed to ask myself what paying interlocutors meant for my research and its relationships.

Upon reflection, I realized that offering direct payments helps me achieve my research goals by strengthening the personal relationships that are at the core of engaged research. While Graeber (2001, 221) suggests that payments introduce a market logic into the process, risking the depersonalization of the relationship and perpetuating power imbalances, I experience that offering direct payments foster access to interlocutors' time, experiences, and perspectives. For example, by paying Yaro for our discussions, I spoke with him frequently. Our conversations also became more personal, providing opportunities for deeper learning about his life and his relationship with others. Similarly, Baruch who occasionally reaches out for modest financial contributions, has now become one of my key interlocutors. When I am in the Netherlands, our almost daily conversations on WhatsApp allow us to stay connected and exchange insights about queer men's lives in Nairobi. The financial contributions I make do not define our conversations, but they do facilitate personal relationships and a sense of intimacy and relatedness that might otherwise be hard to achieve. I learn a lot from our conversations, and I also know that when I come to Nairobi, he will take care of me and accompany me to places where queer sex workers meet and work, which would otherwise be difficult for me to access. In this context, sex workers are not only benefiting from my social capital; I am also leveraging their social capital to achieve my research goals.

At this point, I am uncertain how my research relationships will evolve over time and how the financial aspect will influence them. Experience shows that balancing material imbalances in research relationships is delicate and runs the risk of coming under pressure when payments

cease. For instance, my communication with Yaro has waned since I stopped providing financial assistance. To navigate this balance carefully, I am increasingly moving towards more equitable research engagements with my interlocutors, where they are paid a salary, and we work together as colleagues. This helps to overcome some of the power imbalances between us, although material inequalities persist.

Reimagining Relationships: From Friendship to Collaboration

As the previous section demonstrates, engaging with queer sex workers over the long term, discussing the rationale behind payments, and situating these within a larger socio-political context has deepened my understanding of the economic realities of sex workers realities and facilitated a more nuanced approach to managing payments. Nonetheless, in recent years, I have increasingly grappled with the realization that despite periodically paying and financially supporting interlocutors, the benefits they receive from their involvement in my research remain relatively modest, which feels inadequate considering both their needs and their contributions.

My long-term engagement with queer sex workers has provided me with a deeper understanding of the everyday economic realities they navigate, including their pursuit for economic opportunities. Ongoing reflections on my positionality and privileges have fuelled a desire to make more substantial and lasting contributions to their needs and aspirations. In this sense, I prefer to support them when they engage in economic activities, particularly in small businesses or entrepreneurial ventures with a focus on long-term goals beyond basic necessities. Consequently, I am inclined to make purchases or offer support by buying the products they sell. However, I have learned the importance of maintaining a sense of balance in these situations. For instance, there was an occasion when someone approached me for assistance in starting a grocery shop. Given our longstanding connection, my belief in their potential, and their substantial savings, I decided to complement their funds. Their gratitude was evident, and they expressed the strong opinion not to let this opportunity slip away. This experience reaffirmed my belief in the value of financial support as a means to unlock otherwise inaccessible opportunities. After reviewing their business plan and related documents, I transferred the funds to cover the stall's rent and deposit. Afterwards, I never heard back from him, and I remain unaware of the outcome. While this experience has not deterred me from supporting other interlocutors with similar aspirations, it has taught me to be more strategic when considering larger donations. At the same time, I frequently wrestle with the arbitrary nature of providing financial support to certain interlocutors while not extending the same to others.

In this context, Baruch's question, which I described in the opening vignette—"how can the [sex worker] community benefit from this research?"—has pushed me in trying to become much more inclusive in my research practices. Currently, with regard to my research in Kenya, I am particularly interested in co-creative research projects where I can hire sex workers as co-researchers and collaborate with them. Currently, in collaboration with five key interlocutors, we have developed a CLRA research project that began in June 2024. This project addresses the structural challenge of achieving economic stability for financially vulnerable queer men engaged in sex work in Nairobi. Our goal is to explore pathways to financial auton-

omy and stability for queer men, with a specific focus on queer entrepreneurship. We aim to inspire and provide the broader queer male sex worker community in Nairobi and across Kenya, enhancing their “economic empowerment” as the co-researchers would say.

One of the key principles of this research is that it relies on long-term, sustained reciprocal relationships that are mutually beneficial, facilitated by the combined and generative knowledge and the deepened connections and networks developed among all partners (Cornish et al. 2023). While the project officially started in June 2024, our collaboration began in January 2023 with the design and writing of the research proposal and securing the grant. In the process, instead of engaging in a traditional researcher-participant dynamic, we have established collaborative working relationships. We meet regularly and openly discuss our roles and responsibilities, fostering a sense of trust, openness, and relatedness. This approach creates a space where we can build solidarities across our differences in terms of privileges and inequalities. Concerning the material inequalities, we addressed financial aspects from the outset, setting clear expectations to ensure transparency and clarity. For example, the co-researchers were informed about the budget, participated in its design, and defined their own salaries as part of this process. And now that the project has started, it is evident that such transparency alleviates insecurities around payments on both sides.

Despite advancing towards more collaborative ethnographic approaches, material inequalities between me and my co-researchers continue to exist. In this specific context, I find that rather than striving to fulfil an ideal of a “genuine” research relationship or friendship, collaborative research relationships can foster increased mutuality, a sense of relatedness and intimate connection as we work towards a common goal. This dynamic, in turn, facilitates the co-production of socially relevant anthropological knowledge aimed at social justice and transformation.

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to explore how material differences between researchers and interlocutors can be bridged to foster ethical and reflexive research practices that benefit marginalized communities, such as sex workers. It also examines what can be learned from anthropologists who employ participatory and CLRA methods to collaboratively work with communities towards social change.

The article has addressed the perception of payments as taboo in anthropological research, where direct payments are often viewed as impersonal and potentially undermining the personal nature of ethnographic relationships. This perspective is informed by the notion of “closed reciprocity” (Graeber 2001), which raises concerns about how payments may depersonalize relationships, perpetuate power imbalances, and potentially terminate essential social connections necessary for meaningful ethnographic research.

The experiences described in this article illustrate that, rather than depersonalizing research relationships, payments can indeed strengthen them. The article illustrates how payments facilitate prolonged access to sex workers’ time, experiences, and perspectives, enabling more personal conversations and deeper insights into their lives, including their economic realities.

Additionally, these payments create a space for open discussions about my perceived vulnerabilities regarding financial transactions with my interlocutors. Theoretically, this supports the previously established notion that material aspects are important in developing research relationships (e. g., De Regt 2019; Cheng 2022; Vanderstaay 2005).

The findings provide additional insight into the specific role of payments in relationships with sex workers who are accustomed to a “payment for participation” logic as well as the practice of *toanisha*. These insights explain how the role of the ethnographer is perceived from the standpoint of interlocutors, highlighting their expectations regarding money and payments.

In answering the question of what can be learned from anthropologists who work collaboratively with communities, this article illustrates that shifting towards mutual collaboration—where interlocutors are compensated for their involvement and there is transparency about budgets and salaries—helps to alleviate insecurities around payments. Moreover, such an approach fosters increased mutuality and balanced reciprocity, moving beyond idealized notions of “genuine” research relationships or friendship towards a more equitable engagement.

This article highlighted the difficulties young academics face in discussing payments within academic circles and advocates for greater transparency and dialogue, both among colleagues and with interlocutors. To support young researchers, it is crucial to reconsider and redefine the role of payments in research, particularly in contexts involving economically disadvantaged individuals and communities. Enhanced transparency and open dialogue, where experienced researchers share their experiences and insights regarding the financial aspects of fieldwork, are essential to this effort. Equally important is challenging discourses that maintain neutrality and silence among the economically privileged, recognizing that such silence may serve to perpetuate existing inequalities. Therefore, this article calls for more openness and discussion about these critical issues.

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