

## 5. Considerations on Research with Asylum-Seekers

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This book is grounded in my ethnographic research with asylum-seekers at Projekt DA-SEIN. This ethnography involved a year of recording participant observations, over 75 formal and informal interviews, and many hours of being present, playing games, having conversations, and being attentive to the routines and concerns of Projekt DA-SEIN and the asylum-seekers who participate in the program. Collecting, recording, analyzing, and interpreting the data is a complex task. It requires skill in empirical methods as well as nimbleness and responsiveness to the needs of the research and the dynamic relationships between the researcher, the participants, and the field site. My ethnographic method was responsive to the people and circumstances at Projekt DA-SEIN that were part of my research. The goal of an ethnographic project is to create a “thick description” of a cultural group, in this case asylum-seekers at Projekt DA-SEIN. I sought to understand how Projekt DA-SEIN operates and how aspects of home are experienced, discussed, and thematized at the program. Because “thick descriptions” are both descriptive and interpretive, they represent the observed community from the perspective of both the participant and the researcher.<sup>1</sup> As John W. Creswell writes, “[An ethnography] is a holistic cultural portrait of the group that incorporates the views of the participants (emic) as well as the views of the researcher (etic).”<sup>2</sup> While my method prioritized the experiences of the program participants, it also accounted for the role and impact of the researcher. This is a relational ethnography that grounds research in relationships; prioritizes listening and presence alongside gathering data; and considers the social, political, and interpersonal dynamics of research. I draw on three tools to develop this model of relational ethnography: migration research, reflexivity, and collaborative inquiry.

Migration research provides protocols for working with vulnerable and marginal populations that account for their agency, preferences, and participation in the project. Migration research advocates for practicing care and deference when

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1 John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 2nd ed. (Sage Publications, 2007), 217.

2 Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, 72. See also: Elizabeth A. Munz, “Ethnographic Interview,” in *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods*, ed. Mike Allen (SAGE Publications, 2017), 455–57, <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781483381411>.

conducting research with migrant populations, going slowly, shifting research approaches, and abandoning lines of inquiry depending on circumstances and impact. Reflexivity is an ongoing consideration of how the researcher's perceptions and presence impact the project, and it makes the researcher's involvement and influence more explicit.<sup>3</sup> The data of ethnographic inquiry is mediated by the perspectives, interests, and questions of the researcher. The researcher's social and personal background, academic training, beliefs, and motivations influence how a research project is approached, what questions are asked, and how answers are interpreted. The practice of reflexivity sheds light on the assumptions a researcher brings, the gaps in their knowledge, and their possible misunderstandings and even failures. Collaborative inquiry considers the relationship between and the interactions of researcher and participant as factors that contribute to the resulting data. It challenges the assumed hierarchy of researcher and research subject in order to highlight the ways knowledge is co-produced. It also considers how research subjects shape ethnographic data through their perspectives and reflections as well as how their knowledge is communicated, heard, recorded, and received. Establishing a relationship between researcher and participant both facilitates the research and impacts the information and data collected. Drawing on these three threads, this chapter describes a relational ethnographic approach, how it shaped my project and resulting data, and its relevance to future practical theological projects.

## 5.1 Research in the Context of Migration

Working across languages, cultures, and socio-economic groups adds urgency and complexity to a research project. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith writes in *Decolonizing Methodologies*, “[R]esearch is not an innocent or distant academic exercise but an activity that has something at stake and that occurs in a set of political and social conditions.”<sup>4</sup> These conditions are heightened when working with marginal and vulnerable populations and in situations with distinct and institutionalized power imbalances. Techniques of ethnographic research must deeply consider what is ethical, logistically possible, and appropriate for the larger context of people's lives.

This ethnographic project was situated amid the concrete power dynamics of asylum-seeking and involved those in the vulnerable circumstance of applying for asylum. These circumstances could not be treated merely as a context for the data

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3 To see an example of how reflexivity is iterative and can change research design, see: Jun Li, “Ethical Challenges in Participant Observation: A Reflection on Ethnographic Fieldwork,” *The Qualitative Report* 13, no. 1 (1 March 2008), <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2008.1608>.

4 Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (Zed Books, 1999), 5.

and research methods, for they constituted the lived reality that framed all my interactions with the asylum-seekers. Often when working with marginalized communities, the interactions of researcher and participant are not confined to the research topic. I knew about the challenges of the participants' asylum applications, about their families' health and well-being, about what they once were, and about what they hoped to become. As migration scholars Ilse van Liempt and Veronika Bilger write in *The Ethics of Migration Research Methodology*, "After all, the position of researcher vis-a-vis refugees may not be so different from that of a humanitarian field worker."<sup>5</sup> Asylum-seekers interact with many people, from staff at migration offices and non-profits to curious citizens wanting to learn about their stories for school projects or radio programs. Each of these interactions may be motivated by a different goal but may not appear different to the asylum-seeker who is fielding (often repeated) questions about their reasons for fleeing or their experiences adapting to the country where they have arrived. My participation was not always measurably different from that of other volunteers.

I was not simply a researcher; I was a German teacher, confidant, game partner, and fellow cook. Immersing myself in the context of my research by volunteering at Projekt DA-SEIN meant that I was a part of a program dedicated to creating relationships across difference. The experience of entering the Projekt DA-SEIN space, either in the garden area or the kitchen, was characterized by arriving and entering a different kind of place. As I put down my backpack, took off my coat, and greeted the first people I saw, I transitioned to a different world, apart from the bustle of the city or the deadlines of my academic work. I entered a space that was not defined by transaction or accomplishment. Instead, it was defined by presence. Simply showing up was the work. In this way, everyone who participated was a central part of the program. Aside from people who came to offer one-time workshops or help with special events, volunteers and participants co-created a space of learning, exchange, and community-building. Each person played a role in shaping the place of Projekt DA-SEIN, even while they occupied unique roles and had different goals for participating in the program.

For me, the most important factor in securing interviews was my relationship to the potential interview partner. Securing formal interviews grew out of my involvement with the program as a volunteer. By building relationships through regular participation, I was able to establish rapport, gain trust, and grow connections. I spent time hanging out and being with asylum-seekers at Projekt DA-SEIN, often holding my specific goal of understanding home loosely. My approach was to first

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5 Veronika Bilger and Ilse van Liempt, "Introduction: Methodological and Ethical Concerns in Research with Vulnerable Migrants," in *The Ethics of Migration Research Methodology: Dealing with Vulnerable Immigrants*, ed. Ilse van Liempt and Veronika Bilger, eds., (Sussex Academic, 2009), 5, <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.18427157.4>.

get to know participants and build connections. Trust is a key factor in any interview situation, and it is even more important in situations where interview partners occupy a marginal or vulnerable social status. Van Liempt and Bilger document the complexity of overcoming mistrust in their study of migrants who have experience smuggling. “Upon arrival, asylum hearings or restrictive regulations create a culture of suspicion that makes the migrants generally mistrustful again while being continuously mistrusted and intensively questioned from many sides themselves.”<sup>6</sup> This culture of mistrust and constant questioning was evident in my work at Projekt DA-SEIN. Asylum-seekers are categorized by their country of origin, their reasons for fleeing, and the details of their journeys. This categorization occurs with bureaucratic institutions, NGOs and assistance programs, and curious individuals, including volunteers and visitors at Projekt DA-SEIN. Telling their stories is expected, and even required, due to their circumstances as asylum-seekers.

Thus, the stakes are very high for participating in interviews. When I raised the topic of interviews, responses included trepidation, nervousness, skepticism, frustration, and sadness. Often it was unclear if it was the interview itself or the content that evoked these affective responses. Stories about fleeing and seeking asylum are often embedded in trauma and connected to the pressures of the asylum process, and they serve as reminders of what has been lost. In addition, these stories are often personal, and the details of asylum-seekers’ lives are already more public than those of other people’s lives. Rarely am I asked to give reasons for why I have chosen to move or pursue a certain life path, and I am not repeatedly asked to recount my distressing life events. The external lens brought by interviewers is often focused on the lives and stories of those who have experienced loss, pain, and marginalization. Researchers, and curious individuals, can bring assumptions of entitlement to hear others’ stories of pain, loss, and oppression. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, scholars of Indigenous and Ethnic Studies, argue that extracting and retelling “pain narratives” from marginal communities can reinforce hierarchies and reduce asylum-seekers to objects of curiosity.<sup>7</sup> There is a balance in the desire to both engage non-dominant perspectives and honor the agency and dignity of the holder of the story.

At my volunteer orientation, I was cautioned against asking directly about asylum-seekers’ journeys to Switzerland and their reasons for leaving.<sup>8</sup> This line of

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6 Veronika Bilger and Ilse van Liempt, “Methodological and Ethical Dilemmas in Research among Smuggled Migrants,” in *The Ethics of Migration Research Methodology: Dealing with Vulnerable Immigrants*, ed. Ilse van Liempt and Veronika Bilger (Sussex Academic, 2009), 122, <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.18427157.9>.

7 Eve Tuck and K. W. Yang, “R-Words: Refusing Research,” in *Humanizing Research: Decolonizing Qualitative Inquiry with Youth and Communities*, ed. Django Paris and Maisha T. Winn (Sage Publications, 2014), 223, <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781544329611.n12>.

8 Participant Observation by Katherine Kunz, Basel, Switzerland, February 8, 2018: 20180208\_DA-SEIN\_v1\_PO, Pos. 3.

questioning is potentially unwelcome to asylum-seekers for several reasons. First, these topics are likely to include traumatic memories they may not wish to tell. Fleeing as a traumatic event is noted by psychotherapists and art therapists who worked with volunteers and asylum-seekers. Second, the stories of why and how asylum-seekers fled must be told repeatedly in official asylum interviews. These stories must be deemed “believable” and must sufficiently meet asylum requirements in order to justify their asylum claims.<sup>9</sup> This creates a pressure to tell these stories correctly in the eyes of government decision makers.<sup>10</sup> There is a tension between the marginality of asylum-seeking and the hyper-focus on the refugee experience in the country where they are applying for asylum. Asylum-seekers are both relegated to the margins and subjected to scrutiny through bureaucratic and social systems. Third, curious journalists and individuals often probe, out of personal interest and curiosity about the other, for stories of fleeing. During my time as a volunteer at Projekt DA-SEIN, program participants were asked to share their stories for a radio program, for a student’s school project, and for the purpose of documenting the program’s work as part of its funding application.

Despite these cautions and my attentiveness to not ask directly about fleeing, stories about why asylum-seekers left, the details of their journeys, and their asylum experiences in Switzerland often came up in conversations. During my first day as a volunteer, I spoke at length with an asylum-seeker from Afghanistan who shared the story of his journey to Switzerland, including crossing the Mediterranean by boat from Turkey to Greece.<sup>11</sup> Several men from Eritrea and Nigeria talked about the brutality they endured in Libya and the terror of crossing the Mediterranean to Italy in overcrowded boats.<sup>12</sup> In addition, asylum-seekers often shared reasons for fleeing – including military conscription, war, and limited opportunities for education and work. These stories gave me additional information about what home could or could not provide. Yet, I did not feel that these were my stories to share, and I considered

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- 9 Schweizerisches Arbeiterhilfswerk, “Weiterbildungskurs zum Thema Asylverfahren.”
- 10 Interview by Katherine Kunz, Basel, Switzerland, December 11, 2018: 20181211\_21AS\_FRAU-SEIN\_II, Pos. 3. Some asylum-seekers declined interviews with me because they were focused on their official interviews. One woman told me she was unwilling to do an interview because talking about her “Heimatsland” would be too stressful. In addition, she had been contacted for her second interview but had not yet responded because she was so anxious about the prospect of the interview.
- 11 Interview by Katherine Kunz, Basel, Switzerland, February 15, 2018: 20180215\_2AS\_DA-SEIN\_II, Pos. 11.
- 12 Interview by Katherine Kunz, Basel, Switzerland, March 15, 2018: 20180315\_18AS\_DA-SEIN\_II, Pos. 1; Interview by Katherine Kunz, Basel, Switzerland, September 6, 2018: 20180906\_15AS\_DA-SEIN\_II, Pos. 19–20; Interview by Katherine Kunz, Basel, Switzerland, October 29, 2018: 20181029\_8AS\_IN, Pos. 102–50.

these narratives as having been shared in the context of vulnerability, trust, and relationship-building.

These examples illustrate the delicate ethical considerations of conducting research in the context of migration. Due to the precarious legal, emotional, and physical situation of many asylum-seekers, these ethical considerations are necessary even when conversations and interactions appear mundane. Asylum-seekers' lives, including access to basic resources, can be dramatically impacted by asylum decisions as well as by the perspectives of the community where they arrive. To account for the ethical dimensions of power and agency, researchers often use flexible and adaptive methods when building relationships with vulnerable populations. Reflexivity is one corrective that has emerged to address the ways imbalances between researcher and research subject may cause harm, further colonial and racist agendas, and lack empathy and consideration for the precarious personal and systemic circumstances that impact individual lives.<sup>13</sup>

## 5.2 Participant Observation

I spent 12 months (from February 2018 to January 2019) as a volunteer at Projekt DA-SEIN observing and recording the rhythms of the program and the interactions between staff, volunteers, and asylum-seekers. Projekt DA-SEIN is built on the participation of both asylum-seekers and Swiss volunteers. It is not primarily a service program, but an opportunity for different communities in Basel to interact, with a parallel goal of assisting asylum-seekers in finding connection and a sense of home in Basel. Volunteers not only assist with practical aspects of running the program, but also, more significantly, build relationships through daily interactions with program participants. By becoming a volunteer, I took on the role of participant while also enacting my role as researcher. In ethnographic parlance, I engaged as a participant-observer, participating in the community while also researching and collecting data on what I observed and experienced. I was both a member of the program, participating in daily tasks and interactions, and a researcher, noting and recording my observations.<sup>14</sup> While this created some tension, I primarily focused externally on my role as a volunteer while at the program. An observer can never *not* be present, even while minimizing their involvement. I occasionally jotted down

13 James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, 13th ed., A School of American Research Advanced Seminar (University of California Press, 2005). Also: Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*.

14 There is a necessary balance between participation and observation in any study. If the researcher becomes overly identified or invested in the field, they can lose the necessary distance for analysis and reflection. If the researcher maintains too much distance, there is a risk of not being close enough for accurate observations and understanding.

thoughts or mentally noted something I wanted to remember. After my volunteer shifts, I recorded my observations as field notes. At the beginning of my time as a volunteer at the program, I spent time learning the basics of the program and how things operated, introducing myself to people, and sharing stories.

As I became a familiar presence, I settled into the rhythms and found myself experiencing the program not only as a researcher and volunteer, but also as a community member. My participant observations took place primarily during my weekly volunteer sessions. As a volunteer I did not have a particular role or assignment while I was there. I engaged in conversation; played games; helped with German homework; shopped for, prepped, and cooked the daily meal; shared meals, snacks, and tea; helped with maintenance and cleaning; worked on projects, including art and sewing projects; discussed upcoming events; played with children; and participated in *Input Sessions*, short teaching sessions about a topic relevant to life in Switzerland for asylum-seekers. In addition, I conducted participant observation during special events such as the seasonal festivals hosted by the program. Both the summer and fall festivals took place while I was there and, at the fall festival, I led a workshop around the topic of home. I also participated in outings organized by Projekt DA-SEIN, including hiking excursions and attending local cultural events. I attended monthly volunteer meetings, trainings, and planning sessions, where I conducted participant observations. I sometimes met refugees and asylum-seekers informally, either because we encountered each other in Basel or because we made plans to attend local events together, such as the Swiss National Day celebration.

Projekt DA-SEIN is unstructured, and the flow of each day is impacted by who shows up, what was happening in their lives, and more mundane factors such as weather, available food, and cultural, religious, or social events. This “hanging out” or “being there” quality is a defining feature of the program, as reflected in the program’s name: *DA-SEIN*.<sup>15</sup> This quality of hanging out became an important framework within my research, as it allowed me to integrate observations and participation and to build relationship. As I moved from participant observation to interviews, the relational aspects of building rapport and being with people in unstructured ways set the stage for how I engaged in formal interviews. I spent time talking and being with over 50 asylum-seekers (that I could identify by name) during my year volunteering at Projekt DA-SEIN. These conversations and interactions helped me develop a deeper understanding of the context of asylum-seeking, build relationships that led to interviews, and shape questions that I asked in interviews.

My goal was to collect data in order to accurately document the community, yet I also brought my own perspectives, experiences, and background to the research project. These included sensitizing concepts of home developed through my

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15 Graeme Rodgers “‘Hanging Out’ with Forced Migrants: Methodological and Ethical Challenges,” *Forced Migration Review* 21 (2004): 48.

research, my political and social views on migration, and my own experiences of home and migration. My sense of home is influenced by my family of origin and my experience of moving every few years throughout my childhood. As the daughter of a U.S. Army officer, I lived in both the U.S. and Germany during the Cold War and confronted the physical and political realities of borders and migration on a daily basis.

Therefore, my interviews and conversations about home took place in a context where both I and the asylum-seekers were migrants. I am not Swiss, I had grown up elsewhere, and I had only a temporary residence permit. (My permit, L, was for a short-term, one-year stay.) Because of the context of our interactions, even without asking about home, we often discussed country of origin, reasons for being in Switzerland, and stories of family. In addition, as newcomers, we often shared our impressions of Switzerland, our challenges with the local language and the cost of living, our life in the countries we left, and when we might go back. Asylum-seekers asked me about home or brought up the topic, unprompted by me. Unlike Swiss volunteers, these conversations assumed a shared context of being away from home. This shared context was supported by the environment of Projekt DA-SEIN, where different backgrounds were common.

Yet, our contexts of migration differed in significant ways. Any research, but especially one with marginalized populations, must contend with issues of power. I was aware of my own position of privilege on several levels, including my migration status and the benefits the interview would afford me in my goal of completing my doctoral dissertation. I am a woman of European descent with an American passport and a college degree. I am fluent in English and German and grew up with relative personal security for myself and my family. While I also jumped through numerous hoops to secure my one-year visa to live and study in Switzerland, my interactions with and reliance on the Swiss migration office were vastly different than the interactions and reliance of those applying for asylum. I could reasonably expect to maintain basic freedoms, economic security, and choices in my life, regardless of the decision of the migration authorities. In addition, I had language, economic, educational, and political capital to influence and advocate for myself to these authorities.

Reflexivity assumes that data is interpreted differently by different people, depending on their backgrounds, perspectives, experiences, and commitments.<sup>16</sup> It considers the role of the researcher in the data and research context. Someone with different characteristics may receive and interpret the data differently. In *Qualitative Data Analysis*, Ian Dey explains the importance of reflecting on the role and context of the researcher:

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16 Robert M. Emerson, Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes* (The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 151.

[I]t is often essential to regard the researcher as part of the context being studied. This is obviously relevant in interviews, where the respondent is responding to some sort of stimulus on the part of the interviewer. It is also relevant in observational research where the researcher interacts socially with the subjects of the study. How subjects perceive and respond to the observer can then have a significant effect on what they say or do. The researcher's own actions and perceptions therefore become part of the social interaction, and need to be observed and analysed as such.<sup>17</sup>

My interactions with asylum-seekers at Projekt DA-SEIN impacted my research as much as the questions I asked. Had we interacted in a more formal setting, such as a legal aid office or a training school, our interactions and the data collected would likely have been different. Or if another program volunteer, such as a Swiss citizen or a staff member, engaged in this research, perceptions by asylum-seekers as well as the quality of interactions would also have differed. My presence at Projekt DA-SEIN as a scholar from the United States influenced the research project. Asylum-seekers perceived me in certain ways based on my migration history, language ability, and interpersonal dynamics, and their responses reflected assumptions or perspectives about me.

Ethnography relies heavily on the researcher's participation, including their positions, viewpoints, and social location. This reflexivity is an ongoing process of self-reflection that aims to understand how social location, assumptions, preferences, and perspectives influence the research process and resultant data.<sup>18</sup> It seeks to make implicit motivations, beliefs, and biases more explicit.<sup>19</sup> As an ethical practice in research, reflexivity asks who benefits from the research and how as well as how the data is organized and why.<sup>20</sup> When organizing and presenting

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- 17 Ian Dey, *Qualitative Data Analysis: A User-Friendly Guide for Social Scientists* (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2005), 116.
- 18 Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, 218.
- 19 Tone S. Kaufman, "Normativity as Pitfall or Ally?," *Ecclesial Practices* 2, no. 1 (2015): 92–93, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22144471-00201006>. As Kaufman writes: "I propose that attending to precisely reflexivity might change our initial, naïve normativity from an implicit to an explicit normativity."
- 20 For an exploration of reflexivity as ethics, see: Boguisa Temple, "Watch Your Tongue: Issues in Translation and Cross-Cultural Research," *Sociology* 31, no. 3 (1997): 607–18, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038597031003016>; Eve Tuck and K. W. Yang, "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1 (2012), <https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/des/article/view/18630>; Marilyns Guillemin and Lynn Gillam, "Ethics, Reflexivity, and 'Ethically Important Moments' in Research," *Qualitative Inquiry* 10, no. 2 (2004): 261–80, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800403262360>; Lindsay Baker et al., "Recognizing and Responding to Ethically Important Moments in Qualitative Research," *Journal of Graduate Medical Education* 8, no. 4 (2016): 1, <https://doi.org/10.4300/JGME-D-16-00384>.

research, the researcher acts as a translator, making sense out of empirical data in conversation with relevant theories. This translation and organization occur within the complexity of the researcher's own experiences and assumptions. For me, this included my own experiences of home and migration, a sensitizing concept of home, my theological and sociological training, and my interactions with asylum-seeking at Projekt DA-SEIN.

### 5.3 Interviews

I conducted two types of interviews in my research – formal and informal. Formal interviews were scheduled, took place one-on-one, and followed a standard series of questions. These interviews were arranged during my time at the program, scheduled in collaboration with the interview participants, and conducted with a common set of questions and methods. Informal interviews occurred during unscheduled interactions, could involve multiple people, and did not follow a standard set of questions. These interviews often occurred during volunteer shifts and were sometimes revisited or picked up again at later meetings.

I conducted 67 informal interviews with 44 individuals, including asylum-seekers and refugees (32), volunteers (4), and staff (8). The 55 informal interviews with asylum-seekers represented 32 people, including 5 women and 27 men, ranging in age from 21 to over 50.<sup>21</sup> The religious backgrounds of those I interviewed were Islamic (both Sunni and Shi'a), Orthodox Christian, Catholic, Alevite, and atheist or agnostic. Their countries of origin were Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Tibet, Turkey, Eritrea, Sudan, Nigeria, and Algeria. Their residency status was usually that of an "N" or "F" visa, but there was at least one person with a "B" visa and one person who was not eligible for a residency permit due to the Dublin accord.<sup>22</sup> Some asylum-seekers I interviewed or spoke with throughout the year started with "N"

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21 In both my formal and informal interviews, I spoke with a greater number of men than women. This was due to several factors. First, more men than women applied for asylum in Switzerland. These proportionally fewer women were less likely to attend Projekt DA-SEIN. The reasons for this were cultural as well as circumstantial. Many women had more household and childcare responsibilities, which made them less available. In addition, when I arrived in February, a parallel program targeting women opened at the Offene Kirche Elisabethen on another day of the week. Part of the reason for opening this parallel program was that women did not always feel comfortable or welcome by men who attended the program, particularly those from the same cultural or national backgrounds. This was relayed to me by at least one woman I spoke with. In addition, this reasoning was given during an Input Session about gender relations. Women felt uncomfortable due to comments about their dress or other interactions, therefore they created a day specifically for women.

22 For more on the designations of these visas, see Chapter 3, section 3.4.

visas and during my time there received a response to their asylum application, which was usually a negative decision or an “F” visa. Because of limited opportunities for employment and schooling and the need to learn German, Projekt DA-SEIN attracted a proportionally larger number of asylum-seekers with “N” permits or recently acquired “F” permits (usually these people had been in Switzerland three or fewer years). My research, including formal and informal interviews, focused on those in the early stages of the asylum process.

Informal interviews often occurred during volunteer shifts at the program or related events. There was ample space to sit at tables, indoors or outdoors, or in separate corners in order to converse and share stories. Informal interviews were sometimes interrupted by planned events or meals, invitations to play games or help with German, or being joined by other program participants. At the same time, the unstructured nature of these conversations meant they could stretch out and cover multiple topics. Other times informal interviews occurred at program events or at scheduled or unscheduled encounters outside of the program. Walking, swimming, or hanging out often takes place at the Rhine River, a central and popular physical and social center of Basel, and this was a common place where both formal and informal interviews occurred.

I conducted 16 formal interviews with 15 different people: 8 asylum-seekers, 4 volunteers, and 2 staff members of Projekt DA-SEIN. I selected interview participants who had some involvement in the Projekt DA-SEIN program and were at an early stage in the asylum process, with either “N” or “F” permits. Five had “N” permits and were either waiting for an initial asylum decision or had received a negative initial decision (of the five, one had received a negative decision). Three interviewees had an “F” permit, which grants an individual provisional residence even when they have been denied formal refugee status. In addition, I did not know the migration status of one interviewee, while another had started with an “N” permit and, during my time in Switzerland, was subsequently granted an “F” permit. I interviewed a diversity of participants based on categories of place of birth and/or ethnicity. The asylum-seekers were from Afghanistan (3), Eritrea (2), Syria (1), Pakistan (1), and Turkey (1). Their ages ranged from 21 to mid-30s, and all were men. Their religious backgrounds were Muslim, Orthodox Christian, or Alevite. Their current religiosity varied, with some following strict religious protocols and some being atheist or non-practicing. Most of them spoke more than one language, even before arriving in Switzerland, and their first languages were Kurdish, Uzbek, Persian, Tigrinya, Tigre, and Pashto.

My four formal interviews with program volunteers were with two women and two men, ranging in age from their early 20s to 80. While they all were born and grew up in Switzerland, two had migration backgrounds, including one who was a permanent resident (C-visa) and not a citizen of Switzerland. Their first languages were Swiss German, and they were also fluent in Standard German as a second language,

which was what the interviews were conducted in. One interviewee was Protestant Christian and the other three were Roman Catholic by background. Again, their current religiosity varied but they all expressed some continued connection to Christian practices and the church. They had volunteered at the program between one and two-and-a-half years.

### 5.3.1 Building Relationships

The interviews in my study purposefully grew out of the time I spent at the program talking, cooking, practicing German, and playing games. I did not begin my formal interviews until I had been a weekly volunteer at the program for five months. This initial period of learning about the program, hearing stories, and familiarizing myself with the background and cultures of participants was critical preparation for conducting interviews. This was especially true given the context of asylum-seeking, where building trust and rapport is especially critical. Migration scholars have noted the importance of taking time to show up and be part of migrants' contexts. Psychologist Joan E. Sieber's writing on ethics in empirical research argues: "Researchers who are unprepared to understand the culture of the refugees they seek to study and to gain their trust via relationships with trusted gatekeepers are quickly out of their depth – even in their own country."<sup>23</sup> From the viewpoints of migrants, even apparently familiar contexts may not be experienced as familiar. Their realities are shaped by their often precarious circumstances. Research and relationships are grounded in trust. This trust must exist between advisors, universities, research partners, and, most significantly, research participants. Even if the circumstances that separate individual experiences are difficult to reconcile, the act of presence centers relationships and experiences of mutuality.

In my research I became familiar with Projekt DA-SEIN and its participants by showing up, being present, and participating in the program. I built relationships, got to know some of the regular guests, and became a "regular" volunteer myself. I became familiar with the structure of the program and some of the reasons people attended. I gained knowledge about the refugee and asylum process, listened to the stories and experiences shared by asylum-seekers and volunteers, and participated in the daily life of the program. By becoming part of the daily life of the program, I built trust and established relationships. Without taking this time, I would not have established the rapport to engage in in-depth interviews. In addition, I would not have gained the knowledge I needed to approach my research participants with nuance and sensitivity. While some of my interview partners may have participated in

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23 Joan E. Sieber, "Refugee Research: Strangers in a Strange Land," *Journal of Empirical Research on Human Research Ethics* 4, no. 3 (2009): 1–2, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jer.2009.4.3.1.2>.

interviews with people they did not know as well, and while many did other interviews with some frequency; the content, tone, and results of the interviews I conducted were shaped by my involvement at Projekt DA-SEIN and the relationships I established at the program.

While this familiarity with the program and these established relationships enabled my interviews, the interviews were not without complications. As van Liempt and Bilger note, there can be different motivations for building relationships, and it is important to be aware of issues of power and other motivating factors, such as interviewees wanting to be friends or romantic partners or wanting legal help or advice.<sup>24</sup> If I had a sense that an individual wanted something from me, either directly or indirectly, it was preferable to avoid doing an interview with them. Navigating boundaries added complexity to my research methodology and demanded greater reflexivity regarding my own social location, assumptions, and perspectives. In my time at Projekt DA-SEIN, I wrestled with my own guilt and limitations in helping asylum-seekers. I struggled with a sense of responsibility to my interview partners, due to the unequal power and privilege in our relationship. I wanted to avoid the presumption that I was “using” their stories and these relationships only for my research goals. I raised this question at the volunteer supervision meeting I attended. The psychologist leading the session, as well as other volunteers, emphasized that being present and sharing stories are powerful ways to show up in another’s life. Yet I often wondered if being present to their stories was enough, especially as I witnessed struggles with bureaucracy, language, and money.

In addition, stories of fleeing were embedded in the history of the countries they left. This included colonial implications in places like Afghanistan. Many of the circumstances under which asylum-seekers had to flee allow for advantages in my own life. As a man reflected about the situation in Syria, “There are advantages for everyone, well, not everyone, but for the powerful, when the war continues and when they can sell weapons and get cheap oil and gasoline. This has advantages for places like the U.S., Russia, and Great Britain.”<sup>25</sup> The politics in Africa and the Middle East are complex and entrenched in systems that, for some, create the need to flee and, for others, provide security and resources. I was repeatedly reminded that the lives of asylum-seekers hang in a balance, in ways that mine does not, despite our shared fundamental vulnerability.<sup>26</sup> Yet it was from places of shared humanity that relationships were built. We played games, such as dominos and Uno, and cheered when we won and laughed when we lost. We shared stories of our favorite food, often over

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24 For more discussion on these challenges, see: Bilger and van Liempt, “Methodological and Ethical Dilemmas,” 128.

25 Interview by Katherine Kunz, Basel, Switzerland, September 3, 2018: 20180903\_6AS\_NO, Pos. 13.

26 Bieler, “Verletzlichkeit.”

meals cooked together. We played music we liked, on instruments or streamed on phones, while washing dishes. We considered whether the weather was favorable for outings, we discussed family we missed, and we offered advice on everything from the merits of different training programs in Basel to fashion and sports. These conversations and interactions were the work of being in the place of Projekt DA-SEIN, and therefore the work of the research.

### 5.3.2 Saying Yes

When I first started asking individuals if they would be interested in doing an interview with me, the experience was awkward due to my nervousness and eagerness. I often jumped in too quickly, making a rushed transition from chopping onions to talking about an abstract university project. This led to some confusion and the need for clarification. People I approached often wanted to know why I was interested in doing the interview, what I would do with the material, and how they could be helpful. There was also confusion about the context of the interview. Many said we could talk about the topic at any time, thinking my request was a conversation topic suggestion, rather than a scheduled and structured interview as part of a research project. Establishing the context for an interview involved negotiation, conversation, and clarification.

One hurdle to setting up interviews was the word “interview” itself, which can raise particular associations for asylum-seekers. The asylum process involves two high-stakes interviews to determine if they meet the criteria for asylum.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, an interview is not a neutral event, power, safety, and agency are all at stake, and thus it is often a high-stress event. In addition, being “unbelievable” (*Unglaublich*) during the asylum interview process is the most common reason that asylum applications are denied. The two official state interviews are the only chances for asylum-seekers to communicate the legitimacy and veracity of their claims. In this context, the word “interview” is easily associated with the vulnerability and precariousness of asylum-seeking.<sup>28</sup> In order to build trust, I shifted my language away from the word “interview” to disassociate it from more negative interview experiences. I used other words, such as “conversation” or “discussion” in my requests. I also allowed for longer conversations leading up to interview requests or the actual interview in order to build trust around the process. I also emphasized during the interview that there was nothing participants had to tell me, there was no obligation to share particular stories or information. Unlike in their asylum interviews, they were free to answer according to their own level of comfort and to withhold information.

27 For more information on these interviews, see Chapter 3, section 3.4.

28 Guillemin and Gillam, “Ethics, Reflexivity, and ‘Ethically Important Moments’ in Research,” 256.

Only a few people agreed to the interview on my first invitation. Most appeared skeptical, not saying no, but not agreeing. Often, I had to ask multiple times, over several meetings, for an interview. Each time, I engaged in a conversation about my project's structure and the participant's potential role. Those who were most willing to do the interview were also most familiar with me and the context of my request. Some knew about the project because of previous conversations, or they had experience with research or with interviews beyond those associated with their migration experience. If they had studied at a university, they tended to understand the context of my request more easily. Some were also personally interested in my research topic and wanted to discuss it at greater length, and others wanted to be helpful to me. Some were willing to do the interview because they wanted to practice their language skills, either English or German. Many refugees are highly attuned to the practical skills they need to acquire and the official requirements they need to meet in order to build a life in Switzerland. English, while not a requirement, was often viewed as a valuable skill and, for those who learned English before, there was a desire to practice it.<sup>29</sup> Sometimes a volunteer or other program guest recommended someone to me for an interview. There were complex motivations embedded in these interactions, making the reasons for doing an interview multi-layered.

Of those who agreed, several told me they were willing to an interview with me because they knew me and we had a relationship. I met an asylum-seeker from Afghanistan on my first day volunteering at the program. At this first meeting he shared personal stories about his family and his struggles in coming to Switzerland. Over the next few months, I interacted with him frequently as it became clear that he was a key member of the Projekt DA-SEIN community. Despite his apparent openness to sharing information, based on this first conversation and subsequent interactions, it took several conversations to schedule an interview. The day before our interview, he took me aside and explained that he was willing to do the interview with me only because he already knew and trusted me, but he did not want to be available to everyone in this way.<sup>30</sup> This caution around doing an interview was something I assumed in every interview, even when the interviewee did not express this directly. There is a vulnerability in the migration status of asylum-seekers, and inquiries about home, family, and coming to Switzerland delve into this vulnerable territory.

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29 This sometimes clashed with Projekt DA-SEIN's official policy of speaking only Standard German (*Hochdeutsch*).

30 Interview by Katherine Kunz, Basel, Switzerland, July 4, 2018: 20180704\_2AS\_II, Pos. 3.

### 5.3.3 Saying No

Having established a relationship with someone did not guarantee that they would grant me an interview. Several refugees declined to do an interview with me. A “no” answer was an equally important part of the research process, as it often reflected individual experiences with interviews or expressed choices about who to engage with and how to share personal stories. I never asked for their reasons for declining the interview, as I did not want to indicate that they had to justify their choice. Even so, most asylum-seekers who declined interviews offered some explanation for their refusal. The most common reason given was that they had done so many interviews and they were not interested in doing more. There are no options for asylum-seekers to refuse interviews related to their asylum applications if they want to remain in Switzerland. As discussed earlier, the stakes of the required asylum interviews are very high. There is a pressing need to appear believable and for their stories to convey that they meet asylum standards. Geographers Olimpia M. Valdivia Ramirez, Caroline Faria, and Rebecca Maria Torres explore the relationship between asylum officials and asylum-seekers. They discover that despite the veneer of objectivity in the asylum process, the methods of determining and judging the validity of asylum-seekers’ claims are based on “highly affective and biased state assumptions about asylum-seekers and their motivation.”<sup>31</sup> The explicit question of whether an asylum applicant has a “well-founded fear” is subjective and up to the state actors to determine.<sup>32</sup> In addition, methods of listening focused on centering worthiness and believability are embedded in assumptions based in racial, ethnic, religious, and national identities. It is within this context that asylum-seekers encounter requests for interviews, and these requests can elicit feelings of fear, stress responses, or a protective impulse.

Other reasons for refusing interviews included uncertainty about their language ability, an unwillingness to talk about difficult experiences, or a general frustration with the asylum process. Those who declined interviews were frequently still interested in conversing with me and sharing their experiences, but not in a formal format. Van Liempt and Bilger noted in their research that an asylum-seeker’s refusal to do an interview was not necessarily correlated with a refusal to talk about their migration experiences.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, I discovered that asylum-seekers often wanted to share their experiences even if they did not want to participate in a formal interview.

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31 Olimpia M. Valdivia Ramirez, Caroline Faria, and Rebecca M. Torres, “Good Boys, Gang Members, Asylum Gained and Lost: The Devastating Reflections of a Bureaucrat-Ethnographer,” *Emotion, Space, and Society* 38 (2021): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2020.100758>.

32 Valdivia Ramirez, Faria, and Torres, “Good Boys, Gang Members, Asylum Gained and Lost,” 3.

33 Bilger and van Liempt, “Methodological and Ethical Dilemmas.”

An Eritrean asylum-seeker was one of the first people I asked to do an interview with me. He had talked frequently with me, and in these talks he shared his family situation, the meaning of his name, and work he had done. He immediately declined my request to do an interview, saying that he had already done so many interviews, and he did not want to do more. Several weeks later, a radio program broadcast from Projekt DA-SEIN. They asked for volunteers to say a few words about their experience of the program. Again, the asylum-seeker adamantly refused to speak when the radio producer offered him the microphone. Again, he said had already done so many interviews and was often pressed to do more. He shared a story of a time when someone walked up to him on the street and put a microphone in his face, asking him questions. As he recounted the experience, he appeared visibly upset, emphasizing that he had not welcomed this intrusion. After the radio program host had moved on with the microphone, we continued our conversation about his life and experiences before coming to Switzerland.

Van Liempt and Bilger share similar experiences in their empirical research with refugees, especially those who have experienced human smuggling. The researchers found that many refugees refused to do interviews because of a weariness at being questioned about their experiences, but that they were not necessarily unwilling to talk about these experiences in more informal settings.

Surprisingly, persons did not refuse because he or she did not want to talk about the human smuggling process as such. The decision not to participate was rather related to the fact that these persons had been questioned many times already on their migration process and that they were tired of talking about it again.<sup>34</sup>

This weariness was especially evident when the subject of asylum interviews was raised.

Other program guests gave different reasons for not doing interviews. One person felt he could not adequately express his thoughts on the subject of home in a second language. Another woman refused because her second interview was scheduled for the next week, causing her anxiety. In addition, she told me that thinking about home made her too sad. Others were more forceful in their refusal. One participant, an asylum-seeker from Afghanistan, said he had done interviews before that benefitted the interviewer but left him, still, with nothing. Van Liempt and Bilger encountered this in their research as well. Some migrants refused interviews because of bad experiences they had with previous researchers, or a perception of

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34 Bilger and van Liempt, "Methodological and Ethical Dilemmas," 127. See also: Catriona Mackenzie, Christopher McDowell, and Eileen Pittaway, "Beyond 'Do No Harm': The Challenge of Constructing Ethical Relationships in Refugee Research," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 20, no. 2 (2007), <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/femo08>.

the unequal benefits accrued to the researcher.<sup>35</sup> Denying an interview is often embedded in a larger frustration. An asylum-seeker I spoke with frequently had been denied asylum in several countries and had no easily apparent options to find a place where he could build a life. Migration research is situated within a climate of increased academic and popular interest in refugee issues and experiences. During my time at Projekt DA-SEIN I noticed numerous volunteers and visitors interested in researching asylum-seeking for anything from class projects to collection of official data on migrants. This heightened interest in, and eagerness for access to, the stories of asylum-seekers stands in juxtaposition to the limited power that asylum-seekers have to direct their lives, and especially to influence asylum decisions.

### 5.3.4 Refusal and Agency

In this difficult context of being subject to widespread scrutiny, yet having limited options, refusal and silence can be read as acts of agency. Refusal may be a way for marginalized communities to exercise control over their narratives, including how and when these are told.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, agency is often found in small acts, of which refusing an interview is one example. These acts of agency can be understood as “tactics” in de Certeau’s theory of power in everyday life.<sup>37</sup> Tactics are ways that those with lesser power negotiate meaning and agency by re-purposing more official “strategies,” structures, and systems.<sup>38</sup> Refusing to participate in media interviews or to tell one’s story within the larger national narrative of Switzerland are ways of opting out of these systems. There are three ways that the presumed lack of agency of asylum-seekers is reinforced by researchers: presuming marginalized populations are voiceless until given a voice, focusing on stories of pain and loss, and approaching participants primarily as sources of information.

Many marginalized populations are viewed as “voiceless” until their stories are recorded and shared by journalists, academics, or others. This assumption of voicelessness further removes agency from communities and individuals and reduces their ability to control the distribution of their own stories. It concentrates power with the researcher and privileges researchers’ desires over participants’ desires. Tuhiwai Smith writes about research with indigenous populations in *Decolonizing Methodologies*. This kind of research, she explains, is embedded in a colonial history that “conveys a sense of innate superiority and an overabundance of desire to bring progress into the lives of indigenous peoples – spiritually, intellectually, socially, and

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35 Bilger and van Liempt, “Methodological and Ethical Dilemmas,” 133.

36 Tuck and Yang, “R-Words,” 243.

37 Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 34–39.

38 Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 34–39.

economically.”<sup>39</sup> This motivation is embedded in the history of ethnography is often still present in research projects that hope to help, save, or interpret the lives of those in other communities.

In addition, ethnographic research can overly focus on telling the difficult stories, or “pain narratives,” of the research subject.<sup>40</sup> As noted earlier, at Projekt DA-SEIN I was advised not to ask about stories of fleeing. Even though I intentionally avoided asking about these experiences, the stories I did hear were often embedded in contexts of loss and suffering. The researcher and writer shape how stories are told, and often the narrative of pain acts as a backdrop to the data, even if other angles are present. Tuck, as well as the philosopher and social critic bell hooks and others, challenge this focus on pain in the retelling of narratives in academic research. As Tuck and Yang further argue, while the subaltern can speak, they are only invited to speak their pain, and a politics of recognition built on pain narratives undergirds colonial and racial hierarchies.<sup>41</sup> Hooks describes in *Marginality as a Site of Resistance* (1990) how marginal voices are silenced, even when they are purportedly invited to speak for liberation.<sup>42</sup> There is an implicit instruction: “Do not speak in a voice of resistance. Only speak from that space in the margin that is a sign of deprivation, a wound, an unfulfilled longing. Only speak your pain.”<sup>43</sup> In the official asylum process, the burden of proof lies with the asylum-seeker to demonstrate that they meet the criteria for receiving asylum. As Tuck and Yang argue, the researcher can adopt this perspective of needing to justify the needs of marginalized populations. In doing so, they focus on painful and sometimes humiliating narratives. “Damage-centered researchers may operate, even benevolently, within a theory of change in which harm must be recorded or proven in order to convince an outside adjudicator that reparations are deserved.”<sup>44</sup> This approach demands a focus on “pain narratives” at the expense of other kinds of stories, such as those of refusal and agency. Yet, these alternative perspectives may offer more humanizing research trajectories.

In a similar way, there is a tendency for researchers to “mine” for knowledge in their fieldwork. This practice, conscious or unconscious, treats participants as sources of information, not as complex people and communities. Researchers often presume a right to access these stories due to personal interest, research goals, or a perceived moral imperative. Kakali Bhattacharya calls this approach by the

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39 Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 56.

40 Tuck and Yang, “R-Words,” 228.

41 Tuck and Yang, “R-Words,” 226.

42 hooks, “Marginality as Site of Resistance.”

43 hooks, “Marginality as Site of Resistance,” 343.

44 Tuck and Yang, “R-Words,” 227.

researcher “presumptive agency.” As Bhattacharya explains, “I coined a term, ‘presumptive agency’ to question the researcher’s assumptions about her entitlement to extract information from the participant.”<sup>45</sup> One strategy to balance “presumptive agency” is for the researcher to recognize how agency is shared between the researcher and the participant. This might mean deferring some choices to the research participant, such as choosing the time and location of an interview, deciding on questions they would like to answer, and having open-ended conversations about the research or other topics. Van Liempt and Bilger, in their research with migrants, place a strong emphasis on letting participants guide choices around the interview process from the very beginning. They advocate beginning with periods of listening and adjusting research methods based on the choices of the participants, not on the researchers’ preferred methodologies. With these suggestions they encourage researchers’ willingness to *not* gain access to some information. They name this practice “the researcher’s willingness to leave some ‘stones unturned’ and to learn not to ask further when this is not wanted.”<sup>46</sup> This encouragement by Bhattacharya, to embrace research methodologies that disrupt the “will to know,”<sup>47</sup> might mean that some stories are not told by the academy.<sup>48</sup> Tuck and Yang argue that there are some stories that the academy is not entitled to, that there is “knowledge that the academy doesn’t deserve.”<sup>49</sup> Academic research has its own goals, histories, and biases. It is not endowed with a special privilege to access all stories and information. There may be other more appropriate interventions or values that are not centered in the academy. I found in my own research that not all knowledge and information I encountered was mine to share. There is some information from interviews that I chose not to use due to its delicate content or the context in which it was told. As Tuck and Yang write, “There are also stories that we overhear, because when our research is going well, we are really in peoples’ lives. Though it is tempting, and though it would be easy to do so, these stories are not simply y/ours to take.”<sup>50</sup> Because my research was centered in relationships I built over time, the boundaries between research information and information shared in a personal context was sometimes blurred. It was up to me to decide what was part of my research and what was not. When unsure in what context information was shared, I erred on the side of excluding it over including it in my research. I also excluded information

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45 Kakali Bhattacharya, “Othering Research, Researching the Other: De/Colonizing Approaches to Qualitative Inquiry,” in *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research*, Vol. 30, ed. John C. Smart and Michael B. Paulsen (Springer, 2015), 111, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-9628-0\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-9628-0_3).

46 Bilger and van Liempt, “Methodological and Ethical Dilemmas,” 134.

47 Bhattacharya, “Othering Research, Researching the Other,” 111.

48 Tuck and Yang, “R-Words,” 232.

49 Tuck and Yang, “R-Words,” 232.

50 Tuck and Yang, “R-Words,” 234.

from my research for other reasons, such as a participant's explicit request that certain details not be shared and my own sense that some stories were particularly vulnerable to share. I attempted to hold two goals at the same time, collecting informative data *and* respecting the agency of the participants. This effort attempted to address the power imbalances inherent in research by focusing on listening and relationship-building, recognizing moments of shared agency, and taking refusal as an important research point. By being willing to "leave some stones unturned,"<sup>51</sup> I sought to prioritize relationships, build trust with participants, and develop a more ethical research project.

### 5.3.5 Interview Scheduling

For those who agreed to do interviews with me, scheduling a time and place were the next steps in the interview process. Asylum-seekers still waiting for results of their asylum applications do not have access to the same infrastructure and resources as more established residents. Refugees and asylum-seekers live in shared housing (often sharing rooms) provided by the local government and managed by non-governmental organizations. They receive a limited amount of financial support from the state, do not usually have regular access to computers, often do not have email addresses, and do not have regular schedules. Circumstances vary by person, but in general, scheduling interviews involved considerable negotiation, flexibility, and creativity. Interviews were usually scheduled in person, often after several conversations, or via messaging systems, such as WhatsApp, after the initial in-person conversations.

Even after interviews were scheduled, interview participants sometimes rescheduled their meetings with me. My impression was that they took their commitment to the interview seriously. No one ever missed an interview and those who did reschedule were apologetic. The reasons for rescheduling were usually due to commitments to other people. One interview partner had to help his aunt who had sustained an injury. Another rescheduled in order to accompany another asylum-seeker, whose asylum application had been denied, to meet with a lawyer to appeal the decision.

Being an asylum-seeker in Switzerland means being subject to specific bureaucratic and practical conditions. The refugees' limited material resources, the lack of available meeting spaces at the Offene Kirche Elisabethen, and the fact that I did not have an office meant that the location of our interviews was not immediately obvious. Our interviews were without a fixed location, therefore finding a place for the interview became part of the data-gathering process. Based on the experience of van Liempt and Bilger, I approached these circumstances not as hindrances, but

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51 Bilger and van Liempt, "Methodological and Ethical Dilemmas," 134.

as part of the context and structure of my research. Van Liempt and Bilger often let the interview participant take the lead in choosing the location and context of the interview, including whether it will be recorded and how the questions will be answered.<sup>52</sup> This flexibility considers the interview partner as more than a source of information and as a participant in the research project. For my research, it also allowed for greater curiosity and a broader view about relationships to home in Basel.

I often met my interview partner at the Offene Kirche Elisabethen, as it was a site familiar to both of us as well as how we knew one another. From there, I invited the interview participant to determine the location of the interview. I conducted interviews in parks, at cafes, at libraries, and even on the banks of the Rhine River. Interview locations often emerged from places where my habitual paths overlapped with that of the refugees. My first interview, with an asylum-seeker from Turkey, took place in the cafe at the University of Basel's main library. He mentioned that he had seen me in the library and liked to go there. I selected this site because it was familiar to both of us but also offered some anonymity. I completed three interviews at Projekt DA-SEIN, in the garden outside of the main building and away from the activity of the program. Interviews partially took place when we were "on the way" to the interview location.

Margarethe Kusenbach offers a model for this interview-in-motion, which she calls the "go-along" interview.<sup>53</sup> Kusenbach's method merges phenomenological inquiry with ethnographic research by asking interview partners if she can join them on their daily activities and routines. During these "go-alongs" Kusenbach observes activities while also asking questions about these activities. This method merges observation and interviewing and provides a way to observe spatial practices while also engaging interviewees in shaping the research site.<sup>54</sup>

The go-along method also brings greater phenomenological sensibility to ethnography by allowing researchers to focus on aspects of human experience that tend to remain hidden to observers and participants alike. It makes visible and intelligible how everyday experience transcends the here and now, as people weave previous knowledge and biography into immediate situated action.<sup>55</sup>

While my interviews were more structured than Kusenbach's and did not rely solely on walking, many of Kusenbach's methods applied to my research. Doing some of the interviews "on-the-go" offered me an opportunity to observe participants' interactions with local places. I sometimes asked questions about these specific places.

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52 Bilger and van Liempt, "Methodological and Ethical Dilemmas," 134.

53 Margarethe Kusenbach, "Street Phenomenology: The Go-Along as Ethnographic Research Tool," *Ethnography* 4, no. 3 (2003), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1466613810343007>.

54 Kusenbach, "Street Phenomenology," 463, 474.

55 Kusenbach, "Street Phenomenology," 478.

Other times I observed participants' interactions with places or people we encountered. Locating my interviews in-motion and without a clear location allowed me to engage the question of home in the materiality of the interview, not only in the interview questions.

### 5.3.6 Interview Protocols

Once we arrived at the location of the interview, I introduced the interview context and explained the consent form. I developed the consent form based off Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines from the United States. IRB guidelines establish an independent committee to review research projects and ensure that their methods protect the "rights and welfare of human subjects."<sup>56</sup> My consent form was written in both German and English. Due to varying language skills, I explained the consent form in detail and asked if participants had additional questions. I emphasized how the data would be used, that I would record the conversation, that they would remain anonymous, and that their signature was required on the form.

I also asked if they had questions about the form, and we engaged in conversation about it. Some participants did not have questions about the form of the process and did not seem concerned about the interview and how it would be used. Others wanted to know more about my project and how it would be published. Their questions largely appeared to stem from interest in the research project, how it was set up, and how they could help. All interview participants accepted the copy of the consent form I provided.

Using a consent form in research is necessary to ensure that participants are informed about the research, about how the data they share will be used, and about their right to withdraw from participating. Yet these forms also have the potential to alienate those in marginal circumstances and further cement the roles of researcher and participant. Some researchers working with migrant populations do not insist on signed consent forms.<sup>57</sup> Because of differing literacy levels, as well as cultural associations with signing documents, sometimes verbal agreements are more appropriate. While a consent form was necessary and appropriate for my work, not all migration researchers use consent forms. For example, van Liempt and Bilger often secured only verbal consent in their interviews with migrants. They discovered that written consent forms often made migrants wary and mistrustful of the

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56 U.S. Food and Drug Administration, "Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) And Protection of Human Subjects in Clinical Trials," Center for Drug Evaluation and Research, accessed May 5, 2021, <https://www.fda.gov/about-fda/center-drug-evaluation-and-research-cder/institutional-review-boards-irbs-and-protection-human-subjects-clinical-trials>.

57 See: Mackenzie, McDowell, and Pittaway, "Beyond 'Do No Harm,'" 307; Bilger and van Liempt, "Methodological and Ethical Dilemmas," 131.

researchers.<sup>58</sup> The complications of consent forms became evident for me when participants read and signed the form. Some refugees had not attended school before fleeing their countries of origin and had learned to read and write only when they arrived in Switzerland. Asking participants to write their name and the date was not always a simple request. One interview partner explained that it took him a long time to write his name because he had not learned to write growing up, and this was because he did not go to school.

The consent form also included a place for a pseudonym. I explained that ensuring their anonymity meant that I would use another name when referring to them. I invited them to select a pseudonym for themselves, if they wanted, a practice employed by van Liempt and Bilger in their migration research.<sup>59</sup> Over half of the interviewees selected a name. This became another rich source of insight into cultural naming practices, identity, and associations with home. A Kurdish refugee from Turkey chose the Kurdish name of his hometown. Using the Kurdish name is forbidden in Turkey. Another participant from Afghanistan chose a common name from his region and we talked for several minutes about naming practices in this culture. Some participants did not express concern about their anonymity, and some even said I could use their real name, though I insisted on anonymity in my project.

To begin the interview, I explained the context of my work and my own interest in the research question. This introduction served to situate myself in a more personal way within the research and the conversation and provided a more informal entry point. The disadvantage of introducing my research in this way is that it can potentially shape participants' answers based on how they understand the topic and what they thought I wanted to hear. Yet, this challenge already existed through my involvement as a volunteer at Projekt DA-SEIN. Many already knew about my research project and had engaged me in conversation about it. Therefore, I decided that being transparent about my project as well as my personal connection to the topic was most important to my process.

My interview questions took a semi-structured format. I started the interview by asking one of two open-ended, biographical prompts.<sup>60</sup> "Tell me about 2 or 3 important places in your life. Please think all the way back to when you were young." The second question was "Please tell me about 2 or 3 important people in your life." These questions usually generated an initial story and from there the conversation developed. Towards the end of the interview, I asked a series of questions about specific topics, if they had not already been raised during the interview. These were about the interviewee's relationship to religion, Projekt DA-SEIN, and Basel. In addition,

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58 Bilger and van Liempt, "Methodological and Ethical Dilemmas," 131.

59 Bilger and van Liempt, "Methodological and Ethical Dilemmas."

60 Uwe Flick, *Qualitative Sozialforschung: Eine Einführung*, 8. Auflage, Rororo Rowohlt's Enzyklopädie (Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 2017).

I asked targeted questions about home, though I never asked about specific migration experiences, as cautioned, even though these often emerged in other ways during the interviews.

My interview questions drew on my sensitizing concept of home and, therefore, did not start by asking for a definition of home, but instead asked about important people, places, and practices in a person's life. With these questions I hoped to elicit the complexity of home for each individual and the interplay of social, cultural, geographic, and familial influences on home. I paid attention to narratives about family, descriptions of important practices, and attendant affective associations, especially emotions such as longing and sadness. I took note of what was not mentioned, topics that were avoided, or questions that I was asked in return. I noted negative and missing experiences, understanding that these shape conceptions of home just as much as positive and present experiences do.<sup>61</sup>

I sometimes felt that my questions had minimal impact on what interviewees told me. Instead, their understanding of my topic and the relationship we had established had a greater impact on what they told me. Their answers often reflected their own sense of what I wanted to hear, their interests, and what they hoped to portray. In my interview with a Kurdish man, the interview focused on the religious traditions of his region in Turkey. Despite my questions about his personal relationship to home, our conversation largely circled around the theoretical until just before the end of our conversation. I circled back several times to his relationships to home and he finally shared a more personal story. Yet, it became clear to me that he was not comfortable discussing these more personal aspects of home. In hindsight, I wish I had let go of my desire to elicit more personal descriptions of home and followed his comfort level in exploring the topic. I took this experience into future interviews and attempted to slow down and trust the trajectory of the conversation and the approach each participant wanted to take.

Another interview partner, an Eritrean asylum-seeker, spoke mostly about his connection to religion and not as specifically about home. He was recommended to me by another volunteer at the program because of his strong religious faith and practice. She thought he would be a good conversation partner, as she knew I was interested in religion. In the interview we discussed his religious practices at length and his experiences as a Muslim both in Eritrea and in Switzerland. This was perhaps because his faith was important to him, but also because he understood religion as important to my project. The content of each interview still addressed the topics of home and asylum-seeking, but from different angles and perspectives.

Many of my interview partners expressed, at the end of the interview, a hope that they had been helpful. They often closed by offering me encouraging words, saying they hoped that my project would be successful and that they had been able to help.

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61 Joisten, *Philosophie der Heimat*.

These encouragements caused me to pause and consider my assumption that the interview was something that only served me. It is possible that my interview partners felt that the interview also served a need for them – perhaps a need to connect, to be helpful, to participate in something, or to tell a story. I did not ask directly about this, so I can only theorize based on these comments and responses.

### 5.3.7 Language

None of my interview participants completed the interview in their first language; all were conducted in second languages. Asylum-seeker interviews were conducted in either English or German, which were second languages for my interview participants. My volunteer interviews were conducted in Standard German, which is not the first language of these Swiss volunteers. Their first language is Swiss German. With every interview partner, I assumed we would speak German, but I let them know English was also an option. As mentioned earlier, some interview partners were interested in participating because of the opportunity to practice their English.

While many migration researchers, including van Liempt and Bilger, encourage the use of translators in interviews, I found advantages to conducting interviews without an interpreter.<sup>62</sup> Since my research was heavily embedded in the context of Projekt DA-SEIN and the relationships built at that program, bringing in an outside translator would have disrupted this context and felt at odds with my research questions. While a translator may have been able to tease out the nuances of asylum-seekers' experience and descriptions of home, the dynamic of negotiating home in the context of displacement and at Projekt DA-SEIN would have been diminished.

Geographer B. Filep, in his article *Interview and Translation Strategies*, argues against the use of translators and for finding a common second language. "Personally, I prefer conducting interviews without an interpreter [...] I support the idea of finding an alternative common language with the interviewee, and, whenever possible, a language that can even be foreign to both."<sup>63</sup> Filep's preference for working without translators stems from the additional layer of translation that translators bring as another participant in the research process. The translator is another actor in the research process and therefore also impacts the informant, the communication process, and the translation process by bringing their own social location, assumptions, and perspectives to the research project.<sup>64</sup> Since meaning is socially produced, translators bring another layer of interpretation into this process of

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62 Bilger and van Liempt, "Methodological and Ethical Dilemmas."

63 B. Filep, "Interview and Translation Strategies: Coping with Multilingual Settings and Data," *Social Geography Discussions* 5 (2009): 64, <https://doi.org/10.5194/sgd-5-25-2009>.

64 Filep, "Interview and Translation Strategies."

meaning-making, both linguistically and experientially. Working across languages and with second languages requires additional considerations of translation strategies and self-reflection by the researcher about their own language abilities and social location.<sup>65</sup>

Meaning and understanding are negotiated even when language, culture, and context are shared. As Marjorie Faulstich Orellana, a professor of education and migration scholar, explores in her book *Mindful Ethnography*, all language contains contradictions and subjectivities, and ethnographic projects benefit from an awareness of these tensions.<sup>66</sup> Working across languages heightens this need for awareness and highlights the collaboration between researcher and participant. These interactions influence the interview and data. Meaning emerges through the researcher's and participant's cultural, social, and linguistic contexts, personal experiences, and choices about what and how to share information, even when a common language is used.

Most methodologies assume a common language that is used with a high, if not fluent, level of mastery. Acknowledging the limitations of working across languages brings greater focus to the act of translation that occurs in all communication. As Filep writes about interviews, "It is a conscious joint 'struggle' for the clarification of words or meaning and in the end a joint production of meaning and knowledge."<sup>67</sup> All interviews, even in shared first languages, involve translating one person's ideas through the experience and context of another person. Even when speaking the same language, understanding is filtered through the viewpoints of individual conversation partners, including their experiences and their relationships with language. A shared culture and language promote understanding, but meaning-making is still fluid and dependent on translation.

Instead of a translator, my interviews utilized other strategies and methods to determine meaning and elicit understanding for both of us. During both formal and informal interviews, we often mixed languages. Many researchers who work across languages encourage mixing languages to allow for greater flexibility in conveying meaning.<sup>68</sup> For those who spoke English, this meant mixing English and German. Interview partners also used their first languages. This occurred most often when talking about places and people's names. But sometimes they would also use a word

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65 Danau Tanu and Laura Dales, "Language in Fieldwork: Making Visible the Ethnographic Impact of the Researcher's Linguistic Fluency," *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 27, no. 3 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.1111/taja.12150>; Bogusia Temple and Alys Young, "Qualitative Research and Translation Dilemmas," *Qualitative Research* 4, no. 2 (2004): 353, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794104044430>.

66 Marjorie Faulstich Orellana, *Mindful Ethnography: Mind, Heart, and Activity for Transformative Social Research* (Routledge, 2020), 6.

67 Filep, "Interview and Translation Strategies," 64.

68 See: Filep, "Interview and Translation Strategies," 64.

that they were unable to translate, in the hope that I would understand it or that it had an English or German cognate. We freely used Google Translate or other translation software in these moments. This negotiation of words involved a back-and-forth conversation, further causing us to come to a shared understanding about certain words, terms, and descriptions. We created shared meaning in the interviews. The stories and descriptions existed in a shared space between the two of us that was unique to our conversation and connection. The negotiation of meaning was not driven by an abstract objective. I assumed that subjectivity existed in our interviews, and I focused instead on ensuring, as much as possible, that the participants' meaning took precedence over mine. The practice of reflexivity, as ongoing self-reflection, helped to tease out how social location, assumptions, preferences, and perspectives might influence the research process and to make my implicit motivations, beliefs, and biases more explicit.<sup>69</sup>

During the interview, many participants paused at regular intervals to ask if I understood what they had meant, interrupting their narrative to ask: "You know?" ("Weisst du?") or "You understand?" ("Verstehst du?"). If I indicated something was unclear, the interview partner often tried other words or phrases or described the word or phenomenon in alternate ways. I always put a blank pad of paper and a pen on the table between us at the start of the interview. The interview partner often used it to write out words or phrases or draw images or diagrams to help elucidate meaning. We often turned to other technology, looking up images or videos of events, or viewing locations on maps. This mixing of languages and technology served to distill information and negotiate meaning. Even misunderstandings could serve to uncover deeper understanding as we negotiated meaning by further questioning and interrogating words and phrases. When we did not understand each other, we looked for other words, descriptions, and communication methods. Language is a communication tool and involves a negotiation between intended meanings and interpretations. Even though we did not share mastery of the same languages, my interviews involved these same elements of negotiating meaning, often with additional tools.

### 5.3.8 Home and *Heimat* in Translation

I want to address a particular aspect of language relevant to my research, namely the use of the word *home*. Most of my interviews and conversations were conducted in Standard German, while a few occurred in English. As explained in the chapter about home, there are several German words for home: *Heim*, *Zuhause*, and *Heimat*.

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69 Kaufman, "Normativity as Pitfall or Ally?," 92–93. Kaufman links the practice of reflexivity to revealing deeper assumptions that might influence the research process. "I propose that attending to precisely reflexivity might change our initial, naïve normativity from an implicit to an explicit normativity."

In my interviews the most frequent German word used for home was *Heimat*. *Heimat* is a word imbued with cultural specificity and affective associations within the German-speaking context. Yet, this cultural nuance cannot be assumed to carry over when *Heimat* is used in translation. For speakers of German as a second language, *Heimat* is unlikely to convey the cultural nuances of German-speakers who are more acculturated to the meaning and history of the word. Therefore, when the word *Heimat* was used by someone speaking German as a second language, I assumed that it did not carry the cultural meanings of someone speaking German as a first language. Instead, I assumed it represented a broad term for home and belonging, more akin the English use of the word home.

Because of the multiple and ambiguous meanings of home, I did not directly ask about *Heimat* or home until the end of a formal interview. Instead, I explored the nuances of home for each person through important places, relationships, and memories. At the end of an interview, for those speaking Swiss or Standard German as a first language, I asked specifically about their use and understanding of the word *Heimat*. A Swiss volunteer explained that the words *zu Hause* and *daheim* refer to the place where he lives, while *Heimat* refers to the place he lives as well as to the outer home, which encompasses a larger space and broader meaning.<sup>70</sup>

For those who spoke German as a second language, I asked about words for home in their first language. Some easily answered this question and others were unable to offer a word for home in their language. Of those who responded, many of the words were translated as either homeland and nation or house and dwelling. More abstract notions of home, such as those associated with *Heimat*, were infrequent. For example, a Persian speaker explained the meaning of three words that could mean home. According to his definitions, *Zadgah* means the place of your birth, *Watan* the country or place of citizenship, and *Maihan* the land or home where you live.<sup>71</sup> These words are similar to the three categories of home as defined by Islamic scholars. These are, “watan al-asli, the country of birth, the country of one’s spouse or the place of permanent residence; watan al-sukna, the country of temporary residence and employment; and watan al-safari, the country that is traveled to.”<sup>72</sup> The nuanced and varied answers that I received about the word home further underscore the complexity of definitions of home. In addition, language or individual words can be limiting when describing home. What one person means by home may not be what someone else means.

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70 Interview by Katherine Kunz, Basel, Switzerland, September 13, 2018: 20180913\_1FW\_IN, Pos. 177.

71 Interview by Katherine Kunz, Basel, Switzerland, July 4, 2018: 20180704\_11AS\_DA-SEIN\_II, Pos. 5–12.

72 Yucel, “Do Muslims See Australia as Their Homeland?,” 191.

## 5.4 Relational Ethnography

My methodological decisions were based on my unique research setting and were the result of the realities of working with populations in the context of migration. These decisions were also related to my research goals, to the realities of working across languages, to the foregrounding of relationships, and to interview tools tailored to migration research. It was critical for me to follow interview methodologies that ensured that my research was ethical and objective and that participants were fully informed about the study and their role in it. Yet, the content and context of my interviews led to a more a collaborative interview style that foregrounded relationships. As van Liempt and Bilger reflect on in their research with migrant populations, “The more active involvement of both researcher and research participants also affects the relationship between researchers and respondents that could be best described as a more collaborative relation exceeding a simple relation of researcher and researched.”<sup>73</sup> This relational ethnographic approach emerged in my own research process with asylum-seekers.

### 5.4.1 Co-production of Knowledge

My research practices approached the data collected not simply as information-gathering, but also as collaborative projects between myself and the research participant. Instead of viewing myself as the expert and collector of data, I sought to focus on how the research participant and I engaged in the topic of home and asylum-seeking together. This “joint production of meaning,” as coined by Filep, acknowledges that meaning and information exist not in a vacuum, but in the social milieu and relationship between researcher and the research context.<sup>74</sup> Researchers do not simply document what happens but participate in creating the event and its potential meaning, through writing, recording, and asking questions.<sup>75</sup> Sociologist Stephen Hirschauer describes this process as a social and linguistic collaboration. “[M]ost ethnographies can be thought of as a collaborative verbalization of the social through participants and observers.”<sup>76</sup> In ethnographic research, what is heard and how it is understood is a product of the interaction between researcher and research subject.

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73 Bilger and van Liempt, “Methodological and Ethical Dilemmas,” 134.

74 Filep, “Interview and Translation Strategies,” 64.

75 Filep, “Interview and Translation Strategies,” 64.

76 Stefan Hirschauer, “Putting Things into Words: Ethnographic Description and the Silence of the Social,” *Human Studies* 29, no. 4 (2007): 437, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10746-007-9041-1>.

For the researcher, the goal is to put what did not exist before into words.<sup>77</sup> This documenting makes meaning and creates understanding, which is filtered through the listener's frameworks, experiences, and goals. One approach that attempts to account for this participation is the "active interview," as described by sociologists James A. Holstein and Jaber F. Gubrium:

[I]nterviews are inherently social productions. With this orientation, respondents are better seen as narrators or storytellers, and ethnographers are cast as participants in the process. Working together, the interviewer and narrator actively construct a story and its meaning. Interviewing, then, is inherently collaborative and problematic.<sup>78</sup>

It is problematic because it is difficult to determine what impact the researcher has on the resulting data. Reflexivity in interpretation can help to account for the impact of the researcher, but the interpretive and collaborative processes are nuanced and not always transparent. Yet, the acknowledgement of collaboration makes an impact. The shift towards collaborative inquiry reflects an emphasis on relationality that acknowledges the co-production of knowledge between researcher and participant.<sup>79</sup>

While many interview methodologies assume that it is possible for the researcher to be a neutral observer, it is not completely possible to remove the researcher from the interview process. Typically, researchers generate the focus and questions of the interview and otherwise attempt to influence answers and the flow of the interview as little as possible. The goal of this approach is to prevent the resulting data from being unduly influenced by assumptions, ideas, and perspectives of the researcher. To achieve this outcome, researchers are encouraged to allow pauses, to refrain from interjecting, to ask follow-up questions at the end, and to not show visible reactions, responses, or emotions. The researcher should also avoid statements or questions that are suggestive or that imply expectations or hoped-for results.<sup>80</sup> These interview techniques assume that, with proper application of technique, the interviewer will minimally influence the interviews and the data collected. Yet collaborative interviews foreground the reality that both the researcher and the interview participant impact the data.

Many methodologies tacitly assume that the proper application of technique will lead to valid and "pure" results that reflect the authentic experience of the

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77 Hirschauer, "Putting Things into Words."

78 James A. Holstein and Jaber F. Gubrium, *The Active Interview*, Qualitative Research Methods Series, vol. 37 (Sage Publications, 1995), vii.

79 Holstein and Gubrium, *The Active Interview*.

80 Flick, *Qualitative Sozialforschung*.

interview participant.<sup>81</sup> Yet, researchers have argued that the idea of “pure” and singular data is a myth. Information is always produced in a specific context and by specific people. Holstein and Gubrium further make this point: “Any interview situation – no matter how formalized, restricted, or standardized – relies on the interaction between interview participants.”<sup>82</sup> Kusenbach, a sociologist, and Barbara Czarniawska, a scholar of organizational theory, among others, point out the fallacy of thinking that an interview offers “unadulterated” information.<sup>83</sup> Czarniawska writes about social science research: “Another vain hope connected to an interview situation is that it will yield ‘information,’ ‘facts.’”<sup>84</sup> Knowledge does not exist in a “pure” form that can be preserved through appropriate application of methods. Ethical and methodologically sound research practices are critical, yet knowledge does not exist in a rarified state. Data is always a product of the context in which it originates. The places where I conducted observations and interviews, as well as the perspectives and experiences I personally brought to the research project, impacted the data.

Instead of trying to remove the impact of the researcher, more collaborative interview approaches ask what is unique about the data, given the unique presence of the researcher. The interviewer not only formulates the questions, but also selects interview partners, chooses interview locations, records and transcribes the data, and interprets the results. Holstein and Gubrium continue:

We contend that if interview data are unavoidably collaborative, attempts to strip interviews of their interactional ingredients will be futile. Instead of adding to the long list of methodological constraints under which interviews should be conducted, we take a more positive approach, proposing an orientation whereby researchers acknowledge interviewers’ and respondents’ constitutive contributions and consciously and conscientiously incorporate them into the production and analysis of interview data.<sup>85</sup>

This focus on the process of generating data highlights the relational aspect of data collection, production, and analysis. My interest in how home is experienced and created means that place and relationality are key components of data generation. In my experience, a collaborative interview style was more successful at including these aspects of my research interests in the process and analysis. Collaboration as-

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81 Holstein and Gubrium, *The Active Interview*, 19.

82 Holstein and Gubrium, *The Active Interview*, 19.

83 Kusenbach, “Street Phenomenology”; Barbara Czarniawska, *Narratives in Social Science Research* (Sage Publications, 2004).

84 Czarniawska, *Narratives in Social Science Research*, 48.

85 Holstein and Gubrium, *The Active Interview*, 4.

sumes the interaction of the researcher in bringing themselves and their own reflexive awareness to the process. As Graham writes:

In the interests of integrity and transparency, the self as researcher, as one who brings particular presuppositions, questions and interests, must be prepared to “write themselves in” to the text of their research. This practice [...] entails more than simply “reflecting” in the sense of thinking deeply about something, but of identifying how we are simultaneously both the subjects and objects of our own experience.<sup>86</sup>

Relational research means that the researcher is open to being part of the research process, to reflecting on their biases and commitments, and to being changed by the experience. In collaborative research it is critical to acknowledge the researcher’s role in generating data.

A more interactive method is often well-suited for research within the context of migration. In tandem with increased flexibility in interview methods, van Liempt and Bilger advocate for more conversational and improvisational interview methods in migration research. “[A]pplying an unstructured, conversation-like interview style by which interview partners could talk freely and according to their own structure, ‘embedded questioning’ and the private surrounding in which the interviews took place proved to be very helpful not only in a technical sense.”<sup>87</sup> Conversational interviews are advantageous because they build trust and generate information that might not otherwise be offered. Allowing collaboration in the interview process is ethically and methodologically appropriate, allowing more flexibility in responding to the often complex and vulnerable situation of migrants. As described in my interview process, the frequent back-and-forth of conversations between myself and interview participants were necessary to clarify meaning, translate across languages, and understand ideas. This meant that sometimes I chose not to refrain from inserting myself into the interview. I approached interviews as a process of gathering information in a two-way conversation fueled on both sides by curiosity.

#### 5.4.2 Practices of Pastoral Care

In addition to these methodological considerations, a collaborative interview style reflected my location as a theological researcher. Ethnographic theology includes empathic listening practices, conversational interviews, and an attitude of presence

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86 Elaine Graham, “On Becoming a Practical Theologian: Past, Present, and Future Tenses,” *HTS Theologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 73, no. 4 (2017): 5, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v73i4.4634>.

87 Bilger and van Liempt, “Methodological and Ethical Dilemmas,” 134.

within empirical research.<sup>88</sup> These methods are drawn from practices and theories of pastoral care, theological anthropology, and Christian ethics. As practical theologian Mary Clark Moschella writes, “I suggest that ethnography can become a form of ministry, a kind of pastoral listening to a social group or a community of faith.”<sup>89</sup> My context as a theologian often had clear impacts on the data collected. One example of this occurred in an interview when an interview partner (a volunteer) shared some very challenging and personal parts of her life. After sharing them, she commented: “I know now that you study theology, and maybe also, yes, that gives me confidence, that I can say these things to you.”<sup>90</sup> Her own understanding of practices of care in religious settings influenced how she approached the interview and what she chose to share.

Non-theologians have also advocated for a shift in interview practices to reflect more collaborative methods and acknowledge interpersonal dynamics. Hirschauer calls the shift to a more collaborative interview style “empathic curiosity.”<sup>91</sup> And sociologist Martin Gerard Forsey reframes the work of the researcher as a practice of “engaged listening.”<sup>92</sup> Bhattacharya, an education and empirical methods scholar, advocates for a practice of “contemplative inquiry” in interviewing.<sup>93</sup> And Orellana advocates using tools of mindfulness when conducting ethnography in order to better engage listening and reflexivity.<sup>94</sup> These practices help to shift the researcher’s understanding of an interviewer from a neutral source of information to a co-participant. By approaching their participants with “empathic curiosity,” researchers can lean into a more collaborative interview process.<sup>95</sup> In addition, the practice of “witnessing” or “attentive presence” is particularly resonant with the ways I engage in research. “Witnessing” means bringing attention and presence to a person and

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88 Christian Scharen and Aana M. Vigen, eds., *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics* (Continuum, 2011), 233.

89 Mary C. Moschella, “Ethnography,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, ed. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 229.

90 Interview by Katherine Kunz, Basel, Switzerland, September 20, 2018: 20180920\_2FW\_IN, Pos. 162.

91 Kaufman, “Normativity as Pitfall or Ally?,” 104.

92 Martin G. Forsey, “Ethnography as Participant Listening,” *Ethnography* 11, no. 4 (2010): 567, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1466138110372587>.

93 Kakali Bhattacharya and Meaghan Cochrane, “Assessing the Authentic Knower Through Contemplative Arts-Based Pedagogies in Qualitative Inquiry,” in *The Journal of Contemplative Inquiry* 4, no. 1 (2017), <https://digscholarship.unco.edu/joci/vol4/iss1/3/>; Kakali Bhattacharya, “Critical, De/colonial and Contemplative Approaches to Qualitative Inquiry,” Advanced Methods Institute, The Ohio State University, Advancing Culturally Responsive Research and Researchers, accessed May 27, 2021, last modified May 21, 2021, <https://advancedmethodsintstitute.ehe.osu.edu/keynote-kakali-bhattacharya/>.

94 Orellana, *Mindful Ethnography*.

95 Kaufman, “Normativity as Pitfall or Ally?,” 104.

their situation, and it is not limited to listening. This practice is appropriate to work with vulnerable populations, and it allowed me flexibility in responding to difficult stories, working across languages, and engaging with the specific topic of asylum. In addition, given the circumstances of asylum-seekers in Switzerland, approaching my interviews without empathy and compassion would have felt inauthentic.

A theologically informed ethnography draws on practices of pastoral care. Pastoral care attends to the fullness of a person, including their cares and concerns, challenges, and potentials. While pastoral care (*Seelsorge*) is often a focus of Swiss churches working with asylum-seekers, it was not an explicit offering of Projekt DA-SEIN.<sup>96</sup> Instead, pastoral care was understood as part of the fabric of being together at the program. Focusing only on practical tasks or spending time with a small group of people was discouraged. There was an openness that was expected of participants when arriving at the program, an openness to the people and circumstances that might be encountered. This space of pastoral care prioritizes being with the cares and concerns of another person. In the context of ethnographic research, this translates as bringing attention to the larger story and concerns of a person.

My research questions focused on important people and places in a person's life in order to understand their relationship to home. These questions, and the semi-structured nature of interviews, elicited answers that brought up personal stories, longings, and both joyful and painful memories. Being present to these stories as more than data to be collected was an important part of my research approach. Pastoral care maintains a focus on the individual by being present, acknowledging their wholeness, and holding space. This approach can also be brought to ethnographic research. At various points in my research process, I offered to pray for an asylum-seeker's wish to see his mother again, I extended compassion when stories of loss were shared, and I relinquished control of the study by inviting asylum-seekers to accept or reject my invitation, to choose interview locations, and to ask me questions as well as answer mine. My goal of being present to the fullness of a person's experience was held to be of equal, if not more, importance than discovering truth, collecting data, and remaining neutral.

This theological underpinning of my research was also expressed in the goals and approach of Projekt DA-SEIN. As Hungerbühler told me in our interview, she considers the religious aspects of Projekt DA-SEIN to consist in seeing each person as a child of God. "I see you as a person, as I am a person, with fears, hurt, and a history, maybe also with scars. But I see also your hope and potential as a creation of God."<sup>97</sup> Bringing a pastoral approach to the task of research means having two goals simultaneously – a fidelity to the research questions and project and an openness to each person's human fullness, past, present, and future.

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96 Evangelisch-reformierte Kirche Schweiz et al., *Seelsorge im Bundesasylzentrum*.

97 Interview by Katherine Kunz, Basel, Switzerland, January 16, 2019: 20190116\_2EI\_IN, Pos. 27.

Other researchers have also approached ethnography with a sensitivity to being with people instead of only extracting information from them. These approaches consider the whole person while also acknowledging what the researcher brings to the process and the relationship between researcher and participant. In particular, Bhattacharya's research methods are designed to disrupt the "will to know" and to instead focus on being with the stories and experiences of each person.<sup>98</sup> She utilizes contemplative research approaches that acknowledge the deeper implications of research.

Contemplative approaches reflect a set of practices that are focused on stillness, deep inner-journeys, and a triggering of insights and clarity that come from accepting that the process of inquiry is an excavating journey into self, understanding the relationship between self and other, and cultivating insights that stem from a state of expansive and critical awareness.<sup>99</sup>

A contemplative approach, like pastoral care practices, focuses research on the larger dynamics of interviews and on relationships between subjects. Contemplation in ethnographic inquiry is a practice that can also support reflexivity and an awareness of one's own assumptions and biases. Orellana writes that mindful approaches to ethnography can help researchers develop intellectual humility, cultivate intellectual and emotional openness in the field, and challenge the dualism of either/or thinking and insider/outsider positionalities.<sup>100</sup> Practices of mindfulness can cultivate self-reflection while reflecting on the subject matter. These reflections can open space for contradictions that one's own subjectivity brings to the field. While the roles of researcher and participant can never be fully equalized, these sociological and theological tools bring an awareness to how information is collected and acknowledge the complexity of interactions between researcher and subject. Considering people as more than subjects demands reflection and adaptability.

## 5.5 A Relational Approach to Research

Qualitative, empirical methods offer rigor in researching subjects outside of explicit theological spaces. At the same time, it was important to adapt these methods to reflect my location as a theologian and my research site at the Offene Kirche Elisabethen. I developed my own style that resonated with my priorities as a theologian and the priorities of the church and the program. As a researcher, I spent most of my

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98 Bhattacharya, "Othering Research, Researching the Other," 111.

99 Bhattacharya, "Critical, De/colonial and Contemplative Approaches to Qualitative Inquiry."

100 Orellana, *Mindful Ethnography*.

time participating in the program, sitting and talking, playing games, and joining Input Sessions and events. A relational approach to research, informed by practices of pastoral care, prioritized building relationships over identifying research subjects and allowed me to focus on the fullness of the human person instead of only their identity as an asylum-seeker. I learned about the participant's interests, personality quirks, skills, family, and life, both before and during their time in Basel. These experiences shifted my perspective on asylum-seeking, or more specifically, on those who seek asylum. My relationships at Projekt DA-SEIN revealed that there is greater nuance in asylum-seeking than what is understood by viewing asylum-seeking only as a monolithic event characterized by desperation and a lack of options. While asylum-seeking involves unspeakable loss, trauma, and isolation, including a lack of options, these are not the only characteristics that apply to asylum-seekers. Being defined primarily by an oppressed and marginal status limits viewpoints and possibilities of thinking about individual situations.

Research that involves marginal and vulnerable populations must also pay attention to the impact of social location and power dynamics within methodology. It asks that the researcher acknowledge their own role in data generation, including using reflexivity to assess cultural location, assumptions, and biases. This demands that the researcher give up some agency in coordinating and conducting interviews as well as in the outcome, particularly when working with vulnerable populations. More collaborative research acknowledges this role of the researcher and embraces the co-production of knowledge, the role of empathy in the researcher-participant relationship, and the possibilities as well as the limitations of the research project. This approach is reflected in the final data that was generated and in my interpretive frameworks. In the next three chapters I will share insights from my research on home, asylum-seeking, and church. These insights draw on both the words and the experiences of my interview partners as well as on my observations and interpretations within a relational ethnographic framework.

