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CRITICAL EXCHANGE

Production of Knowledge

Thinking through payment in fieldwork

Changing the narrative about money and reciprocity

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Abstract

Ethnographic research has long illuminated diverse economic relations. Yet ethnographers have said little about an economic relation that they themselves often rely on: payment in fieldwork. Indeed, the particularities of monetary exchange between ethnographers and their interlocutors often remain hidden—or taboo. This is so even though thinking through reciprocity is increasingly important in discussions of anthropological research ethics and the discipline's colonial legacies. Traditionally, fieldwork relies on long-term, intimate relationships that are often idealized, suggesting that money might taint ethnographic interactions. Yet, for anthropologists, it is our job to pay attention to taboos and unpack them. Here, we aim to advance critical discussion on payment in fieldwork and its implications. Given that ethnographic knowledge is always contextual, such discussion should be integral to equitable ethnographic research practices, creating theoretical space to engage with research participants' expectations of payment.

KEYWORDS

ethnography, fieldwork, knowledge production, methods, money, payment, reciprocity, relationships, research ethics

The analysis of diverse economic relations has been central to ethnographic research since its inception (e.g., Boas, 1920; Malinowski, 1922; Mauss, 1990), and it remains central to the discipline of anthropology (e.g., Tsing, 2015). Contemporary anthropologists have persuasively called for close attention to economic transfers (Pickles, 2020) and the cultural meanings of money (Kusimba, 2021; Maurer, 2006), yet they have paid little attention to one economic relation that is often essential to ethnographic research: payment in fieldwork. Such payment is hardly new; monetary transactions have long been part of fieldwork interactions, even if indirectly. Nonetheless, when it is addressed, the discussion is usually brief and euphemistic, as when payment made by Franz Boas to the Kwakiutl of Fort Rupert is glossed reductively: "Boas gave George Hunt money to hold a feast" (Pöhl, 2008, p. 44). Today, if discussed at all, payment is typically relegated to the margins. As Cheng (2022, p. 18) puts it, "Every researcher who has done fieldwork has a story of money to tell, but few write about it."

The discipline would benefit from an open discussion of this issue, if not a reflexive interrogation of money's impact on ethnographic encounters. A few authors discussed below have begun to demonstrate how payment and nonpayment shape

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ethnographic knowledge production (Cajas & Pérez, 2017; Cheng, 2022; de Regt, 2015; Johnson & Searles, 2021b; Srivastava, 1992). But most anthropologists, whether or not they offer payment to research participants, do not consider the topic worthy of critical reflection. This perpetuates a taboo that mirrors a broader cultural aversion, particularly among many anthropologists based in the US and Europe, to discussing intimacy (and friendship) in monetary terms (Hart, 2007; Zelizer, 1989). Given that anthropological fieldwork traditionally relies on long-term, complex personal relationships that are often idealized, payment can undoubtedly be a challenging issue. This challenge makes it even more urgent for us to stop avoiding a constructive debate on this issue. Payment should not be treated as a peripheral curiosity but as a fundamental aspect of the discipline's methodological and ethical foundations.

LACK OF DISCIPLINARY GUIDELINES

Contemporary handbooks and textbooks on anthropological methods often overlook the issue of payment for research participants (e.g., Bernard & Gravlee, 2014; O'Reilly, 2012; Robben & Sluka, 2012). So too do the codes of conduct and ethical guidelines published by major anthropological associations. No mention of payment appears in two recent contributions from the European Association for Social Anthropology regarding data governance and collaborative research (EASA, 2018, n.d.). The topic is also omitted from the Brazilian Anthropological Association's ethics statement (ABA, 2005). Other organizations that do provide guidance tend to be brief and euphemistic. For example, the Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK's ethical guidelines advocate "fair return for assistance," adding, "There should be no economic exploitation of individual informants, translators, and research participants; fair return should be made for their help and services" (ASAUK, 2021). The Australian Anthropological Society Code of Ethics asserts, "Research participants should receive a fair return for services rendered, or for object [*sic*] acquired from them by request" (AAS, n.d.). Meanwhile, the Association of Social Anthropologists of Aotearoa/New Zealand Code of Ethics states,

> Fair return should be given them [research participants] for their help and services. Ideally, anthropological research should have mutual benefits for the anthropologist and research participants. Anthropologists should recognise their debt to research participants and their obligation to reciprocate in appropriate ways. (ASAA/NZ, n.d.)

None of these guidelines address whether a fair return could or should be monetary. Anthropology Southern Africa's statement on ethics does engage with the topic but explicitly states that fair return "should not be understood as direct payment" (ASnA, n.d.). This implies that introducing money into ethnographic interactions corrupts relationships with research participants and data. A similar sentiment appears in the European Research Council's guidance on research ethics, which acknowledges that "direct payment" to research subjects might be appropriate but phrases it euphemistically as "the provision of external services to meet community needs" (Iphofen, 2021, p. 26), avoiding a direct discussion of payments to individual research participants. Furthermore, it refers to ethnographic material as a "gift of data" from research participants to anthropologists:

> The researcher's ethical responsibility is then associated with how that shared gift is cared for (whether or not the data continue to be treated as "precious" as they are analysed, transformed and reproduced as new knowledge) and how the person who shared the data is cared for as a consequence of that data being delivered—albeit in a different form—to a larger audience. (Iphofen, 2021, p. 62)

Although the etymology of the word *data* connotes "that which is given," this framing makes assumptions about the motivations, expectations, and hopes of research participants engaging with anthropologists. It addresses the ethical responsibilities of researchers through underdeveloped references to concepts of care and gifting that, without further explanation, risk perpetuating anachronistic assumptions about the hierarchies between anthropologists and their research participants. Like guidelines that mention but do not elaborate on the ambiguities of "a fair return," the ERC's framing fails to address the pragmatic, ethical, and methodological implications of providing cash payments in exchange for participants' time, knowledge, and expertise.

Even when explicit guidance on payment has been requested, it has not materialized. In 2000 the American Anthropological Association (AAA) publicly called for attention to fieldwork payment. This was in response to serious concerns raised by the Brazilian Anthropological Association (ABA, 2000) regarding accusations by Patrick Tierney against Napoleon Chagnon, James Neel, and others regarding their research among the Yanomami people. The AAA convened a special task force charged with "developing additional draft guidelines to the [AAA] Code of Ethics and other materials, and report to the Executive Board" (AAA, 2000). The resulting document stated, "Consideration should be given to the common dilemmas faced by anthropologists conducting research in field situations," and it specified five areas of concern, including "the level and kind of renumeration [*sic*] to subject populations and individuals that is both appropriate and fair" (AAA, 2000). Later codes and reports from the AAA did not address this issue, including the AAA's 2012 Code of Ethics, which says only that "anthropologists may gain personally from their work, but they must not exploit individuals, groups, animals, or cultural or biological materials" (AAA, 2012). The code goes on to focus more on the role of anthropologists as teachers and mentors before adding—in passing, in the final paragraph—that "anthropologists should appropriately acknowledge all contributions to their research, writing, and other related activities, and compensate contributors justly for any assistance they provide"

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(AAA, 2012). Clearly missing is the clarion call for ethical guidance on payment.

There is, accordingly, little reflection on how ideas about a fair or just return may vary or about whether such notions carry across different contexts. Clearer expectations are evident in the national regulations of some countries where anthropologists have long worked. For example, the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology, which oversees research permissions across all disciplines within the country, requires researchers to pay study participants 10,000 Ugandan shillings (US$2.50) without specifying whether this is per visit, day, or hour. The Malawian national regulations suggest a payment of US$10 per study visit. How or when such a transfer should occur is not specified. Still, there is a clear contrast between the concrete instructions from some governments in the Global South and the vague principles among anthropological associations, particularly in the Global North.

The lack of guidance on monetary payments in fieldwork is problematic for several reasons. According to our own interactions across different universities, field sites, and subdisciplines, an increasing number of anthropologists are paying for access to fieldwork and data. In doing so, they are often responding to participants' (implicit) requests, their own ethical considerations, or a combination of both. Yet they frequently lack comprehensive guidance on this practice. There is little debate on the methodological implications of such payments, beyond occasional but notable interventions (discussed below). In failing to acknowledge the economic dimensions of knowledge production and how they intersect with politicized, racialized, and gendered hierarchies, our discipline has made a significant ethical lapse. This lapse risks perpetuating or even creating exploitative hierarchies, which anthropologists aim to challenge, while obscuring their existence. Furthermore, the absence of critical reflection on monetary payment disadvantages anthropologists—particularly early-career researchers and those without personal resources. Without cohesive disciplinary guidelines to effectively advocate to funding bodies, university administrations, and ethics committees, securing funds to enable payment can be challenging. Additionally, neglecting to discuss the realities of fieldwork payment may lead the discipline to miss out on theoretical insights into the (moral) operations of money and their meanings in intimate relationships.

THE NEED FOR REFLEXIVITY

Working across four universities in Europe and conducting research on various continents, we have found little guidance on payment in fieldwork, even though this issue has figured prominently in our ethnographic work.[1] The silence on the issue is surprising, given certain trends in anthropology, such as applying ethnography to processes of social transformation (Eyre, 2022; Nencel, 2017) and participatory research that emphasizes the role of participants as collaborators or cocreators.

If anthropology has evaded discussion of payment, it has not shied away from examining reciprocity in general. In the early years of the discipline, anthropologists often viewed reciprocity as an instrumental means of getting what they wanted, without critically reflecting on the ethical responsibilities involved in these reciprocal relations. Conversely, recent discussions of reciprocity have broadened our awareness of the ethical complexities inherent in research relationships, examining the anthropologist's position within fieldwork relationships. Johnson and Searles (2021a, p. xiv), for example, state that "in the course of their research, anthropologists accumulate a debt to their research participants. What this debt looks like specifically or how it should be repaid, however, is complex and not always clear in the beginning."

As fieldwork relationships become increasingly embedded in contexts requiring multifaceted considerations of payment, we must think about reciprocity *in terms of* monetary payment, its methodological implications, and its status as a building block of ethical knowledge production. Ethnographers often enter fields where, for example, international development cooperation has initiated a process of monetizing participation. Accordingly, participants have come to expect payment for their involvement in "projects," whether development oriented or research based, as Woensdregt (2025, p. 78) observes. Equally, the intensification of digital communication between researchers and research participants adds another layer to this discussion. As Cheng (2022, p. 19) notes, this often becomes relevant after fieldwork, facilitating demands for monetary support over long distances. We should also recognize the ongoing requests from anthropologists for information that benefits their careers even after fieldwork has "finished."

The "corrupting narrative," according to which payment threatens the research relationship and the authenticity of anthropological knowledge, can no longer be sustained. As Cajas and Pérez (2017, p. 150) argue, it is problematic in anthropology that the unpaid participation of research participants is considered "a way to build equitable relations with researchers," because their participation is untainted by payment claims made on the anthropologist. Should research participants offer their time for free when most anthropologists receive salaries and additional fieldwork allowances from their universities or other institutions? The offer of payment could indeed influence the data produced (Das & Parry, 1983); the dialogic nature of ethnographic fieldwork relations increases the risk that research participants may cater to "their ethnographer's" interests and preferences. We believe, however, that the fiction of "peaceful fieldwork" (Srivastava, 1992, p. 17), untainted by discussions of money, poses a greater threat to ethnographic research. How can we be certain that research participants who receive no payment are not factoring this into how they respond to "their ethnographer's" interests and preferences too? This assumption is just as unfounded as that of the "corrupting narrative." Hence, in the contemporary context of ethnographic encounters, anthropologists must remain both open to the possibility of monetary payment and sensitive to the possibility that research participants may refuse payment. When Shan (2024) offered payment to young Chinese mothers participating in her research, they declined, viewing their involvement as a contribution to scientific knowledge or as personally therapeutic. It remains an important feature of many ethnographic encounters that participants recognize the value

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of sharing their stories without monetary compensation, even if this does not preclude payment in other contexts. Payment is thus highly contextual, influenced by interpretations of money, reciprocity, and exchange, as Nencel found while preparing a new research proposal with a Latin American organization led by sex workers. The organization was pleasantly surprised to learn they would receive payment for their participation if the proposal was funded, something they were unaccustomed to. Yet Nencel was equally surprised by their reaction, given her experiences with sex worker organizations in East Africa, where payment for participation has become an expectation in research collaborations.

While early anthropologists' failure to reflect on payment in fieldwork is illustrative, the need for reflexive questions is more evident than ever. We cannot assume that contemporary ethnographic research resembles the fieldwork contexts of our disciplinary ancestors. By fostering a critical and reflexive discussion on when, how, and whether money is paid in fieldwork relations, we do not claim to offer a conclusive approach to managing payment or avoiding awkward encounters. Rather, we argue that payment can no longer be considered an unimportant topic (Cajas & Pérez, 2017, p. 145). We need thorough and comparative reflection on the fact that, in many contemporary research settings, payment appears to be the only ethical way to conduct fieldwork. Avoiding a discussion of payment partially obscures the related taboo surrounding payments in field-based interactions (Cajas & Pérez, 2017). Is it naive or unscientific to think that paying for data does not affect its reliability? Or is it immoral and extractive to refuse to acknowledge this issue? Can we overlook the complexities that may arise when we pay our research participants? Such complexities would include the potential erosion or transformation of relationships that enable and even constitute ethnography—a concern that may also explain anthropologists' reluctance to deconstruct payment in fieldwork interactions. These questions need to be unpacked and reformulated within a holistic discussion of the realities and consequences of monetary payment for fieldwork. Providing answers to these questions will contribute to new narratives about "monetary reciprocity" that more accurately reflect contextually informed and reflexive ideas about ethical research conduct and knowledge production. By synthesizing insights from the small body of literature on the topic and our experiences, we aim to advance the debate and create space for different kinds of narratives.

DISCIPLINARY NARRATIVES

On the question of guidance, discussion, or debate on payment and fieldwork, anthropology contrasts sharply with other disciplines, such as biomedicine, in which compensation for participation is a significant topic (Nyangulu et al., 2019). For some critics, payment in biomedical research is unethical because it turns volunteering for a clinical trial into a matter of financial reward. In this scenario, healthy participants—who may take more risks when they urgently need cash—are relatively well remunerated (Wertheimer & Miller, 2008). For other critics, payment is still about "more than money" (Stunkel & Grady, 2011). Yet within bioethical debates, it is acknowledged that there is nothing inherently unethical about incentivizing people to volunteer through payment (Gelinas et al., 2018; Stones & McMillan, 2010). An ethical issue arises primarily when payments are deemed excessive or inadequate (Talukder, 2011). The relevant point here is that such matters are openly debated in other fields.

Closer to our discipline, discussions are ongoing within social and behavioral sciences (Head, 2009; Thompson, 1996). The roles of research participants are often more clearly defined than in anthropology, with cash or vouchers provided in exchange for specific data-gathering activities, such as expert interviews, psychological experiments and games, or participation in workshops. Concerns tend to focus more on the quality of data produced through various forms of payment (Brase, 2009; Incekara-Hafalir et al., 2022) rather than on the ethical implications of payment itself. In other qualitative social sciences, ethical issues have been explicitly addressed. Indeed, "making payments (or gift-giving) becomes a mark of ethically sound research" (Head, 2009, p. 337) because it is considered a way to recognize and begin to equalize power relations in research relationships. Recently, three early-career geographers have rejected the notion that payment can eliminate power imbalances; instead, they argue, it signifies respect for participants' time and expertise (Warnock et al., 2022). The relationship between researcher and participant is one of interdependence, as seen in ethnographic research, though the authors acknowledge that payment in this context has its own peculiarities (Warnock et al., 2022, p. 198). Ethnography often incorporates specific and formal research interactions, such as interviews or attendance at workshops or focus groups, for which payment may be relatively straightforward. But these bounded interactions take place within the broader scope of open-ended ethnographic research, which involves longer periods of participant observation and is less rigidly structured. The long-term engagement inherent in conducting research *on* and *with* human participants (Cajas & Pérez, 2017) often distinguishes ethnography from other methods, meaning that answers from other disciplines and perspectives cannot be uncritically imported, even if they provide helpful clues.

Ethnographers' long-term and less formulaic engagement with research participants often blurs the distinction between "research" and "real life," as well as between the "formal" and the "informal." Data collection is often more ad hoc and spread over extended periods, resulting in more personal and diverse fieldwork relations: "Researcher positionalities with respect to interlocutors often [also] shift over time … leading to altered expectations and changed relationship dynamics" (Russell, 2024, p. 179). When, then, do fieldwork relationships end? Who gets to decide? These are difficult questions that require critical self-reflection. Integrating payment may complicate matters further, because it entails discomfort (Moodie, 2007; Otañez, 2007). Payment exposes inequalities between researcher and researched that scholars increasingly recognize and are uncomfortable with, since they pose something of an existential challenge to the discipline and its practitioners (Jobson, 2020). Such inequalities can lead to unease, guilt, or even anger when both parties interpret requests for

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payment differently. Yet neither refraining from payment nor avoiding the discussion eliminates educational inequalities, class distinctions, and racialized differences. These issues are almost always operative in fieldwork interactions, even when the obscured relationships are shaped by unequal roles and motives (Von Vacano, 2019, p. 126). The increasing scrutiny of inequality, representation, and neocoloniality in research practices makes it untenable to ignore payment in fieldwork. This necessitates a discussion of our disciplinary ancestors and the long-ignored taboos on mixing intimacy with money.

MISSED (HISTORICAL) OPPORTUNITIES FOR REFLECTION

From its inception, the discipline of anthropology has been shaped by a long European history of moral concerns about money, as reflected in biblical narratives such as the "cleansing of the temple," in which Jesus drives out the money changers from the temple in Jerusalem. Money was perceived as corrupting, in line with related concerns about commodification, which was considered to both rationalize and undermine social ties (Zelizer, 1998, p. 1381; see also Marx, 1964). In contemporary capitalist society, these concerns have not waned (Shipton, 1989; Taussig, 1980). As Hart (2007, p. 13) emphasizes, money in capitalist societies "stands for alienation, detachment, impersonal society, the outside." Consequently, there has been a tendency to avoid discussing how money affects our everyday (research) lives. This avoidance leads anthropologists to perpetuate a moral imaginary of money as a symbol of alienation and detachment, which contrasts with the rich lived experiences we should prioritize (Hart, 2005). Such an imaginary obscures the reality that research participants may not share these beliefs about money, and it conflicts with recent work in the sociology and anthropology of money, which emphasizes not self-interest but rather context and relationships (e.g., Di Muzio & Robbins, 2017; Kusimba, 2021; Maurer, 2006; Schmidt, 2017; Zelizer, 2000). Anthropologists have yet to integrate these insights into their considerations of fieldwork interactions. Instead, a tendency persists to refrain from discussing how money affects our work and lives, which has long constituted a disciplinary taboo.

In the early foundations of ethnographic research, Malinowski (1922) was intrigued by the way the Trobriand Islanders "did business" through the Kula ring. Yet he rarely reflected on how he himself dealt with reciprocity and payment. Malinowski mentions only in passing that he gave his research participants something in return for their willingness to include him in their lives. Eventually, he notes, "they finished by regarding me as part and parcel of their life, a necessary evil or nuisance, mitigated by donations of tobacco" (Malinowski, 1922, p. 8). Tobacco as a form of payment appears to have been a central theme for anthropologists of Malinowski's era, particularly in Oceania (Marshall, 2013). It seems the local population was "pacified" with gifts in exchange for granting the researcher access to their lives. At least that was Malinowski's impression. In his diaries, he expressed frustration about offering tobacco to villagers he wanted to photograph, but who left with his tobacco without allowing him to take their photos (Young, 1998).

Mead (1963) also financed her fieldwork in New Guinea with goods such as salt, matches, and razor blades. While it is unclear how she paid the people she studied (with), she evidently paid for ethnographic assistance. "To supplement their own work," she and her husband "selected local youths from each men's house to report to them on events of interest, paying them a razor blade for each report" (Shankman, 2025, p. 9). Further reflections on compensation are lacking. In the case of Evans-Pritchard (1973, p. 5), "two personal servants" and "two paid informants" helped him decipher public events and rituals among the Azande. Although Evans-Pritchard expresses regret at the term "informant," he provides no details or discussion of payments to those so described. Their mention alongside "servants" reinforces the impression of a relationship between colonizer and colonized. Yet not all anthropologists had the same resources for compensation as these disciplinary figureheads. Ella Deloria, a Yankton Dakota Sioux woman who worked with Boas as an ethnographer among Native Americans, lamented that Ruth Benedict, one of Boas's students, halved her budget, which included "twenty-five dollars a week to get about, and do the socially correct things—provide meat and such presents, on paying my visits to my informants." Underlining the socioeconomic disparities between them, Benedict told Deloria "that she and anyone else who went on the field did it at their own expense"; this made Deloria, who had insufficient means, "feel very uncomfortable" (Geliga, 2014, p. 66). The case of Zora Neale Hurston, an African American woman who also worked with Boas, illustrates that funding for gifts was essential for ethnographic fieldwork. In her case, the peaches, ham, and insect repellent she brought on frequent visits helped her build a relationship with Oluale Kossola, the only surviving member of the *Clotilda*, the last US slave ship to bring captives from Africa, in 1860 (Cep, 2018).

As these examples indicate, payment was important in early anthropology for establishing contacts in the field, but our disciplinary forebears did not reflect on the ethical and epistemological dynamics of that payment, aside from Deloria's brief mention of gifts as "socially correct things." For much of the 20th century, academic discussions of fieldwork focused on techniques and methods of analysis (Glowczewski et al., 2013, p. 114). The question of reciprocity—whether in the form of gifts, payments, or even the opportunity for research participants to share their stories—was not deemed worthy of reflection. Giving gifts appears to have been uncritically accepted as part of the process. Global changes, however, turned the tide.

RECONSIDERING LONG-HELD ASSUMPTIONS

After World War II, scrutiny of fieldwork gradually shifted, thanks in particular to increasing concerns about anthropology's involvement in colonial projects. In former colonies, where much ethnographic research was concentrated, the division of the world into communist and capitalist blocs had severe consequences. Anthropologists working in the contexts of political projects exhibited a growing reflexivity and took something of

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an "ethical turn," acknowledging questions about "the writing of ethnography, relations in the field, the ethics of research and questions of ethnographic authority" (Glowczewski et al., 2013, p. 114). The involvement of anthropologists in the study of counterinsurgency in Latin America prompted the American Anthropological Association to issue its first ethics statement in 1967 (Biswas, 2015, p. 251). Consequently, anthropologists began to take the concerns and perspectives of research participants more seriously, recognizing their obligations toward them. Issues of informed consent and confidentiality became increasingly acknowledged, while reciprocity and gifts began to receive critical attention (De Waal, 1998; Wax, 1952; Ybarra, 2014). Anthropologists' long-standing interest in why and how people form relationships around the concept of "give and take" (Hann, 2006) also began to inform reflections on fieldwork relationships.

In a short article from 1952, Wax describes reciprocity as a "field technique." She begins with the simple question that most anthropologists have likely asked themselves at least once: "Why should anybody in this group bother to talk to me? Why should this man take time out from his work, gambling, or pleasant loafing to answer my questions?" (Wax, 1952, p. 34). In addressing this question, she argues that the relationship between researcher and researched should be understood as an interaction in which both actors' needs must be satisfied. For research participants, these needs could include curiosity, boredom, or an opportunity to let off some steam, as well as material goods like tobacco.

Yet determining exactly what, when, and how much to reciprocate is not a straightforward process. Adams (1998) illustrates, for instance, that reciprocity can be a minefield of ethical, power, and cultural differences. Von Vacano (2019, p. 132), who critically examines the term *reciprocity*, considers it "imbued with anti-market sentiments … leading to neglect of the economic dimension of fieldwork." The fact remains, she argues, that there is an economic asymmetry in many fieldwork situations, one that should not be obscured by assumptions about what counts as reciprocity. In short, while anthropologists have rightly explored reciprocity and gifts in fieldwork interactions, a divide persists between the "good" noncapitalist world, associated with reciprocity and gifts, and the "bad" capitalist world of markets, money, and payment.

In reality the distinction between "the ideology of a pure gift versus an intrinsically self-interested commodity, of which money is the iconic example, emerged in tandem with the growth of capitalism and modern social institutions," argues Cole (2009, p. 112). "When applied to the domain of intimate relations," she continues, it is evident that "the dichotomy of love and money, or of pure gift versus interested commodity, is not natural" (p. 112). This false distinction arises from a particular historical sequence of economic developments, often referred to as the history of capitalism. This perspective echoes Zelizer's (1989) discussion of the cultural taboos around the mingling of money and intimacy in the United States. Money, often perceived as qualitatively neutral, profane, and calculative, is commonly portrayed as antithetical to "personal, social, and sacred values [that are] qualitatively distinct, unexchangeable, and indivisible" (Zelizer, 1989, p. 347). Yet the two are deeply intertwined in US history and law, as evidenced by various everyday examples (Zelizer, 2000). Zelizer argues that the interactions between (intimate) social relations and money must be examined with an open mind, rather than through a normative analytic that is limited by unexamined beliefs—such as the belief, common in many parts of the Global North, that money is incompatible with intimacy.

While Zelizer's work focused on the US, many anthropological studies have problematized taboos about money from Madagascar to India. The chapters in Parry and Bloch's (1989) edited volume, for example, demonstrate that monetary exchange is more multilayered than ideologically informed interpretations suggest. Rather than undermining social ties, money often helps maintain them. More recently, Kusimba (2021) shows the essential role that loving familial relations play in distributing money through Kenya's mobile money network. As Cole (2009) points out, popular Western ideologies of love—which critically interpret intimacy as instrumental when certain criteria are unmet—tend to overlook the deep intertwining of emotions and materiality, as illustrated in her research on romantic relationships in Madagascar. Similarly, Mains (2013) discusses how (male) friendship in Ethiopia involves both affection and the exchange of material goods. His research participants convey that friendship is "clearly associated with the ability to provide material support," though affection and a positive relationship are equally essential; finding the right balance between the two is often complex and prone to creating conflicts among friends (Mains, 2013, p. 338). Strikingly, these studies reveal that in many societies where anthropologists conduct ethnography, the distinction between intimacy and money is blurred. Despite recognizing the diverse meanings money can take and how it configures relationships in different societies, payment for fieldwork is rarely assessed in light of these cultural meanings. Instead, it is often extracted from its context and analyzed within the confines of a research process that has, until recently, upheld the distinction between intimacy and money. How can a researcher justify not paying a participant in cultural settings where social relationships are entwined with material or monetary gain? In this sense, unpacking taboos about money and fieldwork could help combat unintentional ethnocentrism.

NAVIGATING COMPLEXITIES

Among the few anthropologists who *have* considered the role of money in fieldwork interactions, Srivastava (1992, p. 18) argues that all ethnographers must address the question "Should anthropologists pay their respondents?" He suggests that ethnographers should disclose any payments or favors they provide to their respondents. Thirty years and a few citations later, such discussions remain conspicuously absent. This is evident in Cheng's (2022) description of her internal conflict over payment in the field as a doctoral student. When she reluctantly shares her concerns with her supervisor, he surprises her by admitting that he also pays respondents: "'Yes, of course. My career was built on the lives they shared with me. And if they need help with money, of course I would give it to them. I give them money all the time!'" (Cheng, 2022, p. 19).

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Tellingly, he had not considered sharing this information with his students. Unlike other disciplines that rely on payments for one-off or short-term research projects, as discussed above, "researchers whose intellectual projects are rooted in long-term fieldwork and intimate bonds and empathy for their research subjects have been evasive about the *meanings of money* in fieldwork" (Cheng, 2022, p. 21). Part of the reason for this may be that anthropological reflexivity, when focused on monetary payment, can raise discomforting questions.

Those who have explicitly discussed monetary payment often highlight the challenging emotions that arise when money is involved in research relationships. Cheng (2022), for example, was disappointed by a research participant, with whom she had developed a close bond, who showed little interest in her own life. After making a payment they had both agreed on, this participant did not ask about the health of Cheng's mother, despite knowing she had been hospitalized, which caused an earlier meeting to be rescheduled. This led Cheng to question the depth of their relationship. Similarly, de Regt (2015, 2019) offers sustained reflections on the challenges of combining friendship and monetary payment over many years with Noura, whom de Regt met while working on development projects in Yemen. She recounts initial advice from other expatriate development workers against providing money to local friends and colleagues, advice she ultimately chose to ignore. When Noura needed medical care, including a heart operation and ongoing medication, de Regt promised to cover the costs. This financial commitment, however, eventually became uncomfortable; de Regt felt that Noura's demands for money began to strain their friendship. This concern grew significant enough that she ultimately stopped providing the funds Noura requested (de Regt, 2015, pp. 60–63). Payment is not a cure for discomfort.

High (2010) illustrates some reasons for discomfort through her efforts to compensate research participants in a Malay village. During her fieldwork, she frequently faced questions about how she would help the poor research participants in her study. The villagers, familiar with schemes inaugurated by international aid and state agencies, believed she should offer something similar. Eventually, village leaders explicitly asked her if she could help finance the construction and maintenance of a school building, a request she felt she could not refuse (High, 2010, p. 311). But her efforts backfired. The money she provided never seemed to be enough, and her host family was viewed with suspicion because people assumed they must have gained from her, given the resources at High's disposal.

Moodie (2007) also notes competition for financial support among research participants she was close to and other local actors whom they viewed as illegitimate and opportunistic. It was quite challenging to bridge the gap between the contested distribution of resources—as perceived by some close participants—and Moodie's concerns about gathering ethnographic material and alleviating her conscience (Moodie, 2007, p. 51). Ultimately, this dynamic prevented her from cultivating relationships with a broader range of research participants.

Despite the inequalities between anthropologists and many of their research participants, it would be incorrect to portray the latter as lacking agency (Rouse, 2021). For example, when de Regt (2019, p. 105) questioned the level of payments she made to Noura, Noura replied dismissively, "In friendship one does not count such things." For anthropologists, such a riposte is hard to argue with or negotiate. After all, in our intimate research relations, we want to be considered more than just "money providers," especially given the disciplinary and personal ethics mentioned above.

As Cheng (2022) notes, the expectation of monetary payment can linger long after fieldwork has concluded. She emphasizes that the intimacy of the original relationship makes it challenging to refuse requests for financial assistance. At the same time, she expresses her growing discomfort with the financial aspect of one friendship, in which nearly all their distant communication consists of requests for money. These requests seem to undermine the friendship she believed they shared. Reflecting on her own complicated and enduring relationship with Noura, de Regt (2019) argues that it would be ethically problematic to refrain from compensating her friend. Not only did de Regt hold a stable position as an academic anthropologist, but Noura also played a significant role in various articles, thus contributing to her career. Consequently, de Regt felt compelled to transfer money in response to her friend's repeated requests for large sums, which persisted for many years after her fieldwork ended. She has also felt the need to write about this issue, not because payment assuages feelings of awkwardness, shame, or guilt (cf. High, 2010; Johnson & Searles, 2021b), but because de Regt (2015, p. 63) had an enduring concern about it: "I do not feel comfortable with the financial dimension of our relationship, and I often wonder why." Changing the narrative around payment and fieldwork involves foregrounding such questions of "why," encouraging more anthropologists to examine their own involvement in monetary payment, fieldwork, and the ethics of knowledge production.

REFLEXIVITY, RECIPROCITY, AND PAYMENT: TOWARD ETHICAL KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

By integrating accounts of payment and nonpayment, both reflective and unreflective, we have traced a metanarrative of payment in fieldwork that examines the challenges, assumptions, blind spots, and guidance involved. Once we acknowledge the complexities of payment in fieldwork—specifically if, how, and when we pay—we must also consider how these complexities affect knowledge production, particularly ethical knowledge production. This, in turn, entails reflecting on the multiple dimensions shaping an ethnographic study's conditions of production. If discussions of decoloniality in anthropology involve a critical examination of such factors in the discipline's history, together with efforts to confront and move beyond anthropology's relationship with (neo)colonialism, then addressing the issue of payment becomes a significant methodological and ethical component of decolonizing anthropology. This issue cannot be resolved with a one-size-fits-all "solution"; rather, it serves as an invitation to critically reflect on our own positionality.

Questions about who gets paid for what can create difficulties for researchers, as well as for participants and the

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wider communities in which they live. They can also affect research findings (High, 2010; Moodie, 2007). In this respect, Srivastava's (1992) distinction between "general" and "specific" knowledge is relevant. "General" knowledge is shared by most members of a society or community, while "specific" knowledge "is the repository of fewer individuals who are its specialists" (Srivastava, 1992, p. 18). He notes that payment to individuals possessing "specific" knowledge tends to be less problematic for others in the community than payment for what is regarded as "general" knowledge. The latter can provoke envy, since it is not immediately clear to others why one person may be included in the research and receive financial reimbursement, while others, who also possess the same "general" knowledge, do not. As High's (2010) experiences demonstrate, the salient issue is not only the bilateral exchange between researcher and participant but also how payment may be perceived by other community members.

Sometimes, payment is framed as reimbursement for people's time. But the cultural construction that equates time with money can devalue certain forms of labor and living (Eräsaari, 2020). Hence, beyond the negotiation of intimacy and money across cultures, broader contextual factors and potential social consequences must also be considered. Anthropologists can and should reflect on this for at least two reasons. First, reflecting on the conditions of knowledge production can reveal cultural dynamics and power relations that are crucial for considerations on payment during fieldwork. Second, anthropology aims to understand general knowledge and beliefs through direct interaction and participation. But it is problematic to describe general knowledge when the impact of payment—or the lack thereof—clearly affects how anthropologists participate in a community and interact with people in order to understand this general knowledge. In other words, whether payment is required is a methodological aspect of participant observation, one that should be discussed as such. This raises further questions: With whom do you discuss the details of payment? Participants? Local researchers? Key participants? Academic colleagues? Or all of the above?

Furthermore, valid ethical concerns remain about the consequences of monetary payment for other researchers; these concerns are distinct from the exaggerated fears expressed by some anthropologists regarding the potential corruption of research insights through payment during fieldwork. For example, expectations of payment among potential research participants could create inequalities between local and expatriate researchers, since the latter often have far greater access to funds (Das & Parry, 1983). This is further complicated by the near ubiquity of participant compensation among development practitioners and those in other disciplines that engage with larger numbers of research participants. Nonetheless, the issue of inequality in research resources is as relevant today as it was during the time of Ella Deloria and Ruth Benedict.

Among our authorial group, it is evident that seniority matters. Those of us in permanent, relatively well-remunerated positions can more easily honor payment requests than those just starting their careers. This situation is, however, not impossible to address. For example, Eyre negotiated payments to research participants from the funder of his PhD research in Tanzania, the United Kingdom's Economic and Social Research Council. He used the funds to buy livestock for several cattle-herding groups he had worked with, as well as window panes for a local primary school and an electricity connection for a dispensary. Although the funder deemed such requests "highly unusual," they were permitted because they aligned with general guidelines on gifts and were framed as culturally appropriate (Eyre, 2023, 2024). Ultimately, Eyre needed to transfer cash because he could not purchase livestock at the same price as his research participants. Such flexibility among funders is, however, unusual.

Searles (2021) notes several setbacks that added expenses to his already-stretched budget during his PhD research in the Arctic, including return flights for a reexamination, the purchase of an expensive skidoo, and the late withdrawal of budget accommodation. As a result, he could not afford to pay one of his friends and research participants the going rate for translating Inuit elders' stories, which curtailed the first significant breakthrough in his fieldwork before it even began. The lack of debate on these issues may stem from the fact that such challenges can evolve over an academic career. Since professional and personal commitments often go hand in hand with increasing seniority, many senior researchers tend to make shorter research visits. Negotiating monetary payment for an extended period of fieldwork at the beginning of one's career is typically more complex, given the blurred boundaries of research and the cautious aspiration to integrate into a community of research participants, with whom relationships must first be established. This experience is qualitatively different from the friendships and intimacy that senior researchers develop with long-term contacts, whom they tend to revisit and nurture over many years. Thus, reflection encompasses not only the cultural and institutional context of the research but also the researcher's personal and professional position and responsibilities toward peers.

Anthropologists must reflect on their position relative to other actors who might shape their assumptions and evaluations about the monetary aspects of fieldwork. Otañez (2007) struggled with the fact that a union leader he paid was simultaneously accepting payments from actors Otañez politically opposed (in his research), specifically a multinational tobacco company. He recognized that he had no moral claim over the union leader; as Cheng (2022, p. 26) succinctly states, "Providing financial help does not grant one moral authority over the recipient, but neither does it exempt one from feeling morally responsible, for money is just one part of the exchange in the relationships we forge in research." In reflecting on these interactions, Otañez began to question whether his payment mirrored that of the tobacco company, since both were compensating local actors to advance their respective projects for personal gain. His experiences with monetary payments in fieldwork interactions illustrate that money can evoke a range of discomforts, confrontations, and emotions from both researchers and participants. These experiences often undermine the belief that anthropologists are inherently different from others, since they have a "real" interest in their research participants. Otañez (2007, p. 77) had to reconsider his hope that he was an exception "to the example of impersonal

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and infrequent encounters that non-Westerners experienced at the hands of Westerners in Malawi and other non-dominant societies." He realized that rather than the fictive pure friendship he professed (Otañez, 2007, p. 77), the relationship had always been instrumental, its primary aim being to advance his publication record.

As with Otañez, our experiences also suggest that monetized fieldwork relationships may provoke—rightly or wrongly—certain expectations. More often than not, however, the discussion centers on the reciprocal-exchange relationship—money in exchange for knowledge production—from the perspective of the research participant. This raises questions about the anthropologist's obligations toward the participants and, in turn, the latter's rights and expectations. Yet to fully grasp the realities of monetary payment in fieldwork, the expectations of researchers also require attention. Otañez and Cheng, for example, remind us that we often harbor unspoken expectations of our participants. Anthropologists need to acknowledge these expectations and emotions about what they will receive "in return" for the payment. For example, is payment a means to ensure the participant's commitment or engagement in the project? Rarely are such expectations discussed. It is often assumed that participants are, to some degree, committed to or invested in the research, particularly in participatory action research (PAR) and the like. Researchers often become aware of others' expectations only when something goes wrong, realizing firsthand that a participant may have little interest in the project for which they are being paid.

Sabelis and Nencel (2022) encountered such a situation while using photovoice methodology with a group of Ethiopians who were members of a sex worker–led organization. The participants halted their participation in the project and refused to return until they received more money, which was covered by official funding. Leading up to this stalemate, the researchers adhered to the ethical principles of participatory research, adjusting the payment amount according to the recommendations of their partner organization. But this did not meet the participants' expectations. The impasse raised further questions about what would be more ethical regarding payment. Was it more ethical to cease payment, since their refusal indicated they were participating solely for the money—contradicting the accepted epistemological principles of PAR? Conversely, might it be more ethical to pay participants what they deemed appropriate, since an anthropologist should not dictate the required degree of willingness to participate or the motivating factors expected from participants? Expectations exist on both sides of the relationship, extending beyond the notion that monetary exchange in fieldwork is simply impersonal or formulaic.

Negotiating payment cannot be separated from the researcher's status, gender, or ethnicity. Although reflexive analysis of one's positionality has become integral to ethnographic practice (Grassiani, 2019; Nencel, 2014), this practice generally does not include an analysis of the researcher's position regarding payment for fieldwork. Yet, as Gillen (2012) shows, gender, race, and nationality were significant factors in paying fieldwork participants in Vietnam. Given the history of the Vietnam War, female research participants would not request financial compensation from him, since sex work was often associated with receiving payments from white men from the United States. Conversely, Vietnamese men did not express similar concerns. In various instances, race has been entangled with decision-making about payment. Eyre, as a white man conducting research in sub-Saharan Africa, has frequently felt unfavorably compared to other white actors with far greater resources (Eyre, 2023, 2024; McLellan & Eyre, 2025). At times, he has been warned by other white expatriates about the risks of financial entanglements with Black Africans (particularly women) with barely concealed undertones of racism. The symbolic meaning of being an outsider and wealthy influences researchers' interactions in the Global South, whether they are students or professors, shaping participants' expectations regarding money and payment. This dynamic can discomfort researchers, who may feel uncertain about whether they have paid enough, paid too little, or should not have paid at all. Moreover, researchers are aware that their decisions can inadvertently reinforce the very stereotypes of the white ethnographer they are fervently trying to dismantle.

Salverda's (2019, 2021) approach to payment in the field has been shaped by stereotypes about white male visitors in rural Zambia. He navigated the tension between the belief that global inequalities necessitate financial redistribution toward poor, rural Zambians and a reluctance to be perceived solely as a "money provider." This hesitation made him reluctant to respond to requests that seemed unrelated to research, such as for beer money when there was no substantial ethnographic exchange. Such reluctance led to many negotiations over small sums and convenience-based decision-making, leading Salverda to miss the opportunity to theorize money's role in knowledge production. When researchers lack a methodological and ethical framework for navigating monetary payments, they have little room to systematically deconstruct why and how research participants frame their requests, or even what their expectations may be. Reflexive engagement with research participants on these themes could open new avenues for research into the moral economies of (re)distribution (Salverda et al., 2024) through participant observation. It might reveal that research participants' requests for redistribution at a micro level (i.e., in their interactions with the researcher) are influenced by their perceptions of the unfairness of resource distribution at the macro level, both nationally and internationally.

A notable exception in this respect is Rouse's (2021) monetary contribution to the construction of a school on the western edge of Accra, Ghana, which serves as a form of research project in itself. This initiative echoes High's (2010) approach of compensating a community rather than individuals as a means of "giving back." Rouse, however, explicitly sought to subvert the potential for neoimperialist associations by inverting the act of reciprocity, presenting her upfront donation as a generative act of research. By critically reflecting on her own positionality as an African American woman working in West Africa, Rouse challenges those colleagues who assume that such an ambitious project to "give back" during fieldwork reiterates the neocolonial international development practices that anthropologists have critically examined. Her position as an African American anthropologist allows her to engage with

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questions of payment and neocoloniality in ways that differ from those of white researchers. This distinction arises not only from her divergence from behaviors typically associated with wealthy white outsiders, such as riding in an SUV, or from the assumptions made about her wealth or power based on race and gender, but also from Rouse's clarity that the research project of building a school is not a quest for personal or political redemption from any sense of culpability for past colonialism or imperialism. Instead, it enables her to "theorize development from the perspective of the embodied act of doing" (Rouse, 2021, p. 54). This presents an opportunity for other researchers who are willing to reflect on and discuss monetary payment, allowing them to gain theoretical insights into how knowledge is and should be produced by anthropologists.

CONCLUSION: THINKING THROUGH PAYMENT IN FIELDWORK

By bringing together historically and geographically diverse sources, we argue that the issue of payment in fieldwork should always be a consideration for anthropologists and research participants. This is especially important given the remuneration academics typically receive for their work with people who are often much poorer than themselves, whether they are "outsider" anthropologists or those working "at home." Yet we must be cautious of default assumptions about who an anthropologist is while recognizing generalizable observations regarding the idealization of informal and sometimes intimate ethnographic encounters. Many anthropologists may need to accept that a "happy equilibrium" between researcher and research participants is often unattainable (Hatfield, 1973) and that circumventing privilege is all but an impossibility. If achieving fully balanced relationships with research participants is more of a romantic ideal than a realistic goal, should anthropologists avoid the topic altogether? How can reciprocal interactions manifest within "imbalanced" relationships?

Some important first steps have been established, focusing critical and theoretical attention on the challenges of reciprocity. Debating monetary payment should be part of the discussion. Although the topic of payment raises additional concerns for anthropologists, we cannot cling to romanticized notions of ethnographic relationships untainted by financial considerations. By examining the anthropological literature's limited discussions of payment in fieldwork, we aim to reshape the narrative surrounding payment and move beyond the "corrupting narrative" and its assumptions. We hope to encourage the discipline to understand how our role in ethical knowledge production can be enhanced by reflecting on the topic of payment in fieldwork. We invite fellow researchers at various stages of their careers to openly share their experiences with payment in the field, fostering collaborative efforts to create new narratives about the methodological, ethical, and theoretical implications of monetary payment. Questions about whether payment corrupts research participants, undermines the integrity of the research process, or sullies pure knowledge tend to overlook the opportunities and challenges that contemporary ethnographers face.

We propose that payment—if and how it takes place, when and why not, who is paid, and how much—is at the baseline of ethnographic inquiry. These questions should be explicitly addressed during the conception of research projects, the design of budgets, and the preparation for fieldwork, and we should reflect on them throughout the fieldwork process. This should not imply that monetary payment is obligatory or that the absence of payment is suspect, but rather that even in research in which monetary payment is inappropriate, researchers should consider their monetary practices during fieldwork. Analyzing expectations, positionality, and any challenges encountered will enrich knowledge of this subject and help other ethnographers engage in more informed and ethical decision-making regarding payment. Clarifying who determines the conditions and amounts of payment, and why these choices are made, will denaturalize the notion that not paying is the norm in ethnographic fieldwork. Transforming normative assumptions about paying research participants enables a more thorough engagement with the various options that constitute reciprocity in ethnographic relationships and ethical knowledge production. There cannot be a one-size-fits-all solution to the question of payment in fieldwork. This would treat the issue with as little nuance as the corrupting narrative that once prevailed or the silence that previously surrounded the topic. Given the changing world in which contemporary ethnography takes place, such decisions about payment in fieldwork must be made within the complex contexts in which we conduct our research.

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ENDNOTE

[1] Salverda conducted research in English; Eyre in Swahili, Nyakyusa, and English; Nencel in Spanish and English; Grassiani in Hebrew and English; de Regt in Arabic; Woensdregt in English; and Shan in Mandarin. All translations are by the authors.

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