

Proactive Reciprocity

Educational Trajectories Reclaimed through Patterns of Care among Refugee Men in Greece

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Introduction

Abdul and I sat together on a bench, struggling to make sense of our teacher, Demetra. “Do you understand what she is saying?” Abdul whispered. I shook my head and replied, “Not really.” Abdul looked around the class and then leaned toward me again: “I don’t think the others do, either.” Demetra was relying on her native tongue and pedagogical expertise to teach Modern Greek to students of various ages, ethnicities, genders, and educational backgrounds. Despite her efforts, she faced a difficult task. “Teacher, can you explain in English?” Abdul spoke up. He was in his forties and, before the Syrian war, had obtained a degree in English literature. “*Mathainoume Elliniká, opóte miláme Elliniká* [We are learning Greek, so we speak Greek]” Demetra replied. “I don’t mean to be disrespectful, but I don’t understand,” Abdul continued, “and neither do the other students.” Demetra sighed, then went on: “Not all students here speak English. I am sorry, but I also don’t speak much English. Maybe Nikki can help.” Nikki, a young Greek-Kenyan woman, was volunteering with Demetra. She sat down next to us and some students transferred to our spot. “*Entáxei, paidiá as páme* [Okay, kids let’s go on],” Demetra affectionately continued.

This scene is rewritten from my field notes transcribed in November 2014 to capture the negotiation of reciprocity and autonomy within the multilingual encounters that commonly occurred in the solidarity center, Kentro, in

Athens, where I was anchored during my fieldwork. Kentro (a pseudonym) was a grassroots initiative founded in the 1990s by activists to create solidarity between workers, immigrants, and refugees. Its ideology was based on anti-capitalism and anti-authoritarianism and was grounded in respect and empathy for each human being. This was not without some friction and bridging dialogues, as the vignette depicts, but the horizontal practices were a continuous endeavor. Since the initiative's founding, members have offered free Greek language lessons. With the increase of refugees and other migrants in Greece, and after the economic crisis began in 2009, the irregular students began to request other European language classes, as they aspired toward social and economic mobility elsewhere.

In 2015 and 2016, when close to one million refugees traveled through Greece, education became one of the prevailing themes in refugees' struggles (Rezaian, Daskalaki, and Apostolidou 2019). The focus of government programs and refugees themselves was on children's education, but as access to higher education was limited to people with local citizenship or official refugee status, young men stuck within the limbo of acquiring legitimacy as refugees through state approval sought unconventional routes to advance themselves. Therefore, some sought free education among solidarity activists, which by that time included volunteers from all over the world. However, as the men in this study interacted with the activists, they encountered an absence of knowledge about their own languages, politics, history, and habits. By becoming proactive in the ideology of reciprocity that prevailed within the initiative, the men began to reconfigure knowledge production by teaching their own classes, highlighting the diversity of their home communities, and sharing their expertise with arriving refugees and volunteers. As a result, they engaged in transnational solidarity networks and increased their opportunities for the future.

In this chapter, "proactive reciprocity" is introduced as a term to illustrate how the men engaged with their own subalternation in an inclusive social setting. It is important to bear in mind that male refugeeeness is a fractured and morphed existence (Peteet 2005), impacted by class position, securitization, and humanitarian engagement (Amar 2011; Griffiths 2015; Suerbaum 2018; Turner 2019). Thus, refugees' masculinities are formed through various interactive patterns. By proactively claiming their masculine autonomy by means of a reciprocity that disseminates individual authority, the men in this study reinstate themselves, not simply as men, but as reciprocal and autonomous human beings.

Methods

The findings presented in this chapter are based on ethnographic research conducted in Greece over twenty-two months between 2012 and 2015, and

during ongoing visits until 2018. Alongside field notes, I documented conversations with 103 men between the ages of eighteen and fifty from Middle Eastern, South Asian, and sub-Saharan countries, including thirty-two in-depth interviews. The conversations tended to oscillate between English and Greek. However, few interviews included a translator, occasionally provided by the men using mobile technologies (see Ingvars 2019a: 44–45). Most chose their own pseudonyms, based on role models or heroic figures from childhood. My interlocutors' religious alignments varied, with most being Muslims. Few were devout, most were religiously skeptical, and several were atheists. They had experienced diverse persecutions—economic segregation, xenophobia, homophobia, gang violence, and civil and international wars—dire enough to seek refuge in another country. Many of them aligned with a resistant refugee identity but also struggled with the restriction of movement enclaved within the asylum procedure and refugee status, which inhibited them from visiting their family members but offered other trajectories. As such, they negotiated their identities and modified the legal categories that the Greek state assigned them—for example, by enhancing the image of autonomous wanderer. I apply the term “(im)mobile men” (Ingvars 2019b) to capture their desires for mobility and struggles against the restrictions applied by European states. As part of my fieldwork, I studied Greek and taught English at Kentro. Thus, to many of my interlocutors, I was both a teacher and their fellow classmate. This created a bond through which we assisted each other with languages, shared humorous thoughts, and exchanged knowledge and criticism about our cultural habits, economics, and politics. The findings presented here are drawn from those conversations, as well as from the interviews.

The Terms of Autonomy among (Im)mobile Men

Several studies have shown that men in refugee trajectories are stigmatized and shamed through images of terrorism, hypersexuality, immorality, and laziness (see Griffiths 2015). Personnel within state policymaking, border control, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have been prone to dispute or disdain the men's vulnerability (Ticktin 2006; Turner 2019). Therefore, (im)mobile men tend to be in a contradictory situation because voicing their grievances or fighting marginalization can increase their stigmatization either way. That said, men in migration have the propensity to mold a cultural blending of masculinities, by which they negotiate their desires for success in a new environment, the stereotypes of themselves that they encounter in that environment, and expectations from their home communities (Howson 2014). In a similar manner, (im)mobile men assess their vulnerability and empowerment strategies in relation to temporal, geo-

graphical, technical, and economic changes occurring in the world (Ingvars and Gíslason 2018). In other words, to cite the theories of Arjun Appadurai (1996), they reconcile aspirational desires in relation to the terms of recognition available to them.

The men in this study described how ascendant structures, such as educational routes, in their home countries had collapsed, been rescinded, or been barred, apart from the military. Thus, they expressed the desire to improve or retain their economic situation by networking, expanding their language skills, and gaining access to higher education or vocational training. In doing so, they hoped to improve their own positions as well as the prospects of their family members by sending remittances, and to use their acquired knowledge to improve the situations of other refugees. In this, they reflected studies that indicate that inclusive pedagogy, family care, and resistance to educational segregation are influential among men from Muslim societies (Crea 2016; Grewal and Coolidge 2013; Mac an Ghaill and Haywood 2018). Moreover, they exemplified a caring masculinity, which scholars, following Marcia Inhorn's (2012) theory of emergent masculinities, have demonstrated is rising among Muslim men (Naguib 2015; Palivos 2018). One of the aspects defining emergent masculinity is transgressing formerly restrictive masculine roles by nurturing interdependent relationships. As such, whatever their religious or political alignment, the men in this study demonstrated the desire to control their own futures, but not without a moral code of caring, empathizing, and understanding the human dignity of others. To follow the Kantian understanding of autonomy (Kamm 2008), they used knowledge to be critical of authority, while embracing the core value of care. This became the pathway of an active manhood in a life of precarity in Greece.

Julie Peteet (2005) demonstrated that refugee manhood, as a social construct, is impacted by the men's fractured and locational experiences of statelessness. Her work, furthermore, shows that the ideal manhood, which can be morphed as subjectification, becomes valorized through moral distinctions and gendered support in the men's social surroundings. Calling out such interactive patterns, Paul Amar (2011) appealed to Middle Eastern scholars to focus on how masculinities are formed in nuanced relation to the neoliberal human security states, where the practice of a gendered shame is shaped to maintain the postcolonial civilized/uncivilized binary. Therefore, refugee men's masculinities must be deconstructed in a way that refrains from reproducing the crisis/savior mode.

Studies conducted in the last decade tend to highlight Syrian men's experiences of sudden statelessness, loss of class status, and masculine transformations in relation to local settings and shifting global politics (Ingvars and Gíslason 2018; Suerbaum 2018; Turner 2019). However, studies have also emerged that show how refugee men may carry with them other forms of

fractured identities due to factors such as disabilities (Muhanna-Matar 2020), queerness (Tschalaer 2020), or ethnic duality (Farahani and Thapar-Björkert 2020). Collectively, these studies draw attention to the multiple ways fractured refugee masculinity is negotiated in nuanced relation to locational and temporal settings.

It has been documented that refugees in the Global North are expected to comply with images of a childlike being, compliant with local regulations and not engaging with civil rights movements (Cabot 2014; Fassin 2010; Ticktin 2006). Katerina Rozakou (2012) has shown how this occurs in Greece through the rhetoric of hospitality. Greek citizens have faced their own stigmatization, most recently as the blame for the “refugee crisis” was diverted to the “incurability” of the Greek people (Kirtsoglou and Tsimouris 2018). However, the Greek state and NGOs located in Greece are instructed through financial assistance from members of other European states to restrict and accommodate the refugee population, and thus the benevolent factor is contingent. Rozakou (2012: 568–71) has demonstrated that this hierarchical structure has been both resisted and assimilated, as grassroots members refused conditional aid, and members of local NGOs referred to refugees as “worthy guests,” thus invoking local rules of conduct toward guests. Reflecting the discourse all over Europe, worthier guests tend to be the ones perceived as eligible refugees. For example, more effort has been expended by the Greek state to provide credited education to people with refugee status than to those still waiting in camps or on the streets. Access for NGOs to provide education to children in camps has even been restricted (Rezaian, Daskalaki, and Apostolidou 2019: 6). Men in this study generally referred to camps as prisons, and some had even been detained as asylum seekers in penal institutions. However, since the European Court of Human Rights ruled the situation for asylum seekers in Greece unacceptable in 2013, some amendments have been made. Therefore, facilities for refugees have included open and closed structures, and some refugees have lived in occupied houses with considerable freedom of movement (Tsavdaroglou 2018). Whether in closed-off camps or occupied spaces, women tend to have less freedom to seek education outside of their locations due to restrictions from their families and harassment from other refugee men (Rezaian, Daskalaki, and Apostolidou 2019: 165). Some men in this study acknowledged this gendered privilege and therefore designated their remittances for their sisters to attend school and offered female fellow students protection on their way home. Yet, the men were in severe danger as they moved on the city streets due to violent harassment from the police officers, mafia members, and supporters of the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn party. As such, they would put themselves at considerable risk just to show up for classes, particularly at Kentro, which was located within Exarchia, an area often associated with anarchism and heavily surveilled by the police.

Understanding the irregular students' dilemma, as well as their economic precarity and unreliable working hours, Kentro aimed the language classes toward different levels of competency and designed the structure to accommodate fluctuating attendance. In this way, the autonomy of the student was at the forefront of the teaching methods, even if this meant slowing the overall progress. Measured against Marcel Mauss's ([1924] 1990) theories of the gift, the teaching was presented as unconditional, so that each person could contribute to the movement on their own terms. That said, there was subtle encouragement for the students to comply with the norms of the initiative and even with larger cultural norms. For example, in the opening vignette, Abdul's suggestions are sidelined in favor of the teacher-student hierarchy and the dominance of the local language.

By drawing out the classroom as an example, I emphasize the deconstruction of hierarchy within refugees' environments, as underlying structures can either restrict or support refugees' negotiations of autonomy. Furthermore, it is relevant to comprehend the previous negotiations refugees have faced on their trajectories as these inform their paths of reclaimed autonomy, skills, and practices of care. Therefore, I start by examining the men's work environments prior to entering Kentro.

“I Speak Them All”: The Purpose of Languages within Refugee Trajectories

After the economic crisis hit Greece in 2009–10, it was difficult for (im)mobile men to find work, and, even if they did, it was mostly seasonal, in either agriculture or tourism. Therefore, knowing many languages was perceived as an asset. Evraz, an Iraqi-Kurd, said, “After one year I speak Arabic, another year Farsi, another year Greek! I know many languages. And Kurdish! Sometimes I am speaking four languages at the same time, with different customers. No problem, whatever you want!”

Evraz was describing how he learned many languages as a refugee en route to Greece and used them in his current employment. Then he went on to say, “No matter how many languages you speak, it is not enough. It is not enough.” Thus, Evraz's words portray a theme prevalent in this study, where the men emphasized their capabilities regarding languages, while recognizing that the locals would continually perceive them as strangers under scrutiny (or *xenos*, to use the Greek term). Therefore, knowledge alone was not able to provide them a sense of safety. Much as Heath Cabot (2014: 69–70) previously demonstrated, the men in this study had to negotiate the meaning of their legal documents, as they tended to be met with skepticism and variable interpretation of their papers by the public and personnel of the

state. As Evraz recounts, for example, they needed both an AMKA (social security number) and an AFM (tax number) to sign a work contract. These same documents were also needed to establish a legally recognized address. However, to get these identification documents, they needed to provide a proof of address, and citizen services' personnel sometimes refused to accept the documents they provided. As such, the men were highly reliant on their employers' lax enforcement of these rules while the papers were inserted in the bureaucratic roundabout. This black-market environment increased the men's anxieties, and they often described working under extremely harsh conditions (Ingvars 2019b). Such experiences were not limited to Greece, as most of the men in this study had resided temporarily in other countries, where they described minimal opportunities and structural discrimination. Situated within such precarities, the men stated that they had to rely on their learning skills while developing relationships with their employers, some of whom were violent. Within such working conditions, the men elaborated on performing their knowledge, much as Magdalena Suerbaum (2018) showed Syrian refugee men in Egypt stating their economic value. As such, while the men in this study sought to impress their employers, they were also demonstrating a desire for autonomy over their precarious existence.

Despite their resilience, the men described this precarity as wearing them down. They also illustrated how everyday routes in Athens were riddled with demeaning encounters. For example, Moses from Togo described being confronted with people making the sign of the cross and/or changing seats when seeing him on public transit. Then he went on to say, "Some Greek people just think: 'Those people are from a poor country, or maybe they are from Africa; they are from Asia, and they are not educated.'" Recalling such encounters, the men reflected that racism arose from lack of education and fear of the unknown. Thus, they would depict racist people as stuck within the prisons of their minds, while relating that such environments made them feel trapped in their own bodies and minds. Countering such mental prisons, however, they believed that people who sought to keep an open mind, to seek knowledge even if they were not formally educated, were good human beings. As such, besides learning more languages, there were several reasons for the men to seek refuge at Kentro.

Language schools providing evening seminars are common in Athens. Alongside private lessons, these schools offer additional opportunities for locals to increase their prospects for employment or higher education abroad (Tsikalaki and Kokkinou 2016). Such seminars were too costly for the men in this study, and thus they discussed finding lessons within humanitarian NGOs and grassroots initiatives. Participation in several different communities was not uncommon, and reasons for attending social centers were various. Jung Fan, a Hazara-Afghan, explained:

People come to know what Kentro is, or they need some help, or like to stay here. 'Cause there are people who have been here a long time, and they just know it is a good place, that they can have fun here. Then they find something to do also. There are people that don't do the work [demonstrations and acts of solidarity] we do here, but I think it is a kind of being in the imprisonment of own self-importance. So, I don't know, for everyone the reason is different I can say that people are coming to find a girlfriend, why not!

Men sought out social spaces of solidarity for diverse reasons. Some needed a place to relax, meet people, and network toward employment. Those who experienced Kentro as a sanctuary would describe it as a place where they felt free from surveillance, where the demands of docility were lifted, and as a place with caring and open-minded people. Abdul, the literature scholar, shared his impressions:

I am open-minded. I have talked so far to three young men in this community. They are all like angels They are so polite, so helpful, so educated, so rich in personality, and they are good people to be with Religion tells you how to be a good person, but education can do the same. Knowledge teaches you to be good, that it matters how you treat other people.

Abdul's words emphasize kindness as one of the fundamental attributes in a moral person. Thus, while education was important, caring was a central compass for evaluating morality. In this way, limited access to educational routes could be complemented by caring and respect. Kindness, laced with the desire to learn, was a way out of the madness of the mind. Moreover, the men were provided the freedom to contribute to the initiative on their own terms. Activism entwined with the discourse of human rights became one of the trajectories for performing a locally respectable masculinity (Rozakou 2016). Kentro provided an environment where the men could more easily assert their autonomy and renegotiate the value of knowledge as a gift of reciprocity.

Reconstructed Knowledge and Inclusive Pedagogy

Inclusive activism gained respect as a trajectory for refugee men in Greece after thirteen Syrian men instigated a peaceful sit-in in the winter of 2014. This occurred at a time when the Greek population was rallying against the austerity measures imposed on the country by the European Union, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank, and the two struggles often merged in their chanting outside the parliament. The Syrian organizers, furthermore, used their educations to familiarize themselves with the political landscape and allied with Kentro members in emphasizing practices of care, dignity, and democracy (Ingvars and Gíslason 2018). This resulted,

for a while, in more empathy toward and knowledge of refugee struggles among the local population.

After the Syrians' "fast-track" procedures for refugee status recognition on humanitarian grounds were accepted by the Greek government, some resentment arose among other ethnic men, as most of them had been waiting over a decade for that same recognition. However, the Syrians aimed to show solidarity with other (im)mobile men as well. For example, in February 2015, a memorial walk was organized by refugee solidarians in honor of Luqman Shahzad, a Pakistani man who was killed by Golden Dawn members in 2014. Presented in the memorial walk were several banners displaying the refugees' demands in Greek, English, Farsi, and Arabic. This marked a trend of displaying multiple languages on banners as the refugees sought to reach wider audiences. Moreover, this elicited a shift in the hierarchies of knowledge production; when the numbers of refugees and volunteers increased in Greece, the previously arrived men assumed the roles of teachers in grassroots-oriented spaces. In this way there was a merging of activism and inclusive pedagogy toward the newcomers. For instance, participants in the classrooms could use multiple languages and experiences to contribute to the lessons in Kentro while aligning with the solidarity ideology.

For example, Mohmmad (without an "a") was one of the organizers of the sit-in, and he and I jointly taught an English class in 2015. Before the war in Syria, Mohmmad had been learning to become a medical doctor, and during his undergraduate studies he became involved in activism, which led him to become a refugee. He was well versed in human rights law but deeply disappointed in human rights for refugees in Europe. We often discussed and exchanged articles on the issue. Inspired by our discussion, we made human rights the topic for our class one night in March. The English rhetoric, however, proved problematic for one student, Panos, an elderly Greek poet. "*Den katalavaino, einai polý dýskolo* [I don't understand. This is very difficult]," Panos claimed. Lee, a classmate from Afghanistan, stood up and sat next to Panos, saying, "I will help," and began to explain to Panos in Greek. Lee had spent some time in Britain before his deportation to Greece, so he already knew some English, and while he struggled to return to London, he had become fluent in Greek. Thus, he could use his knowledge to assist us and Panos. "*Eucharistó file mou, eucharistó polý* [Thank you, my friend, thank you very much]" Panos said. "*Na 'ste kalá*" Lee replied, using an old Greek saying that means "May everything be good for you/in your life," but was often understood by the men in this study as "this is the right and good thing to do." As such, Lee merged cultural morality, both Greek and Afghan (Palivos 2018), with Kentro's horizontal practices, as caring for a fellow human being was the right thing to do.

In this way, the men displayed an inclusive pedagogy that corresponded with the horizontal ideology prevalent within the social center. Furthermore,

they exhibited being moral men who, while seeking aspiration through knowledge, also engaged in reciprocity, giving back and forth their acquired knowledge. Thus, they defied their former terms of recognition (Appadurai 1996) in Greece and, by merging activism with solidarity practices, were able to assert more autonomy in their everyday existence. They transformed their lives so that their sufferings would lead to an existence of significant kindness (Fassin 2010; Naguib 2015). They would also go on to transform the value of the knowledge by instigating new classes, schools, and informational programs, not only for recently arrived refugees but for the volunteers as well.

Proactive Reciprocity

The increase of volunteers in Athens, such as students, activists and other NGO members, was both appreciated and resisted among the locals. On the one hand, volunteers could transmit awareness of refugee struggles to other parts of Europe, as noted before. On the other hand, local activists resisted some of the power dynamics brought in by new volunteers, such as aligning humanitarian practices with capitalist measures and requiring English to be set within communication channels. Among the (im)mobile men, however, the concern about volunteers, both local and foreign, was their inadequate knowledge about refugees' cultural, political, and social backgrounds, much as Tom, an Iraqi-Kurd, pointed out:

There was the man who wanted to help the Afghans, but he brought pork. They do not eat pork. People who want to help refugees must be prepared. To know what they carry, and slowly explain to them what we do here. But suddenly, a lot of people are coming from a country where they have not been informed what is happening. It will be big mess. (Translated from Greek)

While other (im)mobile men pointed out that some refugees did eat pork, as not all of them were Muslim, Tom's words reflected the previous concern about the lack of knowledge creating fear in the minds of locals. Moreover, there was concern that people of various nationalities, influenced by different sets of exotic Othering and political agendas would recreate negative images of refugees due to misunderstandings. However, within the initiative, the (im)mobile men had the space to become proactive.

Therefore, in due course, many of the men purveyed their roles as activists into employment of sorts. Some, such as Lee, became cultural mediators between newly arrived refugees and NGO volunteers/academics. Others began to teach Arabic in various settlements. A few, like Jun-fan, started solidarity education elsewhere; currently, there are several such schools in Athens supported through transnational networks (Givonopoulos, Athanasiadi, and Dalakoglou 2019). One or two, such as Fred, delved

into knowledge of the body by becoming dance instructors or actors. Lastly, some of the men organized events that provoked the acquired or absent knowledge of volunteers. For instance, four gay men—two volunteers and two refugees—collectively initiated screenings of films they considered informative for group members, and hosted discussions afterward. Thus, on a warm summer night in 2016, I listened to Marco, a Syrian-Palestinian queer refugee, outlining the important scenes of an old film about Al Nakba, the catastrophe that occurred in 1948 when the first Palestinians were forced to become refugees. Afterward, he expressed how he thought it was important to bring forth this knowledge, so the solidarians could better comprehend stories of resistance retold within many Middle Eastern families against the occupation by Israel and Western allies. Thus, Marco responded to the absence of knowledge by filling the void and speaking his own truth.

Marco's actions also speak of intertwining a fractured refugee masculinity with a collective resistance to benevolent management (Turner 2019) and gendered shaming of Middle Eastern men as inherently violent (Amir 2011; Muhanna-Matar 2020). As such, sharing knowledge was an effort to reframe the perceptions of the “benevolent” volunteers so that they felt a more nuanced solidarity with Middle Eastern activists. Therefore, I believe that implementing new knowledge, alongside the use of the solidarity space to form a caring occupation, speaks less of resubjugating hierarchies (Suerbaum 2018), and more of morphing masculinities in ways that mitigate gendered, ethnic, and class hierarchies.

Conclusion

The practices illustrated in this chapter indicate that the (im)mobile men at Kentro became proactive agents in two ways. First, they resisted the state definitions and confinement of refugees. Second, they renegotiated their positions within the solidarity as they disrupted the classroom hierarchies by inserting their own experiences, knowledge, and languages into the activist environment. Moreover, they were reciprocal within knowledge production through practices of care. This they did by teaching and learning through inclusive pedagogical approaches and by contributing knowledge to the local culture. This rewrites the narrative of undeserving or pitiful refugees and demonstrates how refugees can contribute as equal members of their communities.

In this way, the men in this study also forged new futures for themselves. Though not applicable to all, many aligned the trajectories unfolding within activists' spaces to create respectable roles for exiled men, whether or not they were recognized as refugees by the state. These trajectories included open resistance to confinement and poverty; central practices of care across

ethnicities, ages, genders, and sexual orientations; and employment directed toward building an equal society. Thus, (im)mobile men could assert their autonomy by anchoring the value of care while becoming proactive within the ideological spaces of reciprocity.

Proactive reciprocity should be understood as men forming masculinities that claim recognition as informative and interactive citizens, with a nuanced power interplay embedded within masculine autonomy, at the same time resisting benevolence in order to highlight the voices of the diversified subaltern. Proactive reciprocity must, however, be deconstructed in relation to specific locations, temporal moments in geographical history, and the fluidity of political landscapes. The proactive measures these men were able to assert were in many ways conditional on the ideology prevalent within the grassroots communities and the welcoming atmosphere for refugees at the time. These landscapes change swiftly; therefore, we must continue to explore how refugees enact their agency of knowledge over time, refusing to let discriminating structures or benevolent forces determine their fate.

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