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Giving back and the moral logics of economic relations

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Abstract

This paper uses David Graeber’s work on the moral grounds of economic relations as a vantage point from which to reflect on the ethics of giving back in field research, drawing on my own fieldwork experiences in Sierra Leone and Sri Lanka as well as examples from existing literature. I argue that Graeber’s exposition of different moral logics for economic relations – hierarchy, exchange and communism – provides a valuable set of conceptual distinctions for thinking through what is owed by, and to, researchers in different research interactions. In addition to a recognition of the incommensurability of what is often being exchanged, this approach responds to the danger of researchers setting the terms of ethical interaction, through distant institutional processes and practices built on logics of exchange, in ways that might constrain the ability of interlocutors to meaningfully articulate their own positions in fieldwork relations.

Keywords

research ethics, fieldwork, giving back, reciprocity, David Graeber

Introduction

‘Among the Tonga I have had to learn that I should not give just because I feel like giving as this is an insult to all who do not receive’ (Colson, 2017: 52)

‘Freuchen tells how one day, after coming home hungry from an unsuccessful walrus-hunting expedition, he found one of the successful hunters dropping off several hundred pounds of meat. He thanked him. The man objected indignantly’ (summarised in Graeber, 2014a: 79)

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To engage in fieldwork is to enter into a shifting ethical labyrinth. Or, at least, that is how it can appear to anxious researchers, particularly inexperienced graduate students such as my prior self, when confronted with complex social realities and calls for research that is innovative, decolonising, feminist and more. While these agendas are ones that I support and that many students find liberating, it can, nonetheless, be overwhelming to try to unpack the associated ethical considerations for each and every research interaction. There are, of course, excellent conceptual tools available to support with these challenges, such as ideas concerning reflexivity and positionality, but the strength of these tools – their openness, broad applicability and dynamic nature – often also means that the scope of their potential use is, again, overwhelming. In reality, it is likely that many researchers focus their moral interrogations on critical issues and moments as a means of dealing with being a limited creature traversing apparently unlimited ethical landscapes. It seems what is required to support students and researchers in this narrowing work is what might be called ‘mid-range ethics’, sitting between abstract imperatives, such as ‘do no harm’, and the specific, often at least partially unanticipated, ethical choices researchers face in the field. Such mid-range ethics might also be suggested to fit between the dynamic nature of, say, reflexivity and the more static, but thus potentially more predictable and easily utilisable, nature of institutional ethics rules.

In this paper, I use David Graeber’s discussion of the moral grounds of economic relations as the basis for a mid-range ethics tool that can aid thinking through what it means to ‘give back’ during research. The desire to give something back in return for the generosity shown by research participants and to avoid conducting extractive research is a commonly articulated one. Yet, as the quotes at the beginning of the article point to, neither the process nor the ethics of giving and receiving are necessarily straightforward. I argue that Graeber’s exposition of different moral logics for economic relations – exchange, hierarchy and communism – provides a valuable set of conceptual distinctions for thinking through what is owed by, and to, researchers in different interactions with fieldwork interlocutors. Engaging with these multiple moral logics highlights the diversity of ethical interactions researchers might have during fieldwork. It also raises important questions about which moral logics come to frame research relationships and the freedom of participants and others to choose the relative position they occupy in relationships with researchers.

The paper begins by sketching out reasons why researchers attempt to give back before discussing examples of what this giving back might look like in practice and delineating some of the complexities that can arise. I then provide a brief introduction to Graeber’s conceptualisation of the moral logics of economic relations and proceed to consider logics of hierarchy, exchange and communism in turn. For each of the three, I articulate the relevance of the issues they raise for fieldwork ethics, drawing upon examples from my own doctoral research on universities in Sierra Leone and Sri Lanka. The subsequent section brings these points together to indicate broader implications of the framework underpinning the three logics, for example, with regards to the range of roles that participants and others can play in their interactions with researchers. I conclude by commenting on the politics of giving back in relation to where and how decision making on what is ethical takes place.

The drive to give back

What is it that researchers are seeking to address when they want to give back to research participants, assistants and their communities? Fieldwork accounts and my own conversations with peers suggest three main reasons for the drive to give back. The first is the sense of having received during research prompting a feeling of obligation, of needing to give something back in return. Gupta and Kelly note that ‘we often feel compelled to reciprocate the generosity of those whom we encounter in the field, without necessarily knowing the best way to do so. A desire for shared exchange with our field collaborators causes many of us to consider giving back to these people who have helped us along the way’ (Gupta and Kelly, 2014: 2). Complementing this more general impetus to respond to sharing and generosity, the relative clarity of what we, as researchers, are getting out of research interactions can deepen the drive to give back. Graduate researchers, in particular, can be left wondering: ‘We get a certificate, some letters after our name, and a step up on the career ladder out of our doctoral research, but what about the people and communities involved in our fieldwork?’ (Staddon, 2014: 249).

A second source of the impetus to give back can be concern with avoiding engendering or exacerbating hierarchies, exploitation and situations of poverty or distress. As Sultana articulates, ‘conducting international fieldwork involves being attentive to histories of colonialism, development, globalization and local realities, to avoid exploitative research or perpetuation of relations of domination and control’ (Sultana, 2007: 375). The experience of learning about British exploitation of its former colonies in Sierra Leone and Sri Lanka as I – a person born and raised in colonially enriched Britain – prepared to conduct fieldwork sharpened the sense that I needed to do something to give back while in the field. Even without that colonial connection, awareness of poverty, abuse, exploitation and power imbalances are core elements of the process of formulating and preparing for research in many fields. This awareness can beget a desire to give back in order to avoid following in the footsteps of exploiters who have come before. Ali Johar, a Rohingya refugee who co-authored an article on giving back, draws out a core ethical issue here: ‘Sometimes, some researchers try to ignore the fact the person who is giving time from the community has also a life. His/her time is also valuable. He/she is also involved with a livelihood. He/she also has challenges in the life’ (Field and Johar, 2021: 478). Being cognisant of the time ‘taken up’ by our research can lead researchers to want to give back in order to compensate for the time ‘lost’ by participants and assistants (Hammett and Sporton, 2012), particularly when those participants and assistants are facing significant financial or other challenges (Warnock et al., 2022).

Finally, for some researchers giving back constitutes part of enacting transformative research agendas. The drive to give back can, to take up the Marxist refrain, come from an ideological commitment to not just interpret the world but to change it (Lynch, 1999). This commitment can take many different forms. It might come under the label of delivering impact in return for the position and resources received as researchers. As Huchske comments, the ‘obligation to “give back” is, by now, part of most ethics codes in anthropology’, although the ‘form and extent of reciprocity, however, varies greatly, and is left to be defined by the researcher’ (Huchske, 2015: 55). Giving back, or reciprocity in

research, can also constitute part of emancipatory and social justice research agendas. As an ongoing relationship dynamic, it may form part of feminist research practices that seek to ‘destabilize hierarchical categories of difference’ (Bodwitch, 2014: 3). For Mertens, ‘Researchers who work from a critical, transformative stance have an obligation to make visible power inequities and to do so in a way that stimulates action’ (Mertens, 2014: 15). Seen in this way, research and giving back are not distinct stages of a process but rather research is, fundamentally, a process that gives benefits to the multiple actors involved in it, not just the researcher.

As suggested by this summary, the drive to give back arises across different situations and scales. Researchers might want to give something back to individual interview participants, say, in recognition of their time, insights and attention (Head, 2009). Ethnographers embedded in communities may feel they want to give back to those communities as well as, or instead of, particular individuals (Swartz, 2011). Long-term relationships with research assistants may also encourage a different sort of reciprocity than that practiced with one-time participants (Molony and Hammett, 2007). While recognising the significant differences between these situations and the varied ethical, and practical, issues they may entail, such as those related to paying for participation (Hammett and Sporton, 2012; Warnock et al., 2022) or negotiating academic and financial acknowledgement for research assistance (Molony and Hammett, 2007), I treat them here under the broad umbrella of ‘giving back’ as I believe that, fundamentally, they relate to the same ethical question: what do we owe those we encounter in our research? Moreover, the messiness of research means that these situations are often not encountered in isolation but interpolated with each other, suggesting that it may be useful to consider them side by side. Crucially, by ranging across different situations in our discussions, it is easier to observe the multiplicity of moral logics at work in our research relations.

The complexity of reciprocity

How might researchers put the drive to give back into action, and what challenges might they face in doing so? While the body of literature directly focussed on the topic of giving back in research is relatively limited, there are, nonetheless, a number of valuable examples from across disciplines and contexts available to illustrate what it might look like. Kelly (2014) tried multiple strategies for giving back during their research in Central Africa, including giving money, plastic water bottles, rides and food. Describing the water bottle example, Kelly comments that ‘Early on in my research I would give the bottles to those who asked for them. This turned out to be a mistake. Once I gave one woman, man, or child a bottle I was often overwhelmed by many others asking for bottles as well. I felt guilty, mean, and selfish for not handing out bottles to everyone, but there were almost never enough.... In some cases this even affected my research—people being unwilling or hesitant to talk to me because they had not received bottles while others did’ (Kelly, 2014: 4). Another option is to try to provide employment as research assistants or interpreters as a joint means of giving back and more effectively achieving research goals. Similar issues can arise here, however. As Sawyer explains for their own work, ‘The wages I paid to the

assistants I employed only irritated other village members, rather than their intended effect of giving at least something back to each village' (Sawyer, 2014: 2).

Attempts to give back can also involve researchers providing training, facilitating access to knowledge, or utilising their time and skills to work on or advocate about issues of concern to participants. In their research with Chilean women who made arpilleras (pictures in cloth), Adams tried to give back by 'assisting in the production and selling of arpilleras, carrying coats and bags when one group performed, giving them feedback on the sound coming out of the loudspeakers, writing a promotional article for a newspaper, and numerous other small gestures' (Adams, 1998). During Staddon's work in Nepal (Staddon, 2014), participants asked for technical advice on how to manage the community forests, despite the research being concerned with promoting recognition of local ecological knowledge. For some, the research process itself – where participants are given the opportunity to voice their experiences and ideas – can constitute a form of giving back or intervention (Swartz, 2011).

Reflecting on the examples above, it becomes evident that giving back requires difficult choices to be made about who should benefit (Hammett et al., 2019). Should giving back focus exclusively on the individuals with whom a researcher directly interacted, or should it constitute activities that are beneficial to the larger communities of which those individuals are a part? In either case, the distribution of benefits from the research has the potential to generate conflict. Furthermore, for some situations, the position of the participants may completely alter the dynamics of giving back. Sasser boldly begins their reflections on their research by stating that they have not given back to their research participants and that they do not intend to (Sasser, 2014). In their research on international family planning policies with American activists and development agents, Sasser focussed on how to give back to the women whose lives were affected by the discourses and actions of this network rather than the powerful actors of the network itself.

Deciding upon the particular means of giving back can also present researchers with difficult ethical dilemmas. In Staddon's case (Staddon, 2014), the desire of the community for technical advice meets the researcher's recognition of the problematic epistemological power dynamics that work to structure that desire. Furthermore, there may be a mismatch between what the researcher is willing and able to provide and what research interlocutors want. Ideas of what is appropriate to give back in return for research participation or support can also be shaped by precedence, with communities and individuals that have been previously visited by researchers potentially have expectations informed by those visits (Dyll and Tomaselli, 2016). Researchers may similarly be tempted to base their practices of giving back on prior projects. Cultural norms can inflect what is seen as the appropriate way to recognise and respond to research participation and support in different contexts (Adams, 1998), as is suggested by the quotes at the opening of this paper.

Even if we are able to select who to give back to and how, the ethical complexities of giving back do not end there. Giving back has to reckon with fundamental issues regarding commensurability. As Gupta and Kelly articulate, 'We realize that we can never fully reciprocate the time, kindness, company, and resources shared with us and we will be taking away possibly more than we give back. We understand that we can never actually

know all the ways in which power and difference operate, and thus we are unlikely to fully address these relations in ways that might bring about complete equity' (Gupta and Kelly, 2014: 8). This raises questions of how to think about the relative benefits accrued by the researcher, through the acts of research participants, and the researcher participants, through the researcher giving back. To put it crudely, when has enough been given back? Furthermore, as Goldberg suggests, 'giving back cannot erase differentials of power and privilege between academics and the communities with whom we conduct our research' (Goldberg, 2014: 4). It is possible, in fact, that acts of reciprocity may be seen as threatening when they entail making use of the power connected with the researcher's position in the world (Adams, 1998). Additionally, as Goldberg goes on to explain, 'some forms of giving back can actually strengthen those differentials, particularly if they reflect paternalistic dynamics of patronage or liberal approaches to charity' (Goldberg, 2014: 4). Fundamentally, it is difficult, if not impossible, for researchers to fully anticipate all the consequences of their attempts to give back (Wesner et al., 2014). To return to the issue of commensurability, this unknowability of the consequences of giving back poses problems for any idea of neatly balancing the benefits received.

Navigating giving back

As seen above, the drive to give back can rapidly encounter murky moral waters and complex obstacles when it comes to translating impetus into practice. The existence of such issues does not mean that the urges to recognise and respond to the generosity of our research participants; to avoid continuing legacies of exploitation; or to enact positive change through research are either impossible or necessarily misguided. It does, however, suggest the need for greater clarity concerning the issue of giving back in research in order to better navigate this ethical terrain. While institutional guidelines and principles like 'do no harm' can provide basic overall direction, they are often either so vague or inflexible as to offer little in the way of insights to students and researchers looking to respond in a nuanced manner to the particular situations which they encounter (Blee and Currier, 2011; Sultana, 2007). On the other hand, although individual examples of how other researchers have engaged with their own ethical issues related to giving back can be illuminating, researchers cannot adopt the same approach in every context, and it can be difficult to draw together the applicable lessons from these distinct examples.

I believe all this points to a need for greater attention to what I have chosen to call 'mid-range ethics', which, akin to mid-range theory, sits between the grand, abstract principles like 'do no harm', on the one side, and specific explanations of particular cases and case categories, on the other. As opposed to telling researchers what principles or ethical frameworks to follow or indicating what should be done in specific situations or categories of situations, the point of mid-range ethics might be to give students and researchers tools to work with the various ethical frameworks that they might adopt and encounter in the world across different situations. Reflexivity and positionality (Pillow, 2003; Soedirgo and Glas, 2020) are undeniably useful here as examples of such tools, but they tend to prompt myriad further questions about where to focus one's attention. What specifically should I focus my reflections on? What should I do with knowledge of my

positionality? The following discussion seeks to put forward one further mid-range tool that will complement these existing concepts by providing a navigational aid that can help researchers decide what it might mean for them to act ethically in different contexts, with specific relevance for thinking through the ethics of giving back.

David Graeber and moral logics

When looking for guidance on how to think about giving back, it is, perhaps, unsurprising that David Graeber's lengthy tome on debt (Graeber, 2014a) – quite literally on the history of owing each other – stood out to me. While it is far beyond the scope of the paper to attempt to weigh up the book's main arguments, one of the work's key strengths is that it takes debt out of the confines of its existence in discourses in the financialised economies of the Global North and places it in a much wider social and historical context. By doing so, the book facilitates a deep analysis of the social role of debt and exchange in different relationships. In a chapter titled *A Brief Treatise on the Moral Grounds of Economic Relations*, Graeber discusses how debt features in social interactions characterised by moral logics of exchange, hierarchy and communism. It is this part of the book, which draws on the work of Marcel Mauss, that I believe furnishes us with a particularly useful mid-range ethical tool for thinking through giving back.

Before proceeding to discuss each of the three logics in turn, it is important to say a little more on what is meant by a moral logic in the first place. Rather than being a categorical imperative that is morally valid across all actors in all contexts, moral logics are understood here as socially recognised ways of claiming moral justification for an action or system of actions. Moral logics are, therefore, multiple. Summarising Mauss, Graeber highlights that 'In any relatively large and complex system of human relations... all major social possibilities are already present, simultaneously' (Graeber, 2014b: 67, emphasis in original). Elsewhere, he comments that the three – hierarchy, exchange, communism – are 'moral principles that always coexist everywhere. We are all communists with our friends, and feudal lords when dealing with small children' (Graeber, 2014a: 113–114), with the latter comment referring to hierarchy. These last sentences, in particular, speak to the way in which moral logics might be seen to apply more or less in different terrains and relationships. Appropriately for mid-range ethics, therefore, I do not suggest that the three moral logics and their possible combinations cover all possible moral situations. Neither are they intended to negate the unavoidability of competing or conflicting ethical demands potentially associated with giving back in research. Instead, they represent a way of thinking about the ethics of relations in research, particularly with regards to there being a multiplicity of potential moral logics, that I believe can clarify some of the complexity surrounding giving back and can, thus, enable researchers to better navigate the dynamic arrays of moral obligations and claims they encounter in research.

Exchange

The moral logic most readily apparent in many of our lives, or at least in how we discuss our economic relations, is that of exchange. As Graeber puts it, 'Exchange is all about equivalence. It's a back-and-forth process involving two sides in which each side gives as good as it gets' (Graeber, 2014a: 103). As suggested by the section above, however, exact equivalence is impossible to achieve. In fact, there may be an element of competition involved in exchange, where one side is trying to get the best deal or to otherwise 'win' the exchange. Nevertheless, this competition must be bounded or else there is the danger of a side feeling that the exchange is unjust or that they have been cheated. The goal is to tend to a situation where the things or services exchanged are felt to be of sufficiently similar value that neither side feels itself to be in the other's debt. In doing so, nothing is owed to the other and, in a sense, the interaction between the two sides comes to a close. 'Exchange allows us to cancel out our debts. It gives us a way to call it even: hence, to end the relationship' (Graeber, 2014a: 104). Within communities, Graeber suggests, it is unlikely that things will be allowed to completely cancel out, as debts provide some of the basis for social bonding.

The moral expectations associated with exchange are also predicated on a rough sort of equality between the two sides, at least in the context of the transaction taking place. Where this is not the case, the moral logic at work is likely to be different. Consider the moral obligation one might feel to reciprocate when a co-worker buys lunch (perhaps voiced in the form of 'I'll get it next time') compared with the likely lack of similar obligation one might feel in the situation of a boss paying for a team meal. As this suggests, the moral logic of exchange does not pertain to all transactions or interactions that we might consider as exchanges. Exchanges might, for example, involve deliberately incommensurate 'gifts' or purposeful delays in reciprocation in order to show respect or to avoid the appearance of 'cancelling out' relations through impersonal, market-like exchange (Hammett and Sporton, 2012). Nonetheless, I suggest that the framing of relations through the moral logic of exchange, as detailed above, is pervasive and appears to be a powerful presence in the conceptualisation of giving back.

How can we begin to translate this discussion of exchange as a moral logic into the context of research practice? First of all, it is important to recognise the many occasions the logic of exchange does appear to govern our sense of moral obligations during the research process. From the use of paid transcription services to one-off meals on the road during research trips, there are a number of relationships where our moral obligations tend to be seen as met once we have received our good or service and have paid our price.¹ When researchers discuss the debts that are owed in the context of fieldwork, it seems that it is rarely these relationships that are the focus of their considerations, unless, perhaps, they are contemplating a broader debt to a community of which their partners in exchange are a part.

The limits of balanced exchange or reciprocity (Korf, 2007) as a means of meeting our moral obligations in the field can become visible, however, even within putatively transactional interactions. When initially navigating Freetown in Sierra Leone, I made use of the city's abundant population of taxis, *kehkeh* (three-wheelers) and *poda pod*

(minibuses) to travel around. For the most part, I travelled my distance, paid my fare and went on my way: transaction completed, relationship with driver closed, except, perhaps, a residual nagging guilt that the fare had been too low. When it became clear that much of my research would require travelling a longer, more complicated route, I relied on ‘chartering’ a taxi on an almost daily basis, choosing the same driver, Ibrahim,² each time. I travelled my distance, paid my fare (negotiated up after the first day) and went on my way. Quickly, however, the transaction did not feel complete, and the relationship was certainly not ‘closed’. Even if they rarely touched on my main research topic, our conversations during the journeys gave me insights into Sierra Leone that helped me navigate my research and my life in Freetown. Ibrahim and I spoke about his family, aspirations and challenges, and he asked similar questions about my life. I felt, and feel, indebted to Ibrahim in a way that did not occur with most of the other people whom I attempted to engage in exchange with. When it came time to leave Sierra Leone, I provided Ibrahim with an additional payment as an attempt at showing my appreciation, but, again, it felt deeply insufficient.

In the terms of moral logics, why did my actions fail to match up to my sense of my moral obligation towards Ibrahim? Two main reasons that stand out. First, the value of what I gave to Ibrahim, financially and otherwise, did not feel close to the value of what he had given me. To put it crudely, my payments and conversations did not appear tally up with the combination of driving and insights into life in Sierra Leone with which he provided me and which helped to advance my research and career. For my interactions with Ibrahim to be considered fair or just *under a moral logic of exchange* then what we exchanged should have been (roughly) of equivalent value. As this did not appear to be the case, at least to me, something felt wrong about it all. This resonates with discussions on the difficulties associated with appropriately recognising the role and importance of those who support us or collaborate with us in our research (Gupta and Kelly, 2014; Molony and Hammett, 2007) and on the incommensurability of what was being ‘exchanged’. The sense of imbalance present here, of my receiving more than I was given, can also be seen as connected with concerns related to extractivism in research (Hammett et al., 2019). Awareness of an imbalance, and a corresponding sense of extraction, became viscerally manifest precisely because my interactions with Ibrahim no longer seemed to fit the parameters of the moral logic of exchange.

This lack of fit relates to my second point here: the ongoing nature of our interactions meant that the relationship between Ibrahim and I evolved, moving away from the impersonal quasi-equality that facilitates the closing of a relationship at the end of a commercial transaction. Researcher positionalities with respect to interlocutors often shift over time (Herod, 1999) leading to altered expectations and changed relationship dynamics. Due to our often lengthy drives together, Ibrahim and I learned more about each other’s lives and each other’s positions in the world. Amongst all this, I learned about the material challenges that Ibrahim faced and the differences in opportunities we had both been given. The complexity and altered character of the relationship meant that closing it in the same way as for other, simpler transactions seemed both infeasible and undesirable. Furthermore, the knowledge gained about Ibrahim’s life placed the relationship in a

context that made the notion of a simple exchange – driving for money – seem wholly inadequate. The moral logic of exchange no longer appeared valid.

Hierarchy

The issue of different positions in the world brings in the question of hierarchy. The idea of a moral logic of hierarchy might, understandably, seem to be a contradiction in terms. Returning to the earlier example of the co-worker and the boss buying meals, however, we can see that expectations of reciprocity can vary depending on the social positions of the two sides in a relationship. Graeber writes, ‘relations of explicit hierarchy... do not tend to operate by reciprocity at all’, adding that it’s sometimes hard to see this because the hierarchical relation ‘is often justified in reciprocal terms (“the peasants provide food, the lords provide protection”)’ (Graeber, 2014a: 109). The moral logic applied here could be understood as focussing on the ‘appropriateness’ of the transaction in accordance with respective positions of the sides in the relevant social hierarchy, with Graeber arguing that precedent and custom play a key role in setting the expectations for what is due to each position (e.g., the rent of the feudal lord) and what each position should provide for the others (e.g., the provision of certain goods or services by occupationally linked caste groups). Graeber suggests, however, that such a logic applies not only to structural hierarchies associated with racialisation and caste, for instance, but also in some way to small, intimate relations between otherwise socially equal friends through processes of categorisation (e.g., the generous friend prompts less reciprocity because of their classification as generous).

In the conversations I have had with peers about research ethics, hierarchy has often played a central role. This makes sense given that many academic projects in the social sciences are focussed on understanding and challenging social hierarchies, whether in the form of patriarchy, (neo)colonialism, racism, castism or otherwise. An anxiety often expressed by research students from the Global North planning on working in the Global South, in particular, is how not to reproduce these hierarchies and how not to enter into hierarchical relations in the field, or at least to mitigate the effects of any such hierarchies that may occur. My positioning in ascriptive hierarchies – white-skinned, British citizen, man – undoubtedly affected the research experiences I had and the opportunities available, as I gained access to people and spaces that were difficult to reach for most Sierra Leoneans and Sri Lankans and was frequently treated differently in everyday interactions. In a basic sense, this can be seen as the moral logic of hierarchy in action, different positioning in social hierarchies leading to different treatment. In the context of giving back, however, it is less this largely impersonal privileging or discrimination that researchers appear to be talking about, although this potentially contributes to a sense for some of having unfairly received, and more the personal relationships established with particular individuals and groups (Gupta, 2014).

Thinking about the moral logic of hierarchy – even if we do not believe there is anything ‘moral’ about the hierarchy in question – can be a useful way of reading these relationships. Bolten’s work on ‘love’ in Sierra Leone (Bolten, 2012) is instructive here (see also Enria’s (2018) study of youth in Freetown). Part of this conception of love is that

those with high status positions and access to resources will share resources and opportunities as part of showing their ‘love’ for those in lower status positions in their social networks, with this then reinforcing loyalty and ties. The expectation for what each person is supposed to contribute or give to each other is distinctly differentiated according to status hierarchy. These insights clarified for me the expectations that I had felt being placed upon me in some fieldwork interactions, particularly with James³ – an interviewee who introduced me to a number of other interviewees in Freetown. I was asked by James to show love, that is, to give out money and perhaps provide employment opportunities, in (indirect) return for James’s own contribution of linking me with his social network. This appears to have been the moral logic of hierarchy in action.

What marks these interactions with James as operating in a distinct manner from those of the moral logic of exchange (e.g., a simple market transaction) is that there was neither an expectation of equivalent exchange nor an expectation that the relation would be concluded after a given interaction or transaction. Instead, the relation was expected to be ongoing, with distinct and differentiated roles and obligations for each of us. Being a relative outsider to Sierra Leonean society, I was not expected to provide connections for James in Sierra Leone but to offer ways into the alternative networks and spaces, mainly in the UK, that I was perceived to have access to. Hence, the moral logic of hierarchy in this particular context drew upon established practices and precedents in Sierra Leonean society related to showing ‘love’ but was adapted to account for my mostly outsider status. In other research situations this process of adaptation will likely similarly depend not only on the practices and precedents that are culturally available but also on where a given researcher is perceived to sit within the continua between insider and outsider (Hellawell, 2006).

While it may be tempting to see relations that correspond with the moral logic of hierarchy as characterised solely by domination, this example also brings in something closer to a relationship of care (Warnock et al., 2022), in which different positions are actively recognised and responded to. Both the notion of showing ‘love’ and the idea of care, therefore, offer alternative perspectives on the ethical standing of acts that might constitute part of attempts to give back. A further point of complexity for understanding the workings of the moral logic of hierarchy in research is that hierarchies are not set and often do not go uncontested. At one point in Sierra Leone, for example, I rushed to join a potential interviewee in their car as they travelled elsewhere in Freetown, having only received a phone call about the possibility of meeting 15 minutes prior. After we reached their destination, however, I was briefly brought to sit quietly in a meeting and then the interviewee pressed some change into my hand for the ride home and made it clear that I was dismissed. In this interaction, the appropriate hierarchy was made transparent, and I was definitively positioned in a subordinate space.

Another feature of my research that brought in questions of hierarchy was the fact that I was a student speaking mainly to academic faculty. The student–teacher dynamic was particularly pronounced in some of the early interviews in Sierra Leone, where the expectation was that I would play the student role and largely sit back and be informed of things of which I was presumed to be ignorant (as both student and outsider). These interactions rarely produced the same sense of needing to give back to the particular

individuals involved as with Ibrahim or James, even though they did still produce a general sense of the importance of contributing to the wider context of their university or community. I believe that there was also another element at play aside from hierarchy in these interactions, which speaks to the third moral logic outlined in Graeber's *Debt*.

Communism

In a characteristically playful manner, Graeber uses the term *communism* to describe the third moral logic. Drawing on Marx, he takes communism to refer to human relationships operating on the principles of 'from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs' (Graeber, 2014a: 94). While, initially, many of us may struggle to point to actually existing examples of communism, guided perhaps by the search for communist regimes, Graeber's discussion opens the door to seeing a whole plethora of every day interactions in which this logic of relation is in operation. 'If someone fixing a broken water pipe says, "Hand me the wrench", his co-worker will not, generally speaking, say, "And what do I get for it?"' (Graeber, 2014a: 95–96). Similarly, if someone asks for directions from a knowledgeable local, there is not usually the expectation that something of roughly equal value needs to be exchanged for the information. Graeber even goes so far as to suggest that this form of interaction is 'the foundation of all human sociability' (Graeber, 2014a: 96). In tight-knit communities, the expectation is often that one should not refuse requests if one is able to meet them, with sharing what one has constituting an important part of building social bonds. Even in impersonal urban life, requests for the time, directions, a cigarette or a lighter and so on are hard to refuse. As long as one is not dealing with an enemy, there appears to be plenty of room for a moral logic of communism.

Translating this logic into fieldwork is both powerful and perilous. On the one hand, it can enable researchers to recognise that many of us are already navigating the ethics of fieldwork, at least in part, using this logic. Similar to the closed exchange interactions with drivers or restaurants, researchers often rely on apparently small communist interactions in order to make fieldwork happen, whether getting directions or simply working out how to live in a new environment. Understanding this logic helps to clarify my previous comments on the student–teacher dynamic. The membership of a global academic community – one that is imagined in some senses and materially manifest in others – shared by myself and my interviewees seemed to reinforce the applicability of the communist moral logic at times. Although trends of commodification and commercialisation in higher education are certainly affecting these dynamics, the functioning of academia continues to frequently rely on academics giving what they have, whether that is their subject expertise or their copy editing skills, to members of their community in some form of need, for example, students needing guidance or colleagues wanting feedback on their latest paper. While academics are generally salaried staff, these activities often extend well beyond what they are obliged to do for their employer in the performance of their role, contributing instead, or in addition, to a wider academic community. Even without being a member of a particular community or sitting in the insider/outsider space often occupied

by ethnographers, it is common to hear researchers comment upon how generous people have been with their time.

As suggested by the earlier discussions, 'receiving' can result in a cocktail of guilt and awkwardness for researchers. I would suggest, however, that introducing the notion of a moral logic of communism brings out two important considerations. First, it reminds us that the social world through which we move as researchers is not solely constituted by exchange or hierarchy interactions and that fieldwork interactions might, at times, be one among many forms of communist interactions. To put it simply, there might be solid moral grounds for receiving help, of various kinds, as a researcher. Second, viewing fieldwork interactions through this lens allows us to think about the multiple possible positions research interlocutors can occupy, or attempt to occupy, with respect to the researcher. Participants can be the benevolent provider or the kind stranger instead of just the exploited other or the creditor waiting for commensurate payment. While undeniably riven with complexities, there is something important here about acknowledging the ability, and the right, of those we interact with in research to choose, at least in part, who they are to us.

Evoking the moral logic of communism, however, should not be taken as license for extraction in research. In one particularly lively interview in Sierra Leone, a professor cheerfully challenged me on what I was going to do to support his university in the context of the support I was receiving for my research. Rather than viewing this as a simple matter of exchange, I see this as the moral logic of communism in action. The professor had met my request to the best of his ability and now, according to the same logic, it was expected that I would find ways to help others in the university community to the best of my ability, even though that support would not be directly benefitting the professor. While, in this context at least, it was moral enough for me to receive according to my need, I should have also been giving according to my ability.

Implications for giving back

The mid-range tool of moral logics of economic relations can aid us to better understand and deal with the issues that can arise from trying to put the different drives to give back into action. With regards to the (in)commensurability of what has been given back by researchers benefitting from the insights of their participants, say, we can recognise that this ethical problem emerges, at least partly, from a particular moral framing of the situation, a framing that focusses on the prompt repaying of ones' debts as a prime moral imperative (Graeber, 2014a). Realising that there might be multiple possible moral logics allows us to move past the notion that the only ethical action is to provide our participants with something of commensurate value to what they have shared, which may well be an impossible feat. It may instead be that the means of fulfilling our moral obligations in the eyes of our participants is to provide something qualitatively different that corresponds with our different perceived status in the world, as in hierarchy, or it may be that those who contribute to our research are content that we will 'pass it on' by helping other people out down the line, as in communism. Alternatively, the expectation in some cases may be that, having made ourselves members of a given community, we should continue to make ongoing contributions to that particular community (again, communism).

This final hypothetical example raises two important points about ethics and leaving 'the field'. First, it seems likely that the type of moral logic at work will depend, at least in part, on the degree to which participants might reasonably anticipate that researchers will continue being associated with their community and, thus, to continue with the practices of contribution and indebtedness that govern the morality of membership. This will vary depending on the situation of the researcher as well as the nature and form of the community in question. A researcher from a local university or who will likely live in the same city or region as the participant community is, perhaps, more likely to be expected to follow through on a communist moral logic than one who will depart to a far off country at the end of the fieldwork period. That said, communities are not always territorialised in such a manner, with technological change also altering what it might mean to continue to engage as a community member. Second, and relatedly, the process of leaving the field appears as a crucial ethical juncture for those who have been embedded in communities as it requires grappling with the debts that bond communities together. Framing researchers who have left the field but who continue to contribute as somewhat akin to diasporic members of a community may be one way of thinking through the moral expectations and implications of such ongoing relationships. There is the potential for diasporic members to organise support from afar, connecting communities to broader networks of resources, and to repeatedly return to the community locale in order to make contributions.

A second set of implications relates to the politics of ethics. In this paper I have sought to illustrate the diversity of moral logics that might be seen to govern research interactions. In doing so, I wish to push back against both overly vague and overly restrictive notions of how one can be an ethical researcher. In particular, foreclosing on the possibility of communist interactions in research would seem to move us towards a view of the world in which our interactions as researchers take place either as impersonal exchange, where we are neither indebted to nor particularly linked with our participants, or in hierarchy. Crucially, this can involve attempts to fix participants in positions that they may not want to occupy. The danger of this fixing seems especially acute when, before fieldwork, researchers are planning ahead for how they might give back, with the potential that brings for deciding in advance which moral logics will be in play and, thus, which positions will be occupied by researcher and researched. In fact, we might consider this a sort of political injustice at the level of the meta-politics of framing (Fraser, 2008) – that is, at the level of political contestation about the content and shape of the processes by which the framing for a situation comes to be decided. By moving to pre-plan giving back in our institutional settings, with all the attendant resources and power that go with them, are we not staking a strong claim to ownership of the processes by which the appropriate moral logics for a given relation are decided and doing so without the involvement of our partners in those relations?

To take an alternative approach to this pre-planning, we should, perhaps, aim to be like hikers on a difficult path (e.g., towards greater social justice) who carefully study the (moral) terrain that they are stepping into before deciding how to proceed (Cloe, 2002), recognising how that terrain is shaped by, for example, cultural norms and personal and collective histories. Examining the particularities of the moral terrain upon which we stand, with the navigational aid of the three moral logics described above, might help us to

better fulfil and negotiate the specific moral expectations placed upon us by those who we encounter in fieldwork. We may be able to grasp a little better why some research interactions come with the expectation of immediate compensation and a quickly ended relationship, while others may endure and come with ongoing feelings of obligation, to individuals, communities and causes. If we are unable or unwilling to meet or renegotiate those expectations, we may also be better equipped to recognise and articulate the gaps between those expectations and the positions we take and, more broadly, to seriously engage with questions around whose moral principles and frameworks are being respected and lived up to.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have sought to give researchers, particularly student researchers, a tool for thinking through the ethics of giving back in fieldwork contexts, using David Graeber's discussion of debt and the moral grounds of economic relations as a starting point for examining the question of what we owe the people we interact with in our research. While they are presented here as somewhat foundational modes of interaction, the three moral logics identified in this paper are unlikely to be a completely exhaustive list. It may be possible to combine or re-articulate their features into different framings of the moral expectations at work in different situations. In short, recognising the idea of distinct and multiple moral logics and reflecting on the notions of exchange, hierarchy and communism gives us something to look for when contemplating how to be ethical researchers in different situations, even if what we find does not fit neatly into these three categories. Depending on what we find, we can then think about how our own moral frameworks intersect with interlocutors' moral logics and what it means, in the context of these intersections, to act ethically.

I believe that this notion of the plurality of moral logics that can be encountered in research corresponds better with the complexity of the research environments that we encounter than an unadulterated focus on universal, and to a large extent unidirectional, ethical principles. It does not, however, sit easily alongside the idea of performing pre-emptive ethical reviews. How can we decide how to act ethically in relation to our interlocutors before we have begun to construct those relationships and to unpack the moral logics which permeate their constitutive interactions? In line with Hammitt and Sporton, I believe that 'ethics decisions during fieldwork... cannot solely be the domain of the researcher(s) and the privileging of their own ethical attitudes' (Hammitt and Sporton, 2012: 500). Furthermore, there is the thorny question of where the terms of what is ethical in research are to be defined and negotiated. Returning to the meta-politics of framing, we might enquire into the power dynamics that underpin an emphasis on institutional review boards as the locus for negotiating and defining what it means to be an ethical researcher, when the voices of participants are generally absent from these sites. This does not mean that there is no place for pre-research ethics processes in universities. It does mean, however, that these processes should focus on preparing researchers to negotiate and navigate ethics *with* those they encounter in their research rather than deciding in advance of those encounters what it means to be an ethical researcher.

Building on these points, a final, speculative comment relates to the changes that have been taking place within many university settings with regards to the framing of the university as a business of sorts and the discretisation of research into projects (McCowan, 2016). The dominance of market thinking, with exchange as the activity of the market, presents, perhaps, a challenge to a broader understanding of what it might mean to be ethical in research or what the process of research can look like. In fact, the conceptual contrast between research as a process that might result in debts and ongoing obligations to communities and causes and research as a process of knowledge gain (from participants), then knowledge exchange and impact (or giving back to the participants), and finally project completion (with the accounts balanced) is stark indeed.

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Notes

1. I have not included discussion of the role of prices and quantification in the morality of research relations partly for brevity and partly because such a discussion would not fundamentally impact upon the broader arguments of the article. Nevertheless, it is valuable to recognise that the presence or absence of prices is one significant factor that can shape, and that has shaped, the moral terrain of exchanges (Graeber, 2014a).
2. Name changed for the purposes of anonymity.
3. Name changed for the purposes of anonymity.

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