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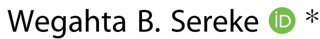
'Are you a refugee like us? Oh then we have hope!' Affective discursive encounters in doing insider Other research

Wegahta B. Sereke  *

Faculty of Communication, Culture and Society, , Institute of Communication and Public Policy, Università della Svizzera italiana, via Buffi 13 Lugano, 6900, Switzerland
*Corresponding author: wegahk@usi.ch

Abstract

In this article, I reflect on how paying attention to the flow of affect between participants and the researcher during interviews unveils knowledge that highlights inequalities and advances a decolonial approach. I specifically discuss the capacity of productive discomfort in revealing valuable insights about the lived experiences of forced migrants and in uncovering knowledge that might otherwise stay hidden. In doing so, I demonstrate how my positionality as an 'insider Other' and my approach to interviews as affective encounters open up profound layers of experiences and sense-making. Expanding upon this, the study presents a unique framework that combines the method of interviews, conceptualized as situated affective encounters, with an affective-discursive analytical framework that views affect as intertwined with meaning and discourse. This fusion emphasizes the significance of emotions as a source of knowledge in the research process. The study highlights how this approach contributes to the reflexivity turn in migration studies and elucidates how the combined framework can guide researchers to work with discomfort. This can be a source of insight, as demonstrated by reflecting on my own research on the lived experiences of Eritrean migrants. I use several excerpts from my data to demonstrate how viewing emotions as meaningful leads to nuanced interpretations, thereby enriching insights into the living conditions of those who arrived as forced migrants.

Keywords: Discomfort; affective-discursive encounters; decolonial knowledge; forced migrants; reflexivity.

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1. Introduction

This article presents my reflections on how attending to the flow of affect between participants and the researcher during interviews generates routes to knowledge that foreground inequalities and advance a decolonial approach (Mayblin and Turner 2021; Amelina 2022). Specifically, I argue that productive discomfort emerging during situated affective interview encounters opens up deep layers of experiences and sense-making and generates knowledge that might otherwise remain inaccessible. I demonstrate this emotional dynamic by reflecting on how productive discomfort emerged relationally between the participants and me as an insider Other researcher in a project on the experiences of Eritreans who arrived as refugees and settled in Switzerland. While most qualitative interview manuals rightly stress the importance of making participants comfortable, my fieldwork experience provided unique insights about the capacity of discomfort to generate insights. I show how the method of approaching interviews as a 'situated affective encounter' (Ayata et al. 2019) made me attentive to how productive discomfort emerged from comfort and how the affective discursive framework (Wetherell 2012) animated an analysis of the varied emotional expressions of discomfort to generate new insights about life experiences of forced migrants.

The burgeoning reflexive turn in migration studies sparked critical scrutiny of the theoretical and ideological frameworks underlying knowledge production (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2003; Schinkel 2018; Amelina 2020; Dahinden Fischer and Menet 2021; Favell 2022). The affective turn in cultural studies and social sciences led scholars to recognize the relevance of emotions in research (e.g. Bondi 2005; Dickson-Swift et al. 2009). While some emphasize the role of emotions in knowledge production (e.g. England 1994; Behar 1996; Widdowfield 2000; Hubbard, Backett-Milburn, and Kemmer 2001; Bondi 2005; Moss 2005), others frame them as subjective experiences requiring careful management (Dickson-Swift et al. 2009; McKenzie 2017; Ratnam 2019). However, rather than managing discomfort away, Chadwick (2021) and Schmidt, van der Weele, and Sebrechts (2023) argue that staying and working with uncomfortable feelings to examine and constructively engage with them leads to reflections that enrich the findings. I built on these insights to extend the understanding of the role of emotions in migration studies (Gray 2008; Wajsberg 2020; França 2023). I elucidate how discomfort and willingness to be unguarded lead to frank explorations and unique insights that challenge what Amelina calls a reproduction of 'occidentalist colonial traces of knowledge about migrant inferiority' (2022: 15). The discomfort emerged as my participants recounted emotionally charged stories of lost opportunities, misunderstandings, failures, exclusions, and insurmountable obstacles that are difficult to tell and hear, yet result from affective openness and, in turn, open up avenues for analysis.

I argue that combining the interviews as an affective encounter method (Ayata et al. 2019: 67) with the affective-discursive analytical framework that sees affect as intertwined with meaning (Wetherell 2012, 2013, 2014) leads analytical attention to emotions as a source of knowledge in the process of research. I first show how this approach contributes to the reflexivity turn in migration studies by highlighting the role of emotions in research. I then demonstrate how the combined framework can guide researchers to 'staying with discomfort' (Chadwick 2021: 5) and working with emotional entanglements as

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sources of insight by reflecting on my own research on the lived experiences of Eritrean migrants. I offer analyses of several excerpts from my data to highlight how conceiving emotions as meaningful leads to rich and nuanced interpretations, enriching insights into the living conditions of people who arrived as forced migrants.

2. Reflexivity and emotions

The reflexive turn in migration studies urges decentring received concepts, theories, and categories that reproduce hegemonic ways of knowing and developing alternatives (Schinkel 2018; Amelina 2020, 2022; Dahinden Fischer and Menet 2021; Favell 2022; Astolfo and Allsopp 2023). As part of broader reflexivity, self-reflexivity refers to critical assessment of how researcher's beliefs, positionality, and education shape interactions with participants and subsequent data interpretations (e.g. Berger 2015; Crean 2018). Scholars in social sciences have been reflecting on how emotions of the participants and the researchers arise in and shape the research process as part of the affective turn (e.g. England 1994; Behar 1996; Widdowfield 2000; Hubbard, Backett-Milburn, and Kemmer 2001; Bondi 2005; Moss 2005; Dickson-Swift et al. 2009). Emotions shape the data collection process and motivate data interpretation (e.g. Lee-Treweek and Linkogle 2000; Lund 2012; Drozdzewski and Dominey-Howes 2015). Emphasizing the relationality of emotions, Bondi (2005) argues that data emerge from multiple interview encounters interwoven with emotions. Reflecting on these emotions allows for discerning power dynamics as part of an ethical approach towards study participants (Meloni 2020).

In migration studies, scholars have begun reflecting on emotional entanglements in research (França 2023). Wajsberg (2020) argues for attention to how fatigue experienced by migrant communities who feel over-researched may impact the quality of findings. Other scholars argue for reflecting on researcher's emotions. As Gray (2008) argues, emotions are not fleeting but are deeply entwined with culture and society and drive action. Consequently, researchers' emotional attachments to the object of study shape how they perceive and frame their research. Franca (2023) argues that when participants make statements that differ ideologically from the researcher's views, the emotions emerging in response should be controlled to maintain research integrity. This is aligned with the position of some scholars in the broader social sciences who argue that when powerful and difficult emotions emerge during fieldwork they should be managed to prevent them from influencing research outcomes (McKenzie 2017) or compromising the well-being of researchers (e.g. Dickson-Swift et al. 2009; Drozdzewski and Dominey-Howes 2015; Ratnam 2019).

However, recently, scholars called attention to the value of discomfort in research. Chadwick (2021) highlights the significance of working with discomfort to not reproduce colonial knowledge about her black participants in South Africa. She views discomfort as an 'epistemic resource for knowledge production and theory-making' to halt the reproduction of colonial knowledge (p. 2). Framing discomfort as 'awkwardness', Schmidt, van der Weele, and Sebrechts (2023) posit that such attention illuminates relational concepts and reveals the often-unnoticed emotional work during fieldwork. I contribute to the understanding of the value of discomfort by reflecting on how its emergence in my

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research project was shaped by the situated affective encounters method (Ayata et al. 2019) and informed by the affective-discursive framework Wetherell (2012, 2013, 2014) allowed the emergence of otherwise shunned topics and development of deeper insights about the experiences and subjectivity of forced migrants settling in conditions of deep structural inequalities.

3. Situated affective-discursive encounters in fieldwork

Ayata et al. (2019) propose a method of interviews as 'situated affective encounters', thus expanding Haraway's concept of interviews as 'situated encounters'. The authors argue that interviews are shaped by affect, among other factors. They invite researchers to pay attention to non-verbal communication and rigorously document their own and the participants' emotions during interviews in field notes and diaries to reflect on embodied data (Ayata et al. 2019: 67). By doing so, researchers can contextualize and analyse interviews more comprehensively, going beyond the textual analysis of transcripts. While Ayata et al. (2019) provide a valuable method for reflecting on affect in interviews, their understanding of affect as non-discursive, that is, as an impulse that 'constantly travels between or among people and artefacts and is registered in varying degrees of intensities, resonances or dissonances' (68) limits interpretive possibilities. I show that infusing their framework with the notion of affect as enmeshed with meaning-making, as proposed by Wetherell (2012, 2013, 2015) offers a more robust approach to analysing emotions as sources of knowledge.

The affective-discursive framework views emotions as embodied, situated, dynamic, and patterned practices. Wetherell (2012) bridges the Cultural Studies notions of affect as embodied with a discursive approach arguing that affect is a 'figuration where body possibilities and routines are intertwined with meaning-making and other social and material figurations' (Wetherell 2012: 17). As social and relational, affect circulates between people, including during interview encounters drawing the researcher and the participants into emotional entanglements and interpretations (Wetherell 2012). While compatible with the interviews as affective encounters method, Wetherell (2015) moves beyond the notion of affect as solely bodily intensities to pay attention to its expressions in narratives where emotions 'bubble up' as we ruminate about past events or narrate our experiences (2). She thus offers a method of analysing emotions as meaning making by taking into account the historical, social, and ideological contexts of their expression in specific social environments. I argue that the combined framework of 'interviews as situated affective discursive encounters' enables researchers to document emotions, interpreting them based on the situation, verbal data, and cultural knowledge. Focusing on emotions in research requires self-reflection about the researcher's relation to the participants.

4. Emotion-evoking positionality: insider Other

Researcher positionality is 'context-specific and relational' and not reducible to an insider-outsider binary (Carling, Erdal, and Ezzati 2014: 44). Despite sharing many

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characteristics with my study participants, I struggled to claim an insider position. Although I am an 'Eritrean' with a 'refuge' status, I describe my relationship with my participants as that of an 'insider Other'. I share cultural and linguistic knowledge from Eritrea which positions me as an insider (Collet 2008; Carling, Erdal, and Ezzati 2014; Ryan 2015). However, while my identity, experience, and 'social and epistemic location' (Grosfoguel 2009: 7) converge with theirs in some ways, there are also divergences due to my unique trajectory. My unique trajectory of arriving to Switzerland as an international student, later obtaining refugee status in a process which is markedly different from that of my participants and pursuing a PhD in Switzerland, places me in relation of an 'Other' to the vast majority of Eritreans in Switzerland. Compared to my participants, I did not experience the arduous travel along perilous routes in search of refuge. I did not cross the Sahara Desert and the Mediterranean Sea risking my life, nor stayed in a detention-like refugee camp facilities. I have been afforded the opportunity to pursue higher education, an opportunity not available to many in similar circumstances. Having studied in international Geneva, I have expanded my social circle beyond my ethnic community. Leveraging my international professional network enabled me to avoid the menial jobs many participants do. These privileges positioned me as the participants' Other, allowing me to access spaces that were not available to many of them. My affiliation with an elite institute served as a protective zone. However, once outside this protective bubble, the realities of the 'refugee' label became apparent.

Although arriving as an international student granted me many advantages, I share with my participants epistemic and social location as a visible subaltern black African refugee in a predominantly white country that defines itself through nativist ideals and whiteness (Dahinden 2022) but denies the significance of race (Lentin 2008; Purtschert 2019). While I had the privilege to study at elite institutions for my Master's and my doctorate, I was one of the few black students in the international programme and later, the sole black student pursuing a doctorate at my university. I thus shared racial hypervisibility (Small 2018) with my participants even as the academic institutions protected me from racist exclusions. I have also experienced some barriers to accessing social services and other hardships that are endured by the participants after I applied for refugee status upon the completion of my Master's and before I began my doctorate studies a few years later. My studies did not fully spare me from prejudice. Notably, having a non-European name posed obstacles to my accessing employment, particularly internships. Following a job-search consultant's recommendation to alter my first name to better appeal to European recruiters, I changed it and felt the loss of meaning and significance that I cherished. This experience forced me to 'un-become' myself, losing a part of my identity to fit into the expectations of an otherizing labour market, only to 'become' myself again later when I reclaimed my original name, encouraged by my PhD supervisor. Despite the challenges, I was able to access internships through my professors' networks.

In light of the discussions presented above, attempting to rigidly categorize myself as either an insider or outsider risks oversimplifying the multifaceted identity and experiences that shaped my role as a researcher. I am not fully an insider but rather an 'apparent insider', as Carling, Erdal, and Ezzati (2014: 51) put it. Similarly, claiming an outsider position would overlook my shared identity with the participants. Instead, my complex identity and experience oscillating between the insider and outsider categories position

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me on the 'insider-outsider continuum' (Carling, Erdal, and Ezzati 2014). Hence, rather than viewing myself as either an insider or outsider, I embrace my positionality as an insider Other. My personal experience of forced migration informs my scholarly pursuits placing discourses about migrants and the attendant integration close to my skin and driving my focus on their lived experiences and emotions. I draw inspiration from Ahmed (2004), who argues that 'Histories are bound up with emotions precisely insofar as it is a question of *what sticks*, of what connections are lived as the most intense or intimate, as being closer to the skin' (p. 54). However, I am very aware that I have to critically self-reflect on my experience and emotions as resources that guide my understanding to not turn my scholarly work into a self-narration and individualist story-telling.

5. Creating rapport: confusion, disbelief, and fear

My doctoral research project explored the experiences of sixty-five Eritreans who came to Switzerland as refugees, were aged 28–60 years, and were in residence from 7 to 40 years. Thirty were females and thirty-five were males. Eighteen held Swiss citizenship, twenty-five had C permanent residency permits, nineteen had B residency permits subject to renewal every 1–2 years, and three were on provisional F residency permits that protect asylum seekers who do not meeting the criteria for refugee status from immediate deportation. I recruited participants with diverse backgrounds for in-depth interviews that were conducted in Tigrinya and lasted 2–3 hours. I use the label 'Eritreans who came as refugees' to include participants with permanent residence and naturalized citizens. This is done with an awareness of how such categorization can carry essentialist ideas and inadvertently reproduce the exclusion of already marginalized groups (Dahinden, Fischer, and Menet 2021).

Prior to and during my fieldwork, I adopted a reflexive approach by acknowledging my positionality and openly discussing my background with my participants. Doing so elicited affect-loaded responses (Wetherell 2012, 2013, 2014) that from the outset engulfed my relationship with them in emotional entanglements (Ayata et al. 2019). Sharing information about my background and research elicited fear, disbelief, and confusion. Introducing myself as a researcher while simultaneously identifying as an Eritrean refugee evoked a sense of affective-discursive puzzlement (Wetherell 2012, 2013, 2014). Many repeatedly asked me how I managed to become a doctoral student while they struggled to secure survival. Others wanted to verify my Eritrean identity. When those with whom I established rapport introduced me to potential participants, they often referred to me as 'she is our Eritrean sister, let us help her'. However, I soon realized that potential participants were expecting a young second-generation Eritrean student, not an adult refugee woman pursuing a doctoral degree. Many reiterated the question, 'So are you born here or are you a refugee like us?' While some of the participants were genuinely curious, others appeared to be somewhat sceptical of my actual identity.

These episodes illuminate how participants' negative experiences, due to structural constraints, inform their understanding of who fits under the category of a refugee. Many Eritreans are concentrated in menial jobs due to poor education, language barriers, and societal structural inequalities (Eyer and Schweizer 2010). Their position within the social

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and economic structures in Switzerland influenced their reactions to me and shaped their interpretations of who a refugee is. None of my participants had ever encountered an Eritrean refugee woman pursuing a PhD.

Approaching interviews as situated affective discursive encounters allowed me to focus on emotions as forces shaping the interviews as well as in the interpretations of the data (Wetherell 2012, 2013, 2014; Ayata et al. 2019; see also Wetherell, McConville, and McCreanor 2020). This reflection helped me to 'cultivate self-knowledge' as a researcher and develop strategies to engage with participants, including identifying sensitive topics they may be reluctant to discuss (Gould 2009: 30) or pushing beyond their comfort with expected cultural scripts. To assuage their fears and establish rapport, I assured them that certain topics would not be discussed and framed the interviews as casual conversations, which created a friendly environment at the start. I informed participants of their rights and my readiness to answer their questions. Holding an honest and transparent conversation about my life trajectory allowed participants to share their experiences unguardedly. Sharing my experience prompted affect-laden comments such as *emo tesfa alena*, meaning 'oh, then we have hope'. Encountering me not only challenged their self-definition of a refugee, but forced them to re-evaluate their way of 'seeing, feeling, and being' as refugees (Wetherell, McConville, and McCreanor 2020: 11). Although the approach I took did not completely balance the power relations, it facilitated unguarded exploration of experiences as discussed below.

6. Interviews as situated affective-discursive encounter

Most qualitative methods instructions emphasize the importance of making participants comfortable to share their subjective experiences. My efforts to make the participants comfortable from my 'insider Other' position and being 'open to be affected' to participants' emotions (Ayata et al. 2019: 68) allowed for the emergence of the participants' and mine feelings of discomfort. This led to deeper reflections on their experiences, losses, and uneasy gains, thwarted hopes, and new ideas about life. It also troubled their identifications and the cultural scripts through which they initially spoke. Throughout the analysis, I will illustrate how documenting emotions and self-reflexivity produced embodied data (Ayata et al. 2019) and how the affective-discursive framework powered my analysis into the deep layers of meaning (Wetherell 2012, 2013, 2014).

6.1 Loss of status

Sharing my own experiences and predicaments encouraged participants to open up and be unguarded. The excerpt below shows how answering a curious participant's question, prompted him to discuss his frustration with a loss of social status and identity.

P: Where did you study?
R: I did my LLB in Asmara University. I joined in 2002.
P: Really? You studied in Asmara? Because I did [name of specialization withheld] in Asmara university and I was working in the office of [name withheld], department of [name withheld].

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R: Oh, really, wow!! You must be one of those smart students then.
P: Yes, I was.
R: Nice. And what do you do now?
P: Hmm, *refae*. (His sadness and hopelessness came through as he quickly blurts out the word in a hushed tone. He looked at me as he said it, his eyes filled with shame and degradation).
R: (I was silent for few seconds, emotionally overwhelmed, I was lost for words, finally, with a trembling voice I said) Don't say that. You still can make it. You came with a good background and have potential.
P: How are you able to continue your education? I am wondering.

Hearing the word come out of his mouth left me speechless and in shock (Ayata et al. 2019). I looked down, caught between feelings of discomfort and compassion. I noted his intense emotions as he said *refae*, documented his bodily gestures and my reactions in notes taken immediately after the interview and later in the interview script following the interviews as affective encounter method (Ayata et al. 2019). The emotions underlined the significance of the term calling for an analytical focus. My analysis then employed the affective-discursive framework (Wetherell 2012, 2013, 2014), as I probed into the meaning of the term as used in the Eritrean cultural–linguistic context and its referent in Switzerland as well as how it linked up to the participant's description of his life to understand the function of its affective load. The term *refae*, in Tigrigna is comparable to that of 'coolie' in English. In its denotative meaning, it refers to people working in menial jobs. As a pejorative term, it is part of an affective-discursive practice that humiliates people working on construction sites, as porters (who carry loads on their heads and shoulders), in the cleaning industry, etc., thus expressing and protecting the privilege of those higher in the economic structures. It attaches the stigma of dishonour and shame to manual labour. Before the 1998–2000 border conflict with Ethiopia, these types of jobs were predominantly occupied by a particular ethnic group coming from Ethiopia. Thus, the term also has an element of an anti-migrant ethnic slur.

The participant did not use this term to describe his job, but rather to express his loss of status, his marginalization, and the attendant emotions of despair, defeat, and degradation. These emotions were further conveyed through paralinguistic cues like furrowed brows, squinted eyes, and a tilted head. *refae* is also part of affective-discursive practices among refugees internalizing the dominant view of them as unentitled and relegated to less skilled jobs despised by the privileged white citizens. While some resisted the system that marginalized them (Sereke and Drzewiecka 2023), others, such as this participant, internalized it. The affective-discursive practices of marginalization incorporate feelings of exclusion, undesirability, and powerlessness (Mowat 2015). This participant lost his social status and educational opportunities while gaining political safety; the feeling of political safety linked up with the feelings of degradation and loss so that safety is now interwoven with hopelessness. He understands his menial job as not only a low-status position in Switzerland but, and more powerfully, as a loss of his prior status in Eritrea. The discomfort arose from his choice of language that reflected a classist disdain towards menial labour and now expressed his loss of his prior class position. Initially, the classist anti-ethnic and anti-migrant sting of the term was less apparent to me as I felt compassion

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for a peer student at my former university who was not able to pursue his professional dreams.

As we delved deeper into the topic of pursuing education in Switzerland, he expressed his desire for further education but mentioned that it was curtailed by misinformation. When I inquired about his source of information, his response revealed the effects of the community's affective-discursive practices on him:

> You aspire to get an education, but you are misinformed in this country. *Habesha* (Eritrean) people are our sources of information, and they tell you to work in a factory because there are no educational opportunities after 35.

He revealed that he stopped pursuing opportunities as he was affected by the communal practice conveying feelings of apathy and expressed by repetitive talk about the 'lack of opportunities' and 'giving up' as the only option. Upon learning about my doctoral studies, he realized how deeply he was affected by the communities affective-discursive practice and that perhaps he gave up too quickly. His puzzlement, expressed in 'really?' and 'I am wondering' and his reference to his interrupted studies showed him trying to make sense of his experience. He revealed his entanglement in the affective-discursive practices of the Eritrean community discouraged from pursuing opportunities by fruitless efforts and various structural barriers.

Affected by the participant's emotions, I expressed my encouragement in a trembling voice. I recognized that my role as a refugee researcher and my inquiry about his profession elicited difficult emotions. Sharing the same ethnonational identity, and refugee status, along with transparent engagement during the conversation, created a sense of comfort that paved the way for discomfort to emerge, allowing him to open up and be unguarded to express his emotions. However, my experience as a researcher placed me as his 'Other', prompting discomfort that led him to use a self-demeaning term to identify himself.

Approaching interviews as situated affective-discursive encounters allowed me to capture what Maclure (2013, as cited in Chadwick 2021: 2) refers to as 'data that glows'. This kind of data stimulates curiosity and invites deeper exploration and thorough analysis. Through this method, I was able to discern the dynamic interplay between the structural barriers and the community that affected by them reproduces hopelessness and low status. Both elements played significant roles in his feelings of disempowerment and the emergence of a self-demeaning identity. Transparent conversations led to moments of discomfort, fostering a space where the participant felt more open and less guarded. My position as an 'insider Other' added another layer to these interactions, facilitating a heightened sense of discomfort.

6.2 Speaking the unspeakable

In an encounter that was profoundly uncomfortable and deeply devastating, a female participant shared her experience of conjugal violence:

> You know the problem of Eritrean men. They don't integrate. They still want to maintain their patriarchal privileges (*in a calm tone displaying dismay*). Maybe

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> you know him. That is how I know you. His name is [withheld]. He abuses me verbally and physical. Now we are separated. He calls me names such as (*gohaf*, 'garbage,' *ebet*, 'bull shit,' *shermuta*, 'prostitute,') etc. (*in a calm and hushed tone of voice*). I feel very destroyed when he calls me names. My younger daughter once asked me what *gohaf*, 'garbage' means. She was shocked when I told her the meaning because she usually calls me *alemey*, meaning 'my world' [. . .] The prolonged suppression of my emotions has caused me health issues, including persistent leg pain, chronic headaches, and other related symptoms. What I disliked most is his sexual abuse [. . .] (displaying hopelessness, frustration and desperation in her a calm and hushed tone of voice, nodding head and frowning her face).

Listening to her emotionally charged account of abuse deeply affected me. It was a challenge to contain my emotions, and at times, tears rolled down my face. I reacted with shock, sadness, and anger. As I was expressing these emotions, she continued adding to her story of abuse, with affective expressions noted above, yet in a calm and hushed tone of voice. Through attentive observation of her bodily gestures, such as her nodding head and frowning face and linguistic articulation, I could discern the hopelessness, frustration, and desperation, aversion she felt. I noted these emotions and the emotions she expressed such as 'I feel destroyed', 'she was shocked', and 'What I disliked' along with my emotional responses both during our conversation and afterward during transcription (Ayata et al. 2019). I then analysed her emotions and her statements to understand her struggle and her subjectivity as a woman in a Swiss cultural context.

As she recounted her experience of abuse, she revealed emotional distress. Her statement 'I feel destroyed' is an emotion that transcends mere despair or sadness. It highlighted the defeat she felt in the face of the abuse, and the extent to which the derogatory terms eroded her self-worth. While discussing her daughter's reaction to the abuse, she not only highlighted the impact on the child but also unveiled her own struggle with conflicting narratives about self-worth. She grappled with oscillating feelings of being valued by her daughter and feeling devalued in her relationship with her partner.

Despite my understanding of the prevalence of domestic violence in the community, I was unprepared for how devastated I felt by her personal account. When she stated his name, I was shocked, exclaiming, 'Him!?' I knew the man from my past involvement in human rights advocacy work but was unaware that he was an abuser. Her willingness to disclose his identity and open up about uncomfortable subjects, providing insights into her life, was prompted not only by my insider status but also by my 'Other' position. My role in advocacy work and my education, in contrast to her struggles balancing motherhood and abuse as a housewife positioned me as her 'Other'. Her desire to share her experience then was derived from an urgent need to reveal a jarring contradiction to expose a man who outwardly stands for human rights in Eritrea and decries tyranny, but who privately assumes the role of a tyrant within his own home. My positionality, a nuanced blend of similarity and difference, facilitated her sharing something often considered unspeakable in Eritrean society and stigmatized women for their own oppression. Before our meeting ended, I pleaded with her not to return to him. In retrospect, as I reflected on my interaction with her (Ayata et al. 2019), I questioned whether I had overstepped my role as a researcher by offering advice on her personal situation.

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After reflecting on the flow of emotions between us, I delved into her opening sentence, 'men don't integrate', which caught my attention from the onset. Discourses of integration problematize migrants as deficient and in need of changing to fit normative cultural and economic expectations. Safouane, Jünemann, and Göttsche (2020) showed that migrants sometimes appropriate dominant discourses, even when they are complicit with their own marginalization. While the language of integration problematizes the migrant and thus this participant, she seized it to problematize the patriarchal males. Her statement about men not integrating and her description of abuse highlighted not only her personal struggle with an abusive relationship but the larger structures of male hegemony rooted in Eritrea's patriarchal society that subject women to continuing subordination—a pattern that persists even in their new social context. This new cultural context changed her understanding of gender relations and evoked a desire for a change in her partner and other men.

Discussing experiences of domestic abuse in many parts of Eritrean society is viewed as shameful and often labels women as improper. Women are typically expected to endure in silence. This affective-discursive practice, which silences women from revealing abuse, embodies both shame and the fear of stigmatization and ostracization. Her story of abuse and references to the prevalence of such practices among men in the new social context were imbued with despair and frustration, combined with condemnation, to emphasize the need for men to unlearn old habits and adapt to their new surroundings. The participant interpreted her abusive marriage in the terms of her current cultural context which made it possible to feel differently about it than how women are supposed to feel about it according to Eritrean cultural norms that define good wives as selfless nurturers, tolerant, and champions of household harmony even in the face of adversity and marital abuse. Thus, her interpretation of abuse as a manifestation of failed integration and her emotions highlighted her departure from traditional norms that uphold patriarchy and resistance to it.

Allowing for affect to flow between us and my positionality cultivated a space for productive discomfort to the surface, thereby providing embodied data (Ayata et al. 2019). Employing the affective-discursive practice framework (Wetherell 2012, 2013, 2014, 2019) unveiled the predicament of a woman transitioning from a habitus shaped by a patriarchal social structure to a new socio-cultural-economic setting. This framework illuminated how her emotions articulated her stance against cultural norms, which often compelled women into silence, and highlighted her resistance in her new cultural context.

6.3 Deconstructing colonial perceptions

Many participants recounted experiences of marginalization when struggling to find employment and/or housing and receiving feelings of social contempt. These post-arrival experiences contrasted their pre-migration imaginations of Europe as a land of opportunity and equality. To navigate these challenges, some participants adopted specific coping strategies. A former prominent personality in Eritrea, now juggling low-paying jobs, shared her story:

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> For about two and a half years after my arrival, I lived a shared apartment in a refugee shelter [. . .] Although I had no precious belongings, I feared my diary, where I documented everything that had happened to us during our trip to Europe might be lost or stolen (overwhelmed with deep sadness, struggling to hold back her tears and at times wiping them away). I approached the manager to give me a key me for the bedroom. Do you know what he said? (with a forceful tone, moving her arm back and forth and nodding her head with anger), 'back in your countries, you use large stones to lock your doors. You come here and would to live like a king or queen. Some of you demand keys, whereas others couches.' When I heard this, I was engulfed with anger. My blood boiled. I said to him, 'you don't know about Eritrea. You know nothing. Period! If you think I am living a good life here, you are wrong. I left behind a big bed, a big house, and most of all, a loving family. I came here because I have a political problem in my country.' I really did feel bad at that moment (with loud voice in anger).

Without prompting, she continued:

> You ask yourself. Everything I came through was for this, to be disrespected, to become a helpless refugee? To be honest with you, as a refugee, you have to live by killing your confidence (with a forceful tone and furrowed brow, moving her arms here and there with frustration). If you were a strong and confident person, you would become alarmed [. . .]

While feeling deeply sad and empathic during the interview, I quickly jotted down her bodily gestures and paralinguistic cues expressing her emotions in my notebook. I also noted her conflicting emotions and regrets about coming to Switzerland and the affect loaded statement 'killing your confidence'. I included these emotions in the transcript and along with my own emotions in response to what she said (Ayata et al. 2019). In my analysis, I worked to unpack the flow of emotions between us and their intertwining with meaning to gain insight into the power regimes that shape forced migrants' experiences of marginalization in settlement (Wetherell 2012, 2013, 2014).

The participant's profound anger, evocatively described as 'my blood boiled', was ignited not only by the stark denial of a simple request for a key, a basic necessity she took for granted in Eritrea but also by the manager's response seething with contempt steeped in colonial imagination of Africa. Her visceral anger at the racism she experienced and the painful emotions flowing between us illuminated the emotional costs of 'misanthropic scepticism' (Maldonado-Torres 2007: 246). Introduced by Nelson Maldonado-Torres, the concept of misanthropic scepticism envisions the racial Other as less human, uncivilized, irrational, and undeserving. Positioned within the framework of coloniality—the enduring structures and legacies of power and knowledge that persist even after the end of formal colonial administrations—Maldonado-Torres draws attention to the dark side of European modernity, where the narratives of progress and enlightenment were often built on the dehumanization and marginalization of colonized peoples. He elucidates how, despite the dissolution of formal colonial regimes, the promotion of a racial hierarchy that relegates the racial Other as 'sub-Others' persists (255). In the contemporary anti-black world, the experiences of racialized people continue to be shaped by the shadows of

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misanthropic scepticism and racism (Maldonado-Torres 2007). While studies have highlighted the bureaucratic categorization of migrants and their ties to colonial remnants (Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2018), the ensuing analysis offers a distinctive perspective. By applying the concept of misanthropic scepticism to an asylum seeker's experience, I illuminate how the participant's interactions with a state migration and integration employee appear to subjugate her as a racialized refugee to colonial hierarchies steeped in misanthropic scepticism. This process effectively renders her humanity invisible and casts her as undeserving of the benefits of European modernity.

The manager's attitude seemed to convey that her very existence as a human being was insignificant, exacerbating her sense of marginalization and perceived inferiority within the Swiss social structure. The encounter deeply stirred her anger and resistance, compelling her to confront racism and misanthropic scepticism by challenging the manager's colonial imagination, pointing out that she did not come from the primitive jungles as he might have imagined. The response misconstrued her social, cultural, and economic position, assuming that she came from poverty and a lack of basic amenities. The implication was that her escape from persecution was mere opportunism, galvanizing her to clarify her reasons for seeking asylum and to refute assumptions about her pursuit of resources perceived to be exclusive to Switzerland. For a moment, I could feel the power of her defiant response. However, when she followed with the admission that it was necessary for her to 'kill her confidences' to avoid living in constant 'alarm', the full effects of experiencing misanthropic scepticism became clear.

While reflecting on the administrator's colonialist response, the participant also expressed ambivalence and regretted about her decision to come to Switzerland, that I could also read in her paralinguistic cues and bodily gestures. Such emotions are normally suppressed by refugees expected to perform gratefulness and resilience (Moulin 2012). As she talked about having different expectations about Europe in general and Switzerland in particular, I reflected on how those expectations were steeped in the legacy of colonial imagery that Europeans imposed on the African colonies. Revealing ambivalence and regret about having sought refuge after having suffered significant losses as a result, can be deeply uncomfortable. In the safe space of our interview between two refugees, this discomfort allowed for abandoning the 'grateful refugee' position that became productive of a deeper understanding of the violent confrontation between the colonial imageries that present Europe as civilized and African people as not. While our shared experience of being a refugee from Eritrea, even as I was ever mindful that my own search for refuge was not as arduous as hers, established an understanding that refuge has its costs that might overwhelm the gains. The expression of gratitude for a life free from persecution and stability in Europe is expected by the host and the refugee community, although for different reasons, and inhibits admissions of ambivalence that bring up a possibility that perhaps one left a situation that was not so dire after all and is not a genuine refugee.

Such perilous and costly admissions were animated by productive discomfort that emerged between us as two refugees producing insight into the loss of dignity by refugees faced with misanthropic scepticism. As an insider, I understood that the price of a refugee status is a death of subjectivity as an Eritrean professional woman that changes one's perspective on the life-threatening dangers prior to refuge seeking. The positionality I embodied was both familiar and unfamiliar to her. Our shared gender, nationality, and

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refugee status built a foundation of trust and kindled her eagerness to share her experiences, provided her anonymity was ensured. As a researcher, a role she viewed as typically reserved for white non-refugees prompted her to share her feelings and convey 'her truth' revealing details she claimed to have shared with no one else. I could feel the desire, both hers and mine, to know the depths of abjection experienced in refugee settlements. Even though I am an insider, the stories she shared were unknown to me.

7. Conclusion

My interviews with participants who came as forced migrants about difficult experiences and reflections were deeply enmeshed in emotional entanglements of comfort and discomfort. I embraced this relational discomfort and saw how it enriched the data and interpretation, while it also raised some difficulties and posed various dilemmas about finding the appropriate response after hearing their poignant stories and how to reciprocate for their invaluable contributions. While scholars recognized the value of discomfort during fieldwork (Chadwick 2021; Schmidt, van der Weele, and Sebrechts 2023), they focused on researchers' emotions. This article, however, approaches discomfort as a relation between participants who shared nationality and ethnicity as well as some experiences, but not all, with me as an 'insider Other' researcher. I have illustrated how delving into mutual discomfort and its interpretations was instrumental in unveiling knowledge that foregrounded inequalities and advancing decolonial perspectives (Mayblin and Turner 2021; Amelina 2022). I have demonstrated how my intersectional identity, fluctuating along the insider-outsider spectrum (Carling, Erdal, and Ezzati 2014: 51), positioned me as an 'insider Other' that made the participants feel comfortable enough to recount stories imbued with discomfort while sometimes feeling discomfort owing to our differences. This distinctive positionality relationally evoked a myriad of emotions in the interview encounters, enabling the revelation of deep layers of experiences and interpretations that might otherwise remain obscured.

I demonstrated how merging the 'situated affective encounters' method (Ayata et al. 2019) with Wetherell's 'affective-discursive practice framework' (2012, 2013, 2014), enabled not only attention to emotions for subsequent reflection but also an analytical approach that revealed depths of experience that otherwise remain hidden, either protected by the participants as shameful to uncomfortable or inaccessible to them during interviews. This approach views interviews as 'situated affective-discursive encounters', highlighting the central role of emotion as a form of meaning making. The proposed framework, in tandem with my unique positionality, enabled the garnering of 'data that glows', as described by Maclure (2013, as cited in Chadwick 2021: 2)—data that not only captures attention but also beckons for a deeper and more nuanced analysis. Following the method, I demonstrated how documenting emotions expressed verbally as well as through bodily gestures and paralinguistic cues during the interview and later at the transcript phase makes them available for reflection and analysis. This allowed for deep understanding of the lived experiences and subjectivity of participants and how they make sense of their emotions in their new social contexts (Wetherell 2012, 2013, 2014).

Based on my analysis, I offer the following observations towards deeper understanding of the role of emotions and the value of discomfort in interviews. First, emotional entanglements with participants can arise even before the commencement of formal interviews, specifically

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during rapport-building stages. This is especially prevalent when researching marginalized minorities, and becomes even more pronounced if the researcher's positionality represents an intersectional identity that blurs the line between insider-outsider binary. Such dynamics can provoke discomfort, often manifesting as fear or confusion. Reflecting on and interpreting these emotions enables researchers to discern participants' positioning within distinct social, cultural, and ideological frameworks, thus uncovering the roots of their discomfort. These emotions serve as pivotal insights, shedding light on participants' self-perceptions in relation to researcher's identity. By leveraging this understanding, researchers can 'cultivate self-knowledge' (Gould 2009: 30) which allows them to develop strategies to approach participants effectively and identify sensitive questions that might discourage them. Framing interviews as situated affective-discursive encounters and engaging with discomfort not only provides insights into participants' lived experiences but also facilitates engagement.

Second, the proposed framework requires attending to uncomfortable revelations during interviews, documenting and analysing them. This approach allows researchers to unpack what these emotions entail such as: How do they elucidate the ways in which forced migrants position themselves in their new social and cultural environments compared to their standings before migration? What insights do these emotionally charged conversations offer regarding the possible transformation or loss of their subjectivity in new cultural contexts? And how do these affective-discursive practices of forced migrants in their countries of settlement intersect with structural barriers, subsequently shaping their interpretation and understating of their subjectivity in the new socio-cultural terrains?

Third, allowing emotions to flow between participants and researchers during interviews, and transparently addressing participants' questions, cultivates a space where productive discomfort can emerge, yielding rich embodied data. As I have demonstrated, my positionality combined with my willingness to be affected by and transparently respond to participants' inquiries, often sparked by curiosity, encouraged them to open up and be unguarded. These facilitated discussions about loss of status, sharing stories of domestic abuse breaking patriarchal cultural norms that silence women, and revealing perilous, costly admissions animated by productive discomfort producing insight into the loss of dignity by refugees faced with misanthropic scepticism.

By focusing on both the feelings of the participants and the researchers, and attending to emotions in conversations about difficult topics unique analytical and theoretical insights can be gained. Employing the 'situated affective-discursive encounters' paradigm directs attention to emotions as productive of knowledge, rather than something one should minimize and guard against. This approach emphasizes not only the significance of participants' discomfort and emotions for deeper analytical and theoretical insights. In the case of research on forced migrants, unpacking meaning entangled in emotions allows unpacking the influence of Europe's colonial representations on refugees' destination choices as well as the impact of lingering misanthropic scepticism on refugees. In harnessing this framework, I have been able to shed light on the lasting impacts of the colonial legacy, giving voice to the subaltern expected to speak through the scripts of grateful refugees. Thus attention to emotions, in any research context, might allow moving beyond cultural scripts and performances of expected hegemonic identities.

Finally, although the emergence of productive discomfort was facilitated by the provision of a safe space, delving into discomforting emotions could potentially trigger and overwhelm

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participants. Thus, it is imperative to ensure an environment conducive to open interaction and reflection to put the participants at ease to embrace their discomfort. But in some cases, it might be useful to induce discomfort with specific participants who, in this case, spoke smoothly through the scripts of 'good refugees' in ways that I could tell they omitted some experiences and repressed some issues. This was crucial to prevent the reproduction of colonial narratives that expect refugees to be merely grateful, striving to seamlessly integrate into their host communities. One participant, for instance, insisted that his training and employment journey was hassle-free. However, upon prompting with more probing questions, it became apparent that his journey was not as smooth as initially presented. He initially worked as a factory cleaner for several years before being offered a mechanic's vocational training by an Italian boss. This boss, familiar with the Italian colonial legacy in Eritrea, recognized the mechanical skills many Eritreans acquired during that period and extended the training opportunity. This revelation not only highlighted the significance of inducing discomfort to uncover obscured knowledge but also shed light on the lingering influence of colonial ties in determining the roles refugees assume in their destination countries.

While productive in this case, it is crucial to introduce discomfort carefully. Granting participants autonomy in leading the conversation is essential. Responding to their inquiries, even personal ones, to the extent researchers feel comfortable, forges a stronger bond. Sharing mutual challenges, especially when they express feelings of shame or fear, can assuage these emotions. Demonstrating empathy and encouraging them to seek support makes them feel acknowledged and validated. It is crucial to be attuned to their emotional state, proposing pauses during particularly intense segments and inquiring about their feelings to maintain their comfort. In situations where participants seem to be withholding the truth, eliciting a touch of discomfort by sharing insights from the researcher's own experiences, combined with a light-hearted or informal conversational style, can often break barriers. Finally, offering or connecting them with relevant support networks is advisable. Such gestures ensure their well-being beyond the interview. My commitment to participants transcends the interview sessions. Specifically, for a few participants, predominantly women, I communicated my readiness to accompany them should they opt to seek medical or legal assistance. I stayed in touch with several participants, ensuring I was updated on their situation and providing information when required.

This study contributes to migration research by emphasizing the importance of attending to affect and framing interviews as affective-discursive encounters when examining the experiences of forced migrants. Emotions are perceived not only as embodied but also as discursive, playing a pivotal role in meaning-making. This approach highlights not only the importance of participants' discomfort and emotions for deeper analytical and theoretical insights but also their value in revealing hidden knowledge and unpacking the influence of colonial legacies, thereby advancing decolonial approaches (Mayblin and Turner 2021; Amelina 2022).

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