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Beyond support or exploitation: inequality and reciprocity in informal housing arrangements between newcomers and their migrant hosts

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ABSTRACT

In cities facing housing shortages, vulnerable newcomers almost always live with family or friends upon arrival. While social networks are often seen as a source of support that facilitates migration and settlement, research has also shown that newcomers can be exploited by established migrants and relatives. Challenging the dichotomy between positive and negative social capital, this article reveals how exploitation and support coexist within social relationships. It shows how exploitation emerges from the ambiguous and implicit obligations of reciprocity that is inherent in informal support. Examining the informal housing arrangements and experiences of Colombian newcomers in Rotterdam (NL), this article analyses what support they receive from their hosts and how they reciprocate. It shows how the arrangements are shaped by the unequal positions of guests and hosts, and how they involve relational work. Through negotiating informal housing arrangements and reciprocity, guests and hosts negotiate and shape their relationship. The article draws on anthropological theories of gift-giving to explore the tensions and uncertainties that characterise hospitality. It shows how attention to reciprocity makes it possible to move beyond the opposition between support and exploitation and to understand how relationships can simultaneously be both supportive and exploitative.

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Introduction

In cities where housing is expensive and scarce, being offered a room or even just a sofa for the first period is an invaluable form of support for newly arrived migrants. Research shows that newcomers – especially when in a vulnerable situation – almost always live with family or friends, at least for the first few weeks or months. This is often seen as a prime example of how social networks constitute a source of support that facilitates migration and settlement (Ryan 2024; Van Meeteren and Pereira 2018). However,

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researchers often point out that such ‘social capital’ has a ‘dark side’ (Huschke 2014; Portes 1998). Indeed, newcomers are also exploited by more experienced migrants, including by their relatives (Mahler 1995; Rosales 2020). These findings have led to a dichotomy between support and exploitation, or between positive and negative forms of social capital. In this article, I suggest that these dichotomies do not adequately capture the complexity of reciprocity between newcomers and established migrants, and the relational work involved in the (often implicit) negotiation of informal housing arrangements.

Based on a qualitative study of informal housing arrangements between Colombian newcomers and their host in the city of Rotterdam in the Netherlands, I show that attention to reciprocity makes it possible to move beyond the opposition between altruistic support, on the one hand, and selfish exploitation on the other. I turn to anthropological theories of gift-giving and hospitality, in order to explore the tensions and inequalities that characterise informal housing arrangements. Rather than a negotiated reciprocal exchange in which rational agents seek to optimise the cost–benefit ratio, ‘hospitality, like gift-giving, involves [...] a tension between spontaneity and calculation, generosity and parasitism, friendship and enmity, improvisation and rule’ (Candea and Da Col 2012, 51). My analysis focuses on how guests experience these tensions between freedom and obligation. I will ask these questions: What kind of support do they receive, besides accommodation, and how do they reciprocate? What meanings do they attach to this exchange, and how do they assess its fairness? How do frames such as kinship or friendship shape the exchange and its meanings?

Before addressing these questions empirically, I first review the body of literature on hospitality and reciprocity within migrant networks, and I describe the methods and the data that I draw upon. The empirical section starts by questioning the directionality of support and distinguishing between invitation and self-invitation. Secondly, I describe the kinds of exchange (money, work, care, time, intimacy) involved in informal housing arrangements, and how these exchanges are perceived by the guests. Thirdly, I look at how differences in gender and legal status shape housing arrangements, forms of reciprocity and their evolution from the moment of arrival to the gradual entry of the guest into paid work. Fourthly, I describe the relational work involved in the arrangement; that is, how guests define their relationship to the hosts when negotiating their arrangement with them. Fifthly, I show that guests are willing, but not always able, to reciprocate. They wish for a contract that would clarify their role. But the research findings show that even an oral contract does not necessarily provide the symmetry that would allow the guest to feel at home. In the conclusion, I suggest that in a context of housing shortage and restrictive migration policies, informal housing arrangements can be both supportive and exploitative, simultaneously.

Hospitality and reciprocity within migrant networks

Studies in Europe and North America show that vulnerable migrants almost always live with family or friends upon arrival, at least for the first few months (Bloch and McKay 2017). Often excluded from social housing policies because of their legal status (Felder and Pattaroni 2024), they face competition and discrimination in the housing market. Under these conditions, securing a rental contract seems almost impossible for a

newcomer, without a stable income (Costarelli, Kleinhans, and Mugnano 2020). Newcomers with a precarious status, therefore, often turn to informal housing: subletting, shared flats, rooms, beds, sometimes even renting in day and night shifts (Lombard 2019), which they find through contacts. Newcomers receive more than food and shelter, as the host sometimes provides information and moral support (Menjívar 2000). They also benefit from accommodation ‘with no questions asked’ (Rex and Moore 1974, 141), provided by hosts who ‘turn a blind eye’ (Smith 2015, 135) to their irregular status and take risks (Bloch and McKay 2017, 132).

Scholars have used the concept of social capital to talk about newcomers accessing vital resources, such as housing, through ‘migrant networks’, while also pointing out the many limitations and risks associated with such networks (De Haas 2010; Snel, Bilgili, and Staring 2020). Scholars have warned against conflating networks with their instrumental benefits. Social relations may provide resources in an uneven manner, reflecting ‘bounded solidarity’ (Portes 1998). Then, social relations need to be ‘activated’ (Ryan 2024) and are not always ‘mobilisable’ (Anthias 2007). People may also refrain from asking for support in order to preserve their reputation, not to worry others, and to avoid forms of control or debts that are difficult to repay (Bredewold et al. 2020; Rosales 2020). Even support from relatives needs to be negotiated, mediated, and reciprocated (Bakuri, Spronk, and van Dijk 2020; Belloni 2016). While this literature looks at why people either forego support or are denied it, other works show the challenges associated with receiving support.

Reciprocity is a cornerstone of social capital (Putnam 2001). It is often framed as mutual support within communities through which individuals both meet their needs and strengthen their ties through exchange. Renowned studies of urban marginality portray reciprocity as a key strategy for coping with scarcity, uncertainty, and insecurity (Lomnitz 1977; Stack 2003). However, the emphasis on the virtues of reciprocity can overlook the obligations it entails, which can become burdensome and lead to exclusion or withdrawal for those with few resources to exchange (Offer 2012). As Portes (1995, 14) argued: ‘the resources obtained from fellow community members and members of social networks, while apparently “free,” have hidden costs’. In the wake of the seminal essay by Mauss (2002), anthropologists have long explored this ambiguity by studying the exchange of gifts.¹ Like gifts, informal support, care and hospitality can be free and disinterested – which increases their symbolic value – yet this does not eliminate the expectation of reciprocity.

The exchange of gifts thus involves power relations. The donor’s generosity may impose a debt on the recipient, at least until he or she devises a roughly equivalent or superior counter gift (Mauss 2002; Sahlin 2011). Charity, but also social benefits, are sometimes experienced as a gift that cannot be reciprocated, and that hurts the recipients’ self-esteem (Felder, Fneich, and Stavo-Debaug 2023; Vandevordt and Verschraegen 2019). However, in principle, the debt is never fully settled. Since bargaining over gifts is seen as unacceptable, there remains a constant ambiguity about who owes whom (Komter 2004, 53). This ambiguity keeps the participants in a permanent cycle of exchange that social theorists see as stabilising (Gouldner 1960) or reproducing social relations (Godbout and Caillé 2000). This ambiguity is further reinforced by the fact that reciprocity can be generalised, meaning that the receiver is not expected to reciprocate to the giver, but rather to someone else; thus, creating a chain of exchange.

The concept of chain migration stems from this kind of reciprocity. Ethnographies of migrant communities show that the accommodation of newcomers sometimes follows the logic of generalised reciprocity: newcomers are housed ‘for free’ until they find a job, save enough money and have their own home where they can host newcomers, creating a virtuous circle (Werbner 2002). However, this does not mean that guests are not indebted to their hosts. In the case of newly arrived migrants, Bashi shows that hospitality creates a debt that can never be repaid:

The experience of sharing a residence with one’s benefactor as he or she sets you up in a new country is one that immigrants regard as especially altruistic, one for which the [host] earns long-term (and perhaps a lifetime of) gratitude. (Bashi 2007, 97–99)

Such generalised or indirect reciprocity would be more common among kin (Sahlins 2011, 95). As the renowned study by Rex and Moore (1974, 133) of the Pakistani community in Birmingham concurs: while relatives were accommodated for free or for a contribution to the household, fellow countrymen were charged a low rent and other tenants were overcharged. In the case of the Netherlands, Engbersen, van San, and Leerkes (2006, 219) argued that established migrants help relatives out of ‘solidarity’, compatriots out of ‘loyalty’, and others out of ‘economic rationality’.

Does this variation mean that support is inversely related to social distance, or does it reflect efforts to distinguish some relationships from others? Zelizer (2005) analysed the widespread belief that these intimate and economic spheres are incompatible, and they are likely to corrupt each other when brought together. Yet economic activity is never absent from intimate settings. To negotiate the intersection between the two, Zelizer (2005) suggested that people engage in ‘relational work’; that is, the process of setting boundaries between various types of relations, and adopting specific kinds of transaction (for example, exchanging gifts rather than paying) deemed appropriate for each type of relation. Consequently, adopting a specific ‘payment system’ with someone means (re)defining the relationship with that person.

When relatives host each other, they are ‘doing family’ (Miah and King 2021). However, these relationships are asymmetrical. As Baldassar and Merla (2014, 7) wrote: ‘Transnational caregiving [...] binds members together in intergenerational networks of reciprocity and obligation, love and trust, that are simultaneously fraught with tension, contest and relations of unequal power’. As with local care, the burden of transnational care falls most heavily on the shoulders of women, who are likely to receive less than they give (Ryan 2007). Differences in gender, age, and legal status create power dynamics that often reinforce the dominance of the host over the guest (Candea and Da Col 2012). Importantly, scholars have shown that kinship ties can be ‘toxic ties’ (Del Real 2019). Rather than an anomaly, this represents ‘the dark side of kinship’ (Andrikopoulos and Duyvendak 2020, 310), where solidarity coexists with forms of rivalry and conflict (Scalettaris, Monsutti, and Donini 2021).

Changing structures of opportunity also condition hospitality and the type of reciprocity it involves. In a context of poverty, Menjivar (2000, 126) suggested that migrants ‘have come to pay for services that normally would have been part of reciprocal exchanges among them’. Payment can be in kind, such as for the newly arrived Salvadoran women met by Mahler in the US (1995), who were working for their host as ‘live-in maids’. In the 1990s, a study in Rotterdam showed that 90% of the irregular

migrants interviewed were living with someone else, most often someone of the same origin. Half of the respondents paid nothing for their accommodation (Burgers 1998). However, at the time, 58% of the Dutch housing stock belonged to the social sector, and it is likely that the increasing commodification of the Rotterdam housing market (Custers and Willems 2024) has led to the ‘commodification of social ties’ (Mahler 1995). Snel, Engbersen, and Faber (2016) found that Moroccans in the Netherlands are reluctant to support newcomers, due to stricter migration policies and a decline in economic opportunities. Rather than acting as ‘bridgeheads’, they act as ‘gatekeepers’.

This literature suggests that the phenomenon of informal housing arrangements is widespread, but that it conceals grey areas which need to be explored. What are the ‘hidden costs’ for newcomers being accommodated ‘for free’, and how does reciprocity work in informal housing arrangements? How can we understand the link between the type of relationship between the host and the guest, and the way in which the housing arrangement is experienced and negotiated? Finally, attention should be paid to the evolution of the arrangements, as research suggests that guests are sometimes offered a ‘grace period’ before being asked to contribute financially (Usman, Maslova, and Burgess 2020, 13). Only by clarifying these dimensions will it be possible to understand how adequate are the notions of positive and negative social capital, in describing the fact that newcomers are accommodated by established migrants, and how their support relates to exploitation.

Methods and cases: Colombian newcomers in Rotterdam

This article is based on semi-structured interviews with Colombians who had arrived in Rotterdam between one month and three years earlier (see Table 1). I met most of them at a free Dutch language course that I, as a non-Dutch-speaking newcomer, attended almost every week between autumn 2022 and spring 2024. I identified myself as a Swiss man who had come to Rotterdam to work at the university on migrant housing.

Table 1. Cases.

	Pseudo	Used to work as	Age	Family situation	In Rotterdam since*	The first host was
1	Ana	Administrative clerk	30	Came with a school-age child, separated from the father	13 months	An older brother
2	Milly	Land surveyor	40	Came with a teenager, married but separated from the father	6 months	An older brother
3	Laura	Cook	42	Widow, a young adult daughter in Colombia	2 months	A younger brother
4	Christian	Assistant accountant	44	Separated, a young adult daughter in Colombia	3 years	A distant cousin
5	Carmen	Small business owner	41	Separated, a teenage son in Colombia	1 month	A friend's sister
6	Flor	Administrative clerk	30	Single	3 years	A friend
7	Daniela	Healthcare technician	32	Separated, a teenage son in Colombia	4 months	A friend
8	César	Mover and driver	40	Separated, a teenage son in Colombia	9 months	A stranger
9	Juliana	Engineer	28	Single	2 months	A stranger
10	Raquel	Cashier	23	Single	11 months	A stranger

* at the time of the first interview.

The course was run by an organisation assisting irregular migrants. Colombians (and Latin Americans in general) were rare among the participants, but the fact that we shared a common language – Spanish – helped to make contact.

Compared to Turks, Moroccans, and Surinamese, South Americans have rarely been studied in the Dutch context, to the best of my knowledge. The number of irregular Colombians is unknown, but national statistics show only 21,853 residents of Colombian origin (for comparison: 419,272 residents are of Moroccan origin). Studies conducted in the Netherlands have shown that, due to regional, political, class, and legal cleavages, there is no apparent Colombian ‘community’ to welcome or support the newcomers, and that ‘ethnic’ networks rarely go beyond kinship (Galeano Rodriguez 2017; Zaitch 2003). This, therefore, makes newcomers particularly dependent on the people who receive them.

My intention in choosing this national group is not to identify specific characteristics of Colombians in relation to other national groups, but rather to be able to compare between cases on the basis of a relatively equivalent context, in terms of opportunities for migration and regularisation in Europe. Colombians do not need a visa to visit the Netherlands for less than 90 days, but they must prove that they possess at least €55 per day to cover their expenses, or that they have a sponsor who has signed a liability form.

Most of the interviewees come from Colombia’s largest cities: Bogota, Cali, or Medellín. All claimed to have entered the Netherlands lawfully, and most had overstayed by the time we met. Carmen, Christian, and César had stayed in Spain for a few months before coming to the Netherlands. They found life easier in Spain: the language, the housing, but also the prospect of legalisation, and only the wages were not what they expected. Carmen remembers working for €3.5 an hour in a small Spanish town. When they found a host in the Netherlands, they either travelled by plane or used car-sharing platforms. The rest of the respondents arrived directly at Amsterdam’s Schiphol Airport and took the train to Rotterdam, or they were picked up by their host. Juliana stayed in Amsterdam for two months before moving to Rotterdam to live with someone she had just met in Amsterdam and was dating. This set of ten cases offers insights into different housing arrangements involving relatives, friends, and strangers.

Those individuals who explicitly consented to participate in the study were interviewed in the Spanish language. This occurred after the Dutch course, sometimes in a public park or café. I offered compensation of €20, as researchers are not exempt from the ethics of reciprocity. All participants were guaranteed anonymity. Participants’ names have been changed, and minor details that could identify them have been omitted.

Most participants attended the course only a few times, but for others we met regularly. This provided an opportunity to catch up with their situation. I met with half of the interviewees at the course, while the other half were referred to me by the former. My initial idea was to interview their hosts as well, but I realised that they were very uncomfortable with this idea, as it could jeopardise their (family) relationships, and also their housing situation. They were worried that their host would think they were talking behind their backs. I also realised that hosts were taking a risk by receiving someone without a residence permit. As a result, when I talk about the hosts, it will only be through what the newcomers have told me. As part of the study, I conducted other contextual interviews, with experts and with other newcomers in different legal

situations, or from different backgrounds. These interviews informed my understanding of hospitality and provided points of comparison, although they are not included in this article.

In terms of analytical strategy, I adopt a case study logic and proceed sequentially: each case (a situation involving a newcomer and one or more hosts) helped me to refine my understanding of the phenomenon, and to adapt the questions asked in the interviews. With such logic, the validity of the analysis does not depend on the representativeness of the sample, but on the subsequent validation or revision of the analysis across multiple cases (Small 2009). What interests me about these cases is what they tell us of the housing challenge faced by economically and legally vulnerable newcomers, about support, reciprocity, and inequality among the migrant population, rather than what they tell us about the specific population of Colombians in Rotterdam.

Inequality and reciprocity between newcomers and their hosts

In this section, I will analyse the experiences of Colombian newcomers hosted by settled migrants. Firstly, I examine how these housing situations came about, which leads me to question the directionality of support. Secondly, I examine what guests and hosts receive from each other, and how guests experience this exchange. Thirdly, I consider how differences in gender and legal status intersect and shape the contributions of guests, particularly when they are women. Fourthly, I examine the relational work involved in negotiating the arrangements, and how it relies on the semantics of help and kinship. Fifthly, I consider cases where guests are unable to reciprocate, and long for a more balanced and negotiated reciprocity.

Who supports whom? Directionality of support between the guest and the host

I first assumed that newcomers were living with someone because they came to Rotterdam and did not find a place of their own. But, I realised that the causality is reversed. The newcomers are in Rotterdam because someone offered them a place to stay. This determined their choice of destination, but sometimes also the decision to migrate. Laura and Flor, in particular, said they had no plans to migrate and were persuaded to do so by their host. Others actively looked for a host in Europe who happened to live in Rotterdam. On the one hand, being invited or inviting oneself influences the way hospitality is organised and experienced. On the other hand, the distinction is not always clear and the two parties sometimes have divergent views.

In Flor's case, the host was a friend whose interest – according to her – was to make her his intimate partner. In her view, what he wanted more than anything else was the company of a woman:

He missed companionship. He is a lonely man, he lives alone and he said he misses someone to talk to, someone to be with. More than anything, it's companionship. Of course one has sexual needs too, but it's not that he wanted to push me against the wall, it was really more about being physically close, hugging, and so on.

In Laura's case, her brother Arturo had been irregularly living in the Netherlands for three years when he complained to his sisters in Colombia that he was lonely and

homesick. Inviting his sister seems a home-making strategy, in which one “‘familiarize [s]’ new places by bringing aspects of one’s own home’ (Duyvendak 2011, 15). As the only unmarried sister, Laura felt that the family had appointed her to keep the ‘man of the family’ company. She claims to have left a life she loved to please her family. ‘Family is sacred’, she told me.

Far from just offering their company, Flor and Laura quickly took on the domestic work, cooking, and cleaning for their host. Tensions arose as a result of the hosts’ increasing demands, which made the guests feel as if they were receiving a favour, when in fact they felt they had sacrificed part of their lives in Colombia to be with them. It is tempting to assume that the host supports the guest, rather than the reverse. In some of the cases I have analysed, however, there is disagreement from the outset about who is helping whom. A third scenario is that the request comes from a third party, as in Carmen’s case. A friend of hers asked his sister to take Carmen in. By responding positively to this request, the host is supporting Carmen while maintaining her relationship with her own sibling.

The question of directionality becomes even more complex when considering the relationship over time. When the host and the guest are related, their relationship has a history. This means that the support given to a particular person at a particular time is evaluated based on perceptions of how support and care have been circulated up to that point (Baldassar and Merla 2014, 51). For example, Ana – who asked her brother to host her – felt that she had stepped in for her brother when he emigrated years before her, and that he owed her for maintaining his property back in Colombia, and for collecting rent from his tenants. In her opinion, her brother did not appreciate this enough.

Assessing the arrangements: what is given, why, and how it is perceived

The promise of high salaries plays an important role in the decision to leave Colombia for the Netherlands. On this point, the people I interviewed were not disappointed. As Christian explains: ‘In two days, I can earn what people in Colombia earn in almost a month’. What they often underestimate, however, is the cost of living, especially housing. They quickly learn that a room in Rotterdam often costs more than €500. Not only is affordable housing scarce, but access is often dependent on having a residence permit and a steady job.

As the people I interviewed arrived with accommodation already arranged, they discovered that ‘finding a place is so complicated’, as Carmen put it, when they started looking for their own accommodation. They realised that they would probably have to stay with their host for longer than they had expected, but it also led them to reassess the value of what their host was offering them.

Hosts provide a place to sleep or rest away from the elements. In most cases, guests enjoy some privacy, as well as room to leave belongings, to wash, to use the toilet facilities, to cook and eat, and even to receive visitors. Hosts often provide food, but also information, and even warm clothing. In some cases, they also help their guests to find work, sometimes by sharing their work at the beginning, such as bringing the guest along for helping with a cleaning job and splitting the wage.

Importantly, these arrangements allow guests to save money and send remittances. All my interviewees initially saw their stay as temporary. They could, therefore, be described as ‘investment migrants’, for whom living as cheaply as possible is more important than

settling down and improving their living conditions (Van Meeteren 2014). César provides a telling example: he described his life in his host's basement as satisfactory. It is cold, small, and damp, but it only costs €250, and that is all that matters at the moment, because it allows him to send money home to his teenage son in Colombia. He is also grateful that his host is taking the risk of taking in an irregular migrant like himself.

In the long run, expectations change, as in the case of Christian. After three years, he is disappointed with his housing situation.

It's not like in our country, where you can find nice places to live. Here the stairs are very narrow, [...] the bathrooms are super small. There is no room to build here [in the Netherlands]. It's bad for us Latin Americans who know big houses with patios and gardens.

Even so, Christian feels fortunate that a distant cousin is 'helping' him, by letting him stay with them because his work is unstable.

How gender and legal status intersect and shape the exchange

How the guest reciprocates hospitality, and how the roles and contributions of each party evolve as they live together, is shaped by gender roles, but also by asymmetrical positions linked to legal status and familiarity with the environment. With no work permit, and no means of having their qualifications recognised, the people I interviewed initially had much time on their hands, during which they occupied themselves by doing domestic work. As Carmen explained: 'Well, I don't just lie there sleeping. I help around the house because I'm there. So I help her, you know, clean the house. You have to earn your keep, right?'

Female newcomers like Laura presented this division of labour as logical: 'I clean the house because she (my brother's partner) goes to work and I stay at home. I cannot stay without doing something'. Laura also does most of the shopping and cooking, supporting her sister-in-law perhaps more than her brother, who was not much involved in housework anyway. He encouraged her to take on this role: 'That way you won't get bored, he told me'. I couldn't help laughing. 'Their life has got easier since you've been here', I said. 'Sure has', she replied.

In these cases, gender intersects with legal status. Unpaid domestic work seems to be one of the only jobs available to irregular migrants. Ironically, while working without a permit is punishable by law in the Netherlands, unpaid domestic and care work within the family is not covered by this prohibition. Furthermore, undeclared domestic workers and their employers are not a priority for the authorities and are, therefore, effectively tolerated (Siruno, Swerts, and Leerkes 2022).

These gendered roles represent a continuity with the guest's lives in Colombia, even if they used to have a job. In their accounts, cleaning and cooking are activities they have to do anyway, so letting their hosts benefit from those activities does not represent much extra effort for them. As Ana put it: 'I cook for my daughter and myself anyway, so making a third portion is no big deal. Besides, I have more time than he (my brother) does'. She saves him a plate to put in the microwave when he comes home from work. She insists that 'it's an exchange, not a burden'. She sees it as a fair contribution to the food and shelter she and her daughter receive from him.

Gender roles do not necessarily confine female guests to the home as live-in maids, as women find work more quickly than men. Juliana explains: 'I think it's easier for us, for example in the cleaning jobs, they often want women. [...] The same with babysitting, they feel safer with a woman, they have more trust'. As scholars have argued, migration is both gendered and gendering, as women manage to gain more economic opportunities than men by doing 'women's work', which allows them to challenge male economic dominance in the household, but does not abolish patriarchal norms (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1992; Menjívar 2000).

Indeed, when women get paid work, they begin to contribute financially (or increase their contribution), while often continuing to provide unpaid work. This includes not only 'caring for' their host (cooking, cleaning, etc.), but also 'caring about' their host (spending time with them, showing support and interest) (Tronto and Fisher 1990). While the women I interviewed were accustomed to the 'second shift' (Hochschild 2012), that falls to employed women who remain in charge of the home, they found themselves faced with a third shift, as payment in kind for their accommodation or as a demonstration of gratitude towards their host.

The guest's increasing independence and professional integration mean a change in arrangements, which can be uncomfortable for the host. Laura, for example, quickly found cleaning jobs, but Arturo did not encourage her to work because, he said, she would not have to pay for accommodation. Saying this allows Arturo to appear generous while downplaying the value of his sister's domestic work, which over time may have become more valuable than the room she shares with his partner's daughter's bedroom.

My data do not allow for proper gender comparisons, but it is worth noting here that the two men I met paid their host, and did not reciprocate hospitality with housework. César was hosted by a man, and they each cooked and cleaned for themselves. As for Christian, he said that he 'helped' the women who hosted him, and that his previous arrangement was with an Ecuadorian woman whom he paid for board and lodging, an arrangement that used to be very common in industrial cities where taking in lodgers was an important source of additional income for women (Goyette 2021).

Negotiating arrangements, negotiating relationships

Although the interviewees sometimes portrayed their housing arrangement as a quasi-contractual exchange of services, their words conveyed a more ambiguous picture. Milly's older brother was granted asylum in the Netherlands two decades ago when she asked to join him with her 13-year-old daughter. She cooks and cleans, 'but he doesn't ask for it, I offer it [...] I tell him to let me do it so I can be useful'. She insists that she 'helps' him without expecting anything in return, 'that's how I am', she tells me. By emphasising her freedom, she establishes her relationship with her brother as meaningful and intimate, as opposed to a relationship based on self-interest.

As Zelizer (2005) argued, presenting emotions and interests as 'hostile worlds' is a way of marking boundaries between different relationships. Economic concerns are feared to contaminate and undermine intimacy. This idea leads guests living with relatives to downplay their contribution and mark it as a 'help'. Even if the two parties believe they have some sort of unwritten contract involving a monetary transaction, it does not proceed as easy as typical market transactions.

Ana and her brother Hugo agreed that he would put her up for free during a ‘grace period’ (Usman, Maslova, and Burgess 2020) of three months so that Ana could save money. He also offered to give her €50 a week to buy food for himself, as well as for Ana and her daughter. Her account shows that an explicit agreement was not enough to alleviate the discomfort.

Often, I do not ask him for the €50, I just buy the food [with my money]. I think it’s normal, when you’re invited and there’s no food, you have to find a way to make a meal. If I have money in my pocket, I use it to buy food, because I am not going to not eat. It is very uncomfortable to have to ask. [...] Just by offering me a roof, he’s already done a lot for me. And also helping me with food is a big thing. So, I think you should not put more burdens on someone.

The quote suggests that, as Finch and Mason (1993) pointed out, explicit negotiations about support between relatives are only the tip of the iceberg and occur within implicit negotiation processes that unfold over a longer period of time. It also shows that the agreement does not put the two parties on an equal footing. Ana does not feel comfortable to demand its enforcement. Her discomfort is not only due to her relationship to the host, but also to the fear of being an ungrateful guest.

Efforts to keep exchanges in the domain of the gift, rather than that of the commercial transaction are also apparent in Christian’s case. The €400 he pays his host could legitimately be considered as rent, but he presents it as a ‘help’ he brings to the household.

With the €400, I help them [pay the rent of €1500, utilities and internet]. We live like a family. We buy food for everyone, we share the expenses, we cook for everyone because it is cheaper.

Such framing seems to facilitate the mixing of economic transactions with intimate relationships. It may also indicate a claim to equality with the other members of the household. As Andrikopoulos (2023, 78) points out, the positive framing of kinship makes ‘unequal relations more bearable’. Regarding the cases in the present study, it makes being a guest more bearable, while it disadvantages female guests, who are expected to shoulder a greater burden of care (Baldassar and Merla 2014).

Finally, the vocabulary of family and mutual help can be used as a strategy to reduce the risk that the guest poses to the host. Indeed, unauthorised work and renting to irregular migrants is prohibited. Although I am not aware of any such cases in the Netherlands, Belgian, French, and Swiss residents have been accused of facilitating illegal immigration through hosting a newcomer, and they had to convince the courts that the hospitality they provided was charitable, and did not involve market transactions (Macq 2019; Rosello 1999; Schmid 2023).

Remaining a guest: the persistence of asymmetry

The literature on exploitation within migrant networks mainly describes situations in which newcomers are expected to reciprocate disproportionately for what they receive (Mahler 1995). If this is the dark side of social capital, the bright side could be a situation where support is gratuitous and does not involve quid pro quo. However, anthropologists have suggested that the unreciprocated gift may make the person who accepts it feel inferior (Mauss 2002). This last section describes how being accommodated ‘for free’ can also mean being unable to reciprocate, as in Carmen’s case.

Carmen sleeps in the living room of the sister of a friend. The two had never met before. Carmen regularly offers money to her host, who always refuses: “Not now”, she says, “you’ve just arrived, wait until you get more work”. There are good people, you see Maxime’. To offer this kind of support to a stranger seems strange to the host’s entourage. But for her, Carmen is not just a stranger, she was recommended by her brother. What matters here is not only the relationship itself, but how it is embedded in a wider network. The host offers Carmen her support, while at the same time doing a favour for her own brother, who has asked her to help Carmen.

Such generosity would perhaps have been easier to accept from the friend himself, and even better from a relative, but coming from a ‘stranger’, it makes Carmen feel uncomfortable:

Sometimes I want to bring something [food] just to feel good, to contribute, but she says ‘no, we have everything we need’. It makes me feel uncomfortable. I don’t dare take anything from the kitchen. She has to tell me: ‘Carmen, don’t leave without eating, make yourself a “tosti” [sandwich]’, as they say here!

The terms of the exchange seem imposed by the host and, in terms of relational work, it means a relationship of dependency, which makes Carmen feel disempowered. ‘Charity is wounding’, warned Mauss (2002), recalling the double meaning of the German word gift, which also means poison. Although it is probably not the host’s intention, by not allowing her guest to reciprocate, she turns the gift into a burden.

When hospitality is prolonged, guests long for a more balanced exchange, and even for a contract that would free them from the uncertainty and asymmetry associated with their guest status. The guests are never safe from a change of circumstances where their ‘generous’ host suddenly demands compensation. Flor remembers the first year she spent with the Dutch man who had invited her:

When you live with people you know, expectations rise. You cannot be independent and pay as if you had a contract, then there would be fewer arguments, fewer problems. But if you are dependent on people, it leads to conflicts, because then one starts to say “you live for free, you owe me this or that”. The idea starts to grow that you are a burden, a heavy burden.

However, the above mentioned cases, such as Ana, cast doubt on the effectiveness of a contract in resolving the asymmetries of hospitality. Milly is another case in point. She and her brother had agreed that he would provide lodging, and give her money for food for three months in exchange for her help with housework and cooking. After three months, Milly had regular cleaning jobs. She and her brother agreed that she would start paying rent – which she admits was below the market price – and that he would now pay her for cleaning. This exchange may seem balanced, but because she pays a lower price, and because he boarded her for three months and takes the risks of having her despite her irregular situation, she still feels indebted. Should he need anything in the future, she told me, she would be both happy and obliged to help him.

Other cases show that the guest’s contribution, even if it amounts to rent, does not release the parties from their mutual obligations, nor does it make the guest a full member of the household. César – who pays a retired Dutchman of Antillean origin to sleep on his sofa – had a contract with his host. César would pay €250 a month and have access to the studio and be free to use the kitchen and bathroom. But despite this

agreement and the fact that he pays rent, César limited his presence in the studio as much as possible and did not feel comfortable there. When the weather became warm enough, he even moved to the basement, where he had placed a mattress and urinated in a bottle. He cooked as little as possible and always in quantities so as not to 'occupy the kitchen'. He also refused his host's invitations to eat and spend the evening in the studio, preferring to go down to the basement so as not to disturb his host's privacy. While much of the literature on hospitality towards migrants highlights the host's sacrifice of privacy (Bassoli and Luccioni 2023), few studies explore the importance of this privacy from the guest's perspective, especially in terms of their efforts to respect and avoid intruding upon it (Felder and Stavo-Debaugé 2025). César's case suggests that this concern contributes to the persisting asymmetry between the host and the guest. The fact that they have a contract and that rent is paid does not resolve the basic asymmetry.

Conclusions

While a large body of literature analyses why some newcomers receive help from their contacts in the destination country while others are denied support, this article shows the value of analysing in more detail what happens when newcomers receive help. My argument is not about proving, yet again, that social relationships have light and dark sides, but about offering an interpretive framework for understanding why these two sides are inseparable. This framework, based on the literature on gift-giving, moves beyond economic approaches by linking the question of exchange to the question of the relationship itself.

In other words, social relationships are not pathways along which resources are exchanged, as uses of the concept of social capital sometimes imply. The pathways do not exist without the flows and exchanges; and when exchanges involve gifts, their purpose is primarily to build or maintain the pathways. I have shown that accommodating a newcomer can be a way of 'doing family', of establishing new friendships, of aiming to give an intimate or romantic character to an existing friendship, or of responding to the request of a friend or relative who has intervened on the newcomer's behalf. Sometimes guests struggle with the terms of the exchange, which would make them a lover and not a friend, a maid instead of a sister, or a disempowered guest instead of a contributing member of the household.

This perspective implies a broad understanding of social exchange, considering not only tangible goods, but also intangible goods. This helps to recognise that no one is accommodated for free, in the sense that hospitality always costs the guest something: if not money, then forms of care provided to the hosts and their households – ranging from domestic work to companionship – and demonstrations of gratitude.

Adopting this perspective has revealed that the directionality of support cannot be taken for granted, as support flows in both directions. Guest contributions evolve and sometimes grow to the point where they probably exceed the value of accommodation. 'Who supports whom' is an open question and is sometimes the subject of disagreement between a guest who feels that they have done their host a favour by accepting the host's invitation, and a host who expects gratitude. My interviewees also struggled with uncertainty about the proportionality of their contribution, wondering if they were doing enough or too much for their host. Some guests wished they had a contract that clarified their rights and obligations as a member of the host's household. However, I

have shown that those guests who say they have a contract are not necessarily relieved, and their asking for the enforcement of that contract is considered inappropriate.

Finally, the vocabulary of help and family solidarity used by guests to describe their arrangement should be viewed as relational work, attributing specific qualities to the relationship with the host. It must not blind us to the obligations, expectations, ambiguities, and inequalities that condition informal support. In the studied cases, the fundamental asymmetry between host and guest was compounded by inequalities of gender, legal status, and economic and cultural resources. Although hosts also risk being exploited by their guests (Miah and King 2021), the framing of reciprocity as an exchange of gift perpetuates inequalities, to the detriment of the guests I interviewed, and who could hardly use their contributions as bargaining chips to improve their condition.

Rather than opposite ends of a spectrum, exploitation emerges *from* support, from the ambiguity and implicit obligations that govern hospitality. Having received the gift of hospitality, newcomers sometimes find themselves trapped by it. In their situation, notwithstanding the dramatic consequences of the commodification of housing, having a home for which one is expected to pay money, with no other expectations, feels like a luxury. Of course, exchanging gifts remains essential to maintaining relationships and alliances, but when affordable housing is so scarce, accommodation may be too heavy a gift for the recipient to bear.

Note

1. The philosopher Derrida (1930–2004) argued that a gift is not a gift if it involves an exchange. Hospitality, like a gift, is only authentic if it is completely unconditional. For a critique of this perspective, see Stavo-Debaugé (2017, Chapter 4).

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