

# Emotions, Positionalities and the Reproduction of Border Regimes: Multi-Sited Ethnography with Syrian Transnational Families



**NJMR** NORDIC JOURNAL OF  
MIGRATION RESEARCH

**SPECIAL ISSUE  
ARTICLE**

**MIRIAM STOCK**

**HUP** HELSINKI  
UNIVERSITY  
PRESS

## ABSTRACT

This article analyses how overlapping border regimes between Europe and the Middle East affect and shape the emotions of Syrian migrants and their left-behind families and communities. It argues, from a transnational perspective, that border regimes are always emotional regimes. This research combines different research strands, including one on border regimes, with a theoretical discussion on emotions in migration and transnational contexts. The empirical material is based on a multi-sited ethnography of young men in transnational Syrian families in Germany, Lebanon and Syria. My analysis indicates the omnipresence of different emotions, such as envy and guilt, which form different subjectivations and link different positionalities in overlapping border regimes between the Middle East and Europe. Finally, my mixed feelings as a Germany-based researcher are also considered. I show how these emotions and subsequent subjectivations have a direct impact on transnational relations and positionalities in overlapping border regimes and argue for more sensitivity towards emotions in research on such regimes.

## CORRESPONDING

### AUTHOR:

**Miriam Stock**

Department of Cultural  
Studies, Pädagogische  
Hochschule Schwäbisch  
Gmünd, Germany

[miriam.stock@ph-gmuend.de](mailto:miriam.stock@ph-gmuend.de)

## KEYWORDS:

Border regimes;  
Transnational family;  
Emotions; Multi-sited  
ethnography; Positionality

## TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Stock, M. 2024. Emotions,  
Positionalities and the  
Reproduction of Border  
Regimes: Multi-Sited  
Ethnography with Syrian  
Transnational Families.  
*Nordic Journal of Migration  
Research*, 14(4): 4,  
pp. 1–16. DOI: [https://doi.  
org/10.33134/njmr.775](https://doi.org/10.33134/njmr.775)

Sometimes it's too sad, even when we talk to each other. Even if we do not speak with each other, it is sad. I mean to your family members, when there is a misfortune, you can only express your disposition. One feels powerless. One feels mediocre. It's always an abyss. When I make this comparison. Life here, life in Syria. (Interview with K., Feb. 2017)

This is a quote from an interview I conducted with a young man in Berlin who resettled in Germany as a Syrian refugee in 2013. After living in a refugee camp and learning the language, he started to study humanities – a long-time dream – but had to work several jobs on the side to financially support his parents back in North Syria. The quote expresses all too well the ambivalent and difficult feelings of living in Germany while family members remain in war-torn Syria. K.'s parents were not only suffering from bombs but also from the high inflation and lack of basic facilities, such as electricity and clean water. Because of these asymmetries in living conditions, my interlocutor later explained, he would not tell his parents when he was not feeling well or running out of money. Indeed, he usually did not have enough money, since he would send anything he could spare directly to his parents. Even though he wanted to bring his parents to Germany, this was almost impossible because of harsh border restrictions and stringent visa requirements.

The quote is striking in that my interlocutor not only talked about the severe disparities he was experiencing between 'here' and 'there,' between places that were bound and at the same time separated by overlapping border regimes, and thus by overlapping yet different modes of how (forced) migration is governed and controlled. He was also *feeling* them. Starting from this observation, I argue that border regimes are also always emotional regimes. In this article, I analyse how overlapping border regimes between Europe and the Middle East affect and shape the emotions of Syrian migrants and their left-behind families and communities. I reflect on how different subjectivations and positionalities in transnational border regimes shape the emotions of Syrian migrant individuals and how these emotions in turn affect relationships between different subjects. I thereby include myself and my emotions as a European researcher who is also embedded in the transnational field in a privileged position.

This research is part of an ongoing research project that started in 2016, titled 'Being a reliable man in times of crisis: Young Syrians in transnational families,' in which I ask how young men who migrated from Syria maintain and at the same time renegotiate families whose members have been displaced to different countries in the Middle East and Europe. The project aims to counter the hegemonic stereotype of male Muslim migrants as 'dangerous' and 'threatening' by showing that they are vulnerable, feeling subjects caught up in different and demanding transnational care relations (see [Stock 2016](#)). For my research, I conducted ethnography with young men in Germany, Lebanon and North Iraq who live in transnational families. In this transnational research field, highly asymmetric power relations are omnipresent due to highly restrictive border regimes. In my ethnographic material, I detected different prevalent emotions, such as guilt and envy, and other mixed feelings that were closely tied to different positionalities in border regimes between the Middle East and Europe. These emotions moreover did not stop at my interlocutors but also involved me, as I got entangled in these power asymmetries.

In the following, I first outline different strands of research to bring together discussions of border regimes and emotions in transnational contexts. I then offer a background to my ethnography with data obtained through qualitative interviews and participant observation with research participants from transnational families in Germany, Lebanon and North Iraq. In the empirical section, I discuss three configurations of emotional asymmetric relations that were part of the transnational ethnographic research: the first from the perspective of interlocutors in Lebanon, the second from the perspective of interlocutors in Germany and the third from the perspective of my involvement as a researcher.

## BORDER REGIMES AND EMOTIONS IN TRANSNATIONAL CONTEXTS

The notion of ‘border’ or ‘migration regimes’ has received increased attention in academic research since the 1990s (Cvajner, Echeverría & Sciortino 2018: 66). Instead of understanding migration policy as consistent and regulated from above, the concept of ‘regime’ sees the governance of migration as a complex result of actions of different actors who are related to each other in hierarchical and vertical power relations (Mecheril & Karakayli 2018: 227f). For Sciortino (2004: 32), migration regimes can be understood as a ‘set of rules and practices’ that are historically developed ‘in order to deal with the consequences of international mobility, through the production of a hierarchy’. Migration regimes are thus ‘messy’ and produce many ‘ambiguities and gaps’ (Sciortino 2004: 32). That said, border regimes open up opportunities for resistance, subversion and appropriation by migrants (see, e.g., Bhimji 2020; Papadopoulos, Stephenson & Tsianos 2008; Scheel 2017). They are moreover constantly challenged by transnational migration from below (Tsianos & Karakayli 2010). However, these regimes bear not only resistance but also affirmations. As Schwenken (2018: 214–215) proposes, they frame migrant subjects insofar as they develop affirmative or resistant identities in migration contexts. They do so when positioning themselves in relation to societal norms or when internalizing government programmes, geopolitical relations and different forms of inclusion and exclusion. This can also be the case for migrant subjectivities that are located in different geospatial settings along the transnational border regime between the Middle East and Europe.

Emotions have not been systematically analysed when studying (transnational) border regimes, even though they are often mentioned in passing. One example is Griffiths (2014) who detects a ‘temporal angst’ when looking at temporal uncertainties of asylum seekers and immigration detainees in migration regimes but does not connect this aspect to the literature on emotions. Other studies focus on emotions but do not further theorize about border regimes. Kleist and Jansen highlight the role of ‘hope’ in border regimes, as both a motivator for migrants to escape ‘existential immobility’ (Hage 2009, 97) and a governance strategy when, for example, hope is diminished through the enforcement of a border regime via militarization, deportation and similar tactics (Kleist & Jansen 2016: 383).

There is also the case for studies of emotions and transnational families, where the impacts of border regimes are observed but are not further examined. Emotions have been most prevalently analysed in connection to transnational marriage and mothering (Boccagni 2012; Parreñas 2002; Ryan 2008), but recent studies focus on care relations more generally – including elderly care and caring masculinities

(Hoang & Yeoh 2011; Locke 2017; Stock 2021). These studies often consider highly hierarchized geospatial relations and positionings. In families, strong feelings of longing, guilt, shame and nostalgia occur, where different actors attempt to influence each other's feelings from a distance, and individuals are bound to each other via care relations across borders and in hierarchical systems (Baldassar 2008, 2015; Svašek 2008). However, Nieswand (2018) argues that studies of transnationalism only rarely theorize about borders. He introduces the concept of 'border effects' to 'capture the structural effects which border regimes have on transnational migrants' lives' (Nieswand 2018: 592).

Considering this research gap, this study attempts to connect (transnational) border regimes with their emotional discharge on the basis of emerging studies in this field that analyse emotions from different angles, such as D'Aoust (2013) and Scheel (2017), who looks at the deployment of 'love' as a governance technology in marriage migration. De Genova (2002) focuses on how fears shape migrant subjectivities in the face of 'everyday deportability', and Borrelli (2021) analyses emotional encounters between street-level bureaucrats and migrants. Drawing particularly on the last two studies, this article analyses how migrant subjectivities in border regimes are shaped and enacted by emotions.

I adopt Svašek's (2010: 868ff) definition of emotions as dynamic processes through which individuals experience and interpret the social world, anticipate future actions and shape their subjectivities. Importantly, emotions in migration contexts do not arise only in direct physical contact but also through distinct social digital interactions, and they can also be evoked by memories, the imagination and expectations. After all, emotions change with time and geographical context and are thus constantly in motion and negotiation (Boccagni & Baldassar 2015). Moreover, Svašek (2000: 112) claims that 'emotions are embedded in contexts of changing power relations' and thus also reconstitute scalar border relations. Particularly in transnational contexts, emotions can become challenging for individuals because of their contradictory involvements in more than one social setting. 'Transnationals must deal with often competing emotional demands, expectations, feelings and interests of relatives and friends in different transnational contexts' (Engbersen & Snel 2021: 3). Transnational researchers have applied Hochschild's (1979) concept of 'emotional work' to discuss how migrants manage their feelings connected to dominant expectations within particular social settings (see Engbersen & Snel 2021; Ryan 2008; Svašek 2008). Hochschild (1979) claims that managing emotions is work done to cope with what she calls 'feeling rules': socially shared norms about what constitutes appropriate feelings, which must be learnt via socialization. Therefore, emotional cultures vary in transnational settings.

Finally, this article is based on studies of the context of Syrian refugees with highly hierarchized transnational family and kin relations due to an asymmetric border regime that privileges central and northern European states. These states dominate political agendas on migration (Tsianos & Kasperek 2015), while southern European countries such as Greece or Italy count as mere transit places due to their lack of possibilities and economic hardship but still offer entry to the EU. Syria's neighbouring countries have precarious living conditions and legal status for these refugees, especially Lebanon, which introduced strict political measures to control border movements and settlement that forced many Syrian migrants into an illegal residence status (Janmyr 2016). Moreover, Lebanon and North Iraq suffer from economic crises and political turmoil, which may lead to increased racism directed at Syrians (see Cherri, Gonzáles &

Castro Delgado 2016; Dionigi 2019).<sup>1</sup> Finally, Syria itself has a strict border regime not only because of its internal division after the civil war but also because of the difficulties for political suspects or young men wanted for military service, who have to pay a large fine upon return, to cross national borders (Hayatli 2015).

This said, overlapping border regimes between the Middle East and Europe produce different transnational positionalities that are closely entangled with geopolitical relations in the transnational context. These positionalities both concern migrant subjects and intersect with gender and class (Speed et al. 2021). They also involve researchers like me, a European who became positioned in the ethnographic field from a certain geopolitical position (see Lønning & Uzureau 2024). This article endeavours to analyse emotions in these overlapping transnational regimes.

## METHODS

This article is based on a multi-sited ethnographic study (Marcus 1995) consisting of qualitative interviews with and participant observation of young Syrian men located in Germany, Lebanon and North Iraq conducted between 2016 and 2022. All these men lived in families that were transnational between Europe and the Middle East.

A multi-sited approach has the advantage of being ‘comparative by nature’, a comparison based on contrasting examples (Nadai & Maeder 2005: 8). However, choosing more than one site certainly leads to a loss of detail and varying intensities and qualities (Nadai & Maeder 2005: 8; Hage 2005). Indeed, I was involved more intensively with my research participants in Germany, my country of residence, whereas I could visit North Iraq and Lebanon only briefly. This imbalance is reflected in my analysis, where I critically discuss my position in the transnational border regime.

All interlocutors I interviewed and talked to were Syrian young men who had arrived in Germany, Lebanon or North Iraq after 2011. They had to escape Syria either because they were political activists or, more often, wanted for military service. Since the start of the uprisings in 2011 and the subsequent violent civil war, particularly men were threatened by the Syrian state or opposition groups (Davis, Taylor & Murphy 2014: 35). Parallel to interviewing, I conducted participant observation. Most of my ethnography was conducted in Arabic, with one exception in Germany, where a research participant mixed German and Arabic.

In Germany, most research took place in Berlin and Schwäbisch Gmünd, but some also in other places such as Dortmund, between 2016 and 2022. I interviewed seven young men in 2016 and 2017. Some participants were close friends, while I encountered others on the street in Schwäbisch Gmünd because I spoke Arabic. All participants except one had received refugee status by the time of the interview. I also conducted participant observation where I joined my interlocutors in hospital visits, to the embassy and to arrivals and departures areas at airports.

In Lebanon, I conducted interviews as well as participant observation in Beirut in September and October 2017. I found my interview participants mostly through a language teaching platform that was run by a friend. The five persons I interviewed

---

<sup>1</sup> In the case of the Kurdistan region in North Iraq, also a case study here, the system has been more receptive to Syrian Kurdish refugees, but Syrian Arab refugees experienced more scrutiny and discrimination. The border was closed several times because of political turmoil (Dionigi 2019: 27).

had all recently arrived in Beirut (6 months–1 year ago) and were constantly searching for opportunities to leave the country for Europe or elsewhere. All interview participants had siblings in Germany.

In February 2020, I went on a fieldwork trip in Iraqi Kurdistan where I interviewed three young Syrian middle-class men who were studying or working there. All three interview participants had been in Erbil for at least 1 year and were not sure whether they wanted to migrate further. I also conducted participant observation there on various occasions, including through real estate companies and at doctor visits and family reunions.

Regarding my own position in the transnational research field, I entered this field from a very privileged status. I am a white academic, born with German nationality and raised in a middle-class family. My passport enabled me to travel to Middle Eastern countries, while my interlocutors struggled to cross these borders and obtain resident status in their countries of refuge, such as Lebanon. I lived in Lebanon for 24 months between 2011 and 2015, learnt Arabic and since 2015 became privately involved in the transnational field between Syria, the Middle East more broadly and Germany through Syrian friends and my Syrian partner. I thus became a member of a transnational family myself. My middle-class background pre-sorted the field of interview participants I was talking to because of similarities in lifestyles. Indeed, most interlocutors came from middle-class families themselves. However, the civil war and subsequent economic breakdown pushed many families into poverty, and my interlocutors had often experienced a harsh loss in status.

For the data collection, different types of relations between transnational family members were considered in interview guidelines as well as during participant observation: economic exchanges such as remittances as well as social care and sociability, which entails digital communication, family visits and reunions, support in medical issues and family archives that were exchanged (photographs, recipes, etc.; [Stock 2021: 20–22](#)). To analyse the data, I translated all interviews into English and used a thematic content analysis ([Braun & Clarke 2012](#)). By doing so, I detected emotions as a central category present in transnational relations, aligned with the different types of relations, for example, the aspect of guilt connected to monetary transfers. Importantly, emotions such as guilt or envy were often articulated indirectly; thus, to code them, various keywords and key sentences were used. For example, envy was detected in comparative sentences such as ‘they have everything and suffer from nothing. I wish I would have [...]’ Besides, emotions were further discussed in fieldwork next to interviews: guilt was often mentioned as a prevalent emotion explaining why people did not send photos from Germany home, for example. During the analysis, I extracted the most prevalent emotions – guilt, envy and my own mixed feelings – that were directly linked to overlapping border regimes and hierarchies of mobilities in transnational contexts. Other emotions, such as fear and hope, could also be detected in my material on migrants’ lived experiences but were less negotiated in transnational families.

## DIFFERENT CONFIGURATIONS OF EMOTIONAL REGIMES

In the following, I describe and analyse three configurations of emotional asymmetries that were prevalent during my research project. These configurations occurred in

different geospatial settings. To describe them, I focus on one prevalent emotion at a time, even if it is entangled with other emotions.

## GUILT

In March 2022, I was sitting in a car next to my friend Kareem,<sup>2</sup> who came to Germany from Syria in 2015. While driving through the rainy landscape, he told me that he had to call an acquaintance in Syria. ‘Let us listen to some pain’, he commented, before he put the call on speaker. I was a silent listener. Indeed, his friend was complaining about his difficult situation, not being able to provide for his wife and children due to the war even though he was working full-time, the harsh living conditions, and the inflation in Damascus. Recently, he even had to sell his bed. My friend regularly supported him with as much as he could spare since he also had to assist his own family in Syria. Moreover, his own work conditions were exploitative, and he was poorly paid, which he would never mention to anyone in Syria.

The man Kareem was talking to belonged to one of the families whose members did not migrate to European countries, the USA, Australia or the Gulf region to maintain and provide for family members left behind. In his desperate situation, he tried to induce guilt in my friend, the only weapon he had. In this case, he needed €1,000 to start a company, which he thought would be his way out of a miserable life. We had a short discussion after this call. I experienced a strong feeling of unfairness about the unequal living conditions and also a good amount of guilt for being in such a privileged position – even though I knew this feeling was self-absorbed and would not help. I wondered how my friend could navigate all these ambivalent and contradictory feelings in his life between Germany and Syria. At the same time, I noted another feeling, namely shock about this man being so harsh to my friend, asking him so openly and almost demandingly, ‘Can you help me or not?!’ After this phone call, we called a cousin of Kareem living in Germany. This time, he told me: ‘Look now how different it is’, and indeed, the person on the other end of the line was joking, telling him about his prospective marriage and his new job and talking about planning a visit.

This was one of the rare cases during my research that I could observe a ‘guilt trip’, as described by Baldassar (2015), being induced directly in one of my interlocutors. Guilt was an omnipresent feeling among my Syrian interlocutors in Germany. As Baldassar (2015) has shown, guilt plays a central role in the hierarchized relations of transnational families and acquaintances since it is a vital and subtle resource for maintaining caring responsibilities between those who migrated and those who stayed behind. Indeed, during my research I often observed guilt in interlocutors on the German side. Initially, one interlocutor drew my attention to the feeling of guilt when a common Syrian friend found his first job in Germany as a pharmacist but did not seem very happy. He said that many Syrians felt guilty when they succeeded in Germany because of the situation of their left-behind family. However, while guilt was often mentioned as a common emotion that Syrians experienced in Germany, none of my interlocutors would describe themselves as ‘feeling guilty’. It was thus a rather ‘unspoken’ emotion, communicated indirectly. This was also the case in transnational families. For example, I observed that Syrian men in Germany would not send photos home. During a holiday in Italy, Wesam, another interlocutor, took only very detailed photos of a door lock or an old car, which he sent to the family WhatsApp group. And during an interview in 2018, my interlocutor Tareq from Berlin said: ‘I don’t send many

---

2 All names are pseudonyms to ensure the anonymity of my interlocutors.

photos, no, but when my mum misses me, she says, send me a photo'. When I asked him why, Tareq said it was because of the strong disparity between his good living conditions and the difficult ones of his parents. As he stated:

The city where my parents live, the army is controlling it heavily. Two months ago, two cars exploded in the centre of the city. It's very expensive and now it's very cold. The last time I talked to my mother, she said: 'I'm wearing too many clothes and am still cold'.

Because of this guilt, many communication barriers arise. Most prominently, my interlocutors would not tell their families about their difficult living situations as refugees in Germany under the German migration regime. They suffered from long bureaucratic procedures, had difficulties finding affordable housing with the rising rents and were discriminated against. Besides, while most interlocutors had an academic degree, finding work in their field was almost impossible. This was first due to the long recognition processes in so-called regulated professions in, for example, the health sector, as was the case for Tareq. After learning the language, he needed to complete over 2 years of internships and paperwork before he was finally able to find a job. Kareem, similar to many others, could not find a degree-equivalent job as an engineer, despite the official recognition of his degree. He therefore worked in an exploitative setting as an industrial assistant, doing hard manual labour.

One of the biggest difficulties was that, according to the German migration regime, they were individuals and thus received social benefits or – in the case of studies – student loans whose amount was calculated on that basis, while at the same time they had to provide for parents and siblings in Syria. They were thus involved in a family-based care regime. Even before the war, families formed the cornerstone of the welfare system and took over care obligations, from child-rearing to retirement provision, from which the state largely refrained. These obligations multiplied during the war, with the rising economic crisis and erosion of local incomes. These refugees thus became entangled in the Syrian care regime, even if they were separated by borders (see [Stock 2021](#)). Care obligations had a huge impact on their daily life, as Khaled, who came from North Syria to Berlin, told me in 2017: 'Look, I have no money for two weeks, but I don't tell them I don't have any money, then they feel bad because I send them everything'. When I asked him whether he would tell them about his difficulties, he said: 'No, no, just all good, I say Germany is wonderful and so on'.

Khaled's student loans were not enough to provide for his family, so he had to take side jobs. In addition, he was trying to establish his ability to sponsor his sister's migration to Germany since the situation in North Syria was becoming increasingly difficult. However, the financial requirements were extremely high, which rendered it almost impossible.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, he was working many hours alongside his studies, even interrupting them for one term, and felt huge pressure:

I'm usually forced to do what I don't want to do. It's difficult, you know, you have to prepare something for university, I don't have time all day: I either have to work all day and then when the weekend comes, I need to sleep. You know, I feel the absurdity of doing so much and at the same

<sup>3</sup> To sponsor one family member in Berlin currently (as of August 2024) requires a regular net income of at least €2,850; for two family members (e.g. parents), it is at least €3,950. See <https://www.berlin.de/einwanderung/einreise/gefluechtete/artikel.872605.php>.

time, I feel as if I do nothing. Yeah, unfortunately, the good times are over now. I mean in terms of physical performance and in terms of my thinking, but if you've drowned in life and you're just working, that's a pity.

In this way, the contradictory responsibilities of building a career and at the same time sending remittances to transnational families often had an immense impact on my interlocutors because they felt torn between their duties in Syria's care regime and their own dreams and ambition of building a future as an individual in Germany – aspects that were also shaped by border regimes, which prevented them from finding alternative solutions such as family reunions. They were thus often dissatisfied and felt stuck. But because of the above-described guilt, interlocutors could not share these feelings with their transnational families.

## ENVY

From the perspective of interlocutors residing in Lebanon, relations between family and acquaintances were often perceived as troublesome as well. I observed this during a research stay in Beirut in 2017. I met Muhannad in a coffee shop on busy Hamra street in central Beirut. He was one of many young Syrian men who had crossed the border to escape the war and regime politics. While his two brothers had already left Syria in 2014 and 2015 using the Balkan route – the first going to Sweden, and the second to Germany – Muhannad had decided to stay in Damascus with his parents and younger sister to finish his studies in chemistry and care for his family. He had come to Lebanon only 6 months before we met, when he heard that he could be summoned for military service. For the time being, he was stuck in Beirut, where as with many Syrians, he lost his legal residence status soon after arrival. His movement within the country was restricted, since he constantly feared police controls and checkpoints.

While Muhannad had almost daily contact with his parents in Syria and some contact with his brother in Sweden, he hardly spoke to his other brother in Germany: 'My brother in Germany is not talking to anyone, nor with my mother, but that means certainly that he's okay and his situation is good. Whether he's working or not? I really don't know'. His brother seemed to have halted almost all interaction with the family. Even though Muhannad mentioned that his brother was depressed when arriving in Germany, he now interpreted his retreat as a sign that he was selfish and betraying the family. He also saw mistrust from his brother's side: 'He probably thinks I will ask him to send me \$200 or something like this'. In this statement, the obvious disparity between Muhannad's living conditions in Lebanon and his brother's living conditions in Germany was reflected. Muhannad's description of his brother showed that it was hard for him to feel empathy for his brother, who, from his geospatial positionality, appeared to be in a much better situation.

He was not the only one. Indeed, my interlocutors in Beirut showed little understanding of the difficult situation their relatives or acquaintances faced in Germany. While Rael, another interlocutor, displayed an understanding of his brother's difficult situation and knew that he was lonely in Germany, he did not hesitate to express his disgust of Syrians complaining in Germany. He said, 'They are suffering from nothing. They have nostalgia for Syria. They say they want to go back. But they have money, they have a place to live[...]' Muhannad mentioned similar stories: 'They tell you: "Don't come here". They would give you residency for a year, but here I don't even have residency to start with! I feel like I would be going to heaven'. He continued:

One of the things that they complain about is that there is no bread. You left the whole world behind; you have everything, free language schools [...] If you now tell me that I can take free German courses every day for two, three hours and I don't have anything to do [...] I don't need to pay money to go there because I can walk there. Do I reject your offer? You have the possibility to have everything to integrate into the society.

From the geographical and emotional position of the Lebanese border regime, there was clear envy of the much better living conditions their brothers and other Syrians were experiencing in Germany.

Striking here is that envy, in contrast to guilt, was more openly expressed. Interlocutors were not shy about this feeling, which they felt was justified, given their marginal position in the transnational border regime. This was even more so since it became increasingly difficult to leave Lebanon for Europe or other destinations after 2016. However, while they expressed their feelings of envy openly to me, a German researcher, they would not articulate them to family members in Germany. But this envy could have a direct impact on family relations, as the example of Muhannad shows.

The envy expressed by my informants was moreover directly linked to their harsh experiences in Lebanon's border regime. Lebanon's response to Syrian displacement was shaped by an absence of a formal refugee regime, dysfunctional state institutions and political sectarianism as well as a long historic entanglement, in which Syria had a dominant role in Lebanese politics via its involvement in the Lebanese 1975–1990 civil war and its subsequent military presence in postwar Lebanon until 2005 (see [Fakhoury 2017](#)).

While Lebanon initially had an open-door policy and a 'low intensity' form of refugee governance, this changed in 2014 when it became apparent that Syrians would not return ([Fakhoury 2017: 685](#)). In 2014, the country introduced harsh entry and residency regulations that most Syrians were unable to fulfil. Entry was possible for specific purposes only, and Syrians had to find a Lebanese sponsor to renew their residency, paying high rates while being exposed to arbitrary bureaucratic decisions. Moreover, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) suspended the registration of Syrian refugees at the government's request after 2015 ([Janmyr 2016](#)). The informants I talked to in Lebanon found a way to enter the country but soon after lost their residence status. Thus, they were threatened by checkpoints and political arrests daily. According to Muhannad, 'The situation is tragic for Syrians here. If a police officer sees me now, he would arrest me'. Besides, my interlocutors faced rising xenophobia targeted particularly at Syrian men, who were portrayed as a threat to the Lebanese nation and became scapegoats for instability and the growing economic hardship ([Mikdashi 2014](#)). Therefore, the Lebanese border regime limited their freedom of movement tremendously.

Finally, Syrians who were not registered did not receive any financial assistance. This led to a high amount of pressure to generate income in Beirut. Muhannad and other informants were working 7 days a week, 13 hours a day in supermarkets in extremely precarious conditions:

It is really crazy because you are really under huge pressure here and you just keep running, running and running [...] You don't have time to do any social communication, and when you have time, it would be so late at night and everyone is sleeping.

This was also why he hardly spoke to his brother in Germany or his parents in Syria. The envy that shaped transnational relations from the positionality in Lebanon was thus closely connected to refugees' own experience in the Lebanese border regime and expressed their own frustration. Writing on Bolivian migrants, Tapias and Escandell (2011: 90) highlight that envy is a prevalent emotion in transnational spaces: 'In a context of competition and hardship, envy emerges when the expectations of success are not met and where there is the lingering perception and fear that others have succeeded'. Indeed, this frustration and fear that others in Germany had a better situation drove this envy. All informants I talked to were looking for a way out of the Lebanese border regime by applying for visas or looking for sponsors.

## MIXED FEELINGS

Reflecting on my entanglement in these unequal emotional relations is an important part of the analysis I aim to deliver. Indeed, Marcus (1995: 113) stated that, in multi-sited ethnography, 'one finds oneself with all sorts of cross-cutting and contradictory personal commitments'. To discuss my own feelings, I return to the uneasy feeling I had in the car, when I felt that the person in Syria was being very harsh to my friend in his open demands to send more money. I recognized this feeling from a year earlier, when I received a message from Alaan in Erbil, whom I interviewed in 2020 during a stay in North Iraq. A common friend in Germany put us in touch. He took a taxi to my neighbourhood in Ankawa for an interview, and we had a half-hour discussion in a café about his family situation and perspective. Ultimately, however, I did not feel that he was comfortable opening up; he was being very polite and wanted to do his friend and me a favour. He even paid for my coffee.

One year later, his father, who still lived in Damascus, had a complicated medical condition, so he asked me for a second opinion from a specialist in Germany. After contacting some people, I forwarded his request to a professor, who wrote a quick note, saying that his case was tricky, but he could not suggest something for now. When my contact in Erbil reached out again 3 weeks later, I could not get a hold of this professor, since he was travelling, so I asked him to wait. He then became impatient and somewhat angry with me, which left me with mixed feelings. I understood his harshness all too well. He explained to me later that he was under immense psychological stress since he could not return to Syria because of possible conscription and felt extremely powerless in not being able to help his father. Yet there was another feeling, because I realized that this man felt, from his positionality, that I was not doing enough in my comfortable life in Germany where – in his view – I had many possibilities. A few days later, he asked me quite openly whether I could provide him with expensive medication via a prescription in my name to send to Syria since it was barely available there. I had very mixed feelings: an urge to help and a feeling of liability towards my research participants – a 'guilt trip' (Baldassar 2015) that I had observed in informants in Germany – and feelings of anger since I felt that it was almost impossible to do what he needed. I could not get this medicine prescribed to me, as it was not related to a medical condition I had, and he thought it would be easy. This example highlights how I became emotionally involved in the border regime which I was reluctant to break.

This last example highlights my positionality in the field, which led to harsh power asymmetries and communication barriers. Indeed, being a German researcher brought me much closer to the emotions and inner worlds of my Germany-based informants, even if it required a personal encounter to understand the intensity and

power of mixed and ambivalent feelings, from guilt to reluctance, that drove many Syrian migrants in Germany into speechlessness (Stock 2021: 33–34). Moreover, as described in the methods section, my ethnography in Germany was more intense, whereas I could visit Lebanon and Erbil only briefly. This also meant that my informants often were or became close friends in Germany, whereas my encounters in Erbil and Lebanon took place more from the perspective of a researcher.

The transnational asymmetry of my research field was reflected in my relationships with interlocutors in different geographical locations. When discussing positionality in migration research, scholars most notably highlight the formation of a ‘situated knowledge’ and thus advocate for reflexivity, in which analysing one’s emotions can play a vital role (Kofoed & Simonsen 2020). However, the example highlights that emotions about the researcher’s engagement in a transnational research field should also be considered. My experience with mixed feelings brought me closer to the realities of Syrian migrants in Germany since I not only observed but also *felt* a fraction of what it meant to be engaged in a transnational social field characterized by highly asymmetric power relations.

## CONCLUSION

The analysis of my ethnographic material indicates the omnipresence of different emotions such as envy, guilt and other mixed feelings, as described above, which form different subjectivations and link different positionalities in overlapping border regimes between the Middle East and Europe. From the perspective of Syrians resident in Germany, the guilt of being – transnationally speaking – in a more privileged position was a prevalent emotion, while informants residing in Lebanon felt envy. These emotions were often saturated and intermixed with other emotions, such as fear of deportation due to lacking residence status (Janmyr 2016) or exhaustion from extremely hard working conditions in Lebanon or the feeling of being overloaded in Germany by compromising one’s own efforts towards a sustainable career for care obligations for family members in the Middle East (Stock 2021). My own mixed feelings – between guilt and reluctance – as a privileged researcher formed another subjectivation in the transnational asymmetric field. Thus, the analysis portrayed that emotions were an integral part of forming subjectivations in border regimes, as De Genova 2002 or Borelli 2021 indicated. These emotions and subsequent subjectivations influenced family partners from afar, had a direct impact on transnational relations, led to communication barriers and tensions and thus aligned with arguments from transnational family studies (Baldassar 2015; Svašek 2008). Power asymmetries persistent in the transnational border regimes were reproduced in quotidian family communications. The analysis of the data thus calls for a perspective of understanding (transnational) border regimes as emotional regimes.

This research has also highlighted that border regimes involve a high amount of ‘emotion work’ (Hochschild 1979), not only to deal with emotions but also to act emotionally according to ‘feeling rules’ in different geospatial settings. While the emotion of envy, for example, was more easily expressed (particularly from a Middle Eastern context towards Europe), guilt seemed to be a silenced emotion, not expressed to transnational family members, or seemed to be inappropriate for new contacts in the country of destination. Thus, for Syrian transnational migrants, handling border regimes involves a lot of emotional work that should be more closely considered.

Different aspects should be considered when analysing emotions more closely. First, presenting emotions can bring the audience of articles or talks much closer to the lived experiences of informants. However, there are some ethical questions, mostly because uneasy emotions can lead to tensions and secrets in, for example, transnational families. In my research, I decided to refrain from doing ethnography with members of the same family in different locations to respect privacy and integrity. I argue for a consideration of these ethical issues in research in a highly power asymmetric and at the same time intimate field.

Second, it is important to decentralize migration research and take the perspective of those in their home countries or residing in less privileged countries outside the West more seriously, particularly if research is conducted from a positionality from Europe. While it was feasible to do most of my research in Germany, my country of residence, it was mandatory to focus on the perspective of those who stay behind in the Middle East to understand emotional border regimes from different angles and to receive a more complete picture. This said, one should also reflect one's own positionality and proximity to different research partners in a transnational field.

Third, one's entanglement in the hierarchized research field should be more transparent and integrated into an analysis, particularly if one is entangled in the border regime. Thus, the question of reciprocity – of being engaged in a sustainable way – should be dealt with more sensitively and transparently and be systematically included from the beginning. I learnt from this case that, in the future, I want to try to engage more sustainably with interlocutors in locations other than Germany and to support them and give something back wherever possible.

Finally, it needs to be mentioned that, despite these difficulties and ruptures I portrayed here in transnational families due to border regimes, many close family and friendship relations were maintained. Thus, further research could also focus more closely on empathetic feelings among friends and family that may play a vital role in subverting border regimes.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

## AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Miriam Stock  [orcid.org/0000-0001-7192-3409](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7192-3409)

Department of Cultural Studies, Pädagogische Hochschule Schwäbisch Gmünd, Germany

## REFERENCES

- Baldassar, L. 2008. 'Missing kin and longing to be together: Emotions and the construction of co-presence in transnational relationships', *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 29(3), pp. 247–266. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07256860802169196>
- Baldassar, L. 2015. 'Guilty feelings and the guilt trip: Emotions and motivation in migration and transnational caregiving', *Emotion, Society and Space*, 16, pp. 81–91. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2014.09.003>
- Bhimji, F. 2020. 'Border regimes, racialisation processes and resistance in Germany. An ethnographic study of protest and solidarity', Wiesbaden: Springer. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-49320-2>

- Boccagni, P.** 2012. 'Practising motherhood at a distance: Retention and loss in Ecuadorian transnational families', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 38(2), pp. 261–277. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2012.646421>
- Boccagni, P.** and **Baldassar, L.** 2015. 'Emotions on the move: Mapping the emergent field of emotion and migration', *Emotion, Space and Society*, 16, pp. 73–80. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2015.06.009>
- Borrelli, L.M.** 2021. 'Encounters of despair: Street-level bureaucrat and migrant interactions in Sweden and Switzerland', *Anthropologica*, 63(1), pp. 1–18. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.18357/anthropologica6312021272>
- Braun, V.** and **Clarke, V.** 2012. 'Thematic analysis', in: H. Cooper et al. (eds.), *Apa Handbook of Research Methods in Psychology. Vol. 2. Research Designs: Quantitative, Qualitative, Neuropsychological, and Biological*. American Psychological Association. pp. 57–71. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1037/13620-004>
- Cherri, Z., González, P.A.** and **Castro Delgado, R.** 2016. 'The Lebanese–Syrian crisis: Impact of influx of Syrian refugees to an already weak state', *Risk Management and Healthcare Policy*, 9, pp. 165–172. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.2147/RMHP.S106068>
- Cvajner, M., Echeverría, G.** and **Sciortino, G.** 2018. 'What do we talk when we talk about migration regimes? The diverse theoretical roots of an increasingly popular concept', in: A. Pott, C. Raas and F. Wolf (eds.), *Was ist ein Migrationsregime? What is a migration regime?* Wiesbaden: Springer. pp. 65–80. Available at: [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-20532-4\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-20532-4_3)
- D'Aoust, A.-M.** 2013. 'In the name of love: Marriage migration, governmentality, and technology of love', *International Political Sociology*, 7(3), pp. 258–274. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/ips.12022>
- Davis, R., Taylor, A.** and **Murphy, E.** 2014. 'Gender, conscription and protection, and the war in Syria', *Forced Migration Review*, 47. Available at: <https://www.fmreview.org/syria/davis-taylor-murphy>. [Last accessed 16 June 2023].
- De Genova, N.P.** 2002. 'Migrant "illegality" and deportability in everyday life', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 31(1), pp. 419–447. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.31.040402.085432>
- Dionigi, F.** 2019. 'The Syrian refugee crisis in the Kurdish region of Iraq: Explaining the role of borders in situations of forced displacement', *International Migration*, 57(2), pp. 10–31. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12468>
- Engbersen, G.** and **Snel, E.** 2021. 'The emotion management of transnational living', *Population, Space and Place*, 27(5), e2414. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.2414>
- Fakhoury, T.** 2017. 'Governance strategies and refugee response: Lebanon in the face of Syrian displacement', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 49(4), pp. 681–700. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743817000654>
- Griffiths, M.B.E.** 2014. 'Out of time: The temporal uncertainties of refused asylum seekers and immigration detainees', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 40(12), pp. 1991–2009. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2014.907737>
- Hage, G.** 2005. 'A not so multi-sited ethnography of a not so imagined community', *Anthropological Theory*, 5(4), 463–475. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1463499605059232>
- Hage, G.** 2009. 'Waiting Out the Crisis: On Stuckedness and Governmentality', in: G. Hage (ed.), *Waiting*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press. pp. 97–106.
- Hayatli, Z.** 2015. 'Military service evasion as grounds for refugee status: The case of Syria', *Rights in Exile*, 1 September. Available at: <http://rightsinexile.tumblr.com/post/128141383892/military-service-evasion-as-grounds-for-refugee>. [Last accessed 15 June 2023].

- Hoang, L.A. and Yeoh, B.S.A.** 2011. 'Breadwinning wives and "left-behind" husbands: Men and masculinities in the Vietnamese transnational family', *Gender and Society*, 25(6), pp. 717–739. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243211430636>
- Hochschild, A.R.** 1979. 'Emotion work, feeling rules, and social structure', *American Journal of Sociology*, 85(3), pp. 551–575. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1086/227049>
- Janmyr, M.** 2016. 'Precarity in exile: The legal status of Syrian refugees in Lebanon', *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 35(4), pp. 58–78. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/rsq/hdw016>
- Kleist, N. and Jansen, S.** 2016. 'Introduction: Hope over time – crisis, immobility and future-making', *History and Anthropology*, 27(4), pp. 373–392. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02757206.2016.1207636>
- Kofoed, J. and Simonsen, K.** 2020. 'Emotions and positionalities: Experiences from fieldwork among Danish Muslims', *Area*, 54(1), pp. 118–125. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12772>
- Locke, C.** 2017. 'Do male migrants "care"? How migration is reshaping the gender ethics of care', *Ethics and Social Welfare*, 11(3), pp. 277–295. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17496535.2017.1300305>
- Lønning, M.N. and Uzureau, O.** 2024. 'Gender, racialisation, and border regimes: Reflections on social positions and positioning in research with young people on the move', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 50(2), pp. 503–520. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2022.2148093>
- Marcus, G.E.** 1995. 'Ethnography in/of the world system: The emergence of multi-sited ethnography', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 24(1), pp. 95–117. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.an.24.100195.000523>
- Mecheril, P. and Karakayali, J.** 2018. 'Umkämpfte Krisen: Migrationsregime als Analyseperspektive migrationsgesellschaftlicher Gegenwart,' in N. Foroutan, K. Karakayali and R. Spielhaus (eds.), *Postmigrantische Perspektiven. Ordnungssysteme, Repräsentationen, Kritik*. Frankfurt, New York: Campus Verlag. pp. 225–37.
- Mikdash, M.** 2014. 'Moral panics, sex panics and the production of a Lebanese nation', *Jadaliyya*, 22 February. Available at: <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/30261>. [Last accessed 15 June 2023].
- Nadai, E. and Maeder, C.** 2005. 'Fuzzy fields. Multi-sited ethnography in sociological research', *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Social Research*, 6(3), pp. 28. Available at <https://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/22/47>.
- Nieswand, B.** 2018. 'Border *dispositifs* and border effects. Exploring the nexus between transnationalism and border studies', *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, 25(5), pp. 592–609. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2018.1507960>
- Papadopoulos, D., Stephenson, N. and Tisanos, V.** 2008. *'Escape routes: Control and subversion in the twenty-first century'*, London: Pluto Press.
- Parreñas, R.S.** 2002. 'Mothering from a distance: Emotions, gender, and intergenerational relations in Filipino transnational families', *Feminist Studies*, 27(2), pp. 361–390. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178765>
- Ryan, L.** 2008. 'Navigating the emotional terrain of families "here" and "there": Women, migration, and the management of emotions', *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 29(3), pp. 299–213. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07256860802169238>

- Scheel, S.** 2017. 'Appropriating mobility and bordering Europe through romantic love: Unearthing the intricate intertwinement of border regimes and migratory practices', *Migration Studies*, 5(3), pp. 389–408. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/migration/mnx047>
- Schwenken, H.** 2018. 'Intersectional migration regime analysis: Explaining gender-selective labor emigration regulations', in A. Pott, C. Raas and F. Wolf (eds.), *Was ist ein Migrationsregime? What is a migration regime?* Wiesbaden: Springer. 207–224. Available at: [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-20532-4\\_9](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-20532-4_9)
- Sciortino, G.** 2004. 'Immigration in a Mediterranean welfare state: The Italian experience in comparative perspective', *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice*, 6(2), pp. 111–129. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1387698042000273442>
- Speed, F., Scurry, T., Edward, P. and Moufahim, M.** 2021. 'Networks amongst Syrians: Situated migrant positionalities and the impact on relational embedding', *Social Inclusion*, 9(4), pp. 243–253. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v9i4.4521>
- Stock, M.** 2016. 'Überforderte Männlichkeiten–Junge Syrer auf der Flucht vom Nahen Osten nach Europa', *Einsichten aus der Beratungsarbeit und dem persönlichen Umfeld. Feministische Studien*, 2, pp. 311–324.
- Stock, M.** 2021. 'Verbindliche Männlichkeiten in Zeiten der Krise. Junge Männer aus Syrien in transnationalen Familien', *Zeitschrift für Flucht- und Flüchtlingsforschung*, 5(1), pp. 13–43. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.5771/2509-9485-2021-1-13>
- Svašek, M.** 2000. 'Borders and emotions: Hope and fear in the Bohemian-Bavarian frontier zone', *Ethnologia Europa*, 30(2), pp. 111–126. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.16995/ee.910>
- Svašek, M.** 2008. 'Who cares? Families and feelings in movement', *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 29(3), pp. 213–230. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07256860802169170>
- Svašek, M.** 2010. 'On the move: Emotions and human mobility', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 36(6), pp. 865–880. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691831003643322>
- Tapias, M. and Escandell, X.** 2011. 'Not in the eyes of the beholder: Envy among Bolivian migrants in Spain', *International Migration*, 49(6), pp. 74–94. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2435.2011.00705.x>
- Tsianos, V. and Karakayali, S.** 2010. 'Transnational migration and the emergence of the European border regime: An ethnographic analysis', *European Journal of Social Theory*, 13(3), pp. 373–387. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368431010371761>
- Tsianos, V.S. and Kasperek, B.** 2015. 'Zur Krise des europäischen Grenzregimes: eine regimetheoretische Annäherung', *Widersprüche. Zeitschrift für sozialistische Politik im Bildungs-, Gesundheits- und Sozialbereich*, 35(138), pp. 9–22. Available at <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ss0ar-64010-9>.

Stock  
*Nordic Journal of  
 Migration Research*  
 DOI: 10.33134/njmr.775

#### TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Stock, M. 2024. Emotions, Positionalities and the Reproduction of Border Regimes: Multi-Sited Ethnography with Syrian Transnational Families. *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, 14(4): 4, pp. 1–16. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33134/njmr.775>

**Submitted:** 13 August 2023

**Accepted:** 14 October 2024

**Published:** 03 December 2024

#### COPYRIGHT:

© 2024 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons NonCommercial-NoDerivatives Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0), which permits unrestricted distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited, the material is not used for commercial purposes and is not altered in any way. See <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.

*Nordic Journal of Migration Research* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Helsinki University Press.