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RESEARCH INVOLVING PEOPLE OF REFUGEE BACKGROUND

Considerations for ethical engagement

Authors

Ahmad Albtran
Shawki Al-Dubaee
Heidar Al-Hashimi
Matida Nasi Beja
Neo Florence Gilson
Azad Izzeddin
Steve Kirkwood
Abdulai Mansaray
Sharon Dalani Mpofu
Muireann Ní Raghallaigh
Zoë O'Reilly
Karen Smith
Marwa Zamir

UCD DUBLIN
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An Chomhairle um Thaighde in Éirinn

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INTRODUCTION

With geopolitical events and circumstances driving increasing numbers of people to seek protection across borders, the volume of research in this field is increasing, whether it be academic research (including student research), journalistic research, or research carried out by state or non-state organisations. Bearing in mind Shtorn's argument that there is a need for an "open critical discussion with the affected people about what we feel as unacceptable when sharing our stories with others" [2], this document aims to set out key issues that we believe should be considered when undertaking research involving people of a refugee background as participants [3]. In doing so, the paper seeks to suggest ways in which people carrying out research might take a context-based ethical approach, where care and respect are to the fore, and which paves the way for an empowering experience for those people of a refugee background who are involved.

Several useful and important ethical codes or sets of guidelines in relation to working with refugees, migrants and people in situations of forced migration have been published in recent years [4]. We do not wish to replicate this work; rather we seek to add to it by grounding a discussion of ethics in the direct experiences of people of a refugee background who have been involved in recent research in Ireland and Scotland in order to "generate a deeper understanding of people's experiences" [5]. The considerations below are not intended to be exhaustive. They are based on the authors' own very mixed experiences of involvement in research. Despite some very positive experiences, both as researchers and as participants, negative experiences centred around disempowerment and a sense of isolation that can come with not feeling in control of one's involvement in the research and of how information is used, and the negative consequences of this.

This paper is of relevance to both those considering carrying out research and those participating in it. It is based on discussions between three researchers of a non-refugee background and a small group of nine people of a refugee background living in Ireland and Scotland, all of whom have been involved in research in some way [6]. The paper is divided into three sections outlining what should be considered *before*, *during* and *after* data has been collected from people of a refugee background.

WHAT TO CONSIDER *before* INVOLVING PEOPLE OF A REFUGEE BACKGROUND IN RESEARCH

Ensuring researcher preparation and competency

Prior to embarking on research with people of a refugee background, the researcher should ensure that he or she is suitably aware, informed and skilled to conduct the research.

In particular, we suggest that the researcher should give consideration to:

Whether the research is necessary

In order to avoid "participant fatigue", and given the potential negative impact of research on participants, consider whether there is already sufficient information available about the topic from previous research or media interviews. Also, what is the envisaged impact of the research and the potential benefits of this for the individuals involved?

> *If the project is something important to work for, then it really motivates people to take part. So I'd say it all depends on the impact, what is the reason for the project.*

The potential risks/consequences for the person of refugee background of taking part

> *A lot of refugees....can refuse taking pictures with journalists, because they are afraid of the picture [being passed] to their government, who will likely arrest their relatives or their family.*

How might the individual be impacted by recounting painful experiences? Are there any other potential negative consequences of involvement for the individual or for any family members who continue to reside in the country from which the participant has fled? Consideration should be given to whether the person's identity should be protected, with the participant's preferences taken into account. Consideration should also be given to the appropriateness of using photographs, ensuring participants have time to consider whether they wish their photograph to be included.

The potential benefits for the individual of taking part

This may include payment for time (and complications of this for those with/without work permits).

Potential linguistic, cultural and literacy barriers

Researchers should be informed of cultural and linguistic considerations regarding the population or individual in question and should also take literacy barriers into account. Is sufficient time being given to fully explain and contextualise the research in a format that is accessible to the potential participant? Should an interpreter/translator be used? If an interpreter is needed,

sufficient time needs to be built into the interview for this, and efforts should be made to consult the potential participant regarding the gender, origin and dialect of the interpreter. Having an interpreter from the same culture of origin may be appropriate in some contexts and inappropriate in others, and the reasons for this may not necessarily be obvious. For example, a person who is against a certain regime may not want to talk if the interpreter is pro-regime.

Ensuring that informed and voluntary consent for participation is sought

The researcher or journalist has a duty to ensure that people are appropriately and fully informed about what it means for them to participate in the interview and must do everything possible to ensure that when people agree to take part they are doing so voluntarily. This requires considerable thought and time and should be regarded as an ongoing process involving building trust rather than a once-off event.

In particular, attention should be paid to:

> *I had no clear idea about the research, but I was answering what the researcher was asking me. I think it is very important to be 100% sure that the participant or interviewed person has a clear idea about the project and about the aim of the research.*

Clarity and Transparency

It is important that there is clarity and transparency regarding all elements of the research, including the motivations for doing the research, what will be involved for the participants, how the data will be used, what (if any) impact it might have. For example: How long will the research process take? When and where will interviews take place and how long will they take? If relevant, what online platforms will be used? When will the report on which the interview is based be broadcast/published? Is it likely that the data gathered will be used by other researchers or journalists? Providing potential participants with interview questions or other material in advance can be helpful.

The participant's circumstances

This will include consideration of the mental health of participants and the effects of poor mental health and trauma on comprehension and clear thinking, language ability, and memory. In particular, attention should be paid to the fact that at certain points in time refugees may be particularly vulnerable (e.g. during their journey to safety, at the point of arrival and soon thereafter,

> *So I thought, maybe I will do something which can impact positively on my case, or something like that, and I went to the interview.*

during times when the situations in their own countries are particularly volatile, when they have received difficult news from home or in relation to their asylum application).

> *When researchers or journalists ask something or they want the refugee to do something, they should keep a distance and give them time to think about it and come back with an answer, not be adamant and want an answer right away.*

Ensuring that informed consent is given voluntarily, with attention paid to the participant's potential motivations for taking part

Potential participants may feel motivated to take part or compelled to do so for various reasons and an awareness of these is necessary. For example, people may feel unable to say no due to a sense of gratitude for having been offered protection by the state or they may wish to participate in the expectation that it will have a positive impact on their claim for international protection. Ensuring that informed consent is voluntary requires considerable attention to power dynamics, ensuring no pressure (subtle or overt) is placed on people to participate. Is the person experiencing the invitation to participate as a real choice?

Allocating sufficient time

Given the complexity of obtaining informed consent, potential participants need sufficient time and space to consider what they are being asked to do and to consider the implications of being involved.

> *It's not only in terms of language, it's also in terms of understanding the material... if people don't understand fully what the research is all about, they cannot contribute meaningfully.*

Being aware that full understanding is not only a linguistic issue

While language barriers may not always be evident, or may be mitigated through the use of an interpreter, it is important to consider that contextual understandings and cultural considerations may also impact the understanding of what is involved in the research. 'Cultural insiders' may be helpful in mediating to ensure understanding. Is there any material which might be provided in advance to include the participant more in the research process?

WHAT TO CONSIDER *during* DATA COLLECTION WITH PEOPLE OF A REFUGEE BACKGROUND

Consideration needs to be given to:

The ongoing nature of the consent process

We believe that the points above regarding informed and voluntary consent continue to be relevant throughout the research and that researchers need to be attentive to signs that a participant may no longer wish to continue to be involved.

> *When they arrive in host countries, refugees are [in] a ... vulnerable position. We should think of steps to empower refugees before we can interview them as participants in research.*

Empowerment of the research participant

Efforts should be made to empower the research participant by informing them of their rights as a participant. For example, participants should be reminded that there is no obligation to take part and that there is no need to provide a reason if they do not wish to participate. In addition, if they do participate, they should be made aware they have the right not to answer a question if they do not want to, that they have the right to end the interview at any time. Participants should also be afforded the right to retract anything they have said within a given timeframe. It is important to note that if participants have come from countries where human rights were not routinely upheld, their awareness of these rights may be limited, or, conversely, they may assume that their rights will always be upheld in host countries and that researchers would never breach their rights.

> *You should know your rights as an interviewee. Know what to do and what not to do, so you are not put in an embarrassing situation. That's a very ethical issue, I think.*

> *The first thing is post-traumatic stress disorder. Most of the people fleeing a stressful background will suffer or struggle to manage many things, as we know, in life.*

Ongoing attention to the impact of past experiences

Given the effects of trauma on understanding and processing during an interview, is sufficient time being given for the interviewee to consider questions properly? Reassuring the participant that they will have access to the interview transcript following the interview is helpful as it will give them time to identify any content that they do not wish the researcher to use.

Adopting an empathetic approach

The role of listening, body language and tone is very important in this regard, as well as the creation of a safe space. Do you have an ongoing reflective awareness throughout the interview of the various ways that involvement may cause the participant distress or discomfort?

> *When researchers go inside houses for people from Middle East backgrounds, for example, they should be keeping in their mind that they should take off their shoes outside.*

The participant's cultural background

The researcher should consider the cultural context of body language and cultural norms regarding gender interactions, as well as taking into account religious and other cultural practices; for example, respecting that a participant who is a practicing Muslim will not be able to eat or drink when an interview is taking place during Ramadam, or awareness of different cultural norms regarding eye contact.

> *I think it's also important to kind of try not to cross the line, that intangible line between getting as much detailed information as you can and being voyeuristic... there are certain ways to maintain the balance, get as much information as you need for the research without crossing the boundaries.*

Respect for boundaries, privacy and dignity

It is important that only questions directly related to the research are asked. For example, questions about why or how the participant left their country of origin may not necessarily be relevant to research on experiences in the host country.

Adopting a reflexive approach

In particular, it is important to be aware of one's own preconceived ideas about refugees and international protection applicants and to ensure that the participant is treated as an individual with multiple identities beyond that of refugee.

> *I always try to hide my status as a refugee, not because I'm afraid, no, because... I would like to deal with me as myself, this is [name of person], not just refugee: 'oh this person is a vulnerable person, so I need to care about' ... no! I mean I dislike this.*

> *They tend to paint everyone with the same brush, so it becomes difficult to then articulate your own story as an individual, to say "this is me", not as a number, but as a human being, as an individual, this is my experience.*

WHAT TO CONSIDER *after* DATA COLLECTION WITH PEOPLE OF A REFUGEE BACKGROUND

The involvement of the research participant should not finish the moment the interview is over.

We suggest that the following steps be considered as part of an empowering and inclusive approach:

> *It will be ideal if the final draft is shared with the people that have been interviewed before it is published. So that there won't be any comebacks to say, no, this is not what was researched on.*

Sharing a draft before publication

Participants should be given time, support and translation (if needed) to enable them to engage with a draft of the output. This will allow them the opportunity to retract anything which they no longer wish to be released into the public domain. Doing so will also enable them to question or clarify any interpretation of what they have said.

Feeding back on the outputs and impacts of the research

Research should benefit the individuals and communities concerned. Where possible, people of refugee background who have participated in the research should be informed of any outputs and impacts of the research, and the final versions of any publications or other outputs should be shared with them.

> *We were given feedback on each and every step of the process of the research until it was finalised.... it helped a lot to see and know that it's not about the researcher, it was also about the person who was sharing their story.*

> *Reassurance of confidentiality is really important. And also being honest about the purpose of the research.*

Safeguarding confidentiality and privacy

If it was agreed that the person's identity would not be revealed, the process of safeguarding their confidentiality and privacy should be ongoing. Those carrying out research should consider the ways in which anonymity and the dignity of participants can be safeguarded as the data/material is processed and analysed, as well as when using the data in presentations or publications. It should be recognised that simply changing the person's name does not amount to protecting their identity.

CONCLUSION

The above considerations point to the complexities of doing research in this field. They highlight the importance of a sensitive, reflexive and context-based ethical approach, where people of a refugee background are seen as individuals with multiple identities and not simply “sources of data”, and where attention is paid to the rights of participants and the potential impacts of participation. The complexities involved mean that it is vital that all undertaking research of this nature - including academic researchers, students, journalists, policy researchers and NGO employees - have the appropriate knowledge and skills. In particular, an awareness of, and attention to, complex ethical issues (including informed consent and its subtleties) is vital, as is an understanding of what is involved in working with participants who have experienced mental health difficulties or trauma, and the complexity of working cross culturally. While we recognise the importance of refugee-related research and the involvement of people of a refugee background within this, we also wish to highlight the need to ensure that research happens in a considered, sensitive and culturally appropriate way, as well as in a way that is empowering and inclusive for all involved.

Biographies

Ahmad Albtran is a medical doctor and also holds an MSc in Global Health; his current research focuses on refugees' integration experiences and its impact on their mental health.

Shawki Al-Dubaee is SME Engagement Advisor (Knowledge Exchange) at Strathclyde University and Chairman of the United Yemeni Community in Scotland.

Heidar Al-Hashimi is a social researcher and refugee and asylum rights activist who holds an MA in Family Support Studies, a Diploma in Family and Community Studies and a Diploma in Community Development Practice from NUI Galway..

Matida Nasi Beja is a Zimbabwean born mother of two who has been living in Ireland since 2020. She is an avid reader and poet and hopes to one day publish a collection of poems.

Neo Florence Gilson is a Cork-based poet, singer and storyteller originally from South Africa and currently studying Social Science at University College Cork.

Azad Izzeddin is originally from Kurdistan. He has worked as an interpreter and peer researcher and holds an M.Phil in Applied Linguistics from Trinity College Dublin.

Steve Kirkwood is a Senior Lecturer in Social Work at the University of Edinburgh, who has conducted research regarding refugees, criminal justice social work and restorative justice.

Abdulai Mansaray is a refugee, asylum seeker and migrant activist, originally from Sierra Leone and based in Ireland. He is passionate about helping young people and the less privileged in society.

Sharon Dalani Mpofu is a community builder and advocate for asylum seekers and refugees based in Ireland, with qualifications from the Irish Law Society and IT Carlow.

Muireann Ní Raghallaigh is an associate professor of social work at University College Dublin who has conducted research in relation to the experiences of people of a refugee background.

Zoë O'Reilly is a postdoctoral fellow at University College Dublin, whose research focuses on asylum, migration and cultural diversity.

Karen Smith is Lecturer in Equality Studies at University College Dublin. Her research interests centre on childhood inequality and child policy as well as policy and provision for children and families of refugee background.

Marwa Zamir is a member of the Refugee Advisory Board of UNHCR and a youth leader in the Irish Refugee Council. She is currently studying for her Leaving Certificate and hopes to study Law.

Endnotes

1 The UCD/ UOE Strategic Partnership Initiative provided funding to the Scottish Irish Migration Initiative, a collaboration between researchers in the University of Edinburgh and University College Dublin.

2 Shtorn, E. 2020: 'World Refugee Day: the importance of storytelling'. Available at: https://cassandravoices.com/current-affairs/comment/world-refugee-day-the-importance-of-storytelling/

3 For the purpose of this paper, people of a refugee background includes, but is not limited to, refugees and people who are seeking/have sought international protection, as well as their family members. 'Research' refers to academic research (including student research), journalistic research and research carried out by state and non-state organisations. Our focus here is on research involving people of a refugee background as participants, rather than as collaborators or as peer researchers. We hope that a further briefing paper will focus on the latter, funding dependent. This document is focused on research with adults; research with children of a refugee background will require additional considerations.

4 For example: The International Association for the Study of Forced Migration 2021 Code of Ethics; The Canadian Council for Refugees (CCR), Centre for Refugee Studies, and Canadian Association for Refugee and Forced Migration Studies (CARFMS / ACERMF)'s 2017 Ethical Guidelines for Research with People in Situations of Forced Migration.

5 Shtorn, E. 2020: 'World Refugee Day: the importance of storytelling'. Available at: https://cassandravoices.com/current-affairs/comment/world-refugee-day-the-importance-of-storytelling/

6 The nine people of a refugee background are originally from eight different countries, while those of a non-refugee background are from Ireland.





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