




Building an ethical research culture: Scholars of refugee background researching refugee-related issues

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Abstract

Recent scholarship on the need to decolonize refugee research, and migration research more generally, points to the urgency of challenging ongoing colonial power structures inherent in such research. Increased involvement of scholars with lived experience is one way to challenge and remake unequal and colonial power relations. Through discussions with researchers of forced migration, we aimed to explore the challenges, barriers, and supports related to involvement in such research, and to identify how research practices and structures could be improved to increase and facilitate the involvement of scholars with refugee backgrounds. In this field reflection, we highlight key points and suggestions for better research practice that emerged from these discussions. In doing so, we are endeavouring to contribute to the important ongoing conversation about ethics and decolonizing research. We build on existing ethical guidelines by opening up some of the complexities of ethical practice and offering concrete actions that can be taken to work through these.

Keywords: ethics, refugee research, ethical research culture, peer research, collaborative research, decolonial research, forced migration research

Introduction

People who have experienced forced migration, and who have the most to gain, and lose, from research conducted about them, are often excluded from shaping this research. The

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[International Association for the Study of Forced Migration \(2018\)](#) highlights that refugees lack systematic access to determining research agendas and to co-creating the research instruments used in data collection, and lack opportunities to analyse and share findings. In relation to the involvement of people with experience of forced migration in research processes, the Code of Ethics emphasizes the importance of voluntary, informed consent, confidentiality, privacy, and the principle of 'doing no harm'. Moreover, it stresses that people who have experienced forced migration should have their autonomy promoted, that research practices ought to acknowledge and aim to address unequal power relations, and diverse experiences should be respected. Research should also be based on the principle of partnership, aiming to benefit those affected by forced migration, involve them in all aspects of the research process, compensate them for their time and labour, and ensure they are given adequate training. The [Refugee Studies Centre \(2007\)](#) ethical guidelines emphasizes similar principles and highlights the importance of protecting research participants, honouring their trust, anticipating, and avoiding potential harms and unnecessary intrusion. Increasingly, the need to go beyond 'doing no harm' in research involving refugees has been highlighted, including in papers by [Karoooma \(2019\)](#), [MacKenzie et al. \(2007\)](#), [Hugman et al. \(2011\)](#), and [Clark-Kazak \(2017\)](#). In these papers, the authors have argued that such research should work towards providing benefits to people of a refugee background. They have contended that research should be based on the notion of reciprocity, paying attention to how consent and autonomy are negotiated through relationships, and while it needs to protect against causing harm, it should also enable autonomy and rebuild people's capacities. Recent scholarship on the need to 'decolonize refugee research' ([Arat-Koç 2020](#)), and migration research more generally ([Achiume 2019](#); [Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2020](#)), points to the urgency of challenging the ongoing colonial power structures inherent in refugee and migration-related research and knowledge production and to 'remake' relations of power ([Collins 2022](#)). Increased involvement of scholars and researchers with lived experience of forced migration in forced migration research, whether or not that research involves participants with lived experience, is one way to challenge and remake unequal and colonial power relations.

To explore these issues, in December 2022, the Scottish Irish Migration Initiative, a collaboration between University College Dublin, Ireland, and the University of Edinburgh, Scotland, organized an online roundtable discussion, entitled 'Building an ethical research culture: scholars of refugee background researching refugee-related issues'. Participants at this event consisted of fourteen researchers, the majority with refugee backgrounds, all based in Ireland or Scotland, and all involved in research on refugee-related issues (all are listed as authors of this field reflection). The aim of this roundtable event was to better understand the experiences and views of scholars of refugee backgrounds in Ireland and Scotland in relation to their involvement in refugee-related research. The discussion aimed to explore the challenges, barriers, supports, and enablers related to involvement in research on forced migration, and to identify how research practices could be improved. This roundtable provided the basis for a public webinar¹ in March 2023, which opened the discussion to researchers working in the area of forced migration internationally. The webinar featured presentations from roundtable contributors Tandy Nicole, Dr Hyab Yohannes, Gordon Ogutu, and Heidar Al-Hashimi. Guest speakers, Associate Professor Caroline Lenette and Professor Charmaine Williams, provided responses to the points raised in the roundtable discussion and further insights based on their own work in this area.

In this article, we highlight some of the key points discussed during the roundtable session and public webinar and put forward some of the suggestions for better research practice which emerged from these discussions. In doing so, we are not purporting to establish an exhaustive list or set of guidelines. Rather, we are endeavouring to contribute to the important ongoing conversation about ethics and decolonizing research by highlighting what participants at these two events identified as salient considerations towards increasing the involvement of scholars of refugee backgrounds, as part of building an ethical research culture when conducting refugee-related research. Beyond these reflections at the empirical level, we argue that decolonizing

research as a form of knowledge production requires profoundly questioning relations of knowledge, power, and being which are rooted in the 'abyss' of coloniality (Santos 2016), a task that requires intercultural, interdisciplinary, and inter-epistemic praxes. We build on existing ethical guidelines by opening up some of the complexities of ethical practice and offering concrete actions that can be taken to work through these. While we focus primarily on research that directly involves people of a refugee background as research participants, the discussion also poses relevant considerations for researchers involved in other types of refugee-related research (e.g. archival-based historical work, legal analyses, media analyses).

Moving beyond inclusion to challenge colonial power structures

Discussions at both of these events centred around the importance of valuing lived experience in refugee-related research, while at the same time moving beyond tokenistic notions of 'inclusion' to challenge and transform power structures, which are based on colonial and Eurocentric approaches to research and to knowledge production. As highlighted by Lenette (2022), among other critical and decolonial scholars (for example Tuhiwai Smith 2021), research has a long history of reinforcing colonial and Eurocentric power structures and ways of knowing. This criticism also extends to research on forced migration, which has been dominated by scholarship produced in the Northern hemisphere (Chimni 1998, 2008; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2020; Pisarevskaya et al. 2020; Collins 2022), and which can reinforce oppressive and colonial power structures through objectifying and dehumanizing the experiences of people who are forced to migrate (Dobos 2020; Collins 2022). As in other fields, people who do not have a background of forced migration, and institutions, tend to hold the power and benefit the most. Even well-meaning research that is intended to value the views and experiences of people of a refugee background runs the risk of tokenism and continuing to marginalize and disempower those the research is about, for instance, if people's views on the research and how it should be shared are not taken seriously. Therefore, increasing awareness among researchers from different cultures to pay attention to details when conducting research with refugees is very important.

Lived experience may be seen as an enabler in conducting refugee-related research, with the potential to enhance the quality of research, in so far as having this experience provides visceral understandings of forced migration and what it might mean for people. We particularly acknowledge the important contributions already made to the field of refugee and migrant studies by scholars with lived experience. In addition to the visceral response, however, research concerning forced migration and refugees as a category of humanity requires conceptual and philosophical analyses. Thus, it is important not to essentialize the lived experience of refugees and their contributions in this task of investigating one of the most arduous questions of our time. As decolonial scholar Maldonado-Torres (2016) argues, even collaborative research may be problematic if it positions the person with lived experience, or the 'embodied subject', as an 'object to be known with the assistance of a researcher', suggesting that the person with such experience is unable to know themselves without such assistance. And yet, collaboration is essential for better understanding what Maldonado-Torres (2016) calls the 'generative mechanisms' causing precarious 'lived experience', which for him emerge from the structures of coloniality: inherently colonial logics of power, knowledge, and being. Collaboration is a way to build a decolonial chorus against racialized bordering that creates differentiated mobilities and nobilities. Such collaboration should involve intercultural and inter-epistemic communication that engages with a plurality of ways of being and knowing. Ethical research therefore ought to work towards challenging and transforming power structures, rather than only including lived experience and people of a refugee background for the sake of paying lip service to notions of inclusion.

Within this framework, the following suggestions emerged, aimed at supporting researchers without lived experience, as well as academic institutions and funding bodies, to produce better quality and more ethical collaborative research.

Valuing lived experience and involving refugee voices at every level of research, through partnerships

In an approach that values lived experience, people of a refugee background with such experience ought to be involved from the earliest stages of research design and throughout (Ellis *et al.* 2007; Aljadeeah 2022), and their voices incorporated into the decision-making process. However, within this involvement, power relations, and ways of ensuring equality in decision-making, need to be carefully considered. As stated by Hugman *et al.* (2011), the inclusion of people of a refugee background can be reduced to tokenism if it does not actually provide power and influence over key aspects of the research process. Consideration needs to be given to the sharing of responsibilities and decisions on who leads on certain processes. This includes identifying the aims of the study, designing the methodology, creating research tools, and establishing outcomes. The way we make decisions can have an impact on people's lives. It is our view that decisions ought to be made with participants and collaborators, rather than *for* them, based on ethical principles and values.

However, having lived experience does not automatically mean a person (1) has the skills necessary to be involved in research as a researcher, (2) is the right person for a particular project, or (3) wishes to be involved. Any person involved ought to have a clear understanding of the research and be supportive of its aims. Providing opportunities for someone just because they have 'lived experience' may be tokenistic and short term and may not actually be tackling institutional failures, such as employment inequalities in the academic sector, or creating long-term change. As highlighted in the International Association for the Study of Forced Migration (2018), the background of people who have experienced forced migration is highly diverse, and there is a need to ensure that people receive support and training appropriate to their needs and the requirements of the project. This points to the importance of an appropriate selection process, including interviews, for example, as a way of allowing the various parties to understand each other's values and motivation in the research and taking a researcher's role seriously (rather than assuming that someone with lived experience will automatically make a good researcher). As forced migration is not a homogenous experience, and cultures are highly diverse (Kabranian-Melkonian 2015; Aljadeeah 2022), people's personal and professional backgrounds need to be carefully considered in relation to the specific research projects and the potential participants who will be involved. To truly value experience, we also need to constructively ask, when does 'lived experience' become a thing of the past? When does an academic or scholar with a refugee background become an equal rather than only being identified as someone with 'lived experience'?

Thinking about impact

Research on refugee issues ought to be intended to bring about some benefit to people of a refugee background. Key questions to consider here are: what will the impact of the research be? Will it improve the situation for the people concerned, whether at policy level or lived experience level? Karooma (2019) explains that people of a refugee background may experience fatigue and distrust in relation to researchers, especially when the research does not have obvious benefits to them, or their situations remain unchanged despite contributing to research projects. In the roundtable discussion for scholars, it was pointed out that people with lived experience often feel that they are 'speaking without a voice' as they don't see their involvement in research creating any significant change. Developing a collaborative impact plan at the outset of a project and reviewing this together throughout the research process is one way to ensure that impact is core to the research rather than an add-on discussed only at the end. Regular reviewing of potential impact throughout the research process also enables everyone involved to be open to any unexpected outcomes.

Building capacity for peer research: avoiding exploitation and tokenism

Peer research is often seen as a way of 'democratizing' the research process, providing 'capacity building' and facilitating opportunities to co-produce knowledge. Yet, as MacKinnon *et al.* (2021)

argue, these claims are rarely evaluated by empirical investigations into the socio-material work conditions of peer researchers. As highlighted by [Lenette \(2022\)](#), this way of working, and even the term 'peer researcher' itself, is 'messy' and presents ethical dilemmas, including, we argue, the need to consider labels, avoid tokenism and exploitation, and provide trauma-informed support.

It is important to consider the appropriate terms for referring to people and how they would like to be described. MacKinnon *et al.* point out that the approach of inviting people with 'lived experience' to be 'peer researchers' may potentially homogenize and objectify people with 'lived experience'. This may amount to 'assembling distinct persons into potentially uneasy shared group identity categories' ([MacKinnon *et al.* 2021](#): 891). Why, for example, is a scholar of refugee background employed as a 'peer researcher' as opposed to a 'research assistant' or other academic role on the research team? If the term 'peer researcher' is being used, is it possibly useful to differentiate between 'peer researcher' (as a researcher with an academic background, working on a specific piece of research involving people of similar cultural/ethnic background or in a similar situation) and 'community researcher' (non-academic but receiving training in order to carry out a specific piece of research)? Would this terminology be a means to differentiate the various possible ways of involving people with lived experience in research, in line with their own career paths and ambitions? For example, not all people with lived experience working on research are, or want to become, academics. Those who are, or are training to be, academics should be treated as such in a research project. For example, they may wish to be introduced as researchers or academics, rather than in terms of their refugee background or lived experience. Referring to people based on their professional experiences and qualifications helps to appropriately recognize their expertise. In addition, this helps to avoid generalizing about people of a refugee background who are involved in research but may have very different levels of experience, qualifications, and investment in research as a profession.

Consideration needs to be given to how to support researchers with lived experience in the role of peer or community researcher. As with all researchers, people in such roles need support, guidance, and training to carry out the research. For example, it is important to understand the professional development needs and ambitions of peer researchers and assist them to meet these. However, additional support may also be needed, depending on the individual researcher. For example, appropriate trauma support should be considered for researchers with lived experience working on refugee-related issues, given that many may themselves have experienced similar traumatic events to those of the research participants. Peer-led groups may be helpful to enable peer researchers to develop new skills. A lack of appropriate and relevant support and capacity building in order to fully involve a peer researcher in the research process risks their involvement being a tokenistic one.

As well as tokenism, involving people with lived experience in research, either as 'peer' or 'community' researchers, can lead to exploitation, thus perpetuating extractivist approaches to research. Examples of this may include using their knowledge, views, opinions, and expertise without proper acknowledgment in terms of payment, authorship, and/or citation. It is vitally important that the expertise and contributions of someone with lived experience should be appropriately recognized and acknowledged: not doing so is not only unjust but also may have a detrimental impact on the person in question. As highlighted by [Lenette \(2022\)](#), people will have different views and wishes regarding involvement in co-authoring publications and other forms of dissemination, which need to be discussed and agreed upon. Appropriate recognition also includes monetary payment, which is, as [MacKinnon *et al.* \(2021\)](#) point out, one approach to balance power relations between peer and academic researchers.

Being aware of over-involvement of the same people

Just as certain populations may be over-researched (see [Clark-Kazak 2017](#): 13), often the same people from refugee communities are called upon to be involved in research and to speak for their communities. It was noted in the discussions that there can be a tendency in refugee-

related research to over-involve certain people, leading to, first, research fatigue of those people, and, second, the possibility of some people acting as gatekeepers or barriers, controlling access to research for other potential participants. Moreover, this can lead to in-group marginalization among people of a refugee background (Ellis et al. 2007). It is important, therefore, to review the requirements and qualifications of potential participants to ensure these are appropriate and provide appropriate incentives and compensation to encourage voluntary involvement from a diversity of people.

Valuing the expertise of researchers without lived experience

The value of the expertise of researchers, as well as other stakeholders, without lived experience was highlighted during the discussions, as well as the importance of collaboration between those with and without lived experience. Participants of the roundtable felt that it is not always automatically the right thing to do to hand over the platform to those with lived experience. Collaboration between researchers, and other stakeholders, such as host community members and NGO workers without lived experience, who have long-term experience of working on the issues at hand, and those with lived experience is important. However, within this, it is important to consider equality and power relations. For example, this means valuing the specific knowledge, skills, or experience that someone brings, whether this is through lived experience or gained through other research or professional work, while ensuring that someone's qualifications or formal position does not allow their views to overshadow those with lived experience. Valuing the role of those without lived experience also means caring for their well-being and supporting their investment in carrying out ethical research.

Taking time to build trust between researchers and creating an ethical framework together

It was suggested that taking the time to build trust between researchers can allow for the possibility of meaningful collaboration. This is also echoed by Kabranian-Melkonian (2015). This includes focusing on the long-term and challenging systems and institutions rather than practicing short-term or 'token' inclusion. If in a position of power, this should be used to challenge the system and ask the bigger questions, bringing the 'uncomfortable discussions' to the table. Rather than positive discrimination, it was suggested that it is more helpful to focus on exploring possible training and skill development with the aim of increasing capacity.

Participants of the roundtable discussed the importance of building an ethics framework for research that is co-created by everyone involved in the research. While this could draw on existing guidelines for ethical research, such as the [International Association for the Study of Forced Migration \(2018\)](#) and the [Refugee Studies Centre \(2007\)](#) ethical guidelines, developing an ethics framework specific to the context of the project, designed by all those involved, helps ensure that everyone's needs are met. Doing so may also help to address the extent to which standard generalized ethical guidelines often pay insufficient attention to the potential benefits to people of a refugee background who are involved, to relationships, and to the cultural appropriateness of research practices, including the complexities of seeking informed consent (Ellis et al. 2007; Hugman et al. 2011; Altran et al. 2022). This should ensure that peer and community researchers feel safe, that they come first, they are valued, and they are part of the project. An ethical framework should involve defining values and principles, such as respect, honesty, and trust, and principles can include upholding autonomy, promoting dignity, and open communication. Good ethics frameworks should empower peer researchers, facilitate team building, and enable mutual learning.

Identifying a process for dealing with ethical issues that arise might include:

- Creating a safe space to discuss ethical issues. Safe spaces can only be defined by the team together.
- Facilitating open and honest dialogue.
- Seeking and taking on board feedback to improve, and not dismissing feedback.

- Asking ethical questions: what are the ethical principles that are violated here? What is the situation telling us? What do the participants value as ethics?
- Exploring alternative solutions together.
- When necessary, escalating issues, seeking help, or raising concerns with another party, such as members of an ethics committee.
- Reviewing the purpose of the research and reflecting on one's own values.

Using trauma-informed approaches

Researchers need to be aware of past trauma for both research participants and researchers with lived experience, and the potential effects of the research process on this. As highlighted by [Ellis et al. \(2007\)](#) and [MacKenzie et al. \(2007\)](#), people who have experienced forced migration have often experienced some form of trauma, and this can be compounded by research practices that do not take this into account or which increase vulnerability in any way, including those that do not support autonomy or build capacity. It is important to provide support for emotional well-being where possible ([Karoooma 2019](#)), coming from a position of empathy and respect, and to ensure that there is a budget for well-being support and a system for signposting people to services.

Practicing reflexivity and monitoring and evaluation

For researchers of non-refugee background, practicing reflexivity and checking in with intentions is key. It might be useful to ask whether one is the right person for this research. Consider both prospective aspects—what are the potential effects of the researchers on the research? - and retrospective aspects—what have been the effects of the research on the researchers? This includes being reflective in relation to the wider structures and institutions within which research takes place, and how these might need to be challenged. Monitor and evaluate your work. Take the time to review and to look at what can be done better each time.

Being flexible and agile

Being flexible and agile, in dialogue with people with lived experience, allows for researchers to see what is appropriate and relevant. This includes being adaptable and responding to changes accordingly, while mitigating risks on both the project and the researchers. It can help to acknowledge and discuss that both processes and outcomes may be different to what was planned or expected.

Challenging universities and funding bodies to improve their practices

Many of the challenges and barriers for scholars of refugee background centre around access to funding and constraints within university and funding systems in relation to finances, time, and ethics processes. As highlighted by [Pincock and Bakunzi \(2021\)](#), the way academic institutions function, and the ways in which research projects are structured and funded, can create challenges for ethical, collaborative research. Examples of such challenges experienced by participants in our discussions include the use of fixed-term contracts for research staff, bureaucratic hurdles for paying peer researchers and compensating research participants, pressure to conclude research within set (often short) timescales, and limited scope to support peer researchers and participants beyond the end of a research project. We acknowledge that several of these issues are connected to the capitalist neo-liberal system we are living in and many researchers, whether of refugee background or not, are jointly impacted by precarity of employment, bureaucracy, and power issues. While the focus here is particularly on those researchers with refugee backgrounds, it may be useful to explore how this work might be used to create solidarity and challenge these issues more broadly. In addition to the above challenges, researchers of refugee backgrounds may also be dealing with precarious immigration status, negatively affecting access to employment and funding. In order to address the challenges described above and to facilitate

collaboration with scholars of a refugee background, we suggest that universities and funding bodies consider the following:

- Formal training should be provided by universities for peer researchers as well as scholars of refugee backgrounds more generally, as well as helping to develop transferable skills. Consider providing certificates or letters of reference in order to support career development. Expand training and research opportunities for scholars, as well as other people of refugee backgrounds who are involved in refugee-related research, to empower and involve them. Training should be specifically tailored to the needs and career development of the person. Take into account education that has been interrupted by conflict in entry requirements. Provide suitable mentoring opportunities.
- Universities and funding bodies should examine the time and financial constraints in funding systems, many of which create barriers for academics who try to carry out ethical and collaborative work. In particular, there is a need to look at how short time scales and turnaround times within grants make it difficult to build relationships and trust and work in a more long-term way. The time required to build relationships and trust, especially for cross-cultural research, is likely to be significant. The complexities and bureaucracy of university and funding systems can create barriers to paying and reimbursing expenses for people of refugee backgrounds involved in research in a timely manner. This is particularly complex where people involved do not have the right to work or are barred from taking up employment in public institutions such as universities. There is a need to find more flexible payment systems that support different forms of collaboration. Delays in payment can create severe financial hardship for people who may already be experiencing poverty or destitution.
- Often potential collaborators based beyond universities are excluded from being involved until an ethics application is approved. This prevents such collaborators from being involved in forming the research agenda and designing the research methodology or approach. How might university ethics processes better support collaboration with individuals with lived experience from early stages? In addition to this, funding frameworks often operate within set parameters, limiting the questions that can be asked and the material that can be engaged with. Explore how this might privilege certain ways of knowing and being and create a form of 'epistemic bordering' (Davies et al. 2023), and how it might affect access to funding for people and ideas operating outside these parameters.

Conclusion

In this document, we have highlighted some of the key issues that emerged from two conversations—a roundtable event and a public webinar—aimed at exploring the challenges, barriers, supports, and enablers related to involvement of scholars with refugee backgrounds in research on forced migration, and identifying how involvement and collaboration could be increased and facilitated, and research practices could be improved. We have emphasized specific suggestions that might be taken on board by both researchers without refugee backgrounds, as well as by universities and funding institutions.

Within a framework of challenging oppressive and ongoing colonial power structures and the power inequalities inherent within these, we believe in the importance of collaboration and partnership between people with 'lived experience' and those who do not have lived experience of forced migration in order to create space for intercultural dialogue, inter-epistemic communication and restorative processes of healing, as well as for the conditions of possibility for thinking otherwise, doing otherwise, and being otherwise. This requires adhering to the existing ethical guidelines on research in this area, which have tended to focus on avoiding harm and ensuring benefits, as well as attending to the personal and relational needs of all researchers in this space, whether they do or do not have personal experience of forced migration. We believe that ethical

research which is carried out with attention, time, and sensitivity results in better quality research which is both more effective and more impactful.

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Notes

1. The recording of the public webinar, entitled 'Building ethical research culture: Scholars of refugee background researching refugee-related issues', can be viewed at the following link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xIAHImThoRY&ab_channel=WABERConference

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