

Researching refugee youth

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Introduction to the guide

In this guide, we discuss some of the ethical and methodological challenges of carrying out qualitative research with refugee and asylum-seeker youth in European cities. This is neither a guide to how to use specific research methods, nor is it a toolkit that explores the advantages or disadvantages of using specific methods over others. Instead, we consider some of the ethical, political, and methodological quandaries and challenges that have arisen in our research with young refugees and asylum seekers in the four European cities of Brussels, Amsterdam, Leipzig, and Newcastle upon Tyne. In each city, we have worked closely with arts and theatre groups, community organisations, language conversation classes and other groups; some of the insights referred to here draw from these collaborations. We provide examples of research encounters that worked well, and those where challenges arose, or queries and problems emerged. In some discussions, we deal with more practical insights that surfaced during fieldwork, whereas others are more of an open discussion. Hence, in some cases, the solutions were obvious, but in other cases they were not. We discuss how we worked through these contestations in an open and collaborative way.

Building relationships and trust

Our research experiences demonstrate the importance of taking time to build meaningful relationships with community organisations working with refugees and asylum seekers. These can take different forms and can encompass varying degrees of involvement. For example, some members of the research team were already volunteering with the community groups before research started. In other cases, we were new to the research setting and spent time in these organisations to build rapport with people who attended the groups.

Trust and the negotiation of volunteer and researcher identities

Before starting the field research within a specific community organisation, a member of the research team was already involved in this organisation as a volunteer. This voluntary role was unrelated to the research project and meant that other volunteers and learners had some familiarity with the researcher, and a good level of trust was already established as a result. However, this also created challenges in terms of having to negotiate joint roles or identities in 'the field', as a volunteer and researcher. When we take on these kinds of volunteering roles, potential respondents can become accustomed to positioning and relating to us in certain ways. Introducing the research project, talking through things like consent forms and undertaking interviews and focus groups can suddenly seem quite alien, intimidating, and contrived.

This 'double identity' was, at times, quite challenging to negotiate in our research. For example, when people were aware that we were undertaking data collection, this sometimes changed the dynamic of relationships significantly. Some people did not wish to take part in the research and withdrew from interacting in the way they had before. It also meant that the research (what it involved, how the data would be used and so on) and things like consent needed to be explained with even more care, so that people fully understood what we were doing and how that differed from our normal volunteering roles. These kinds of dilemmas are not always easy to deal with and ultimately have to be negotiated as research develops, typically alongside gatekeepers (in our case, members of the community partners). We also dealt with this by writing field notes after sessions to reflect on our ethical practice as researchers, and thought more carefully about how our identities as researchers/volunteers may have shaped interactions with others.

Taking time and building relationships

It can often be useful to be patient and spend time getting used to the surroundings of the organisation or group you are working with. This can help with building trust and can also provide interesting insights and interactions that are worth noting down in a field diary or journal. This presents important opportunities to understand what information would be useful from the perspective of community organisations in ways that can help to inform and guide research questions and aims. Academic research can often be seen as extractive, where research participants and community organisations are instrumentalised for the purpose of collecting data, so it is important to listen and learn from those we work with, most especially in the early stages of research, when building relationships and trust.

This approach moves us away from seeing 'data gathering' as a discrete activity limited to specific research encounters, such as interviews or focus groups. Being present involves listening to the needs and experiences of community organisations and respondents who take part in research. As researchers, we might enter the 'field' with very clear ideas of what we want to find out, but these will often change as we listen to community organisations and refugees. Working on topics related to asylum can often mean that sensitive issues are brought to the fore, and it is not always appropriate or ethical to begin talking about these immediately. For example, the community centre we were working with in Brussels implemented an internal policy of not asking about participants' residency status. Hence, the researcher working there should comply with this principle. Taking time to listen, to let others guide conversations and showing a willingness to talk about 'everyday stuff' that might be unrelated to our research is a useful way to build rapport and trust with respondents.

Changing leadership and priorities in collaborative research

One of the organisations we collaborated with in Brussels had appointed a new director by the time we secured funding. The new director had a strong belief in the fact that (research) projects need to emerge from the participants themselves and therefore felt uncomfortable with the need to engage in a research project that she did not sign up for and which went directly against some of her convictions about how the organisation needs to support and facilitate ideas coming from participants. All this happened against the background of the researcher's previous experiences with suspicious or sceptic gatekeepers in Brussels, particularly when it came to working with researchers. The sense of the new appointee was that universities are powerful institutions working according to their own agenda. We spent time volunteering with the organisation, listening to the concerns of the new director and of those who visited the organisation, to build trust and establish a meaningful relationship from which we could move forward. But mostly, spending much more time than anticipated, respectfully working together on 'stuff' unrelated to the research, and being patient until opportunity presented itself proved to be the key.

Summary points

- To the extent possible, spend time 'being' and listening to people in the settings where you are undertaking research, to build trust and familiarity with community organisations and respondents. Do not hesitate to commit to work in the community organisation that is, at first sight, unrelated to the research project.
- Taking time to listen and observe allows others to get used to your presence as a researcher and enables you to develop research questions and aims that will directly interest community partners and be of relevance to refugee youth.
- These measures can help alleviate suspicion directed towards researchers perceived as conducting work that is extractive and of little benefit to the communities involved.

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Understanding the field

When undertaking research on topics related to the lives of young refugees and asylum seekers, there are many sources of information that can enhance our understanding of ‘the field’. Gaining access to the personal testimonies of respondents via primary research methods, like walking interviews or focus groups, often offers significant insights into people’s lives. However, besides primary data collection, there are other mechanisms that can be useful to gain a holistic picture of the case study cities and localised issues related to asylum. For example, sources of secondary data or information can provide us with a detailed picture of the context underpinning debates about asylum in the places we do research. It is useful, therefore, to think through the diversity of data and approaches that might be available to you as a researcher and how these might broaden your knowledge of the issue you are exploring.

Urban migration histories

In our project, we wanted to explore the everyday experiences of refugee youth in public spaces. Part of this is about working collaboratively with young refugees – and with the organisations they engage with – to access first-hand accounts of their everyday lives. However, we also explored other sources of data and information that were useful in helping us to construct as rich as possible an understanding of their everyday experiences. As such, ‘the field’ was not simply our interactions with refugee youth and the fieldwork notes and interview transcripts this generated. Instead, the field included the migration histories of the cities in which we worked, the current composition of migrants in each city and an analysis of media coverage about asylum and migration.

For example, alongside an exploration of the migration histories of our participants, we also found it important to understand how these are situated within the histories of the place where the research is situated. Urban migration histories can include those of people who left the cities, as well as of those who arrived at different stages. Although migration is intricately linked to the growth and decline of cities, histories of migration are not always told in official narratives. Thus, we found that considerable background research (in public archives, diverse sets of literature and museums) was necessary and beneficial for contextualising our contemporary findings and understanding the discourses that the stories of our research participants would be placed within. Migration histories can influence which migrants are attracted to which cities, the socio-spatial distribution of migrants’ residence across the urban terrain, and the kinds of experiences migrants have while living there. The first step in our research involved writing literature reviews, conducting archival research, completing museum ethnographies, and analysing discursive constructions and representations of refugees and asylum seekers. These can also change over time and between places/publications and are invaluable sources of information for researchers, allowing us to gain deeper insights into urban migration histories. Census data and historical migration data can sometimes also be drawn on to form a (more complete) picture of the place in which you are interested.

Media analysis

Local and national media can provide important contextual background to the context in which you are doing research. The print media draws on several interpretative repertoires when constructing accounts of refugees and asylum seekers, and these are often important for researchers to understand. Local and national media might include print media, such as newspapers, and online forms of news coverage. Indeed, some studies focus only on analyses of the media to understand the issues and challenges facing refugees. Importantly, many recent studies have investigated how asylum seekers and refugees are depicted in media sources, yet much less of this kind of work has been done in local, “urban” media outlets. This may bring about new insights, considering that migration and arrival are often, in the first place, urban phenomena.

Stakeholder engagement

Those who coordinate and direct – and those employed by – local refugee and community organisations often have an in-depth knowledge and understanding of asylum seeking and refugee issues in the context in which they work. Some organisations might be relatively new, having responded to a gap in service provision or to the arrival of a new group. Others have been around for longer but may have altered their focus or adjusted their provision to meet the needs of the local refugee community. Some services might be provided by the state, whereas others will be provided through the voluntary and community sector. In our work, we found it very useful to engage with these organisations, to interview those who lead them – or those who have responsibility or oversight of specific services – to access their insights into the challenges faced by refugee youth.

Summary points

- Context matters, so it is important to familiarise yourself with the city or locale in which you are conducting your fieldwork; one way to do this is through exploring urban migration histories to better appreciate how migration has shaped the context in which you are doing research.
- Alongside urban migration histories, an analysis of the media – and the representation of refugees and asylum seekers in local and national media outlets – offers an important way of appreciating the complex factors that shape local asylum politics.
- Engaging with those who coordinate refugee community groups and related organisations, including the staff working in such groups, can provide important insights into the everyday lives of the refugees they work with.

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Gaining informed consent

Gaining informed consent is a hallmark of ethical research, yet it is often not as simple and straightforward as it initially appears to be. Migrants – especially those who are concerned about their legal status or eligibility to be living where they are – might be worried about the use of documents, such as consent forms, information sheets or interview guides. Likewise, the request to record the conversation and presence of a Dictaphone might be very worrying for them. Here, we reflect on some of the ethical challenges we have negotiated in securing consent from young refugees to participate in different types of research sessions.

Obtaining and maintaining informed consent during participatory research

Gaining access to the field was relatively easy in Amsterdam, as one of our collaborators facilitated our fieldwork and provided us with ample opportunities to participate in their activities. After initially observing activities to enable us to get to know the field and to determine a data collection strategy, we already knew many refugees, asylum seekers and unauthorised migrants who were participating in these activities. There were many informal conversations that revealed a first insight into their everyday lives. At this stage, it was relatively easy to gain oral-informed consent, as it was common to introduce ourselves during the first meeting. This provided the opportunity to inform them of our role as university researchers and all that this entails. The vast majority gave oral consent to participate in the research. However, over time, there was more confusion about consent. Our regular presence in the community organisation offered great potential for data collection, but it also obscured our role as researchers. We had to ask our participants whether they were still aware of the research and whether they understood the implications of their participation. In other words, it was relatively easy to achieve oral consent but more complex to make sure that we maintained informed consent throughout the fieldwork.

We employed several strategies to try to maintain the informed consent during the fieldwork. Information sheets and informed consent forms were discussed and signed before any interviewing commenced. This was trickier during informal conversations and language cafes, as we did not want to formalise each conversation in case this risked damaging the relationship. Instead, we always introduced the research and our role as researchers. As such, we made sure that all participants were aware of our role and the use of our conversations. We regularly reminded those respondents whom we spoke to on a more frequent basis of the research, to make sure that this was still in their minds and to gain their ongoing consent to participate.

Using negotiated oral informed consent

Gaining written consent – where a participant adds their signature and the date to a consent form – tends to be the hallmark of ethical research. However, in our research with refugees and asylum seekers, we tended to use oral-informed consent instead. There were two reasons for this. Firstly, requiring written consent can be intimidating for those who may be suspicious or concerned about the need to sign a formal document. This can result in potential participants choosing not to take part, or, if they do decide to participate, they may be overly guarded in what they reveal. Thus, requiring written informed consent can present risks and limitations to research. Secondly, as the Covid-19 pandemic restricted some of our fieldwork activities to the online context, requesting written consent could have added an unnecessary administrative burden that – coupled with the point made above – would have limited the number of people willing to participate in the research.

Summary points

- In projects that involve long-term engagement – such as participatory research with community groups – it can be useful to regularly remind participants about their involvement in the research and to see the gaining of informed consent as an ongoing process rather than a one-off event.
- In cases where access, recruitment and trust-building can be challenging, requiring written informed consent can act as an additional barrier to those wanting to take part. Using negotiated, oral, informed consent in such contexts can help to ensure that research upholds ethical standards whilst maximising the opportunity for participation.
- Relationships often change as we spend time in the field and as the researcher takes up different roles, such as researcher, volunteer, or even friend. Careful consideration and consultation are key to securing and maintaining consent.

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Positionality and reflexivity in the field

Academic knowledge production is situated in everyday experiences and activities; feminist researchers have played a key role in acknowledging this and in giving attention to the significance of being reflexive and taking care to consider how the multiple positionalities of the researcher are negotiated in the field. This is about considering the potential impact that markers of difference – such as gender, race, class, age, sexual orientation, migrant status and so on – may have on the nature of research relations and on the quality and form of the data collected. Such issues are not fully knowable, and reflexivity has its limitations. Therefore, it is important to consider why research is being done and what it is that is being achieved in the process. However, sensitivity to diverse power relations in research is still important and adds a richness, sophistication, and sensitivity to research that would be missing if such issues were not considered.

Being confronted with class and race-related privilege

In research with refugees and asylum seekers, researchers might be confronted with their social position, their own relationship to the state, and their role in the system. In our work in Leipzig, we were conscious of the social position of individual research team members as white, with a (more or less) stable professional position and, most of all, a German passport. Being part of the field ourselves, we were sensitive to how this created tensions, how this was negotiated within the research process, and how we could learn from these experiences methodologically.

To illustrate this, a researcher from the research team noted the following occurrence. A young Iranian man who had migrated to Germany five years previously met with her in the park, and he opened the interview with the following statement: “So, in the first place, I want to say: In Germany, a foreigner stays a foreigner and stays a foreigner and stays a foreigner. Like a black ball that one throws with a white ball and tries to mix the black ball with the white ball, but this doesn’t work at all. You only see this black ball.” He feels he is always noticed and pointed out because he is not white. As we discussed the research and his participation, he said: “And this voluntary work. There are many people here who take profit out of our situation to improve themselves. Many. They come towards you and want something like, sorry when I say this, an interview or that you engage yourself on a voluntary basis.” In this example, the participant

pointed out that the research interview situation is one that symbolises his exclusion in Germany and the racial inequalities he must negotiate daily. The researcher was pointedly confronted with being involved in research that is seen as part of a racist, white, colonial, and powerful system.

Troubling perceptions about representing the state

During some of our research encounters, participants expressed concerns about potential relationships between researchers and the state, and that their participation in an interview may have an impact on their asylum application. This might not only affect the veracity of their answers but also requires us to consider the issue of positionality, particularly if the researcher holds citizenship in the arrival society. This awkward power inequality is further stressed by the researcher’s consciousness of their own ethnicity, gender, class, and social and cultural capital. Unfortunately, in the context of an interview in a reception centre, not much can be done about this.

Yet a researcher may have the opportunity to engage in a more action-oriented relationship with newcomers while engaging in ethnographic fieldwork as more meaningful relationships can be established. In one example, after a few months of this kind of embedded fieldwork, the researcher, though ostensibly white, male, and highly educated, and while toggling a MacBook in the middle of the workspace, was talked to by the visitors to the organisation and was asked for help, for instance offering advice on matters relating to the asylum procedure or the search for employment. These instances show that research participants are very capable of negotiating the otherness of the researcher. Vulnerable newcomers may be more inclined to reach out to researchers because of their (perceived) influence, which may come with trust between both parties being more easily established.

Moving between research and activism in supporting refugees

In research with refugees and asylum seekers, researchers often work closely with community groups and organisations to secure access to information or potential participants. Some members of our research team volunteered with these groups or organisations or supported them in more activist action, seeking to disrupt hostile narratives and bring about social change for refugees and asylum seekers. The following example illustrates the fine line between being a researcher and an activist, and demonstrates that flexibility is required to balance these roles.

In late autumn 2020, one of the researchers in Leipzig received a text message from a research participant whom she had met before in a theatre research project. He sent her a photo of a letter he had received from the National Agency for the Management of Migration [Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge]. Instead of a three-monthly residency permit, the photo showed a demand for him to leave the country. In her field diary the researcher wrote: “Although we had already scheduled a meeting for an interview, it is clear that when Lucius arrives at my place our meeting will not revolve around the interview. He is in panic of being deported, extremely tense, which in turn is exacerbated by his suffering under the living conditions in the camp. In the coming hours, we sit on the sofa in my living room and conceive a letter to the Federal Minister of Integration in Saxony. Lucius tells me his story. The reason he had to leave Nigeria, about his two-year-old daughter, his wife and family, but also what he faces in the camp in Leipzig. For now, we focus on securing residency for Lucius.” To their surprise, Lucius received a response to his letter just two days later. One of the responsible people for the “Commission for Hardship Cases” in Saxony suggested that he contact him if his case were rejected again. Several weeks later, Lucius was quite succinctly informed that the Federal Office had made a mistake. This experience shows how activism and research can be closely intertwined. Performing acts of mutual care and friendship – with sensitivity to power relations connected with race, class, and other forms of social identity markers – is important in such research.

Similar small-scale acts of activism occurred in the Belgian case study, when the researcher helped one participant to write an application letter for a job and helped another asylum-seeker, who had overstayed their visa, to see how they could enrol in a university in order to receive once again a student visa. In that same case study, the researcher also decided in the early weeks of the 2020 pandemic, with the support of the community organisation, to help set up and work in a hub for homeless and undocumented migrants in the city, providing them with food, drinks, fresh sets of clothes, and personal hygiene facilities.

Summary points

- Being reflexive about the multiple positionalities of the researcher and the researched in work with refugees and asylum seekers can enhance our sensitivity to power relations and inequalities in the field.
- An important ethical challenge to address in research with refugees involves the role of the researcher and concerns about their perceived relationship to the state and to the asylum process.
- Multiple types of relationships between researcher and researched may arise throughout the process; data collection may only be one component, and researchers may be required to act to support participants in times of crisis. It is important to consider these relationships, how they influence the research encounter, and what the more ethical action is to take in each situation.

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Co-producing knowledge and unsettling academic knowledge production

Participatory and collaborative approaches to fieldwork and research have become prominent means by which to challenge problematic hierarchies and the power embedded in research practice. Our research with refugees utilised a toolkit of participatory methods so that specific methods could be useful according to the interests and preferences of those involved. In our research project, these methods included, amongst others, mental mapping, story-mapping photovoice, peer-interviews and walkalong interviews. The co-production of knowledge can offer opportunities and benefits to both the researcher and the researched, and academic knowledge production can be productively unsettled in this process. Yet, in the face of persistent power structures, there are limits to just how participatory we can design our research to be. We consider some of the challenges involved in doing research in this way.

Working with photovoice to build meaningful relationships

In the summer of 2021, five photovoice meetings with refugee youth were organised in a neighbourhood community centre in Amsterdam. The photovoice method was designed to document ideas, experiences, and emotions around homemaking after arrival. The research was conducted in partnership with a professional and experienced photographer. Five female refugees, women from Syria, Afghanistan, and Eritrea, participated. Using the camera of their smartphone, participants were invited to explore how they find their way in their new neighbourhood. Each week, the participants were asked to take three pictures and add a few sentences that expressed their points of view on the research themes discussed, such as feeling at home, identity, safety, exploring new places. In the weeks that followed, further photographs were taken and then discussed amongst the group, which gave a lot of additional information about why photos were taken and what intimacies the photos represented. Apart from learning basic photography skills, through discussion and reflection participants were also stimulated to create new ways of thinking. The meetings were also seen by participants as opportunities to learn from each other, ask questions, and advocate for themselves. Hence, the meetings provided an opportunity for them to connect and enjoy themselves. At the last meeting, participants brought food to share, and the atmosphere was very positive. People seemed to feel at ease, which is important for sharing and discussing personal everyday experiences.

New relationships were built, as participants kept on meeting after the project had finished.

Working with young peer-interviewers

In another case study, we developed a peer-interview-project with the aim of de-centring our position as white academics. Instead of conducting research about young refugees and asylum seekers, we sought to attribute them with the role of protagonists and agenda setters of the research. Through our small project, we attempted to – at least momentarily – challenge the (white) academy's claim to, and authority over, what counts as valuable knowledge and the related problem of whose voices and perspectives dominate academic knowledge production. In this project, a young refugee from Syria (15 years old) and an asylum seeker with a family background in Palestine (19 years old) conducted interviews with residents and visitors of a "Pop-Up-Ice-Cream-Store", set up in a green area in the Eastern part of Leipzig. This day of peer-interviewing had been prepared during two (online) meetings to co-design the research and was followed up by a reflection meeting to learn together by reflecting on the project that equally entailed first pathways towards the analysis.

"Ever since I arrived to Germany, I have been asking myself these questions," mentioned Ayla, one of the peer interviewers in the project, implying that she did not need to construct an interview schedule as she already had many questions to ask in the research. She knew right away what topics and questions she was going to explore: Migrant families' experiences with instability ("How does this make you feel? How do you deal with it?"), their wellbeing and discomfort in Germany ("How is your everyday life? Are you feeling well?"), problems the children face at school, and, above all, religion (What do Germans associate with her wearing a headscarf? What do they know about Islam? Do they have questions?) The questions indicate that she is ready to engage in controversies, but also to encourage an open discussion about stereotypes and fears. Her peer interviewer, Oman, is equally interested in the way people picture foreign people and, especially, Islam. In our meetings, he referred to discussions he has with his schoolmates who ask him repeatedly why he is fasting during Ramadan, while drinks and food are at hand. This emphasises that the young peoples' agendas are anti-racist agendas without being named as such. They address anti-

Muslim racism as an experience that has orchestrated their everyday lives since they first stepped on Western Europe's grounds.

While listening to Ayla's and Oman's collection of questions during our first online meeting, the researchers silently withdrew the questions they had initially come up with, targeting, for instance, 'favourite places' in this particular urban area, so as not to intervene in the agenda of the peer interviewers. In the field diary, one of the researchers reflected on the questions they had initially come up with: "I notice that this is not really of their interest, that this is our white agenda? That their agenda is one of equality and difference." This also made them question the value of a written interview schedule, given that the peer interviewers had a clear sense of what topics to engage with and why. Including peer interviewers' agendas in research can be useful for ensuring that research is grounded, relevant, and applied to the local situations in which refugees and asylum seekers find themselves. Moreover, we can learn from our short-term interaction with these young people that the academic system should be more prepared for being productively decentred in a structural sense, on an everyday basis, by the embodied and intimate knowledge of young and racialised people.

Summary points

- The power associated with the role of the researcher can be productively disrupted in research with young refugees through the use of approaches and methods characteristic of participatory action research.
- Refugees and asylum seekers have significant insights into, and knowledge about, their own everyday experiences and therefore approaches informed by co-production may often be, ethically, the most appropriate to use.
- Collaborative or participatory research is best embedded in research from the start through the involvement of community organisations, other stakeholders and other relevant groups and individuals.

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Emotions in the field

Research about asylum and migration can evoke strong emotions from participants, researchers, and organisations. Those who have fled dangerous situations or experiences of personal or familial persecution often carry with them powerful emotions associated with their displacement, their separation from family members, the harm caused in the process, and the emotions associated with trying to settle down in a new and unfamiliar environment. Furthermore, those who work with refugee youth – in education, in social care provision, or in community and voluntary work – may find themselves in emotionally charged settings as they learn about the experiences of those they work with, whilst also seeking to challenge and work through the exclusions set up by national and local policies/initiatives. Likewise, researchers working in this field will likely find out about such issues and will need to negotiate these with care. Here, we reflect on some of the challenges associated with emotional encounters in the field and how we have negotiated these in our work.

Open and emotional spaces in storymapping

Through a series of storymapping workshops in Leipzig, we worked to encourage newcomers to share stories around personal landmarks in the city and to locate, document and visualise them on a collective map. As the aim of our workshops was to explore how young newcomers experience and perceive the city of Leipzig, the following questions served as guidelines for the participants: “Which places in Leipzig are important to me?”, “What have I experienced there?”, “Which smells and/or tastes do I connect with these places?” and “Which feelings do these places evoke in me?” Hence, we focused on the complex sensory and emotional dimensions of young refugees and asylum seekers’ experiences in urban space.

In the process of preparing the workshops, we had some doubts. On the one hand, we queried whether our methods provided the structure and guidance necessary to re-activate situations that our participants had experienced in the past. On the other hand, we wondered whether the exercise allowed enough flexibility and openness to be accessible and for the workshop participants to respect their capacities to act independently. Moreover, we asked how we could ensure that our participants felt safe and comfortable in this situation of sharing personal experiences, whilst knowing that various sensitive topics in the lives of

many newcomers can trigger negative emotions. We were aware that there is always the danger of causing (additional) harm when researchers ask newcomers to share – or unintentionally stimulate – potentially traumatising experiences. Several weeks later, during one of the workshops, we were impressed, however, by the atmosphere of solidarity and empathic listening we observed. Participants shared and co-valued the societal knowledge they had gathered together.

Regarding the emotional atmosphere of care, attention, and intensity, we noticed that it seemed as if the storytelling task we had formulated was perceived as compact and feasible, as well as appropriate to evoke detailed descriptions of lived experiences. Importantly, this approach respected the agency of our participants in ceding to them to choose the story and to control, as well as to ‘dose’ the content they agreed to reveal. Asking to share with the group a small, emplaced memory produced closeness beyond a ‘risky’ intimacy. It seemed to hit the balance between vulnerability and empowerment. Relatedly, the exchange that emerged throughout the process was mainly led by our workshop participants. This nurtured not only the attentive and sensitive exchange we observed, but allowed us, as researchers, to withdraw from our ‘steering’ positions and adopt the role of ‘listeners’. The classic division between ‘researchers’ and ‘informants’ was not suspended, but, to some extent, blurred.

Disclosure of difficult issues and challenging life experiences

The issues discussed in research conversations and interviews are often varied and unpredictable. Unpredictability is a strength of using interviews but can sometimes lead to the discussion of emotive topics and the disclosure of difficult issues and life experiences associated with fleeing persecution. This can generate diverse emotions for the research participant, such as distress and anger. Yet, it can also potentially be a therapeutic experience, providing a space for the participant to be listened to, something that may be uncommon in their daily lives. For the researcher, listening to difficult experiences can also be highly emotive and it can pose various ethical conundrums, especially if a participant discloses something that is potentially harmful or damaging in their lives. This raises questions about the professional role of the researcher and how to respond to a participant with difficult life circumstances.

In an interview on Zoom, a research team member and a female refugee, who lived with her two children and husband, discussed various topics during their conversation, including employment issues, poverty, support networks, visa requirements and challenges of lockdown. Towards the end of the interview, the participant disclosed that she had experienced domestic violence during lockdown. She disclosed this in a calm manner and did not appear to be particularly upset or distressed. Nonetheless, it was a significant disclosure, and it made the researcher instantly worried about her and her children's safety and welfare. Yet, he was also aware that she was not necessarily asking for help and that making too much of what she said could have made her uncomfortable. However, instinctively he asked her whether she felt safe at home, and whether she was in any danger. She said that she was safe and told him not to worry. They then chatted about other issues for a while longer before wrapping up the interview.

Following the interview, the researcher noted: "I remained concerned about the women's welfare, but I was also conscious that reporting my concerns to the authorities, such as the police, could cause lots of difficulties for this family, especially as they have precarious visas that could potentially be revoked. After discussing my concerns with colleagues, we decided the best course of action would be to send the women a link about a local women's group that provides various services, including domestic violence support. Therefore, if the women did feel like she wanted to talk further about issues she has at home this group would provide her access to professionals who are trained in dealing with people who have experienced domestic violence."

This experience then, alongside others, made him reflect on the role of the researcher and how we should respond to participants who reveal difficulties and vulnerabilities in their everyday lives. There is no clear answer to this, and it will often depend on how vulnerable a person seems, alongside what type of research is being carried out (i.e. long-term ethnography, one-off interview) and the relationship this generates between researcher and participant. Moreover, it is important to acknowledge the professional limitations of a researcher. Although we can provide a certain level of help and solidarity, we are often not professionally trained to provide certain support, such as counselling or therapy, so knowing our limitations and when to seek help from trained professionals is imperative to good ethical research practice.

Summary points

- Emotions can be challenging to work with in research, especially if we are not accustomed to their presence. In some cases, emotions are a useful vehicle for participants to express themselves, and this can help to generate meaningful engagements for them.
- It is important to be aware of our role as researchers and the boundaries of this; strong ethical research practice requires thinking about and respecting boundaries of providing help, support, and solidarity.
- Part of our ethical commitment to our participants is to ensure that they are not at risk (themselves, or to others), and it is important to consider this in all research encounters.

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Leaving the field

There inevitably comes a point at which researchers stop collecting data and move out of the 'fieldwork' phase of research. This is sometimes referred to as 'leaving the field', although some would argue that they are always in 'the field' and maintain constant contact with the field even when data collection is complete. Especially when working closely with young refugees and asylum seekers, the departure of the researcher can have profound implications for the nature of the research relationship and the wellbeing of research participants. This process can be bound with strong emotions as the nature of relationships changes over time. Part of the issue here is about managing expectations of those involved in the research and making it clear what future contact will look like and how they can stay in touch with you.

Struggling to manage expectations

"Do you want to come to my aunt's place to have a coffee together?" "Shall we go for dinner at an Eritrean restaurant?" "When are you at the community centre again to have a chat?" These are some of the questions received from participants after a research team member had already left the fieldwork site in Amsterdam. These youngsters called her or texted her to see whether they could meet again. After all, they had got used to meeting her and to their regular chats and/or WhatsApp conversations. Although she regularly explained and emphasised her role as a researcher, informed them that the research had finished and explained to them that she could not 'hang out' with them anymore, a few respondents had different expectations of their relationship. If time allowed, she would have loved to continue meeting them on a regular basis. However, this is not always possible, and, in some cases, it might be questionable whether this is desirable.

Indeed, participatory research with vulnerable groups brings about close relationships with research participants, and a deliberated strategy is thus required to leave the field. Regarding the situation above, the research team member noted in her field diary: "To be honest, I am still struggling for the best strategy, despite what might be said in methods guides and toolkits. During the research, I tried to manage respondents' expectations by regularly emphasising my role as a researcher, pointing out my temporary presence in the field and explaining what I can and cannot do as a researcher, both during and after the fieldwork. At the same time, I tried to establish a close

relationship with respondents and to help them where possible, for example by writing a CV or making a phone call. I however referred them to organisations for more comprehensive forms of support." These considerations show the precarious balance between close and distant relationships, between a clear demarcation of what you are and what you are not, what you can do and what you cannot. Apparently, the participants in this research had other expectations as they started to consider the researcher as a friend. They wanted to stay in contact with her, making it even more complex to 'leave the field' due to various interests.

While she said goodbye in person or by WhatsApp, the research team in Amsterdam also organised a workshop to round off the research. During this workshop, we presented our findings and provided research participants, volunteers and employees of the community organisation with which we had been working with the opportunity to react to and discuss these findings. We had dinner together, which offered an opportunity to say goodbye. We had hoped to see many research participants there as well, to earmark our departure from the field. However, as only a few interviewees showed up at the workshop, it appears that this was not the best strategy for leaving the field either. Perhaps a more informal and personal encounter might have better suited the desires of the participants. Consequently, the research team member wrote: "I still regularly doubt whether I handled this situation clearly or what I could have done differently. And I still do not know what is best to do in such situations." Our experiences suggest that demands around 'leaving the field' are context-specific and that maintaining close communication with those involved helps to ensure that potential harm is minimalised.

Summary points

- Leaving the field is not easy and, even when researchers have been transparent about their position, respondents might have built up other expectations during the research process.
- Although leaving the field may have consequences, the researcher might also over-think the consequences as participants may react in different ways. To minimise any harm, clear communication is key.
- It is useful to keep in contact with participants and to share any outputs of the research with them, including any changes that might have resulted from your work.

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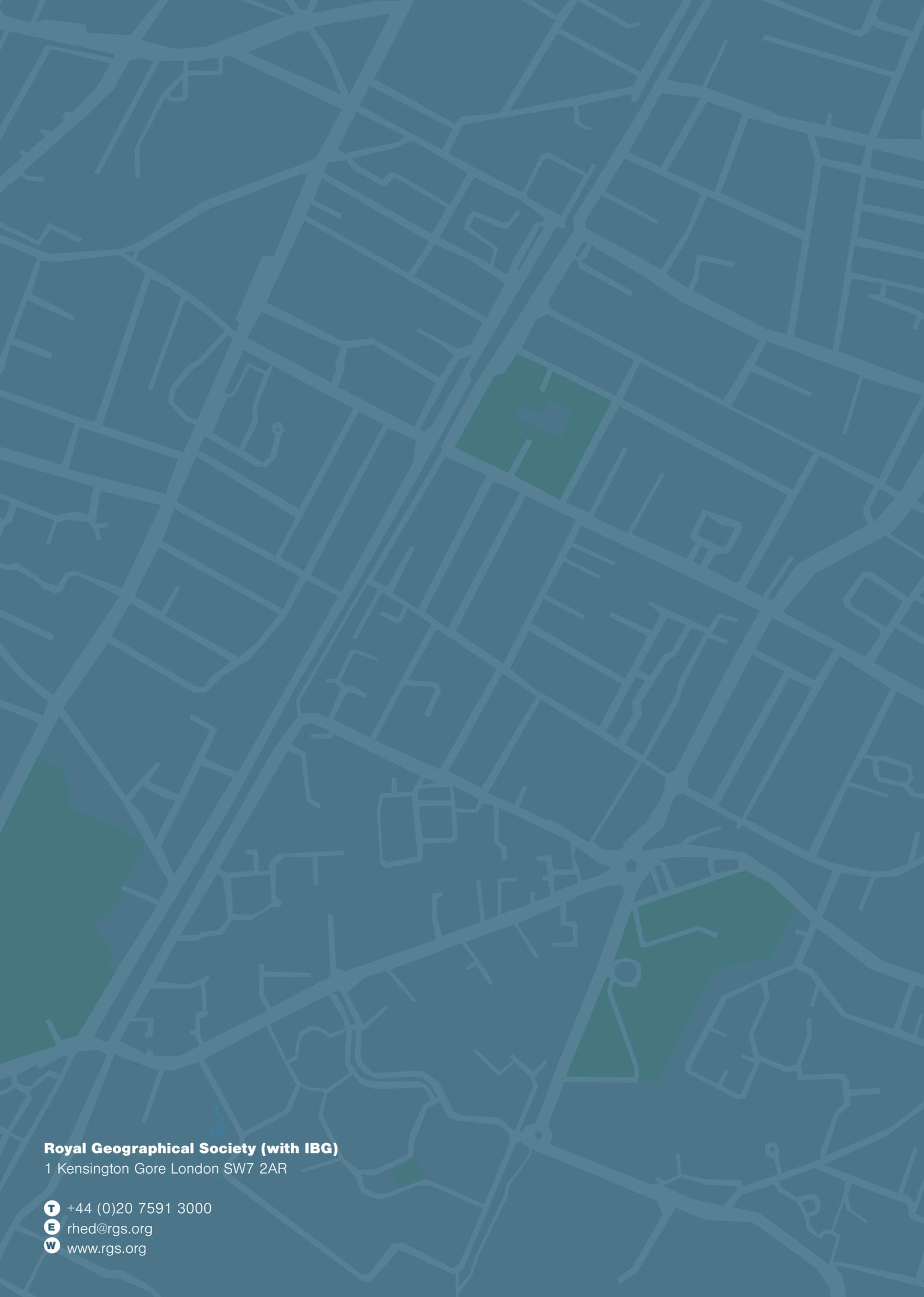
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