Ethics-in-practice in fragile contexts: Research in education for displaced persons, refugees and asylum seekers

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The rising numbers of forcibly displaced peoples on the move globally, and the challenges with providing access to education, reflect the shifting and complex times that we live in. Even though there has been a proliferation in educational research in the context of forced migration, in line with the increasing number of forced migrants, there has not been a commensurate focus on unpicking the increasingly complex ethical conditions within which researchers and participants operate. To examine this issue, the article provides three narrated accounts by researchers in this field and explores the interaction of researcher and author-researcher voice to critically appraise their research experience and identify critical reflections of understanding of ethics-in-practice in fragile contexts. These narratives are framed by the CERD (consequential, ecological, relational and deontological) ethical appraisal framework, which explores ethical thinking through four ethical lenses. The article contributes to a deeper understanding of ethics-in-practice as a central dimension in educational research. The implications of this work show how a one-size-fits-all approach to ethical appraisal is inappropriate for socially just educational research. This work also illustrates the importance of attending to relationships and voice of the forcibly displaced, both of which are often lacking in educational research in fragile contexts.

Keywords: forced migration; educational research; ethics-in-practice; fragile contexts

Introduction

Thousands of people flee their homes every day in search of safety. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated that over 70 million people have been forcibly displaced worldwide (UNHCR, 2019), with the result that quality education is not easily accessible by those affected. Half of the world's refugees of compulsory school age are out of school and, according to estimates by the UNHCR, only 1% of refugees participate in higher education (UNESCO, 2018; UNHCR, 2019).[1] The forcibly displaced are in the political spotlight and the target of funded development and humanitarian work (e.g. Global Challenges Research Fund, UK). Research communities are responding with work that explores the

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challenges in accessing education and examines educational needs, aspirations of and opportunities for displaced persons[2] in contexts that constitute forced displacement—in emergency settings, and in resettlement and asylum contexts.

We use the term 'fragile contexts' to highlight the inherently complex and multidimensional fragility experienced by the displaced in a range of situations and over a spectrum of intensity (OECD, 2018). We view fragility as arising through an unequal distribution of resources and social goods, by various forms of discrimination and through the denial of voice in key decisions impacting upon one's life. Central to appreciating the impact of fragility in these contexts is recognising the experience of trauma and its impacts on mental wellness as a result of these material inequities. Arising from this are questions as to whether research in this field might be reinforcing fragility and injustice—when treating displaced persons as 'subjects of research' (Omata, 2019) and failing them by negating their rights and ignoring their needs (UNESCO, 2018).

This article makes a case for research with deep commitments to and understanding of social justice through ensuring that the voices of the displaced and their communities are heard in the creation and dissemination of research. In doing this, it promotes research that enables overcoming injustices by 'dismantling institutionalised obstacles that prevent some people from participating on a par with others, as full partners in social interaction' (Fraser, 2010, p. 16).

To create effective conditions for the displaced to be able to participate in research processes, responsibilities are placed on researchers. They need to be strongly cognisant of the ethical challenges relating to fragile settings and ethical questions raised when planning and developing research with the forcibly displaced (e.g. see the June 2019 issue of the *Forced Migration Review*). However, they might lack strategies on which to draw to frame their studies appropriately or not know how to navigate micro-ethical issues arising as research progresses (Doná, 2007). In response, this article contributes to a deeper understanding of ethics-in-practice as necessary to complementing procedural ethical guidance (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Hopkins, 2007) for socially just research. Ethics-in-practice refers to anticipating, attending to and learning from the experience of conducting research, in parallel with following guidance articulated by institutional ethics review boards/committees (IRBs) and funders prior to research commencing.

This article is concerned with what makes socially just educational research in fragile contexts and examines how a holistic ethical appraisal approach can demonstrate respect for all those involved to support such aims. First, a principled response is offered, scaffolded by an application of the CERD (consequential, ecological, relational and deontological) ethical appraisal framework (Stutchbury & Fox, 2009; Fox & Mitchell, 2019). This explores ethical thinking through four ethical lenses. Second, three researchers who have undertaken research in the field present narratives documenting key events to reveal complex ethical practice in the field and an empirical understanding of ethics-in-practice in fragile contexts. They used the CERD framework to critically appraise their research experience and identify 'critical reflections' (IASFM, 2018) to illustrate how a procedural, one-size-fits-all approach to ethical appraisal is inappropriate if justice is to be offered to the forcibly displaced (Fisher, 1997; Krause, 2017). We acknowledge that this is neither a comprehensive nor an

exhaustive set of narratives but rather a starting point for active, critical engagement with ethical issues in fragile contexts.

Why focus on ethics-in-practice? An ethical appraisal for educational practice in fragile contexts

The heightened risks that forced displacement poses to both displaced participants and researchers requires thoughtful engagement and continuous critical reflection. The article's advocation of ethics-in-practice aligns with the International Association for the Study of Forced Migration's code of ethics (IASFM, 2018). 'Critical reflections' are advocated to stimulate ongoing reflexivity for ethical research, in line with the British Educational Research Association ethical guidance that 'ethical decision-making becomes an actively deliberative, ongoing and iterative process of assessing and reassessing the situation and issues as they arise' (BERA, 2018, p. 2). In the following sections these guidelines will be articulated through conceptual and then empirical reflections.

Consequential thinking: Anticipating and balancing risks and benefits

The consequential ethical thinking tradition, also known as results-based ethics, is linked to utilitarianism (Flinders, 1992) and associated with the philosophical thinking of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill (Brewster Smith, 1976; Driver, 2011). As a key theoretical perspective relevant to educational research (Hammersley & Traianou, 2014; Israel, 2015; Mustajaki & Mustajaki, 2017), such reasoning guides judgements about whether an act is right or wrong, depending on the results of that act. The more 'good' consequences an act produces, the better or more 'right' that act is and hence it is the act a person should choose when facing a moral dilemma (BBC, 2014).

Exemplifying the deliberative approach advocated by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018), the CERD framework can be operationalised by posing questions to which researchers respond to identify possible issues, explore options and so aid ethical decision-making. In the context of consequential ethical thinking, if the aspiration is to undertake research which improves the situation of vulnerable people, how do we know what would be a 'good' consequence and guide whether any one action would be the 'better' or 'right' choice? Can researchers entering the field anticipate such positive consequences and, further, can they identify or influence immediate beneficial changes in those environments?

Reviews of studies in fragile contexts confirm the prevalence of guidance to 'do no harm' (; Krause, 2017; Sandvik *et al.*, 2017), whilst at the same time stressing researchers' limited capacity to bring improvements in displaced people's lives (Omata, 2019). These reviews reveal an assumption that the principle of 'do no harm', when operationalised by academic researchers in the Global North,[3] is seen as a universal (Fisher, 1997) or principled 'rule' (Krause, 2017). However, for consequential risk–benefit analysis, universalities are not an imperative. This should not exclude considering the participants' perspectives of their needs and values, or diverse judgements as to what are 'good' or 'right' choices in research in fragile contexts.

A case-by-case evaluation is needed to justify any study, as is questioning who is morally placed to make such decisions (Hugman *et al.*, 2011). Clark-Kazak, based in Canada, proposes that decision-making about maximising benefits and minimising harm in research with refugees should be guided by principles of equity, and recognise the right to self-determination, researcher competence and research partnership (Clark-Kazak, 2017). This requires a critical analysis of how inequalities might influence judgements of beneficence or harm, and hence the 'permissibility of the research' (Qureshi, 2011, p. 97).

In terms of anticipatable risks, we note the largely experimental nature of many funded humanitarian projects and their evaluations (Sandvik *et al.*, 2017). While often innovative and underpinned by humanitarian principles, they potentially expose all concerned (researchers included) to unknown risks. This article advocates a joint approach to anticipating and balancing the risks and benefits of research, whilst not assuming this can be accomplished prior to entering the field (MacKenzie *et al.*, 2007; Pittaway *et al.*, 2010).

Ecological thinking: Competing agendas and disjunctions of knowledge

The IASFM (2018) code of ethics upholds principles of equity and partnership and recognises that there are intersecting unequal power relationships that are exacerbated in forced displacement settings, likely to affect research relationships and results. Similarly, BERA ethical guidance recommends risk–benefit analyses to take place early in the research planning, 'to reflect on how different stakeholder groups and the application of [an] ethic of respect can be considered in the research design' (BERA, 2018, p. 5). Ecological ethical thinking draws on the scientific recognition of the interdependency of relationships in a unified system, recommending that educational contexts as research sites should be imagined in the same way (Flinders, 1992). Figure 1 represents the ecological web of those involved in research in fragile contexts, developed for research (Onwuegbuzie *et al.*, 2013) from an interpretation of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model for understanding child development (Bronfenbrenner, 1988).

Power in this context is exerted over agendas, driven by particular accountabilities and prioritising particular forms of evidence and knowledge over others (McFarlane, 2010). Unequal power relationships can be identified, for example, between individual researchers and their institution's ethical review board or funder/donor; between donors and their sources of funding (whether national governments, private sponsors or multinational organisations); and, fundamentally, between the displaced and all others in the web. This power is not that of one party imposing or coercing others but rather, that which is exerted implicitly and often even unknowingly, but which very significantly affects agendas and behaviours. Once identified and recognised as being impactful, such power imbalances can be voiced and hence challenged.

Relational thinking: Relationship-building and trust needed

Linked to an ethics of care traced back to feminist approaches to research (Flinders, 1992), respect is now accepted as one of the universal aspirations for social research
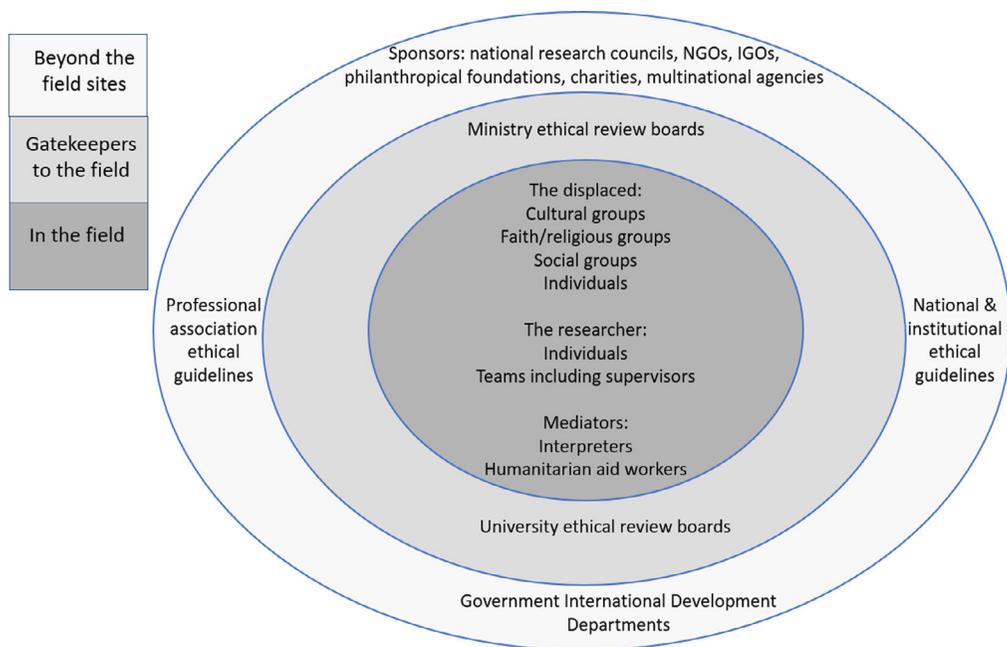
Figure 1.   An ecological representation of the web of potential relationships in educational research with the forcibly displaced [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

—closely associated with trust and relationship-building. With vulnerable participants in fragile contexts, an important principle is the right to self-determination. This means that those who have been forcibly displaced are enabled 'to make their own decisions about their lives and the degree of participation in research processes', in ways which privilege their rights and well-being over the objectives of the research (Clark-Kazak, 2017). Issues of vulnerability are particularly acute during recruitment and when securing consent (Mackenzie *et al.*, 2007; Pittaway *et al.*, 2010). A justice-care ethic is helpful in guiding researcher (and indeed all stakeholder) behaviours in the face of such vulnerabilities. One injustice is an imbalance between what researchers and the displaced will gain from the research. Despite intentions to offer reciprocity (Hammersley & Traianou, 2014), it is often assumed that little will change as a result of participation in research (Omata, 2019), which is unacceptable to those engaging in critical research. Benefit to disadvantaged participants is at the heart of research approaches such as Participatory Action Research, advocated seminally by Paulo Freire (1970), in which research should be driven by the aim of being in the service of the dispossessed in ways determined by that community. A morally binding and careful cost–benefit analysis (Fisher, 1997), and commitment to joint reporting and dissemination, show respect and 'uphold the dignity of our respondents in our portrayal of them—individually and collectively' (Clark-Kazak, 2017, p. 12).

Deontological thinking: Ethics-in-practice needs prioritisation

Deontology means necessity or obligation (after the Greek root *deontos*) (Flinders, 1992). The ecological web of stakeholders involved in research in this context (as in

Figure 1) reveals multiple obligations in research with the forcibly displaced that hold a researcher simultaneously accountable to different parties. According to Block *et al.* (2012), these are threefold:

- To be academically rigorous (and hence responsible to the community of educational researchers; BERA, 2018).
- To be relevant to driving policy development (Jacobsen & Landau, 2003).
- To promote autonomy and capacity-building of participants (Mackenzie *et al.*, 2007).

However, political and policy spheres of operation are very different to those of academia, with different languages, agendas and accountabilities underpinned by different assumptions and biases. This article argues that all those intending to sponsor, act as gatekeepers and/or enter the field require sufficient knowledge of the particular group of the displaced and the fragile contexts in which they will find themselves. This knowledge can be generated collectively to take collective responsibility for offering care and justice to these displaced.

Whilst this has a longer-term dimension, there are also short and medium-term responsibilities to attend to: how to manage entry to the field, the fieldwork itself and how to prepare to exit from the research site. The need for flexibility in the field (El-Khani *et al.*, 2013; Traianou, 2019) recognises the likelihood of unanticipated circumstances, due to external, internal or relational vulnerabilities (Fisher, 1997). An ethics-in-practice approach also requires partners and teams to jointly meet obligations of care for one another in order to deal with the unexpected (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). Partners need to self-evaluate their biases, limits to flexibility and constraints on agency as likely to compromise effective partnership. Further, planning for and paying attention to exiting the research site entails attention to each of the relationships in the web, with ultimate responsibility for how the displaced complete their engagement with the research. Problems have been reported related to representation and the potential to unwittingly cause harm (Pittaway *et al.*, 2010), and concerns raised about 'over- and under-researched' displaced people (Luetz, 2019; Omata, 2019). It is challenging to find and represent these voices. Ethics-in-practice suggests applying a critical deliberative approach, to question how respondents are selected and who they represent. Alternative solutions for giving the displaced a platform and feeding back to their communities include Herd and Pincus (2016), Nguyen (2018) and Yousafzi with Welch (2019).

Narratives of critical reflections: Demonstrating ethics-in-practice in fragile contexts

Here, we draw upon accounts of ethics-in-practice as a method of inquiry where three author-researchers were prompted to use the CERD framework (Stutchbury & Fox, 2009) to engage in thoughtful, critical reflection (IASFM, 2018) on their research practices with the forcibly displaced. Such in-depth examination of research stories from fragile contexts has the potential to inform approaches taken by educational research communities working in these settings.

In meetings as an authoring team, the three researchers were asked to recall ethical questions they were confronted with in working with displaced people. This process revealed and documented 'critical events' from their work in the field: those viewed as significant in generating knowledge that led to further action. Each researcher selected a critical event and used the framework to reflect on their ethical decision-making and how their experiences affirmed, clarified or challenged what they valued as principled ethics-in-practice. The three narratives presented are the outcomes of this process, selected for their distinct contextual differences and the nature of ethical challenges. Their order illustrates issues at different stages of the research process.

The researcher's voice plays a central role in the narratives as they document their reality in the field, evident in the use of 'I' or 'we' statements. In so doing the author-researcher brings to the fore their own research story, commitments, institutional and research experiences, while closely attending to the voices of the participants. These illustrate the inappropriateness of a procedural, one-size-fits-all approach to ethical appraisal (Fisher, 1997; Krause, 2017).

We recognise the limitations in the three narratives as representing authors' selections and their bias to author-researcher priorities. In our agency to construct these, we recognise the impact of our privilege as researchers in the Global North, all white Europeans/Americans without any personal experience of displacement. Despite our intentions to work towards justice for the displaced, we are aware that our work inevitably might reproduce unequal power relations.

Narrative 1: Fieldwork in refugee camps

Victoria is a humanitarian consultant and researcher whose work focuses on migration, voice and community engagement. Her narrative focuses on fieldwork experiences examining communication-as-aid with refugees and humanitarian workers in refugee camps on the Thai–Burma border. This analysis reflects on the need for institutional ethics approval processes to enable and encourage refugee participation and researcher reflexivity.

> This narrative reports my experience of negotiating institutional ethics approval to conduct fieldwork with refugees in three of the nine refugee camps on the Thai–Burma border as part of my doctoral studies. The fieldwork formed part of a qualitative study that sought to understand the information and communication needs of refugees deciding whether or not to return to Burma.

> The majority of refugees in these camps were of Karen ethnicity, with smaller numbers of other ethnic groups, including Burman, Kachin, Mon, Shan and Rakhine people, represented. I was unaware of other researchers at my university who had researched with similar populations and anticipated that my university's IRB would have little, if any, experience overseeing human ethics with these communities.

> Prior to commencing the fieldwork, I prepared an ethics application for the IRB. Advice I received from academic colleagues was either 'Give up. It will be impossible to get approval' or 'Treat the IRB process as a box-ticking exercise'. The first anticipated the risk-averseness of IRBs towards research with vulnerable populations. The second implied their decision need not prevent me from taking in-field decisions. Following submission, I had to respond to several rounds of feedback. I acquiesced to several requests that I knew were irrelevant or ill-suited to the context because there

was no opportunity to convince the IRB of my position without triggering subsequent rounds of time-consuming variations. After a stressful few months of back and forth, approval was granted.

In reflecting on the role the IRB had played in 'approving' my study, I appreciated how this manifest an imperialist epistemology. The IRB appointed itself as the arbiter of ethical practice with the refugee communities I was to study—irrespective of the degree of knowledge it possessed about the studied groups. In requiring that I seek ethics clearance before traveling to Thailand, the approval process did not demand nor support me in incorporating into my application the perspectives of members of the refugee communities themselves. It was not possible—due not least to the lack of internet access in the camps—to build relationships with refugees prior to arriving in Thailand. Instead, I sought input from several aid agencies working on the Thai–Burma border. Whilst international aid workers typically live and work in locations far from the camps and have very little contact with the refugee communities, they are accessible from Australia via Skype and email. The IRB accepted these interactions with aid workers—presumably as they represented the 'Global North'—as sufficient knowledge of the context to grant approval. A failure to prioritise input from the refugee communities who are the focus of the study perpetuates the tradition in western research of valuing western world views and failing to establish a methodology for dealing with other knowledge systems (Smith, 2013). If IRBs seek to promote research 'for' and 'with' refugee communities—and thereby do more than simply equipping institutions with a legal safeguard against liability—they must find a way to ensure that the voices of the displaced are heard in the research process.

In the field, ethical challenges different to those anticipated in my ethics plan arose on a regular basis. For example, I became aware of the limitations of my approved approach to participant recruitment after learning about the frustrations held by refugees from non-Karen backgrounds as feeling excluded from refugee leadership and organisational structures. By recruiting people through committees, I accessed Karen perspectives but concealed the voices of those who viewed themselves as marginalised in the camps. I found that emphasising compliance with a pre-approved ethics plan represents an unrealistic expectation and a burden on researchers that restricts, rather than enables, ethical practice in the field.

It is possible to address unanticipated ethics issues by applying for a variation to the approved ethics plan. I applied for a variation to reflect knowledge acquired in the field regarding more appropriate approaches to participant selection and recruitment. This was again a protracted approval process, preventing me from nimbly adapting—in consultation with members of the refugee communities—to further ethical problems as they became apparent. Furthermore, the delays created a financial burden for me as a self-funded postgraduate researcher, forcing me to extend the duration of the fieldwork and face the prospect of financial penalties if I submitted my thesis beyond my agreed registration period. The threat of such consequences creates an incentive for researchers to comply with a pre-approved IRB ethics plan.

Narrative 2: Humanitarian interpreter perspectives

Barbara is both a professional interpreter and a researcher with a research focus on increasing our understanding of the development of complex cognitive skills in this field. Her narrative focuses post-fieldwork on work conducted with humanitarian interpreters in the African context and discusses the burdens and benefits of participation in research. This reflects on consequential ethical thinking in practice and decisions made not to publish the results of research to avoid increasing the vulnerability of interpreters who participated in this longitudinal research study.

I am aware of significant needs for language mediation in fragile contexts, particularly as relates to communication between humanitarian organisations and vulnerable populations. I have come to appreciate that rarely, if ever, are interpreters trained, and often their proficiency in one of the two languages between which they interpret does not reach a level that allows them to deliver quality. Interpreters, also called fixers, cultural mediators, translators or 'terps', are usually nationals of the country in which a disaster or crisis has occurred. However, some organisations, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, employ only interpreters who are not local nationals. Others, such as UNHCR, with significant needs for interpretation across a vast number of languages, have come to rely on refugees interpreting for fellow refugees. Refugees are legally entitled to interpretation during registration, refugee-status-determination and resettlement hearings. Each of these scenarios harbours significant risks related to professional ethics. For interpreters, humanitarian and professional ethics show considerable overlap: both incorporate the principles of neutrality and impartiality. However, confidentiality, or professional secrecy, is central only to an interpreter's professional ethics.

I am based in an academic centre which focuses on improving the quality of humanitarian communication in the field and building higher education spaces in some of the world's largest refugee camps. We collected qualitative data from over 150 interpreters working in different humanitarian contexts during various blended (on-line and on-site) training courses provided between 2011 and 2017. Our data revealed that interpreters faced a multitude of challenges, ranging from language-related issues, to emotional issues and those related to their role definition. As our research proceeded, we were able to incorporate additional content into our courses to support and improve interpreter practice. Additionally, we designed and delivered seminars for those using interpreters in these contexts to support ethical decision-making by interpreters in a context that exhibited a significant power differential. Challenges related to language were mostly due to interpreters not mastering the languages they were working in, and not having been given the opportunity to improve language proficiency due to the urgency of humanitarian missions. As researchers we pointed this out to humanitarian organisations. Staff were cognisant of the limitations but did not offer additional training due to budget and resource constraints. Where only one or two interpreters were available in a setting, and where one of the languages was rare in the host nation, yet the main language spoken by those who had been displaced and thus needed assistance, the right of the refugee to an interpreter was revealed as often only nominally met. As a result, the vast majority of refugees was deprived of their right to an interpreter and their cases not really being heard.

In our needs analysis, we were aware of the often intangible but significant challenges which face interpreters resulting from emotional trauma and compassion fatigue in such settings. Our research revealed disparities in access to psychosocial support services, to which refugee interpreters were generally not entitled. An additional challenge surrounded inadequate role definition by either interpreters or officers conducting interviews/hearings. Interpreters were variably used as informants, cultural mediators, interpreters and decision-makers. Such role ambiguity could position them as targets from members of their own refugee community, if they were considered no longer as peers. I recorded examples of physical and emotional threats to interpreters from those whose cases had not been decided favourably, and of corruption whereby interpreters were bribed to 'tell the right story'.

To demonstrate our integrity as researchers with respect to preserving confidentiality we selected examples from themes aggregated across training sites so as to minimise chances of individual interpreters being recognised as 'informants'. However, in doing so, we were not able to clearly communicate specific egregious examples of rights violations and corruption. Yet the interpreters we had trained and who had shared their experiences with us expected us, as researchers, to act on and so improve their situation. Refugees tend to associate anyone coming to the field as representing an aid agency. They perceive our need to hear the 'right' story from which aid will flow.

Our needs analysis therefore saw us as trainers/researchers needing to walk a fine line between improving practice in humanitarian contexts and respecting professional ethics. These efforts presented serious challenges regarding the normative 'do no harm' approach. Improving our understanding of training needs, so essential to improving the quality of humanitarian communication in the field, also constrained us from not preventing harm to individuals whose voices we had heard, but whose messages we could not share.

Narrative 3: Newly arrived entrants

Sally is a researcher, activist and English language teacher, whose work focuses on enhancing educational opportunities and outcomes for refugees settled in Australia. Her narrative focuses on exiting the research site and draws on a qualitative longitudinal study of 11 newly arrived humanitarian entrants navigating the tertiary education system in the settlement context of Australia. This problematises static and decontextualised institutional approaches to engaging with issues of vulnerability and highlights the complexities of communicating the purpose and public impacts of research to the target populations of the linguistically diverse displaced.

I am concerned about transitions into and through the Australian tertiary system by the forcibly displaced, which can be characterised as anything but 'smooth' or linear. The basis of this reflection is on a study with newly arrived humanitarian entrants who had been resettled in a regional Australian city as they sought to move from the Adult Migrant English Programme into undergraduate studies via an enabling programme.

Throughout the longitudinal inquiry, ongoing consent to participate was sought—through formal consent and participation information documents, which were translated into participants' first language—at the beginning of the project and via verbal questioning at the start of each interview. This explained that the information participants provided would be used to advocate for better educational supports for student transitions and language needs. Moreover, we were careful to represent our participants in ways that protected their identities, and to include data that fairly represented our interactions, for example, adding context to comments to contextualise the participants' talk, pointing out where our questioning had elicited particular responses, and avoiding depicting them in deficit or pejorative terms. We also regularly outlined our intention to draw on their data for publications, such as journal articles and book chapters.

However, a key incident happened a year after the project formally ended that led me to question how effective our messaging had been, and therefore how successfully we had 'exited' the field. When a book I co-wrote on refugees and higher education was published (Stevenson & Baker, 2018) I added a Facebook post to advertise this (for me, monumental) event. I had included a case study of one of the participants, with whom I had remained friends, and had sought their consent for this inclusion during our final interview. To my post, another participant added a comment asking whether he was included in the book? I experienced a moment of acute panic: had I adequately communicated my intentions when it came to data collection and the different ways this might represent them? This panic resulted from worry that I had not done the best by my participants/friends.

I quickly responded to say that I had not specifically written about him in the book, but that I had written about how difficult it is for recent arrivals like him (and the other participants) to engage in education. I asked 'Is that OK?' He responded with a 'thumbs up' image. I also told him I was writing something about him for an article on the competition between education and settlement for

new arrivals and offered him the opportunity to read what I was writing. He responded that he did not need to read my writing, but that he would like to buy a copy of the book. He then asked me to be a referee for a job interview, for which he was subsequently appointed. It was clear from his response that he was pleased for me (as the writer) and that our relationship had not been damaged by what I had misinterpreted as a concern. Nevertheless, this incident prompted me to contact my other participant/friends and check that they understood that I was still writing about, and advocating for, better access to and support for forced migrants in higher education. I am left feeling unsettled. In retrospect, I feel I could have done a better job of communicating what participating in research entails beyond data collection.

Listening to the voices of the forcibly displaced: A discussion

Together, these narratives highlight the benefits of taking an ethics-in-practice approach to examine whether educational research has the potential to answer the call that 'true justice will be when we no longer need a voice for the voiceless' (Nguyen, 2018, p. 20). The narratives offer insights into the critical and reflexive approach needed by researchers throughout the research process, in particular paying attention to vulnerability and voice. This shows how research vulnerability needs to be considered a relational construct (Fisher, 1999) and one which all those in the ecological web of a study are implicated. The CERD framework is used to organise this discussion of the narratives.

Consequential ethical thinking: Do good as well as do no harm

It is clear how all three researchers are committed to their studies to 'do good' as well as aspire to 'do no harm'. They also talk about how aspirations are not straightforward to enact. Barbara (Narrative 2) talks about how researchers to whom problems have been revealed can expect that they will be addressed when, in fact, the researchers have committed to protecting their identities and keeping sensitive information confidential. Victoria (Narrative 1) and Sally (Narrative 3) reflect on their worries about not representing the full views of the displaced, either because they have not been included in the sample for data collection or in the narratives used when reporting. All three narratives illustrate how it is only through being in the field and implementing the studies that potential issues come to the fore, such as marginalisation within camp structures, an absence of psychosocial assistance for interpreters and responses of participants to research outputs. These issues could not have been anticipated, which therefore pulls the limitations of IRBs into sharp relief. Without researchers on the IRB panel who have experienced the complexities of working in fragile contexts, their legitimacy to act as powerful gatekeepers is questionable. As noted in Narrative 2, once identified through an ethics-in-practice approach, lessons from ethical dilemmas can be incorporated into interventions during later phases of a study. The narratives also revealed challenges associated with vulnerabilities which might not have been anticipated and could not be addressed in the context of the studies, such as the physical and emotional threats to interpreters (Narrative 2) or grievances held of marginalisation (Narrative 1). Again, these issues remind us how the institutional mandate that limits attention to ethics before accessing the field—

effectively ignoring attention to micro-ethics during and leaving the field—is inade-quate. Researchers are therefore likely to need in-field support for risk–benefit analy-sis—especially in such fragile contexts for research (Palmer *et al.*, 2014)—as well as to guide problem-solving arising through to publication and dissemination (Dovemark, 2019).

Ecological ethical thinking: Recognising power imbalances and underpinning biases

These narratives provide limited evidence of a full and critical awareness of the inter-connectedness of all concerned. The chain of information supporting access to the refugee camps in Narrative 1 prioritises views of the IRB and of the powerful aid agencies. By the time the needs and preferences of the displaced were heard, the IRB processes were too slow to allow the researcher to respond. The power of the IRB over the researcher, in terms of pressures to comply or lose their registration, is also reported as tacitly present. The principal motivation of IRBs to legally protect their institution can be argued to be driven by imperialist, positivist approaches (e.g. Smith, 2013) and the biases of those in the Global North (e.g. Qureshi, 2011). Fear of reputational damage also contributes to university IRB risk aversion (Zywicki, 2007). Similarly, the power relations between the humanitarian agency and refugees were outlined in Narrative 2, where biases in favour of the agency and violations of humanitarian principles were observed. To maintain respect for individuals' anonym-ity, a decision was made by the project team to incorporate any violations identified into the training itself, hence improving course design and provision and building human capacity which acknowledged and dealt with power imbalances. A limitation we recognise in the narratives presented is that they do not offer the accounts of the powerful, including the accountabilities and agendas which affected their roles and behaviours. Whilst we have foregrounded hearing and responding to the voices of the displaced, we have not intended to silence those in the outer rings of Figure 1. We briefly consider how the roles and relationships of two key players in the ecological web—IRBs and humanitarian agencies—need to be reviewed.

IRBs in universities hold responsibility for ethical oversight of research with humans. Whilst such oversight is necessary to ensure the quality of research con-ducted, approval practices can be overly procedural and inertial to responding to changes in thinking about ethical reflexivity (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Hamilton, 2016). More perniciously, in the case of studies that are taking place beyond settings in the Global North (Narratives 1 and 2), approval could be considered a colonial practice (McFarlane, 2006; Beach & Arrazola, 2019; Busher & Fox, 2019). Narrative 1 raises the question of whether board members have the experience and expertise to know what is culturally appropriate in specific contexts. Indeed, IRBs may be unfa-miliar with the requirements of research in humanitarian settings (Chynoweth & Martin, 2019). In meeting our aim to be respectful to all concerned, it is important to note that these challenges are not raised against all IRBs and there is a move to a more dialogic approach (e.g. Mustajoki & Mustajoki, 2017) to determining a university's support for a proposal. Ethical work by any board will be dependent on their leader-ship, membership and approaches (Busher & Fox, 2019). In fact, both sides are

culpable in making a full and meaningful engagement with ethical appraisal aimed 'for' the good of all concerned.

Other powerful players in the field are the humanitarian agencies who may allow access in the field (Narrative 1) and determine which forms of research are worthy of pursuing and funding. Such agencies are often under pressure to deliver programmes that demonstrate impact as well as 'value for money', alongside the imperative to obtain funding. This can compromise how research is conducted with refugees and how their experiences are represented (Narrative 2). However, non-governmental organisations and international non-governmental organisations are increasingly considering their options for engaging with evidence and developing more strategic approaches to using, generating and communicating research, often involving research collaborations with academics (Fransman, 2019). One opportunity is their scope to be more flexible and responsive than national/state organisations. They can develop research in-house and encourage and coordinate efforts to minimise 'research fatigue' among the displaced by assessing whether primary data collection is necessary, increasing data sharing with other agencies and/or universities and undertaking joint needs assessments for better knowledge management and cross-sectoral analysis. However, tension between collaboration, peer learning and competition in this field remains (Fransman, 2019). Assumptions about knowledge persist, which value certain knowledge practices over others, often to the detriment of more ethical, adaptive and participatory ways of working. In the best scenarios, humanitarian agencies bound by established humanitarian principles (see Slim, 2015) and experienced in their field of funded research will engage in ethical reflexivity (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004).

Relational ethical thinking: A commitment to respectful representation

All three narratives illustrate commitment to respectful representation, aiming for the voices of the displaced and their communities to be heard in the research process. However, in practice, issues are revealed. In Narrative 1, the displaced who might have been the central participants could not be approached until after IRB approval and were not identified until in the field. Even in the situation where the participants were known and the researcher–participant relationship was strong, co-design was not practical (Narrative 3). However, the narratives reveal care as the researchers built trust in their studies, evidenced through the commitment, despite considerable hurdles, to renegotiate recruitment to be more culturally appropriate (Narrative 1), to act on the information gifted to them to inform future training (Narrative 2) and the commitment to long-standing relationships with the displaced, enabled by social media (Narrative 3). Whilst aiming to enact socially just research which reduces the power imbalances in both structural and agentic ways, the researchers instead felt unempowered to act on the evidence gathered, leaving the field frustrated.

This demonstrates the need for an interconnected commitment to studies where all power imbalances are recognised in order to be challenged and overcome. For trust and cultural understanding to grow, sustained arrangements for committed relationship-building are needed. This places responsibilities on those furthest from the displaced (see Figure 1) in levels holding strategic responsibilities and commitments. This would involve repeated employment of locally knowledgeable researchers as

preferable to utilising consultants on short visits. With relationship-building comes an increased appreciation of one another's agendas and needs and the potential for shared aims to be agreed upon, to maximise the chances of improving the situations of the forcibly displaced. Partnership between all those represented in Figure 1 should increase the agency of all concerned. This should involve developing ways of working which ensure full participation of relevant partners, to anticipate and agree on mechanisms for negotiation and conflict resolution and clarify a vision to promote co-ownership of the research (Clark-Kazak, 2017). With this arises the potential for co-learning (Fisher, 1999) and co-research, with academics increasingly looking for ways to train and invite those displaced to become peer researchers (Krause, 2017).

What clearly emerges from this reflection and the analysis of the three case studies is a need for a meso level of oversight, to ensure that researchers have a safe space to unpack and engage in critical dialogue of the micro-ethical issues that they encounter, and their reactions to them. Rather than this being part of the institutional architecture of the IRB, these could be established by groups of researchers who work/research in fragile contexts. By working in ways that promote collective thinking, but while maintaining the tenets of ethics with regard to protecting from harm and acting with beneficence, respect and justice, the relational element of ethics-in-practice could be foregrounded more caringly and carefully. This is particularly significant in view of the patchy access to ethical training made available to new researchers.

Deontological ethical thinking: Prioritising obligations to the displaced

If we hold these narratives up against the three-way obligations identified by Block *et al.* (2012), all three researchers:

- generated methodologically sound research designs supported as ethically robust by their respective IRBs;
- intended to generate relevant evidence—to better satisfy the information and communication needs of refugees deciding whether or not to return to Burma (Narrative 1), to better support the training needs of interpreters in fragile contexts (Narrative 2) and to advocate for better educational support for the transition of the forcibly displaced which accommodates their diverse language needs (Narrative 3);
- were unable to maximise the hoped-for capacity-building for the displaced in their studies.

The narratives demonstrate how the obligations the researchers felt to the displaced were constrained by the external contexts for their research during planning, in the field and when reporting. Questions about who decides what is worthwhile, responsible, respectful and dutiful research are evidenced here as being asymmetrical and essentially unjust, regardless of researchers' personal attempts to offer hope through showing care.

Conclusions about ethics-in-practice in fragile contexts

The article concludes with implications for researchers, including the IRBs and grant funders, to redefine fragility, vulnerability and approaches to research which exercise

urgency and justice. This is in the spirit of the BERA educational guidelines, which 'recognise and celebrate the diversity of approaches in educational research and promote respect for all those who engage with it' (BERA, 2018, p. iii).

This article has held up a mirror to the field of educational research in fragile contexts and shown, through analysis, the power and voice differentials which, once revealed, should not be ignored. The ethical lessons can also be applied to others who may also be considered 'vulnerable'—not just those who have experienced forced migration—in the pursuit of educational research. It offers a way forward, returning to the principles of humanitarianism and aspirations for justice, whilst being attentive to the calls of economic and political agendas. This involves an explicit awareness of the accountabilities and how these constrain or indeed can enable research 'for' and 'with', rather than 'on' or 'about' the displaced. This critical lens invites research partner contributors to take a team-based, strategic and responsible approach to research. This might be using participatory action research approaches, as has already been harnessed with displaced people in development research (e.g. van der Velde *et al.*, 2009; Collie *et al.*, 2010) and certainly should be based on a strongly dialogic approach by all concerned (e.g. Mustajoki & Mustajoki, 2017; Busher & Fox, 2019). Such research needs to adopt an ethics-in-practice approach, bespoke to the coming together of research stakeholders in any particular context in which the displaced find themselves. By respecting all agendas at play we can, together, help the displaced voice their needs and contributions towards educational, humanitarian and development goals. Hence, this article offers a way forward to not only identify but also close knowledge gaps relevant to the pressing concerns of fragility, vulnerability and urgency.

In following our own line of argument about maximising the benefits of a study, going back to consequential ethical reasoning and to show integrity we needed to think about how best to disseminate the claims made. If these are to be made on behalf of those who have not been enabled to voice their opinions and be evaluated as valid and meaningful to those whom they seek to represent, we now need to take these discussions to the camps and settlements and to reach the lives of those living in fragility or in the process of being resettled. We also need to think about different vehicles to reach those working in humanitarian, development and educational academic and funding arenas who plan to conduct such research. Towards addressing power imbalances for the displaced, they need to demonstrate a commitment to building their research skills to enable meaningful contribution to project design. This would build capacity to set their own agendas and generate knowledge, so acting on the principles of aspiring to equity, self-determination, researcher competence and partnership, called for by Clark-Kazak (2017). This needs a set of principles on which to base evidence-building.

Ways forward might include:

- co-designing courses with the displaced which are then made open access to reach those in similar fragile contexts;
- collaboration between projects sharing monitoring, evaluation and scientific data to look for synergies in the spirit of parsimony of data collection in the field;

- developing ethical guidelines which advocate flexible, collaborative and informed ethical appraisal and which can be shared with IRBs receiving applications for studies in such contexts, as a 'bottom-up' approach with the field informing ethics boards;
- collaboration with humanitarian agencies to maximise awareness and use of existing data, while ensuring data relevance in particular settings.

These ideas relate back to the call for relationship-building within and across the ecological web of those interested in, situated in and/or affected by fragile contexts. This requires a long-standing commitment and strategic approach to ethical research, with all committing to the bottom line that the research should be 'with' and 'for' rather than 'on' or 'about' the displaced.

Ethical guidelines

Ethical approval was gained from the research ethics committees of the higher education institutions to which the three vignettes relate. The study on which Barbara's vignette is based gained approval from the University of Geneva and followed applicable ethical guidance. The studies on which Victoria and Sally's vignettes are based gained approval from the University of Newcastle, and in the case of Sally also the University of New South Wales, and followed national ethical guidance in Australia. The article itself aligns itself with and refers directly to BERA (2018) *Ethical guidelines for educational research* and IASFM (2018) *Research code of ethics*.

Conflict of interest

There are no conflicts of interest related to the publication of this article.

Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

NOTES

1 Of the 7.4 million refugees of primary and secondary school-going age under UNHCR's mandate, at least 4 million do not have access to education. At the primary level, 61% of refugee children are enrolled in school, compared to 92% of children globally. The gap is even larger at secondary level, with 23% of refugee youth enrolled compared with 84% of youth globally. Less than 1% of refugee youth are estimated as accessing tertiary education, compared to 37% of global youth.
2 Whilst the terms 'displaced persons' and 'refugees' are often used as equivalents, they cover a range of different personal histories. In this article we will refer to the forcibly displaced, which covers refugees, asylum seekers, etc. Ethical representation of those who are the focus of this article is one of the issues covered in it.
3 Global North is used to refer to those countries which might otherwise be referred to as More Developed, sometimes Western, as opposed to those countries in the Global South (Halai & Wiliam, 2011) or Low-and-Middle-Income countries. It is accepted as a limited generalisation and a potentially colonial view of the world. In this article, Australia would be considered as in the Global North.

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