Research with former refugees

Moving towards an ethics in practice

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Research into issues relating to people from refugee backgrounds has proliferated in line with the explosion in the numbers of people seeking refuge globally. In this think piece, we reflect on what it means to research with former refugees in contexts of resettlement in an academic and social climate dominated by audit culture and austerity politics. Drawing on an interdisciplinary literature and existing institutional ethics standards, we discuss key, often unaddressed, ethical issues which manifest throughout research processes of recruitment, data collection and dissemination. Specifically, we problematise static and decontextualised approaches to engaging with issues of vulnerability, fair selection, informed consent and the burdens and benefits of participation, and point towards the benefits of taking an ethics in practice approach. In doing so, we hope to make a useful contribution to our collective strategic repertoires to carry out ethical research in practice with former refugees.

Keywords: refugees; corporate academy; ethics in practice; reflexive research

Introduction

We started conceptualising this article in 2017, during one of many flashpoints that have come to characterise Australia's conflicted relationship with refugees and asylum seekers – the Coalition Government's proposal to increase English proficiency requirements in the citizenship test (Burke, Thapliyal & Baker, 2018). This was followed by the permanent and forceful closure of the Manus Island detention centre. The dehumanising treatment of more than six hundred male refugees and asylum seekers who peacefully resisted this decision added to Australia's growing global notoriety with regard to its policies and practices around people seeking asylum. Next, the Christmas spirit flourished along with a racialised moral panic centred on 'dangerous' young African-Australian youth and their crime gangs in Victoria. At the beginning of this year, we learned that the Immigration Department had asked the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) to delay security checks for asylum seekers who arrived by boat in 2013 so that they would miss the deadline for permanent protection. And most recently, many asylum seekers living in the Australian community have had their income support slashed pushing them closer to poverty and low-skilled/exploitative jobs.

It is in this climate dominated by anti-refugee, anti-immigrant protectionist and divisive rhetoric in politics and media (MacDonald, 2017) in which we reflect on what it means to do ethical research about people from

refugee backgrounds (PfRBs). We have been inspired and educated in this enterprise by sustained local and global academic and community activism to protect and promote the rights of asylum-seekers and refugees (Tazreiter, 2010; Block, Riggs & Haslam, 2013; Niggs, 2015; Refugee Council of Australia, 2018). The purpose of this think piece is not to debate whether it is ethical to undertake research with PfRBs; rather we hope to open a space for discussion so as to enhance our collective capacity to do ethical research. We approach this think piece as the beginnings of a dialogue with interdisciplinary colleagues across Australia and beyond, with a view to provoking discussion and exchange of ideas and experiences. Our hope is to deepen understandings, expand our collective strategic repertoires, and extend the case for engaging in ethical reflexivity as educational researchers working with PfRBs.

A context for refugee studies

Globally, nearly 66 million people are living in situations of forced migration, seeking to escape persecution, violence and famine from the consequences of war and political conflict across the world (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2018). As readers will know, the vast majority of the world's refugees reside in countries neighbouring their own. While some countries in the Global North invest resources in highly selective labelling and sorting between worthy/unworthy/dangerous migrants, others have opened their doors wider to offer refuge to those fleeing conflict, most recently for example, Canada. Similarly, while some discourses are focused on containing and managing the refugee problem, others have sought to understand and resist the demonisation of displaced peoples and people from refugee backgrounds.

In Australia, race/ethnicity, religion, class, and gender have influenced the extent to which migrant groups experience discrimination and exclusion (Watkins & Noble, 2013). While the White Australia policy officially ended five decades ago, migrant populations continue to have very different experiences of settlement particularly in relation to English language learning, education, and other support services (Cuthill & Scull, 2011; Farrell, 2006; Refugee Council of Australia, 2015; Terry *et al.*, 2016).

Global policy tensions are mirrored in academic discourse about refugees, which has seen a resurgence in the last decade. In particular, as educational researchers, we have noted a marked increase in empirical research

and literature speaking of/to the challenges and possibilities for refugee education. From our vantage point, there is a preponderance of research on the educational resettlement and transitions of school students from refugee backgrounds. This body of literature has provided valuable insights into the gendered and racialised barriers to education (basic and tertiary) and employment including inadequacies in literacy and language education, racial/cultural discrimination and exclusion, unresponsive and inflexible education and welfare systems, and persistently under-resourced policies and programs for resettlement and transition (most recently see for example Naidoo & Brace, 2017; Bajwa *et al.*, 2017). While we recognise and applaud these contributions, there has not been a similar growth in scholarly engagement with ethical challenges of doing sensitive research with former refugees in educational settings and other contexts of resettlement. With a few notable exceptions, (Sampson, 2015; Lenette, 2016; Sidhu, 2017), the extant literature is largely based on conducting research with people living in protracted displacement such as Australian detention centres, United Nations refugee camps, and as temporary asylum seekers in countries neighbouring conflict zones such as Egypt, Jordan, and Kenya.

In the discussion that follows, we foreground educational settings because of the central role that education plays in the experience of resettlement. In these neoliberal times, educational and other resettlement agencies are key sites for the operationalisation of austerity politics and audit cultures. The dominance of competitive market logics has contributed to the growth of the 'shadow state' made up of non-profit, voluntary and other forms of nongovernmental organisations that deliver services on behalf of the welfare state. These economic imperatives are closely linked with political imperatives to surveil, discipline, order and otherwise manage international migrations.

In the corporate academy, there is a strong imperative to 'do more with less' and as quickly as possible. Like Lindorff (2010) in this journal, we recognise the persistence of managerial agendas, funding and assessment regimes, and related hierarchical power structures, which operate to co-opt research projects with progressive intentions. Recent cuts to public funding have exacerbated structural inequalities in distribution of power and other resources in higher education – for students as well as researchers. Now more than ever, those of us doing sensitive research with human subjects, including former refugees, must continually engage with the question – research for whose benefit?

Ethical research with human subjects: Where is the conversation today?

The progress made on refining ethical approaches to doing sensitive research with human subjects owes a large debt to social science researchers who have made the time to publish reflexive investigations of their research experience (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Christie, 2005; Hugman, Bartolomei & Pittaway, 2011; Block *et al.*, 2012; Gillam, 2013). To begin with, these scholars have troubled the capacity of the label 'refugee' to encompass the diversity of experiences that accompany forced displacement and migration. McDowell (2013) offers an alternative term – 'refugeeness' – for a deeper understanding of the experience of forced displacement and migration, which is produced at the intersection of causes of displacement (e.g. armed conflict, natural disaster, political persecution) as well as the nature/mode of displacement (e.g. official and unofficial refugee camps, detention centres, resettlement).

More complex and situated conceptions of what it might mean to be a refugee have also complicated our understanding of the multiple risks for enacting symbolic violence in sites of refugee research (Block *et al.*, 2012). Feminist, Indigenous, postcolonial, and qualitative scholars to name just a few have critically examined the Enlightenment-modernist paradigm which shape dominant conceptions of knowledge production and institutional ethical standards in the Northern academy (Mohanty, 1988; Collins, 1990; Smith, 1999; Denzin & Giardina, 2007; Fischer & Kothari, 2011). This body of scholarship has provided ethical researchers with a range of strategies to excavate and interrogate the 'partialities, inequalities and techniques of power' embedded in the relationships and discourses that constitute sites and processes of academic knowledge production (Christie, 2005, p. 240). In short, this body of literature has vigorously questioned key assumptions about value-free research and relatedly, the nature and purposes of ethics in research. As Edwards and Mauthner (2002) point out, we also need to problematise assumptions about when ethical issues are likely to occur (e.g. only at the start of a project); how informed consent can offset any potential harm caused during research; and, of course that a project approved by an institutional ethics committee is entirely ethical. Whose values determine what counts as legitimate knowledge and legitimate producers of knowledge? These are fundamental questions to guide any research inquiry involving human subjects, as are questions about justice, rights, caring, and democratic participation (most

recently see Gifford, 2013; Fobear, 2015; Phillip & Bell, 2017). Cumulatively, it has contributed to significant shifts in research practice as well as institutional standards for ethical research away from assumptions that all ethical issues can be resolved at the beginning of the study and through establishing participant consent.

Although institutional standards are not a focal point in this think piece, it must also be acknowledged that Australian human research ethics committees (HRECs) and their counterparts in the Northern Academy have evolved to more nuanced understandings of socio-cultural diversity and therefore what constitutes vulnerability and sensitivity in research with human subjects. In the context of Australian education research, for example, there are at least three national frameworks that provide valuable resources for designing and implementing culturally-sensitive and otherwise ethical research projects. These include the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2007), which requires researchers to be responsive to the linguistic and cultural diversity of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people. It also recognises the ethical significance of communicating information to all participants in first language or dialect (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2007). The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) provides more detailed guidelines for doing research with indigenous populations based on values of human rights and full and fair participation (AIATSIS, 2012). The Code of Ethics of the Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE) reminds researchers to 'inform themselves about cultural, religious, gender and other significant differences' in all research populations and to 'be sensitive to and respect these differences in the planning, conduct and reporting of their research' (AARE, 1993, p. 5). In doing research on social groups, the Code also requires researchers to be vigilant to causing harm through one or more of the following outcomes: stereotyping, creation or perpetuation of prejudice, loss of privacy and dignity, affront resulting from insensitivity, loss of interpersonal and intergroup relationships (AARE, 1993).

For logistical reasons, HRECs cannot and do not oversee ethics in practice; however, researchers can and should (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). In this journal, Lindorff (2010) has similarly argued for non-medical researchers to move beyond compliance and utilitarian mentalities focused on minimising and/or expediting the review process or even avoiding the unethical. From this perspective, ethics is not 'simply a technical matter… to be left to experts

…but everybody's business' (Hugman, Bartolomei & Pittaway, 2011, p. 15). We find the concept of micro ethics particularly useful here in contemplating and being responsive to the ethical dimensions of everyday research practice (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Doná, 2007).

Ethics: From procedure to practice

A micro ethics approach enables a shift in thinking about ethics in terms of procedures to be completed prior to commencing research to a more expansive conception of ethics in practice (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). Here, ethical behaviour takes the form of responding to ongoing 'ethical dilemmas', which occur before, throughout and beyond data collection components of any research project. In what follows, we briefly unpack the key tenets of human research ethics, using the critical reflexivity offered by applying a micro ethics lens.

Vulnerability?

As our understanding of 'refugeeness' becomes increasingly complex, so too should the ways we think about what it means to do sensitive research with human subjects. One way to respond to potentially sensitive research is to rely exclusively on predetermined categories of vulnerable groups of people such as those provided by institutional ethical standards. However, to move beyond compliance mentalities is to think beyond institutional ethical standards and checklists of potentially vulnerable research problems. Static categories of vulnerable populations are problematic because '[they] imply that vulnerability is somehow inherent in a particular type of person and that it is absent from categories of people who are not listed' (p. 906). Instead, we are persuaded by Perry's (2011) argument that vulnerability is 'not a characteristic inherent… but is rather an interaction between the participant's characteristics and the nature of the study' (p. 909). For Perry (2011), all participants have the potential to be vulnerable not just those who belong a priori categories such as pregnant women, children, and prisoners (Perry, 2011).

On a related note, researchers have become increasingly sensitive to the possible traumas they could trigger through insensitive questioning, for example, or through probing past lived experiences of former refugees (BenEzer & Zetter, 2014). However, there are still more questions that need to be asked when doing sensitive research. What is key here is developing a situated understanding of vulnerabilities in relation to socio-historical contexts and the particularity of lived experiences of participants.

Let us take an example of a common ethical issue related to language and recruitment in relation to culturally and linguistically diverse participants, including former refugees. Potential participants with limited English and/ or literacy in any language are not vulnerable because of some inherent deficiency in ability. Instead, their vulnerability is created by a lack of adequate attention or care on the part of researchers who fail to make information about the research project available in an accessible language as well as comprehensible by someone without an academic background (Perry, 2011).

Fair selection

Another aspect of recruitment when doing sensitive research in resettlement contexts has to do with fairness in selection of participants and being sensitive to possibilities for coercion and exploitation in recruitment procedures. There is an increased awareness of how power imbalances can be perpetuated during research with refugees living in displacement when researchers recruit through pre-existing relationships with service provider agencies. In these contexts, it is not uncommon for people to be recruited simply because of their availability due to their deep dependence on aid and service providers or advocacy organisations. Clark-Kazak (2017) reminds us that we cannot create a short cut by relying on refugee organisations/ advocacy networks solely to seek consent. It is always important to ensure that potential research respondents understand their right to refuse without disadvantage to avoid inadvertently creating conditions conducive to manipulation or compromised position (Lindorff, 2010).

In countries of settlement, the gatekeeping landscape is different but still present. First, the term resettlement is inadequate to capture the complexity of experience that accompanies relocation of refugees to an unfamiliar country and culture. Resettlement does not begin and end with physical relocation to Australia. It is a complex and ongoing process, which every former refugee navigates in her or his own way. To be sure, resettled populations continue to rely heavily on relationships with service providers including health and educational institutions, social workers, translators/interpreters, and others positioned as cultural mediators.

We also need to keep in mind that former refugees figure prominently in over-saturated research areas and over-researched populations in Australia (Clark-Kazak, 2017). This presents an ongoing dilemma for researchers who are committed to working with socially disadvantaged groups but must also navigate unceasing pressure to secure grant

funding in neoliberal university environments. From an ethical perspective, when choosing the focus of a research project, we have an obligation to 'take account of the volume of research being published about a group' and continually assess 'the desirability of shifting the emphasis of their work' (AARE, 1993, p. 7).

Given this context, recruitment and selection strategies therefore need to be highly sensitive to possibilities for power dynamics around class, gender, race/ethnicity, religion as well as language which can create unintended forms of pressure and coercion to participate in research with unknown but status-laden researchers (Sidhu, 2017; Steimel, 2017). In other words, researchers must be alert to relationships of dependency and hierarchy perpetuated by the outsourcing and privatisation of resettlement services and highly bureaucratic public welfare systems. Given the issues we have just raised about fair selection, how then can we approach the process of seeking informed consent?

Informed consent

We have previously discussed ethical issues related to language and recruitment. Decisions about interpreters and translation of documents should not be treated as matter-of-factly or as another procedure to be completed for institutional ethics approval. Language barriers to participation can be navigated in culturally-sensitive ways by providing information about the research project in accessible, first language of participants as well as ensuring that participants become familiar with the workings of academic research. Thus, the quality of translation matters as do power dynamics that may exist between the interpreter and participants.

In addition to translation of information statements and consent forms, which is increasingly prevalent, we have found it useful to engage with processes of oral consent, even where participants are literate. Seeking oral consent through dialogue is an effective way to ensure that participants have a full understanding of what the research project will involve as well as their own rights as research participants. Drake (2014) describes his approach as follows:

> Following the provision of information, in an accessible manner, the person is able to describe what the research is about, that participation is voluntary, and has the option of withdrawing from the study at any time. The person should also be able to describe any risks or benefits of participation (p. 314).

The practice of obtaining oral consent where culturally appropriate is increasingly validated by HRECs (Tomkinson, 2015; Clark-Kazak, 2017). However, we have also learned to approach oral consent as a process (rather than a one-step procedure), which can lay the foundation for a mutually respectful research relationship. A research relationship that prioritises obtaining consent through discussion and dialogue implicitly and explicitly positions the participant as subject and agent rather than object or somebody that research is being done to. It strongly aligns with an ethics of care approach and encourages more nuanced conceptions of researcher obligations to their participants.

Meaningful informed consent may not only require dialogue and negotiation between researchers and participants. It may also need to be ongoing and involve collective processes if we recognise that 'autonomy is a capacity that is socially acquired' (Hugman, Pittaway & Bartolomei, 2011, p. 1280). The AARE Code of Ethics also promotes an expansive notion of participation as ongoing and often but not always collective: 'Projects should be discussed with the representatives of the group concerned where such exist … before they are commenced, and the results discussed before they are published' (AARE, 1993, p. 7). Respectful research with refugee communities thus may require an epistemological shift to a collective conception of decision-making shaped by the individual's social contexts – family ties, community obligations and so forth. It may be desirable to negotiate with individuals along community elders, leaders and other forms of community representatives (Hugman, Bartolomei & Pittaway, 2011).

To be clear, we do not suggest a mandated process of community consultation, not least because of the potential to perpetuate power and knowledge hierarchies that seek to control and censor results. As we have learned from the experience of Indigenous populations, there can also be a significant risk of creating a sense of research-fatigue for some participants and communities. Indigenous researchers have proposed multiple ways to navigate this dilemma. For example, Stiegman and Castleden (2015) advocate for building the kind of researcher-community relationships that recognise the autonomy and jurisdiction of indigenous communities and include structures of mutual accountability.

Underlying this ongoing approach to consent and participation is the assumption that communities with

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refugee backgrounds are not inherently lacking in some way or incapable of solving their own problems. We have ample evidence from practitioners of participatory development and participatory action research that power imbalances can be transformed once they are acknowledged by researchers and communities. Collaborative and culturally-responsive decision-making processes supported by adequate resources can be used to shape the focus, implementation, and evaluation of the research (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). In these scenarios, communities have demonstrated the capabilities and the capacity to address and solve community problems (Hugman, Pittaway & Bartolomei, 2011). An iterative and collective process of informed consent works best when researchers are committed to sharing control and strengthening participant autonomy (Hugman, Pittaway & Bartolomei, 2011). These represent significant shifts in researchers' conceptions of research legitimacy, their own autonomy (or academic freedom), and their identity as the principal knower and decision maker.

Benefits and burdens of research participation

When we recalibrate our assumptions about vulnerability and autonomy, we can be more reflexive about anticipating the burdens and benefits of research participation. Institutional ethical standards are informed by principles of recognitive and distributive justice. Recognitive justice encompasses demonstration of respect for participant autonomy, beliefs and cultural heritage of participants; respect for privacy and confidentiality; and respect for welfare of participants and their communities (Lindorff, 2010). Thus, the principle of respect is closely interlinked with the principle of justice as also shown by the discussion in this paper about culturally respectful research in relation to recruitment, selection and seeking consent from potential participants who are former refugees.

The principle of distributive justice requires researchers not to place the burden of research disproportionately on particular groups while others receive benefits (Gillam, 2013). Indeed, researchers are increasingly sensitive to burdens that take the form of monetary and non-monetary costs, such as time away from work, travel to research sites as well as emotional costs of sharing personal experience (Lammers, 2007).

However, an ethics in practice also requires researchers to think more generously about the possible benefits of the research project, particularly when participants belong to socially disadvantaged groups. An ethics in practice approach to thinking about the just distribution of the benefits of research involves being attentive to ethical issues embedded in a) framing of problems and solutions facing PfRB, as well as b) presentation and dissemination of completed research. In both these aspects, the research process should not create or perpetuate socio-historical inequalities in relation to culturally and structurally disadvantaged groups. How then do we develop research and writing in ways that are accountable to community struggles for self-representation and self-advocacy? (Tang, 2008).

As we have previously discussed, a dialogic and ongoing approach to informed consent creates and maintains a space for participants and researchers to discuss framings of research problems/questions and potential ethical issues in relation to research design. These kinds of processes acknowledge that knowledge is contested domain and position participants as agentic subjects. As Doná states: 'it is reasonable to ask what role and involvement forced migrants themselves have in the process of creation, codification, and reproduction of knowledge of which they are ultimately meant to be beneficiaries' (Doná, 2007, p. 211).

Traditions of participatory action research that are explicitly oriented towards structural transformation have long engaged with the challenges and tensions of demystifying the research process and co-constructing knowledge with research participants (Tang, 2008). Such dialogues are oriented to critically investigate the conditions of knowledge production, particularly constellations of hierarchies of knowledge, which enrich the lives of some and impoverish others (de Sousa Santos, Nunes & Meneses, 2007 Hickling-Hudson, 2009). Advances in information and communication technologies have also enabled researchers to expand their methodological toolbox with participatory media such as digital storytelling, which facilitate counter-storytelling and agency (for example see Dreher, 2012; Lenette, Cox and Brough, 2015).

These scholars have also engaged with the challenges of sharing research findings in ways that do not reproduce existing knowledge and social hierarchies. The AARE Code of Ethics (1993, p. 11) states that researchers are under an obligation to make research findings accessible not only to the academic community but to their participants and indeed 'the widest possible audience.' In addition to dissemination through academic publication, researchers and participants can explore additional forms of co-authored publication in the public domain as well as strategies to action research findings. For instance, education researchers working with refugees have availed themselves of the opportunities

presented by the Internet to expand public engagement through self-publishing online (e.g. professional and personal blogs), as well as engaging in policy debates through social networking media.

Conclusion

To conclude, ethical research projects undertake to do research with or produce knowledge with their participants. The ethics in practice approach endeavours to be responsive to the daily complexities and sensitivities of researching with human participants. Participants are viewed as agents rather than objects of research, and research relationships are characterised by mutual respect, care and interdependence rather than distance or hierarchy.

Ethics in practice means to continually question assumptions about the shared value for research as endeavour, that consent given once is sufficient, that people's inner lives are stable enough for continued participation, that the methods chosen do not trigger past traumas or perpetuate more injustice. We are inspired here by the AARE Code of Ethics which adopts an expansive rather than reductive understanding of what respect looks like in educational research:

> Respect for the dignity and worth of persons and the welfare of students, research participants, and the public generally shall take precedence over self-interest of researchers, or the interests of employers, clients, colleagues or groups. (AARE, 1993, p. 2)

As is perhaps obvious by now, to put ethics in practice encourages researchers to become comfortable with the (destabilising) discomfort of engaging in 'messy' research (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007). We cannot rely solely on institutional ethics standards and committees. Halilovich (2013) argues, 'all researchers 'are ethically obliged – within their power, resources and abilities – to work at actively protecting and advancing the human rights and dignity of their informants' (p. 146). We hope that this think piece has made a constructive contribution to deepening academic engagement with ethical challenges in doing research with former refugees.

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