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Rethinking the Ethical and Methodological Dimensions of Research with Refugee Children

Abstract

This paper discusses the ethical and methodological dimensions of educational research with refugee children. We illustrate that research ethics need contextual, temporal and social flexibility to resonate with the changing needs and extraordinary contexts of this population, and that the flexibility is often too complex for ethical preassessments to address. We propose relational ethics, engaging with children and working from the "minds and hearts" rather than fixed ethical guidelines as one way to consider the ethics of working with this vulnerable population.

Keywords: *Refugee children, research ethics, relational ethics*

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Artikel thematisiert die ethischen und methodologischen Dimensionen der Bildungsforschung mit geflüchteten Kindern. Wir illustrieren, dass Forschungsethik kontextbezogene, zeitliche und soziale Flexibilität bedarf, um den sich ändernden Bedürfnissen und außergewöhnlichen Lebenskontexten dieser Personengruppe nachzukommen, und dass die Flexibilität häufig zu komplex ist, um ethische Vorannahmen zu adressieren. Wir plädieren für eine relationale Ethik, die sich mit Kindern beschäftigt, in der Interaktion mit dem ‚Verstand und dem Herz' der Kinder statt mit feststehenden ethischen Richtlinien, als eine Herangehensweise im Umgang mit den ethischen Fragen in der Arbeit mit dieser schutzbedürftigen Gruppe.

Schlüsselworte: *Geflüchtete Kinder, Refugee children, Forschungsethik, relationale Ethik*

Introduction

In 2016 the UNHCR estimated that there were more than 65 million forcibly displaced people globally. Among them, twenty one million are refugees, and over half of them are under the age of 18 (UNHCR, 2016, p. 3). The rising number of refugees and other immigrants to Europe has led to an increase in the need for new knowledge about these populations and therefore, the interest from researchers to work with refugees has intensified (UNHCR, 2016). This expansion of research implies unique vulnerabilities that are relevant to the design of research protocols, as well as to the ethics of review procedures.

The ethical and methodological dimensions of research with refugee children deserve particular attention, and they have already been the subject of several studies (Hopkins & Hill, 2008; Lawrence, Kaplan & McFarlane, 2013; Ni Raghallaigh, 2013; Nardone & Correa-Velez, 2015; Vervliet, Rousseau, Broekaert & Derluyn, 2015). However, as Bilger and Van Liempt (2009, p. 13) argue, 'ethical questions are not static'. The current global context, as well as the many novice researchers entering the field to work with refugee children, highlight the need for researchers to continuously revisit their obligations and practices to resonate with the changing times and the changing needs of participants.

Drawing upon our experiences as researchers and teachers working with children, young people and families with refugee backgrounds in the respective countries of settlement Finland and Australia, we argue that because ethical questions are not static, the ethical review processes need thorough consideration from anyone undertaking research with this population. Like all research in global education, research with refugee children has to be based on empathy, care and trust. It is necessary that researchers inquire and respect the experiences, perspectives, values and beliefs of refugee children, even if these are difficult to understand and different from one's own (Räsänen, 2011). It is essential that we challenge our assumptions of refugee children and elaborate on how we make moment-to-moment ethical choices with people and communities of refugee background (Bourn, 2014). We argue that the complexities of refugee children's contexts require contextually, temporally and socially flexible ethical considerations, which should be placed at the forefront of our research.

Understanding refugee childhood(s)

The first ethical consideration we would like to raise is illuminated by an old adage, "where you sit determines what you see" (Westoby, 2009, p. 13). The way childhood is constructed, understood and experienced within specific cultural contexts and then interpreted by researchers, raises issues that are both ethical and methodological. These issues include the challenge of ensuring research is important for the children (not only for the researcher), the practical difficulty of obtaining a truly informed consent from children (and not just assuming consent when required forms are signed), and engaging both children and communities in planning and conducting research in ways they see as relevant.

Refugee children, like all children, have diverse backgrounds and experiences, as well as specific educational, health and wellbeing needs. Especially due to their experiences of becoming refugees, research is required to improve refugee children's

wellbeing. Refugee research illuminates the complex political and humanitarian aspects of the life-worlds in which refugee children live (Hart, 2014), research on education (Matthews, 2008; Pastoor, 2015), cognitive and social development (Eide & Hjern, 2013) and child migration (Kohli, 2011; Watters, 2008) show how pre- and post-displacement risk-factors may have long-lasting effects on refugee children, as well as on their caregivers. Past experiences of trauma (Eide & Hjern, 2013), unfamiliar social structures (Correa-Velez, Gifford & McMichael, 2015) and multiple overlapping transitions (Kohli, 2011) compound the challenges associated with displacement and settlement. Children have often had interrupted education and multiple language transitions during their displacement (Brown, Miller & Mitchell, 2006) which can affect their overall development and wellbeing as well as their learning. Many refugee children and young people have experienced physical and psychological violence in their countries of origin, during their dangerous flight and in their new countries – much at the hands of adults (Nardone & Correa-Velez, 2015). Many have witnessed threats of harm to their family, conflict and violence, been under combat fire and experienced the separation or disappearance of family members (Paxton Smith, Win, Mulholland & Hood, 2011). Relocation and settlement bring additional stressors, as families negotiate their needs in their new environment, often with limited social supports (Matthews, 2008). Moreover, experiences of poverty, housing stress, food insecurity and discrimination are often present in the new lives of children (Fazel, Reed, Panter-Brick & Stein, 2012, pp. 266). Within this complex situation, children enter educational environments and negotiate multiple changes including family composition, friendships, schooling, community, language, culture and identity.

As shown above, different research fields offer various, often trouble-centred, viewpoints to the lives of refugee children. Although research also shows that refugee children from difficult circumstances often demonstrate resilience and positive social adjustment within and outside of school settings (Rana, Bates, Luster & Saltarelli, 2011), their context places refugee children in a vulnerable situation. In a situation like this, refugee children could be additionally disrespected and misinformed by research, leading to unrealistic expectations of its benefits. To avoid this, researchers need to not only be open-minded to learn about the lives of refugee children, but also to be mindful and sensitive in negotiating the research process with them (aiming for participation on the child's terms) and interpreting research findings from multiple theoretical perspectives (for instance by finding alternative perspectives to the deficit-discourse). However, the fact that ethical engagement in research with refugee children is crucial on the one hand, while on the other it implies an extremely challenging process, has so far not sufficiently been addressed in research ethic guidelines. Due to the special circumstances of refugee children, guidelines should address the position in which the researcher sits (Westoby, 2009) and indeed, the position of the research participants in relation to the researcher.

Ethics of research with refugee children

The second issue to address is how, in practice, to consider the diversity of refugee children while ensuring ethically sound research with them. Formal ethical processes, which social scientists had to adhere to since the mid-twentieth century, offer guidance on what constitutes ethical practice (Drake, 2014). These processes raise usually questions about respect, beneficence and justice, which can be traced back to the Ethical Principles of Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioural Research (The Belmont Report, 1979). Respect means that research participants should be treated as autonomous agents who are capable of making decisions. Those with 'diminished autonomy', such as refugee children, should be entitled to protection. Beneficence requires that research should minimize the harm and maximize the benefit to the participants, society and humanity. Justice refers at a profound level to the 'sameness of people' and on a procedural level to a 'fair treatment' of participants (Gillam, 2013, p. 31). These ethical principles form the basis of many Human Research Ethics Committees at Universities, professional organisations, national policy and legislation. In some countries, such as Australia, all research conducted under the auspices of universities and publicly funded research institutions, must be approved by such committees (Gillam, 2013, p. 22). Although this is not the case in many European countries, such as Germany or Finland, individual researchers and research groups have equally crucial responsibility to ensure their own ethical research practice.

In general, research with children has to adhere to the same ethical standards as all research with human participants, but special attention should be paid at least to children's competences and frameworks of reference. This could include their ethnicity or gender, vulnerability and power differences with adult researchers and the impact of adult gatekeepers on the child's informed consent (Morrow, 2008). Beazley and colleagues (2009) propose rights based principles in research with children, and draw attention to provisions from four articles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Children: children's right to express opinions (Article 12), the right to freedom of seeking, receiving and imparting information using appropriate means (Article 13), the right to protection from all kinds of exploitation (Article 36) and the right to high professional standards being used with children (Article 33) (United Nations, 1989). Thus, the right to be 'properly researched' means that 'all children involved in research are entitled to have their human rights respected' (Abebe & Bessell, 2014, p. 128). Yet, authors such as Pupavac (2001), Hart and Kvittingen (2015) argue that despite good intentions, even the rights-discourse is not sufficient for the full considerations of refugee children. They suggest that any formulation of children's rights is exclusive of children in extraordinary circumstances, such as refugees, simply because the rights-discourse overlooks the specific socio-historical realities in which these rights exist. This highlights the issue proposed by Morrow (2008) that children's differences, as well as the context in which these differences are created, must be addressed when considering what is ethical for different children in different contexts.

Although these are all valuable contributions of the literature, we argue that research with refugee children needs to go beyond respect, beneficence and justice. It needs to go beyond any fixed criteria and extend beyond the standard questions asked by human research ethics committees because in reality, committees do not have the time or the experience to consider the "bigger picture" (Gillam, 2013), which inherently means that ethical questions associated with refugee research are too complex to be formulated in a form of a list of ethical application. For instance, due to the political status of asylum seeking children, it is not

realistic for any single research project to significantly change their situation. This makes the question of "beneficence" complicated to answer. As researchers rarely speak the same language as refugee children, explanatory statements or brief discussions are hardly sufficient in communicating the possible benefits and limitations of research. Furthermore, some refugee children have experienced situations in which expressing their opinion is not acceptable or safe, or they might have been instructed to tell certain things to new people and leave others untold (Hopkins, 2008; Kohli, 2005). In situations such as these, researchers might fulfil all ethical requirements but their well-meaning enquiries might cause stress for the child, especially if sufficient trust has not been built.

Ideally researchers should ask children, families and communities what in their opinion should be researched, and how (Riggs et al., 2015). Of course, there is a long history for highlighting this in traditions such as action research and ethnography. Yet, the focus on narrow forms of ethics, which at times is perceived as ticking boxes rather than thinking more broadly and continuously about relations between the researcher and the researched (Rossman & Rallis, 2010), hinders the utilization of these traditions with refugee children. For instance, in the case of refugee research in educational settings or with refugee children in institutional care (such as unaccompanied minors), the research permit is granted by the gatekeepers who work with children. Gatekeepers have close ties with the community and as such, understand its cultural and political environment. Their connection to community is acknowledged either by a formal position, such as an elected leader, an appointed professional or a person to whom the community turns to 'get things done.' Either way, a gatekeeper is a person of influence and will provide researchers with access to community members, or not. Typical gatekeepers working with refugee children are teachers, principals, and care workers. While gatekeepers have valuable, tacit knowledge and often genuinely good intentions, they might not have sufficient research skills to judge if the research aims are worthy and research tools acceptable (Kuusisto-Arponen, 2016; Morrow, 2008). Furthermore, if the initial green light for research is granted by adult professionals and research introduced to children as something already agreed upon, it might lead to a situation in which informed consent is hard to ensure. This is especially challenging for children such as refugees, who might not have the sufficient language or courage to question adult authorities. Moreover, knowledge created with children in these circumstances might be challenging to interpret. This, in turn, leads to methodological issues, which are briefly discussed below.

From ethical to methodological considerations

In addition to ethical interaction and reciprocal benefit of research, scientific research requires that you know what your findings mean, and that your research has validity, i.e. that your tools measure what they are supposed to measure, and reliability meaning that the results are something more general than just one finding in one special historical moment (Phillips, 2014). Considering the inevitable gap between the life worlds of researchers and refugee children raises critical questions of how can an external researcher claim to expose the "truth" of a situation they have not experienced, and what kind of research "tools" can be used to ethically, responsibly and critically create knowledge about refu-

gee children without homogenising, essentialising or romanticising them? Furthermore, a question which applies to all human research is, how can any "truth" be detached from the historical moment in which it happens (Heikkinen, de Jong & Vanderlinde, 2016)? While there are multiple methodological alternatives to choose from to address these challenges, we would like to discuss the benefits of participatory research (such as different types of action research and participatory ethnography, see for example Levinson & Pollock, 2011; Manzo & Brightbill, 2010), namely to avoid 'naïve objectivity' and aim for self-reflexivity and transparency on own research process. While being transparent helps the reader understand the validity of findings, it also shifts the burden of transferability (or transcontextual credibility, Greenwood & Levin, 1998) on the future researchers searching for inspiration from previous studies. Aiming for transparency and reflexivity also pushes the researcher to maintain continuous discussion with research participants; balancing, questioning and justifying the research choices which would best serve the purpose with certain participants, in a specific time and space (Lanas & Rautio, 2013). Similarly, Andreotti (2011a) argues that the location of the researcher, including their experience of difference, need to be revealed and become the starting point for thinking, interpreting and communicating research. Following this argument, it is not sufficient to only understand the situation of the refugee children (as 'objects') and relating ethically towards them with an unexamined or single-perspective view of their place in the world. Asking questions about moment-to-moment, everyday ethical choices when interacting with refugee children, while also revealing larger issues in relation to all refugees, are a part of a researcher's ethical responsibility. Unproblematized positionality of a researcher, as well as naïve objectivity or a narrow and fixed conceptual framework, can produce 'oppressive', explanatory and normative research (Reason & Torbert, 2001). This is why reflecting one's own stance, as well as having an inductive approach rather than deductive, might be useful.

Although the need for action and participation is acknowledged in research in global education (Andreotti, 2011b; Kaukko & Fertig, 2016) too, the changing and evolutionary nature of participatory approaches, as well as the revelations which ethnographic fieldwork can uncover, provides further reasons why ethical guidelines are stilted. They simply fail to allow for details about research movement, which is inevitable in participatory research. Consider, for example, the requirement that the study design and methods are predetermined and approved before participants are recruited, and that all participants must understand and sign consent forms. This might lead to at least two kinds of problems. Firstly, important issues might remain unexplored and silenced due to the overly strict ethical preassessments. It is possible that sensitive issues raise red flags in the eyes of the gatekeepers, even though research participants would like to address them (Pekkarinen, 2015). Secondly, the requirement of written consent might be a barrier for the participation of some children, and at least hinder the building of natural relations and trust between the researcher and the child (Kuusisto-Arponen, 2016). These requirements also clearly conflict with the aim of involving children in the development of research questions, design and all other aspects of research and thus, if followed without any flexibility, can lead to a less ethical research practice.

Due to the special conditions and assumed trauma related to children's refugee experiences on the one hand, and the language barriers on the other, it can be justified to omit refugee children's active participation in research as too difficult, costly or risky. Although the language of vulnerability and trauma is well-meaning and supported by research evidence on challenges refugee children face, this language might unintentionally reproduce an image of refugee children as permanently damaged, inherently passive and helpless (Orgocka, 2012). Not only is this view incorrect in the light of the research projects which have looked beyond the victimizing discourse (Boyden, 2013), but this view is especially problematic if research should fill the ethical guidelines and start from the needs of participants, enabling participants to be involved in a way they see relevant. A child who is on their journey to recovery can be retraumatized if their experiences are not treated with respect and care. Thus, inflexible ethical guidelines, especially when based on an assumption on refugee children as traumatized victims, can cause both ethical and methodological problems. They may discourage children from participating, and they may falsify or silence the voices of refugee children.

Thus, we suggest that just as any lists of ethical guidelines are not to be treated as universal "truths", similarly we should apply selected methods and theories in a flexible manner, allowing the process to lead the way. In fact, researchers may need to admit what Santos (2007, quoted in Andreotti, 2011a, p. 390), calls the "general epistemology of the impossibility of a general epistemology", as well as the general ethical rule of the impossibility of general ethical rules. Viewing any chosen theories, methods and ethics as interconnected enables researchers to intertwine methodological and ethical questions within research rather than having them as separate questions that need additional consideration (Morrow, 2008, p. 52). This intertwining is a never-ending process, tied to the space and time shared with the research participants.

Embracing relational ethics

McNamee (2012) argues that one way of surpassing the dilemma of the inadequacies of guidelines is to reject the presumption of universality when using any set of criteria for ethically and methodologically sound research, because what makes sense and is protective of one group of people in the one context may not be necessarily useful in another. McNamee (2012), Lanas and Rautio (2013) suggest relational ethics, acting from the hearts and minds, rather than ethical forms as one way of doing this. This approach emphasizes reciprocity in research interaction but rather than viewing it as an exchange of positive actions, it conceptualizes reciprocity as a never-ending, dynamic and relational process which finds its form in the interaction between the researcher and their participants in the space and time they share (Lanas & Rautio, 2013). For example in research with refugee children, relational ethics requires that the adult researcher sensitively listens and interprets the views of the child, trying to actively amplify the voices which may be hard to express, or which are silenced due to difficult circumstances or past challenges (Kohli, 2005). As a result of this engagement, the hard-to-hear voices can be brought forward and given consideration. The purpose is to try to solve what is important to the research participants in their current situation and make sure the researcher and other available resources are of benefit to the children. Furthermore, researchers needs to acknowledge that

each encounter, even with the same group of participants, is different; modified by the changing needs and moods of the children, the increasing understanding that children have of their own world, as well as the presence of the outside researcher. This inherently means that ethical and methodological choices need constant revisiting.

Embracing relational ethics acknowledges our interpersonal bonds to others, and takes responsibility for situational, moment-to-moment decisions with suitable actions in a way which cannot be predetermined in ethics applications. We argue this helps to ensure the dignity and beneficence for participants and encompasses their life situations, which are often too complex for the questions outlined in ethical forms. This means that respect, beneficence and justice must be considered from the perspective of the refugee child, acknowledging their flight from their country of origin, their current life context which might be uncertain, and their future aspirations, all in a way which rejects assumptions based on the child's refugee status.

Relational ethics mean that the process of taking and giving back can be blurry; both the refugee child and the researcher enter a process of giving, taking, teaching and learning while seeking appropriate, supportive and productive ways of working towards a shared goal. This only happens in a mutually constructed space, with sufficient time for engagement. For instance, short, one-off visits to meet with refugee children, especially if 'visitors' (i.e., researchers) sit back and observe without engaging, do not help to understand the point of view of the child. This objective behaviour might fulfil the requirements of ethical research practice, but are not necessarily experienced as such by the participant. A 17-year-old unaccompanied asylum seeker, Ali from Afghanistan[1] recalled a project in Finland, in which student teachers, completing small research projects, and unaccompanied minors engaged in various activities together (Kaukko, Lahti & Nummenmaa, 2016). Ali noted that some of the student teachers came to the reception centre where the unaccompanied minors lived, and remained sitting on the couch, talking amongst themselves. The students' hesitation to make contact with the youth at the centre, and their lack of engagement, made Ali feel that the students would have rather been somewhere else. The students' behaviour, which could have been a result of lack of confidence or discomfort in dealing with a new and unfamiliar environment, did not break any rules of the ethical guidelines; it did not pose a risk to anybody, it did not violate anybody's privacy. Yet, the situation would have been different, if the principles of relational ethics were applied. The students would hardly have considered sitting on the couch as the most ethical and respectful action in that situation; they would have engaged in interaction and created dialogue with the young asylum-seekers, however challenging it might have felt. On the other hand, student teachers who continued to visit the centre regularly, who created lasting friendships and showed genuine interest to engage received praise from the unaccompanied minors. Another young man noted:

"We all had a difficult time. We all had left from our homes for the first times, away from our families. The scary flight to Finland was behind us, and we all missed our families. With you, we had fun and we could forget all sad things for a moment." (Aarif, 17)

And a third young man demonstrated a similar view:

"You showed natural feelings, when we did something

together. We felt that you really wanted to do it. You did not only do it because it was your work, you had a real will and commitment to be with us and work with us. And you had fun!" (Navid, 17)[2]

Due to all above-mentioned challenges, in line with Block, Riggs and Haslam (2013), Kuusisto-Arponen (2016) and Vervliet, Rousseau, Broekaert and Derluyn (2015), we believe that research with refugee children requires more than a good grasp of relevant theories, suitable research techniques or following procedural ethical guidelines. It requires empathy, care and trust which result from reciprocal relationships. Without over-complicating the issue, researchers could consider a helpful question posed by Troyna and Carrington (1989, p. 205): "Whose side are we on?" How do we ensure, as much as possible, that refugee children and young people will benefit from research and that their interests and wellbeing remain central? As suggested above, participatory research traditions, such as action research, offer methodological tools to do this. Moreover, in the above-mentioned project, trusting the gut feeling and one's own ability to make ethical choices proved to work. In Kohli's words (2015), "fun is a serious commitment". This applies in ethics of education as much as it does in research ethics. Having fun means that researchers do not enter the field just to 'hear' the children's stories for the sake of research. It means that researchers, who have been invited into the lives of refugee children, 'get up from the couch' and engage. As the quotes above highlight, fun and commitment are reciprocal, and this is needed if research is conducted with and for refugee children, not on them.

Considerations and conclusion

In this article, we have highlighted some of the issues researchers need to be mindful of to ensure ethically sound research with refugee children. We have argued that respect, beneficence and justice should be problematized and expanded when working with refugee children. This requires that researchers know enough about the situations of refugee children before embarking on research with them, but treat the knowledge in a way which rejects universality. To be able to do this, researchers must engage in dialogue with children; to spend time and energy building trust, showing interest, empathy and care, and being genuinely willing to learn from children. As new researchers are rushing to the field to "hear the voices" of refugee children, these issues require constant re-evaluation.

Furthermore, research with refugee children calls for broadening our understanding of methodologically sound, rigorous research. Considering all the challenges in creating trust, building a dialogue or even achieving a shared understanding of the reality, it can be asked what kind of knowledge can be created from this interaction? How do researchers capture what is important knowledge regarding refugee children's lives, and what can be understood about the lives of refugee children by anyone other than the children themselves? It is important to note that regardless of our methodological or theoretical study design, our findings are always our own interpretations. We have suggested that engaging in a dialogue with different theoretical discourses in a flexible way may help us interpret our findings. Global education might offer tools to consider the context of globalisation and what researching in a global society means, as well as the competencies needed to live, and learn, and conduct ethically sound research in

our global society (Scheunpflug, 2011), however transdisciplinary dialogue with fields such as refugee and child migration research could lead to a more holistic understanding of the issues related to refugee children's lives.

We have shown that research with refugee children raises questions about the limitations of ethics regulation and methodological standards. These questions are always in danger of missing the requirements of any specific cases, not only the needs of refugee children. We argue that going forward we must find a way to expand the concept of 'ethical research' with refugee populations applying both the relational and procedural ethical frameworks. We also acknowledge there is little guidance for researchers on how to do this. A simple guideline we offer is that researchers should constantly ask themselves whose side they are on (Troyna & Carrington, 1989, p. 205), and which theories frame their work. Practically, researchers should consider how they can truly add value to the lives of refugee children instead of disrespecting children by treating them as sources of data, and how they can ensure they do not misinform participants in any way, or make promises they cannot keep. Without constantly asking these questions and without engaging in self-reflexive and relational processes, there is a risk of doing things because that is the way they have always been done.

Notes

1 All mentioned names of interviewed participants have been anonymised.

2 These interview quotes are from a small-scale research project on a co-operation project between teacher students and unaccompanied minors. More about the project can be found in Finnish in Kaukko, Lahti & Nummenmaa 2016; English article forth-coming in 2017. Interviews were conducted by Jennina Lahti and are published with the permission of the interviewer and the interviewed persons.

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