

Researching (with) refugees? Ethical considerations on participatory approaches



by Ulrike Krause

Empirical field research is a central part of forced migration and refugee studies, and scholars have discussed diverse ethical concerns and (potential) effects of fieldwork. In addition to guidelines for ethical research procedures (see [here](#) and [here](#)), a number of articles, [comprehensive volumes](#), and [special issues](#) of journals have been published with a focus on forced migration.

A question that I have been particularly concerned about is the impact my research can have on refugees. Over the past years, I have explored critical issues such as violence for which I carried out fieldwork with Congolese and South Sudanese refugees in Uganda. But what happens when we carry out research *about* refugees? How can we – in reverse – conduct research *with* refugees, and which benefits and risks do participatory approaches bear?

Drawing on academic debates as well as my fieldwork experiences, I argue that building trust is fundamental for fieldwork in order to gather data. However, trust building could be seen merely as a tool for data collection which bears the risk of an objectifying approach to research *about* refugees. In lieu of perceiving refugees as 'data sources', research *with* refugees and thus participatory approaches not only transform refugees' positions to active participants, but can also further the scope of findings.

Building trust in environments of distrust

The relationship between scholars and participants in research projects is ambiguous, influenced by power dynamics, concerns, and objectives. Scholars and participants are likely to pursue differing

aims by carrying out or taking part in research, but scholars have to build trusting relations with participants to collect data. While this applies to most research settings, it is critical in forced migration studies. Building trust is not only complicated by the very conditions which are often core in research projects: refugees' contexts and experiences. Moreover, due to their often traumatizing experiences, careful and suspicious behaviors can have become a [survival strategy](#) for refugees. Scholars thus have to build trust with refugees in environments of distrust and it is their responsibility to develop appropriate research designs.

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Such trust building has also been central for my fieldwork. In my research, I have, among other themes, focused on [sexual and gender-based violence against women in refugee camps](#) as well as the [role of refugees' social organization for their protection and coping](#). Most refugees I spoke with in Uganda had been facing violence not only [during conflict and flight but also in exile](#). For them and their safety, being careful in what they said and how, had become crucial which required me to proceed sensitively to prevent (further) harm.

Building trust is a time-consuming process which often stands in contrast to timely and financially limited research endeavors. It requires researchers to let some things go, to refrain from asking certain, perhaps too personal questions, and thus “to leave some stones unturned”, as [Malkki](#) has phrased it. One may wonder how I refrained from such ‘too personal’ questions while researching sexual and gender-based violence. This was in fact a key question during the preparation and realization of fieldwork to prevent possible retraumatization. Through discussions with team members about possible ways forward, we decided to use, among others, open conversations in the form of ero-epic dialogues according to [Girler](#) instead of structured interviews with refugees. These long conversations enabled us to take the time needed to build trust and to be responsive to dynamics in dialogues. Moreover, in lieu of direct questions about participants' own experiences, I formulated general questions which enabled respondents to tell as much as they felt comfortable with.

While I continued to be concerned about preventing retraumatizing effects during field research, a number of refugees explained that these dialogues constitute a way for them to talk, a chance to tell *their* stories. Thus, similar to other [studies](#), the research process was perceived as beneficial by participants.

Research *about* or *with* refugees?

But how is trust linked with research processes? Isn't it that scholars build trust for the sole purpose of collecting data? From an ethics point of view, this must be reflected critically as it essentially means that refugees are degraded to mere ‘data sources’. As such, refugees become *objects* and [Doná](#) criticized that they are left with “no power over the creation or production of knowledge about them”. Researchers, on the other hand, become intertwined in what [Rousseau](#) calls “the position of voyeur, a position which instrumentalizes the suffering of another person, by making it and him an object of study”. This objectification in research *about* refugees is inherently connected to issues of [power and representation](#) as well as a prioritization of research interests over those of refugees.

With such arguments, scholars in forced migration studies not only criticize research *about* refugees as '[invisible actors](#)', but also shifted towards research *with* refugees. By employing diverse bottom-up and participatory approaches, researchers strive to tackle top-down hierarchical structures. In scholarly debates, a number of benefits (but also limitations) of participatory approaches are pointed out. In addition to minimizing risks, ethical challenges as well as power and knowledge divides, they are said to [support refugees' agency](#) and [empowerment](#). Harrell-Bond and Voutira note that refugees' research engagement is crucial but constitutes "[the ultimate Herculean labour](#)" while Jay Marlowe et al. underline that refugee peer researchers can contribute with diverse insights, offering "[important relational and methodological resources to a particular project](#)".

During research in Uganda, I drew on these insights and put an emphasis on working together *with* refugees. While ero-epic dialogues provided space for refugees to speak about their worries and ideas, I also carried out surveys in the project about violence. These surveys were done in direct collaboration with refugees as peer-researchers. They started with a week of training in which we discussed the project, procedures and ethical concerns. In these discussions, refugees noted a number of aspects (e.g., about framing questions and further preventing harm) which led to re-conceptualizing the survey. Refugee peer-researchers thus had a direct impact on the project. In my current work about refugees' social organization, I again work directly with a refugee peer-researcher who is not only involved in data collection but also analysis (as this is ongoing, I cannot yet draw conclusions).

Another example is from Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh who has developed a throughout participatory approach in her research about [South-South Humanitarian Responses to Displacement from Syria](#). She cooperates with refugees in all stages in her project, i.e. data collection, analysis and publication. As a part of that, she does not believe that 'her' research speaks *about* or *for* refugees, but she has conceptualized the '[third voice](#)' through which she speaks together *with* them. The 'third voice' therefore constitutes a joint voice that emerges in the process of shared experiences, collaborative interpretation and analysis of data.

Quo vadis?

Carrying out research *with* refugees can easily be captured in a romanticizing idea of a process apparently free of tensions, highly productive to gain substantial insights and generate new findings. However, it can actually be quite the opposite. From related discussions of working with 'local assistants,' we know that – despite [productive and fruitful experiences](#) – top-down hierarchies often remain, while conflictive tensions can arise between '[local colleagues and participants](#)'.

In a similar vein, participatory research with refugees can be linked with [potential harmful effects and distinct limitations](#). Conducting research requires knowledge about academic standards, methods and procedures (including ethical reflections) and scholars are responsible for ensuring that all team members meet the criteria. This could mean additional work for scholars to train refugee peer-researchers. Moreover, working in multi-cultural research teams can create tensions, e.g., due to different customs or modes of language. Such differences need to be negotiated among teams but most research projects lack sufficient time and funds. Finally, context conditions such as conflict settings may prevent a truly participatory approach as scholars may not be able to conduct long interviews or work with refugees in collaborative ways.

Despite these challenges and although participatory approaches may not entirely prevent power asymmetries as scholars remain in decision-making roles, research *with* refugees can help to alleviate top-down hierarchies and provide platforms for refugees to be actively involved. Refugees can make their voices heard and dynamically influence research instead of ‘passively enduring’ questions. By involving refugees, scholars can build trust with peer-researchers on procedural basis and reflect on appropriate, context-specific ways to do so with participants. While refugees can strengthen their academic knowledge, research projects can be informed by their local expertise. They can bring issues to light which might have otherwise been overseen. By that, working with refugee peer-research holds the potential to further the scope of findings.

This post draws on a recently published paper entitled [‘Researching Forced Migration. Critical Reflections on Research Ethics during Fieldwork’](#), published in the RSC Working Paper Series.

About the author

Dr. Ulrike Krause is a Research Fellow at the Center for Conflict Studies, Marburg University and PI of the project entitled [Global Refugee Protection and Local Refugee Engagement](#) funded by the Gerda Henkel Foundation. She is also a Research Associate at the [Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford](#). Her research focuses on forced migration and refugees, particularly humanitarian refugee protection, conflict displacement nexus, resilience, gender as well as violence, with a regional focus on Africa, especially East Africa and Uganda.