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Researching forced migration: critical reflections on research ethics during fieldwork

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Abstract

How do we carry out research with refugees? This paper provides reflections on some of the key ethical questions surrounding fieldwork on forced migration. The aim is to bring together multi-disciplinary debates on research ethics; in lieu of stating presumably neutral, objective and universally applicable answers, the paper critically discusses guiding principles and practical issues, and proposes ways forward in order to spark further discussions. For that, a paired view on research ethics is used, as a code of conduct for scholars as well as a framework for normative scrutiny of research in a broader sense. Subjects in this paper include harm in and due to fieldwork with a proposed Do No Harm analysis to minimise risks; relations and responsibilities of researchers to participants and among research teams with reflections on participatory approaches; transfer of results with scholars and humanitarian agencies but also with participants; and benefits of interdisciplinary platforms for exchange to openly address difficulties and opportunities in 'the field'.

1 Introduction

Research ethics is central to any fieldwork endeavour that includes human subjects. This is all the more the case for research on forced migration and with refugees[1], as they might have fled war, experienced traumatic events, and live under precarious conditions in exile. Such hardships often constitute the focus of the research. Thus, our responsibility as researchers conducting fieldwork goes beyond methodological rigour in gathering data, and ethical questions must be at the centre of this process. This paper provides reflections on some of the key ethical questions surrounding fieldwork on forced migration.

Field research in the context of forced migration and refugee studies serves the disciplined[2] collection of primary data in specific settings outside of sterile laboratories, to explore the experiences and practices of displaced people as well as cultural, social, political, economic, and natural environments over a longer period. Researchers therefore enter sites to gather authentic insights with qualitative and quantitative methods in diverse regions worldwide. However, my interest mainly lies in 'western' scholars carrying out fieldwork in the 'global south' working with social science methods, particularly qualitative methods.

Research ethics in fieldwork I understand through a paired view as a code of conduct for scholars as well as a framework for normative scrutiny of research in a broader sense. First, as a code of conduct, research ethics lay out fundamental principles for scholars' approach to participants and contexts, and to prevent harm. Among others, the Refugee Studies Centre in Oxford provides such a code with its *Ethical Guidelines for Good Research Practices* (2007). Whereas principles are

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[1] Terms such as forcibly displaced person and refugee are used interchangeably in the paper.

[2] The 'disciplined' inquiry signifies that fieldwork is shaped by researchers' disciplinary perspectives, which influence the choice of methods and questions guiding the inquiry, although they may situate their work in forced migration and refugee studies.

certainly important to guide fieldwork, they constitute ideals and state what scholars *should* or *should not* do in 'the field'. This not only bears the risk of neglecting how scholars *can* adhere to them and essentially practice what is preached, but also creates the impression of '*the* one appropriate way forward' which I argue does not exist. As research ethics are applied in diverse settings with various groups, they have to be subject to reasoning and interpretation. The second understanding as a framework for normative scrutiny offers a stage for precisely this: a means to discuss and deliberate questions through normative and moral lenses as well as social, political, cultural, or economic perspectives. This can include power structures, issues of representation, and obligations of scholars towards truth and/or participants. These two approaches are not mutually exclusive but rather mutually dependent as issues arising can inform principles. A paired view on ethics therefore helps to enter deeper ethical foundations and consider possible trade-offs or competing standpoints, interests and practices which influence research processes.

This paper draws on the growing body of literature[3] and my own fieldwork experience with a critical reflection on the research ethics underlying these projects. Over the past years, I have carried out fieldwork mainly with South Sudanese and Congolese refugees in Uganda to study sexual and gender-based violence in camps, self-protection of refugees, mechanisms to link humanitarian refugee aid with development, and more generally the conflict-displacement nexus, changing gender relations, and the local impact of the global refugee regime on refugees.[4] With such topics, it was not only important to collect relevant data but – perhaps even more – to reflect on how I can do this as rigorously, carefully and fairly as possible. To create space for critical exchange[5], I have engaged in peer group discussions which have been very helpful but sometimes limited in time and perspectives. These discussions furthermore shed light on the fact that research ethics are positioned in disciplinary perspectives. While much can be learned through multi- or interdisciplinary exchange with colleagues, such undertakings have also revealed to me how the level of attention and depth of ethical debates vary among different disciplines. Scholars are unlikely to share similar or mutual ideas about ethics in fieldwork although they might work on overlapping research areas.

In this paper, I aim to bring together multi-disciplinary debates on ethics in field research, and reflect critically on guiding principles. As such, I want to raise questions about approaches, procedures and practical issues as well as propose ways to put ideals into practice in order to spark further discussions. To this end, I cover diverse subjects and fieldwork periods. First, harm in and due to

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[3] Several contributions about research ethics have been published in reputable journals; e.g. the Journal of Refugee Studies had a special issue on *Methodologies of Refugee Research* in 2007 (see Voutira and Doná 2007) and the Refugee Survey Quarterly on *Researching Refugees: Lessons, Challenges and Ways Forward* also in 2007 (see Crisp 2007). In addition, edited volumes were published on ethics in forced migration and refugee studies, among others, by Block, Riggs and Haslam (2013) on *Values and Vulnerabilities. The Ethics of Research with Refugees and Asylum Seekers* and by Temple and Moran (2011) on *Doing Research with Refugees: Issues and Guidelines.*

[4] The projects include *Global Refugee Protection and Local Refugee Engagement. Scope and Limits of the Agency of Refugee-led Community-based NGOs* (funded by the Gerda Henkel Foundation, 05/2016-07/2018), *Gender Relations in Confined Spaces. Conditions, Scope and Forms of Violence against Women in Conflict-related Refugee Camps* (led by Susanne Buckley-Zistel, funded by the German Foundation for Peace Research, 09/2013-04/2016), and the doctoral research on *Development-Oriented Refugee Assistance* (funded by the Ministry of Education of Saxony-Anhalt through Magdeburg University, 08/2009-12/2012).

[5] Whereas fieldwork has to be approved by ethics committees in Anglo-Saxon academia, such approvals are not always required in social sciences in Germany. As a political scientist, I did not have to undergo ethics reviews at German universities but did so with a research ethics committee in Uganda. While such reviews can be seen critically, they also offer in-depth reflections prior to fieldwork. See also section *5. Brief excursus: ethics committees or platforms for exchange?*, in this paper.

fieldwork is explored, and a Do No Harm analysis proposed to minimise risks. This is followed by discussions about relations and responsibilities of researchers towards participants, benefits and challenges in the composition of research teams, as well as ways to work with refugees to alleviate top-down power dynamics. Then ethical considerations after fieldwork are elaborated and an extended concept of the dual imperative is suggested by sharing findings not only with scholars and humanitarian agencies but also with participants. Finally, before summarizing the paper and questioning the 'boom' in fieldwork, a brief excursus is undertaken by looking into institutionalised ethics reviews and the need for interdisciplinary platforms for exchange to openly address questions, difficulties and opportunities.

2 Fieldwork, risks and Do No Harm

Field research undoubtedly serves as a vehicle to gain better understanding of specific subjects, settings and developments, but the boom in fieldwork in social science (Menzel 2014: 280) certainly also relates to researchers' 'curiosity and adventure' associated with 'the field' (Girtler 2001: 16). This pertains to but is not limited to forced migration and refugee studies. Being curious, raising questions, and striving to explore aspects in-depth is a central part of scientific work – and it is precisely something I appreciate about being an academic – but is field research always necessary and are risks sufficiently considered? Studies often involve people who have experienced war, abuse, torture or other traumatising events, perhaps lost friends and family members, endured flight, and who are likely to live in rather insecure conditions. It is therefore crucial to keep in mind that research about forced migration must not only be about a scholar's curiosity and adventure, but should only be realized if it is indispensable to respond to a research question and if scholars have the necessary knowledge and training. In the following sections, harm in and due to fieldwork is discussed, before an approach to screen and thus reduce it is proposed.

2.1 Challenging settings, harmful projects?

Empirical studies stress that refugees' living conditions in camps as well as urban areas are often shaped by structural restrictions, diverse forms of violence and limited livelihoods (see Turner 2016; Crisp et al. 2012; Krause 2015; Agier 2011). While scholars at times compare refugee camps with "a form of human warehousing and 'storage' of refugees" revealing the intensity of confinement (Jaji 2012: 227), urban areas are found to present displaced persons certain degrees of anonymity and freedoms, e.g. of movement, but can also confront them with discrimination, social exclusion, and lack of formal employment (Koizumi and Hoffstaedter 2015). These conditions are not momentary circumstances but tend to last for years or even decades, which is shown by the increase in protracted situations (Milner 2014).

Conducting studies in such settings requires scholars to be aware that their actions as well as difficult context conditions can produce or increase dangers for the participants. To illustrate such challenging conditions, I can draw on my research about sexual and gender-based violence in Uganda for which fieldwork was carried out in Spring 2014. Although the project had a focus on violence against women in camps, I was also interested in understanding the scope and conditions of violence against men. This was to refrain from reproducing a binary pattern of female victims and male perpetrators, and to reveal the complexity of the topic. However, fieldwork took place at a time when the 'anti-homosexuality bill' was enacted in Uganda, criminalising lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) relationships. Its impact was far-reaching; in addition to wide political debates and media coverage, newspapers published names and photos of alleged LGBT people and violence grew publicly (Makofane et al. 2014). Although fieldwork took place in a remote refugee camp, and although it would not have focused on LGBT people, among the research team, we feared negative consequences for potential male participants. As truly secure spaces for open conversations were hardly possible to establish in the camp, we could not ensure that interviews with male victims may not be interpreted as homosexual acts subsequently putting them in a dangerous position. After a number of discussions among the team members weighing benefits and risks, we prioritised their safety and decided to retain the project's initial focus area.

Apart from such distinct insecurities, the interaction with 'western' scholars can put participants at risk, especially when authority figures object to the research and punish people for taking part (Jacobsen and Landau 2003: 192-194). Moreover, partial selection and an insensitive approach towards participants or involuntary participation can cause fear or frustration among the people (Mackenzie et al. 2007; Ellis et al. 2007; Hugman et al. 2011a). Strict top-down power dynamics of researchers towards 'those researched' risks imposing decisions and objectifying them with perhaps insufficient room for hearing their stories, which also affects the quality of the research (Pittaway et al. 2010; Doná 2007). Even after fieldwork has ended, physical dangers can be produced, e.g. when data is used inadequately, names and photos published without people's approvals or with insufficient consideration of potential risks (Pittaway and Bartolomei 2013; Hugman et al. 2011b).

Such dilemmas can arise, and researchers sometimes fail to amply consider them – or they justify inadequate methods with arguments of difficult context or seeking "ground truth" (Jacobsen and Landau 2003: 188). Taking this lightly is problematic as psychological studies estimate that about fifty percent of victims of rape, war, displacement and torture are traumatised and can suffer from disorders (Flatten et al. 2013: 4; see also Murthy and Lakshminarayana 2006). While I am not trying to frame all refugees as helpless victims, it is important to note that exposing them to a set of questions without considering and determining the most sensitive and appropriate way of doing so may cause (further) harm and put participants in difficult situations. That refugees at times fear consequences of their research participation is widely known (see, e.g., Pittaway and Bartolomei 2013: 155). During my research in Uganda, we generally had very good experiences in interviews, which I will write about more in the subsection *3.2.1 Trust and respect*. However, some people declined to join in dialogues or discussions noting disturbing previous experiences with scholars or research being a 'waste of their time' as it has not led to improvements in their situation so far. This reveals the importance of scholars not making promises of contributing to better conditions for participants in the future, which they might not be able to keep.

In addition to harm for participants, scholars themselves can be confronted with obstacles. While context conditions can pose various daily challenges, e.g. means of transportation and accommodation or falling sick (e.g. malaria, bilharzia, or food poisoning, all of which I have experienced during field research), scholars may face psychological stress or distinct physical insecurity. Darling (2014: 201) emphasises that "[e]ntering 'the field' can be a daunting, demanding and at times bewildering experience, with researchers negotiating a myriad of assumptions, expectations and motivations". This can become emotionally challenging (Thomson et al. 2013). But what happens if scholars are under threat, experience gun fire, fall victim to rape or abduction? Which emergency structures do universities have in place to help, perhaps to evacuate them? Or what if they suffer psychologically from the stories they heard or the things they saw? Are sufficient mechanisms in place in academia to provide adequate assistance? Such questions may not be at the forefront of discussions among scholars and within universities but they are part of ethical or normative reflections – and they are serious; this is especially because scholars or students sometimes conduct fieldwork alone in remote, insecure regions where they are hard to contact. While social science projects require a certain openness and flexibility – it is rarely possible to provide a detailed timetable and agenda, constant locations of work and living, or phone numbers prior to fieldwork, particularly in new contexts – I believe that universities have obligations towards their staff and students, and further exchange is needed about how these obligations can be put into practice.[6]

While it is unlikely that scholars would put participants or themselves at risk on purpose, such challenges nevertheless exist. Throughout this paper, I will discuss some of the issues in more detail and draw on further examples, but at this point the central question is: what can be done to prevent harm?

2.2 Do No Harm as a golden rule and a framework for analysis

Over the past years, the aim to *Do No Harm* has become part of the ethical code of conduct and a golden rule for field research which scholars widely agree on (see fn. 7). It requires them to look into the unique characteristics of settings, including context conditions, population and challenges to thwart hazards, but this implies that risk reduction is bound to scholars' individual commitments. Cassell warned already in 1980 that "weighing potential harms against benefits before research is carried out becomes an exercise in creativity, with little relevance to the ethical dilemmas and problems that may emerge during the research" (1980: 32). Other scholars criticise that do no harm is insufficient as a guiding principle because it fails to outline applicable approaches for its realization and harm can still be caused (see Pittaway and Bartolomei 2013; Block et al. 2012; Darling 2014; Krause 2016b). Hence, although researchers may pursue well-intended efforts, these can ultimately be ineffective and expose participants to wide-ranging consequences, including physical dangers, which in turn means that researchers fail to fulfil their ethical responsibilities (Hugman et al. 2011b: 1271-1273).

While screening the literature on research ethics during fieldwork in – and also beyond – forced migration and refugee studies, I recognized that 'do no harm' is continuously mentioned[7], which generally indicates a wide scholarly consensus. Whereas its meaning is explained in some papers, in others it is only noted as 'the rule'. Such widespread use of do no harm suggests that it has become a buzzword, a construct that some scholars seem to feel they have to mention in order to underline or prove their ethical research procedures, or at least their good intentions. However, similar to other buzzwords – e.g., in international aid, participation, empowerment, innovation or resilience (Cornwall and Brock 2005; Sudmeier-Rieux 2014; Scott-Smith 2016; Krause 2013) – they are extensively used but lack precise definitions, mix normative and assumed factual elements, and fail to provide means for operationalisation. Thus, they are fuzzy or even empty code words situated in contemporary mainstream debates. Only wanting or saying to do no harm is, however, not enough to actually prevent it. But how can do no harm still be helpful in field research?

Anderson (1999) developed a framework for a *Do No Harm analysis* to systematically assess micro-level conditions for designing projects in international development. A central part of her framework concentrates on identifying dividing and connecting factors relevant for these projects; dividers contribute to conflict or violence whereas connectors promote peaceful processes. With the aim of

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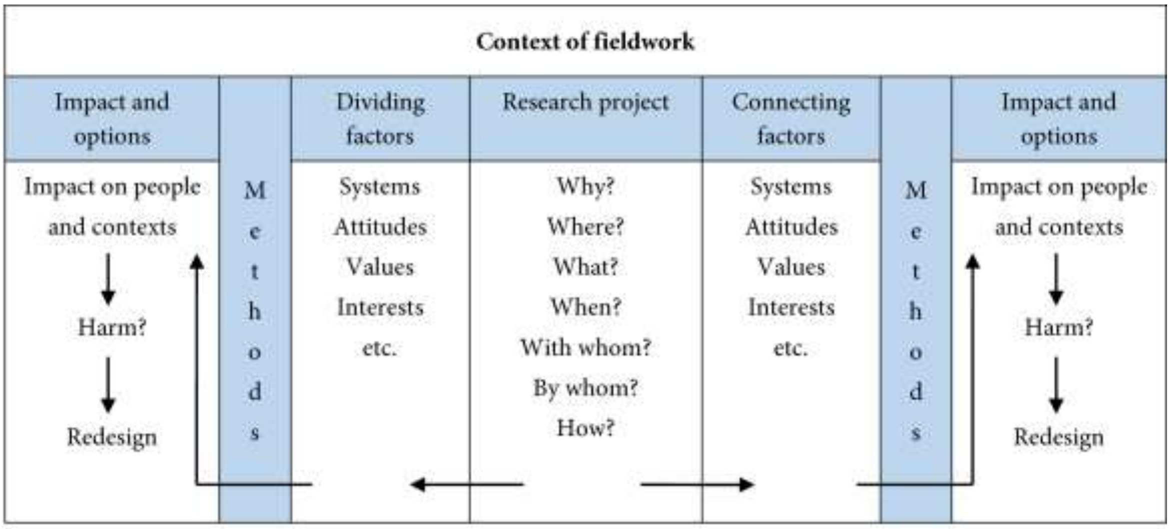
[6] This may also spark debates about possible obligations towards 'local' researchers employed in projects.

[7] See, among others, Gerver (2013); Goodhand (2000); Browne and Moffett (2014); Marlowe et al. (2015); Van Liempt and Bilger (2012); Siegel and de Wildt (2016); Banks et al. (2013); Fluehr-Lobban (2014); Brounéus (2011); Wood (2006); Vervliet et al. (2015).

increasing benefits and reducing harm for participants, I believe it is this analysis that field research endeavours can profit from.[8] Instead of referring to do no harm as a guiding ideal or desirable mantra, possible effects of context conditions and research(ers) can be assessed prior to and during fieldwork. Adjusted to research projects and fieldwork, the following chart can be outlined:



(modified from Anderson's model (1999: 74))

The framework generally enables researchers to assess research design, context and population, and consider tensions and benefits in a fairly structured way. Researchers can use the questions – why (objective), where (context and site), what (research question), when (time and timeframe), with whom (population and participants), by whom (research team), how (methods) – as well as the dividing and connecting factors to reflect on intended fieldwork and possible effects. Some projects may include additional factors, e.g. natural resources or age, depending on the focus areas. In this way, scholars generate a broader awareness about context matters and impact which informs their research approach. Moreover, an important component of the framework is its means for self-reflection and reviewing skills. After all, fieldwork is not about collecting data just 'somehow'; scholars are responsible for adequate approaches and appropriate methods including their application. Besides learning and practising to apply methods, personal skills and sensitivity for group dynamics constitute the basis for conducting fieldwork in the first place, for preventing risks and collecting 'good' data (Jacobsen and Landau 2003: 185-187; de Laine 2000: 67-94; Fernandez and Herzfeld 2014).

The framework is not only relevant in planning phases prior to field research. As additional, perhaps thus far unknown or unconsidered circumstances can emerge while in 'the field', the analysis can be repeated during field research as a part of revaluating the approach in order to identify challenges and adapt the approach as necessary. Carrying out Do No Harm analyses together with research teams not only contributes to team-building but also ensures that all members obtain similar knowledge about the project. In Uganda, I have undertaken such a group exercise together with members of the research team[9]. Our discussions were wide-ranging and shed light on numerous

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[8] Instead of reinventing the wheel or stressing what scholars *should* do, the framework can facilitate an analytical approach to minimising harm. Please note that several other humanitarian assessments exist, including stakeholder or scenario mapping, actor profiling and diverse conflict analyses, which could also be helpful.

[9] See *3.3.1 Cooperating with 'local' researchers* for information about their academic background, etc.

context-specific aspects. In so doing, we had the chance to learn from each other and critically reflect on circumstances and the project approach.

In discussions about the usefulness of the Do No Harm analysis with colleagues, three opposing positions were stressed. Firstly, scholars also engage in new contexts about which they have little information and thus find it hard to conduct a reliable analysis. Secondly, they do not have enough time to conduct such an analysis due to their focus, e.g. on disasters. While these arguments show limitations, they are insufficient for rejecting such a review per se. In contrast, on the one hand, scholars choose sites and case studies for specific reasons and should have at least some information they can use to reflect on their intended procedures in order to reduce risks. On the other hand, time constraints due to the need to immediately carry out a study lead to an imbalance of research interests and possible risks – in other words, researchers' interests become prioritised over the wellbeing of 'those researched'. Such power asymmetries reveal a domination of scholars, inherently contribute to an objectification of participants, and are ethically highly questionable. "As 'objects', they have no power over the creation or production of knowledge about them" (Doná 2007: 212).

The third opposing position stresses that harm can be acceptable or even 'good' for data collection – i.e. tensions being beneficial for gathering 'complete' information, gaining deeper insights, and understanding competing perspectives. Following this argument, preventing harm would be counterproductive as scholars would be restrained from seeing the full picture. From a positivist position, this might seem valid due to the search for visible 'truth' whereas relativists were likely to argue that 'truth' always depends on specific paradigms, or social constructivists that apparently objective facts are actually the result of processes of social constructions and settings. If harm was comprehended as 'good', my counter-question would be: who makes that decision? As scholars were the ones accepting risks – and not those likely to be affected by the consequences, the participants – it is essentially a matter of power and obligations, with researchers apparently only required to satisfy their academic interests with little or no obligations towards participants. This links with the earlier stated objectification of participants, and from a normative standpoint, I believe it is ethically not justifiable to merely accept or even cause harm.

The framework for the Do No Harm analysis does not present a guarantor for preclusion of all risks and it may not be possible to prevent all possible dangers. However, it facilitates structured reflection processes and contributes to wide understandings, not only of difficult settings influencing research but also of harm that can be triggered by research(ers). In line with that, instead of risk reduction being seen as "an exercise in creativity" (Cassell 1980: 32), the framework provides scholars with a tool to systematically scrutinise fieldwork endeavours, prior to and during research.

3 Participants and researchers: relations and responsibilities

How researchers and 'those researched' stand in relation to each other and how top-down approaches with strong power imbalances can be alleviated by participatory engagement is important not only in forced migration and refugee studies but in numerous academic fields and disciplines.[10]

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[10] See, among others, Acocella (2012); Van der Velde et al. (2009); Harrell-Bond and Voutira (2007); Doná (2007); Ellis et al. (2007); Doná (2006); Banks et al. (2013); de Laine (2000); Musante (2014); Schensul et al. (2014).

Considering such relations may be part of scholars' self-reflection processes but it also goes beyond that as it includes how the rights of participants can be protected, trust built and research teams set up. In the following sections, I discuss these aspects, and question approaches of research *with* refugees, instead of *about* them.

3.1 Rights of participants

Legal entitlements of participants are generally determined by the domestic law of the respective countries in which fieldwork takes place. In Germany, the Federal Data Protection Act, *Bundesdatenschutzgesetz* (2015), contains information in article 40 about processing and utilising personal data by research institutions. It specifies that data collected for scientific reasons must only be used for research purposes and can only be published with the permission of the person concerned. As a basic principle, participants thus have the fundamental right for their data to be protected and anonymised.

Even though rights of participants are regulated nationally, certain fundamental, normatively guided entitlements can be stated. These include voluntary participation and provision of information about the research and use of data, as well as the continual possibility to withdraw from interviews (see Block et al. 2012: 79; Seedat et al. 2004: 202; Orb et al. 2001: 95; Refugee Studies Centre 2007: 165-167). Some scholars and a few research associations furthermore note a connection of participants' rights and fundamental human rights (Schönhuth 2009: 16; Adelman 2009: 111; Hugman et al. 2011b: 1275; APSA 2012: 2012). While researchers should obviously refrain from committing any human rights violations, the relevance of human rights is twofold. On the one hand, human rights can be understood as a normative outline to set standards and identify peoples' entitlements in particular situations (Chiumento et al. 2015: 1-2). On the other hand, participatory, human rights-based approaches can be applied to structurally integrate decisions of participants and thus avoid top-down representation structures (Pittaway et al. 2010: 238-239; Bell 2008; Doná 2007). The human rights-based approach also leads to an understanding of participants as rights holders with diverse entitlements. This initiates a change of perspective from considering interviewees as research objects towards seeing them as active subjects with rights and agency.

The human rights-based perspective is crucial particularly in contexts of research on or in (post-)conflict[11], forced migration and refugee situations. Those who have experienced conflict and forced migration have also often suffered human rights violations, been exposed to marginalisation and discrimination, and endured restrictive access to their rights (Ellis et al. 2007: 460-461; Leaning 2001: 1432; Pittaway and Bartolomei 2001). These circumstances are frequently part of research projects, which is why it is even more important for scholars to regard participants' rights in their research processes instead of considering them as privileges which *can* be granted.

3.1.1 Critical view on undercover research

Since rights of participants certainly include the right to privacy, it can be questioned whether approaches such as undercover research are appropriate. The concept of undercover research entails that researchers neglect to identify themselves as such, but collect data secretly or 'under cover'. Hence, research subjects are neither asked about their participation nor informed about the purpose of the research or manners of data use. Arguments supporting the approach mainly refer to security

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[11] A growing corpus of literature focuses on field research in 'difficult' or war-torn contexts; see, e.g., the edited volumes *Surviving Field Research* by Sriram et al. (2009), *Research Methods in Conflict Settings* by Mazurana et al. (2013), *Understanding Peace Research* by Hoglund and Ober (2011), or *Fieldwork Under Fire* by Nordstrom and Robben (1995).

risks for scholars and concerns that target groups might reject participation (von Unger 2014: 219; Bulmer 1982: 630-631; Herrera 2003). Hence, in exceptional cases, data collection seems to be only accomplishable under cover, which thus appears to legitimise hidden research.[12]

However, such projects are confronted with challenging questions, such as how to carry out research without evoking risks for researchers and participants, and how to publish the results without violating the right to privacy of the subjects and thereby causing potential dilemmas. De Laine (2000: 8) furthermore notes critically that "dubious methods for infiltration of 'fronts'" are commonly used in undercover research, and Cassell (1980: 35) stresses the hidden self of investigators "making the research interaction inauthentic" and that "subjects are being used primarily as means rather than ends", violating their autonomy.

Thus, undercover studies without permission by the participants neglect their right to privacy, to decide about participation, and thus to take part voluntarily in research projects. They also involve risks and objectify research participants because they have neither a chance to provide additional information to questions nor a say in the use of their insights. The underlying argument seems to be that the purpose – the research interests, questions and results – justifies the means, ultimately considering research interests above the individual rights of people. From a human rights perspective, this approach is therefore not acceptable or at least highly problematic.

3.1.2 Sampling, voluntary participation and informed consent

The impartial selection of participants is pivotal in data collection to gain insights revealing the complex spectrum and dynamics of a research context and population. Using arbitrary sampling may neglect the voices of people who often remain overlooked, and studies will likely show only one side of a story, or perhaps not even fully this one side. However, who is involved, e.g., in a well-structured household study and who may be left out? And how does this impact on a study? It is likely that the heads of households and not all members will be integrated in such a study. Those in power will therefore gain the chance to speak rather than those of less power. Therefore, research findings may turn out biased towards a certain group although sampling approaches may be elaborated and thought through.

Sampling is not only a methodological issue but has also been criticized by refugees. Mackenzie, McDowell, and Pittaway (2007: 304) quote a refugee in Thailand stressing that researchers "come in and just talk to the leaders and their wives – they never hear what it is really like in the camps". While researchers may assume that such leaders have a good overview of issues in communities and can reveal their complexity in a relatively short time, researchers risk accepting representative roles with little or no questioning. Community members may think differently, may doubt such representation, or may be scared of them, and thus also refrain from approaching researchers proactively to voice their opinions. As a consequence, researchers can unconsciously or unintentionally contribute to silencing some people – and such neglect often occurs along lines of gender and age. While it is hardly possible to involve all members of a community in social science projects, sensitivity to processes of inclusion and exclusion is crucial.

Apart from sampling, how can voluntary participation of people be assured? Over the past years, informed consent forms have become widely accepted as part of a code of conduct for scholars and

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[12] Scholars who have used undercover research argue correspondently, among others, Calvey (2000) with his research about bouncers in nightclubs, Scheper-Hughes (2004) with her undercover ethnography about organ-trafficking, and Köttig (2004) with her study about radical right-wing scene in Germany.

a standard tool in fieldwork in medical and social science to prove *voluntary* and *informed* participation of interviewees (Brounéus 2011: 150; Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 42-43). Informed consent consists of three main features: participants must (1) receive information about the research to (2) adequately understand what they are agreeing to, and (3) be able and free to decide to participate. Standardized consent forms aim to certify that participants possess sufficient knowledge about the research project, use of data, their rights, and their voluntary participation in order for them to weigh benefits and disadvantages and to decide about contributing (Ellis et al. 2007: 467). These certifications also serve as a record of the informed decisions of participants for research institutes (Brounéus 2011: 150).

In spite of wide acceptance, these forms are "no guarantee that research takes place in an ethical and moral way" (de Laine 2000: 8). Consent forms are fairly limited in their applicability, which can be illustrated paradigmatically when working with illiterate persons. Although researchers can read out forms to participants and explain projects, there remains a strong dependency of potential participants on researchers (Brounéus 2011: 150; Kabranian-Melkonian 2015: 718). Moreover, even if participants can read and write, such forms allow the tracing of interviewees, and in cases where forms are lost or 'taken away', participants can be confronted with risks. Different languages, educational backgrounds and social norms may also impede genuinely informed and voluntary agreement to the participation in research projects (Leaning 2001: 1433).

In forced migration and refugee studies, using standardized consent forms raises additional ethical questions which require normative reflections. On the one hand, the value of such forms is doubtful given the conditions refugees are confronted with, e.g. in camps. In one of their studies about research ethics, Pittaway and Bartolomei (2013: 157) quote a scholar who comments that "[i]nformed consent is a joke when there is no food, no proper interpreters to read the legalistic forms we take. No security […] sometimes it makes me feel sick to have to ask people". On the other hand, such forms can evoke hope as well as fears and anxiety among participants. Especially when asylum seekers are not familiar with research projects and procedures, they may connect interviews with their legal asylum procedure although the researchers might have explained that it has nothing to do with it. In the process of justifying their asylum claims, giving the 'right answers' is crucial, since 'wrong answers' can have radical implications such as detention, rejection or deportation. Because of their permanent confrontation with uncertainties about their legal status in asylum and host countries, they may relate their participation in research projects to aspirations for improvement and more stability and certainty (Ellis et al. 2007: 467; Mackenzie et al. 2007: 301-306).

The concept of *voluntary* participation can furthermore be unfamiliar to some people. When refugees have fled countries with restrictive, authoritarian regimes where they were exposed to violence and human rights violations, the 'request' to 'voluntarily' sign a document might trigger fears. Ellis et al. (2007) stress:

> *If a refugee's experience has been that officials will stop at nothing to get a person to cooperate, and that authorities often hold inordinate power over one's future, being told that a study is 'voluntary' may seem absolutely meaningless. Particularly if the study is housed within an official institution, or funded by a federal government, participation may be seen as mandatory. In other instances, fear of deportation or a desire to achieve legal status may lead a refugee to feel forced to participate. In addition, cultural traditions of unquestioning respect for authorities may influence acquiescence to a professional's request to participate in research.* (Ellis et al. 2007: 46)

In order to consider specific characteristics of target groups, contexts and conditions, and to work towards ensuring voluntary and informed participation, Mackenzie, McDowell, and Pittaway (2007: 306-312) propose following a relational approach instead of individual, standardized informed consent forms. This approach is based on the notion that despite participants having agency and capabilities to make autonomous decisions, they are at the same time continuously exposed to the consequences of displacement and trauma. The authors therefore suggest that a more appropriate way forward is to create agreements in a process of ongoing negotiations in which the conditions of participation are continuously discussed and participants maintain certain control over the research procedures as well as the manner of their engagement.

During the research with refugees about sexual violence and self-protection in Uganda, informed consent was a serious topic. Especially in the context of sexual violence, the members of the research team in Uganda and in Germany discussed widely how we could ensure both voluntary and informed participation which we understood as key for building trust. We were concerned not only about possibly influencing participants' statements by providing too much background information about the project prior to discussions, but also about intimidating them with written standardized consent forms. In light of that, we decided to use oral consent with a relational approach similar to that suggested above (Mackenzie et al. 2007). With all participants, we discussed their rights, the overall research aim, as well as the possibilities and limitations of data usage in the beginning of interactions, and explained that we would like to share further details about the project afterwards to refrain from influences. Our decision to use oral consent was furthermore supported by the fact that a number of participants could not read or write and would be unable to truly know what was written on forms. The character of an oral agreement allowed us in-depth conversations and it protected the identity of participants as names were neither listed nor stored. However, we used written consent forms in interviews with staff of humanitarian organisations to secure formal authorisation in case of institutional questions in the future.

3.2 Interaction with participants

Interaction with participants in refugee situations is often influenced by humanitarian structure but also by various risks, some of which were mentioned earlier in this paper. In their article *'Stop Stealing Our Stories'*, Pittaway, Bartolomei and Hugman (2010: 235-239) draw on refugees' experience to analyse how interviewees perceive the interaction with and (lack of) trust in researchers, emphasising three interdependent issues: risks, distrust, and hierarchical distances. According to the authors, refugees criticised that physical risks can occur; e.g. when published papers include (unauthorised) names and/or pictures of interviewees, they might be exposed to harmful reactions from government authorities and military leaders. Psychological risks can arise due to insensitive and re-traumatising interviews without successive support, especially when researchers themselves can hardly deal with the traumatic experience of interviewees. Distrust by participants of researchers can emerge or increase when false expectations about rewards or compensations are created. Although sometimes promised, researchers often neglect to provide feedback and/or reports to refugees[13] and fail to regard the consequences of their fieldwork while only present for a short time. Finally, hierarchical distances can contribute to mistrust when foreign researchers or 'local' staff omit to consider class or ethnic differences.

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[13] See *4.2 Feedback to refugees* for more discussions.

3.2.1 Trust and respect

To collect data, researchers have to build trust in environments of distrust shaped by the experiences of refugees that caused their flight, but also while in asylum and in host countries (Van Liempt and Bilger 2012: 458-459). There they can face restrictive, insecure and uncertain circumstances and the truthfulness of their asylum claims is often questioned (see Sigona 2014: 374-375). In addition, refugees may not be able to anticipate the consequences of their contribution to research projects which can frighten them and eventually thwart their participation (Pittaway and Bartolomei 2013: 155). In such unstable surroundings, suspicious and careful approaches to strangers can become a survival strategy. Among others, Malkki (1995: 48) describes how she gradually built trustful relationships in her research with Hutu refugees from Burundi in Tanzania. And already in 1979, Hansen reflects on his research and trust-building process with Angolan refugees in Zambia in a similar vein:

> *Identifying any refugees and understanding the extent of their settlement took a long time. As I was a chindele (Luvale word for European) stranger with no understandable reason for living in the villages (what is an anthropologist anyway? And what is field research?) people were understandably cautious about revealing much to me. Although I soon learned there were refugees living around me in the villages it was a full year before anyone confided to me that he himself was a refugee. With that one confidence and a list of names of those who came with him, I rapidly expanded my network of refugee contacts and in succeeding months learned a lot about the difficulties and progress of village resettlement.* (Hansen 1979: 376)

This quote reveals how apparently 'neutral researchers' can be observed sceptically during field research and how it takes time to build trust. However, such time-consuming processes can stand in contrast to time-limited field research, possibly leading to hasty research activities with pressure to collect data quickly. The following narrative of women in Thailand who were approached by scholars to gather information about sexual violence exemplifies harmful practices:

> *They asked us to lead them to women who had been raped so they could record their stories. 'Tell us what happened – how did you feel?' Women were so upset after the interviews, we did not know what to do. We never heard from them again – we decided then that we would never work with researchers again. They stole our stories. We can gather the stories ourselves from our own people – you can help [with training] (Women's Group, Thailand, 2003)* (Pittaway et al. 2010: 236).

Not only the first contact but also subsequent interviews were performed in a highly problematic way, and participants did not receive feedback from interviewers about the use of data. The quote essentially also reveals that the interaction of researchers with participants cannot be reduced to formalities such as consent forms or short introduction rounds, but rather includes norms, confiding relationships, and the approaches to presenting findings of research. Trust is ultimately required to speak with someone about sensitive topics, to collect data and to prevent fear, suspicion and false expectations. But is building trust a 'personal issue' of researchers to gather 'better' or 'more' data, or is it their responsibility as a part of an ethical code of conduct? The Refugee Studies Centre's *Ethical Guidelines for Good Research Practices* stresses the linkage of participants' protection and "honouring trust" (2007: 164), therefore noting researchers' obligation to build trust. George (2015) suggests the use of Richard Rowson's FAIR approach to ensure fairness, autonomy, integrity, and results. For that, scholars should act fairly in terms of strength, differences and possible tensions of projects with participants, they should ensure autonomy from interests or judgements, and maintain integrity through truthful and respectful contact with all participants.

In order to gain trust, respect is central, allowing consideration of cultural differences and recognition of participants' freedom of choice and human dignity (Schönhuth et al. 2001: 18; Hugman et al. 2011b: 1275, 1279; Lammers 2007: 74). In their analysis about the role of respect in research with refugee children and adolescents, Lawrence, Kaplan, and McFarlane (2013) differentiate between three forms of respect: universal, protective, and compensatory respect. While universal respect applies to all persons and includes value as a person and his/her human rights, protective respect translates into safety from harm due to context or research participation. Finally, beneficial or compensatory respect refers to "positive contributions to the experiences of refugee young people" by means of the research project (Lawrence et al. 2013: 104). These three forms of respect are not limited to children and adolescents in refugee situations but can also be applied to other persons and age groups. Moreover, they do not merely determine a hermeneutic differentiation of social manners or norms but relate to the research design and specific "decision points" in research (Lawrence et al. 2013: 121-134), including which methods are chosen and how they are applied.

The idea of protective and compensatory respect implies that scholars are to take personal boundaries and privacy of participants seriously, and therefore also desist from *too* personal or *too* intimate questions. In the research about sexual and gender-based violence in refugee camps in Uganda, refraining from such intimate questions may appear impossible but was indeed important to us. Discussions[14] about how we can achieve this, led us to using open conversations in the form of ero-epic dialogues (Girtler 2001: 147-154) instead of structured interviews with refugees. These dialogues enabled us to be responsive to particular dynamics in conversation. Depending on how well we knew participants and where conversations took us, we were able to carefully raise sensitive issues and even ask more personal questions. However, most questions were formulated in the third person and remained rather general – we therefore did not confront participants with intimate questions such as 'Have you been raped, where, when and why?', but instead addressed broader subjects slowly by asking, e.g., 'Do you know if people experience violence in the refugee camp?' or 'Why do you think some people rape others?'.[15] This paved the way for participants to explain as much as they wanted to and felt comfortable with, and allowed us to ask if we did not understand something. Moreover, while our research team put an emphasis on asking sensitive questions to prevent retraumatisation, similar to other studies (see Sieber 2008; Dyregrov et al. 2000), refugees noted that dialogues were a way for them to talk, a chance to tell *their* stories. That providing information can turn out to be a beneficial process for participants was furthermore revealed by the fact that we were approached by a number of people who offered their participation.

Respectful and truthful interaction with participants is not only central for participants but also for researchers; speaking openly and honestly about the possibilities and limitations of their projects can prevent frustration for researchers. As mentioned above, participants may sometimes have hopes or expectations for improvements in their situation due to their involvement which scholars may not be able to initiate, at least rarely immediately. However, if these aspirations are not met, disappointment and mistrust can arise. By the same token, expectations of investigators, e.g. about the willingness of people to join research or provide contacts of potential participants, can remain unfulfilled and evoke feelings of disappointment, annoyance or discontent, particularly considering that research is often limited in time and funding.

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[14] It may be relevant to note that the director of the project, Susanne Buckley-Zistel, and I had lived in Uganda for several years and were therefore aware of some norms.

[15] These questions are examples signifying our approach in which we refrained from personal, direct inquiries but concentrated on broad questions.

3.2.2 Hierarchies and reciprocity

The problem areas of risks, distrust and hierarchical distances stressed above (Pittaway et al. 2010: 235-239) illustrate how interaction with participants, data collection and (lack of) trust are intertwined, and that ethical standards go beyond formalities – they encompass not only components of an ethical code of conduct but also normative reflections and scrutiny. Building trust and maintaining respect is closely linked to the role of investigators. Malkki (1995) explains how this can mean to preserve a certain distance:

> *[…] the success of the fieldwork hinged not so much on a determination to ferret out 'the facts' as on a willingness to leave some stones unturned, to listen to what my informants deemed important, and to demonstrate my trustworthiness by not prying where I was not wanted. It may be precisely by giving up the scientific detective's urge to know 'everything' that we gain access to those very partial vistas that our informants may desire or think to share with us.* (Malkki 1995: 51)

However, even if scholars 'leave some stones unturned', trust with participants is primarily built for the specific purpose of research, of data collection. From an ethics or normative point of view, it can and should be questioned if or how this can be sufficient, if false hopes may be created, if participants may be degraded to mere 'data sources'. In this vein, Rousseau (1993-1994: 13) stresses the danger of the "ambiguity of the position of voyeur, a position which instrumentalises the suffering of another person, by making it and him an object of study".

How important it is to counteract degradation and objectification of participants and therefore to reflect on issues of representation and power is also shown in the earlier cited narrative of women in Thailand who were approached by western scholars studying sexual violence (Pittaway et al. 2010: 236). In addition to the disturbing interview process for the women, the quote indicates how top-down hierarchical structures of researchers to 'those researched' were created and practiced. Researchers exposed them to questions with apparently little or no regard to their impact. The women's reference to 'stealing their stories' indicates that they felt they were treated as data sources, degraded to information-providing objects, instead of human beings with rights and agency. Such hierarchies have implications for interview processes and for issues of who speaks and is heard, how information is presented, and who has access to interview data – even after data collection. This consequently raises questions about how power structures can be screened and tackled.

Critically screening power dynamics strongly ties in with self-reflection of scholars but exceeds the individual level. For example, in instances of research projects at universities in northern countries with case studies in southern states, 'white, western principal investigators' briefly travel to 'the field' in 'exotic regions' to carry out 'fieldwork', perhaps also recruiting 'local assistants' to collect data before travelling back and analysing 'the data'. With this exaggerated wording, I do not aim to plead for a stop to research endeavours but rather to raise awareness. Such arrangements obviously exist and call for queries about representation, power and participation (see Doná 2007; Lammers 2007; Harrell-Bond and Voutira 2007). Issues of power imbalance between the 'global north' and the 'global south' are, among others, part of (post)colonial or critical whiteness perspectives;

although sometimes employed in research articles[16], they have rarely been regarded when discussing ethics in research about forced migration[17]. However, Marmo (2013) points out:

> *The (western, possibly white) researcher is not an abstract entity, but is part of this external context. The researcher, who may walk into the project already as a stronger party as he/she dictates the research agenda, acquires more controlling powers due to those external factors. The researcher does not become the dominant party; he/she is the dominant party.* (Marmo 2013: 94)

Since the 1980s, anthropological debates show how "colonial or at least colonial-thought entanglements of field research were for a long time primarily used to explore and translate 'exotic' ('uncivilised' and apparently 'unspoilt' from Western influences) cultures" (transl., Menzel 2014: 272). They serve(d) to produce 'knowledge of domination' within the western research community. Authors with (post)colonial perspectives such as Spivak (1999) about subalternity or Said (1979) about subjectivity might bring about different strings of arguments in how research is or can be organised as well as who is enabled to speak (for whom and how). And these questions are not only relevant for articles but also – or perhaps even more – for the approach to data collection which these articles are often based on.

Tackling top-down hierarchies from researchers to 'those researched' may be possible by participatory approaches, which will be addressed in the following section on research teams. As a basic principle, Mariam Salehi stressed in a discussion that researchers entirely rely on the collaboration and information-sharing of 'those researched', no matter where fieldwork takes place. Researchers therefore only find themselves in a truly dominant position above participants if collaborations are not acknowledged; and a self-centred focus on 'the researcher' maintains and reproduces the exact power structures towards 'those researcher' which are criticised. In addition to such recognition, the treatment of participants is central. To prevent objectifying interview partners and exercising strong hierarchies, reciprocal values of research projects are relevant. Reciprocity[18] generally refers to emerging mutual benefits of research projects for both participants and researchers, e.g. by giving services or goods and getting information (Musante 2014: 268). The normative meaning of reciprocity can be summarized as: "In return for their help, those studied must also be helped" (Cassell 1982: 28). While the idea of reciprocity comprises a number of dualisms – researcher and 'researched', providing and receiving, apprehending risks and chances (see Clark-Kazak 2013: 104-105; Schmidt 2007: 96; Marmo 2013: 98; McMichael et al. 2015: 253) – the term 'reciprocal gesture' is repeatedly used in the literature referring to a voluntary or even charitable notion of reciprocity with offering something in return for 'data'.

However, reciprocal relationships are also argued to be more than binary frames or charitable gestures as they are based on "mutual empathy – with each person seeking to understand the challenges and opportunities of the 'other'" (Clark-Kazak 2013: 104); i.e. this is not only about researchers recognising participants' challenges and opportunities but also the other way around, that participants understand those of researchers and the limitations of research. And for that, scholars should explain their project and its scope of possibilities. Moreover, reciprocal relations

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[16] See, among others, Chimni (1998); Turner (2005); Koerner (2010); De La Rosa and Frank (2017); Limbu (2009); McDowell (2009).

[17] See, among others, Marmo (2013) on the dominant position of researchers in cross-cultural refugee research and Moran, Mohamed and Lovel (2011) on language and identity.

[18] In anthropology, reciprocity has been widely discussed, see, among others Sieber (1982); Hammersley and Atkinson (2007); Bernard and Gravlee (2014).

can be used to systematically support the agency and capacities of participants (Mackenzie et al. 2007: 300-301, 311) and contribute to their empowerment (Van der Velde et al. 2009: 1298).

How can reciprocal relations be put into practice? According to the dual imperative, scholars are to adhere to academic standards but also share findings with humanitarian actors to improve refugees' protection and living conditions (Jacobsen and Landau 2003). In this way, they can support refugees indirectly through the humanitarian aid channels; though, scholars remain uncertain if their input will be used. A more direct and immediate way of reciprocal benefits for refugees is the provision of advice such as legal counselling. "In such a context, the story told is to the benefit of both the refugee and the researcher" (Schmidt 2007: 96). However, not all scholars in forced migration and refugee studies have a legal background, and counselling bears the risk of blurry lines, of insufficiently clarifying how information is used, leaving participants in uncertainty or with hope for improvements. In addition, researchers can support refugees' autonomy by involving them in research projects and negotiating benefits with them. Therewith, participants are not merely informed about research but rather play an active role in it; they can voice expectations, explain needs and fears, and are thus "able to exercise some degree of control over the research process and the conditions of their involvement in it" (Mackenzie et al. 2007: 311).

But should people be compensated for their participation? Is it ethically justifiable to financially reimburse interviewees as a part of reciprocal benefits for information and to meet expectations? The question about financial or material reimbursement polarizes and provokes wide-ranging debates among scholars. On the one hand, financial benefits can create bias because participants may feel obligated to answer questions in a *particular* way. Offering favours also puts researchers in a powerful position superior to those collecting them, a possible handover to 'those in need'. On the other hand, participants travel distances and take time to support the research when they cannot work (Marmo 2013: 98; Temple and Moran 2011: 16; Vervliet et al. 2015: 479; Ruppenthal et al. 2005). The ethical guidelines of the Refugee Studies Centre (2007: 166) similarly call for "Fair Return for Assistance: There should be no economic exploitation of individual informants, translators and research participants; fair return should be made for their help and services".

So far, there is no consensus but some scholars argue for transparent material compensation (or gifts) for participants' time and travel costs (Clark-Kazak 2013: 104; Hart and Tyrer 2006: 21; Kaiser 2013: 118; Moniruzzaman 2016; Birman 2006). When weighing up these risks and benefits, I believe it is crucial to cover costs that arise for people to take part in a study and to do so in a transparent manner. This is relevant in view of reciprocity, and during research in Uganda, we always provided drinks and snacks[19] in dialogues and discussions, and compensated for transportation costs with an amount that was discussed in the beginning of research and was the same for all participants.

In a number of discussions at conferences or in workshops, some colleagues questioned whether or not translators or other people working in research projects should be reimbursed for their immediate assistance. This appears bizarre to me. While researchers are responsible for carefully selecting people who assist, they are as a matter of principle engaged due to their skills and to deliver certain services, which is why they are entitled to compensation. Otherwise one could ask why do researchers receive salaries? During my fieldwork, translators and research assistants received

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[19] Drinks and snacks may seem needless to provide in dialogues and discussion or pointless to note in this paper; however, in remote regions where temperatures are high, markets restricted, and water sometimes insufficient, these aspects are important. Moreover, in discussions with Carrie Perkins the question arose of what message we send to participants if we had a bottle of water during interviews but did not share it.

remuneration, which we agreed upon beforehand and which was based on the respective budget allocated in the research projects. Precisely this reference to 'allocated budget lines' leads to a critical component especially for early-career scholars. While I had little funding for my PhD project, the other research projects were generously supported by foundations (see fn. 4). However, where early-career scholars have small or no financial resources to work with, field research can quickly turn into an expensive endeavour for them. Although passion for scientific work may be necessary to be an academic, is it ethical to send scholars to the field without the necessary material backing? Research institutions worldwide face funding limitations but insufficient support stands in stark contrast to the pursuit of excellence.

3.3 Research teams

While this paper has so far looked at the interaction of researchers with participants, the perspective now switches to research teams, focussing on the cooperation with researchers from host countries as well as with peer researchers with refugee backgrounds. The division of 'local' and 'refugee researchers' is used figuratively for discussion purposes on ethical questions, to better explore both spheres but does not constitute a strict separation. Of course, there are various different configurations of research teams.

3.3.1 Cooperating with 'local' researchers

The situation where 'western' researchers carry out projects with the support of 'local' staff – researchers, assistants, translators or interpreters – is quite common. 'Local' research assistants[20] are recruited to help conduct interviews, translate data, and identify possible participants. This cooperation is often considered as beneficial to generate "better results" (crit. Jacobsen and Landau 2003: 192-193), predominantly because 'local' staff is assumed to be "often better placed to identify the most appropriate way to conduct an interview" (Turner 2010a: 214). Moreover, "interpreters with insider status may indeed provide invaluable input into the research, contributing much more than mere language aid by interpreting the meanings of different cultural practices and codes, and by adding their own voice to the research" (Halilovich 2013: 135). During my ethics review in Uganda, the board furthermore emphasised the relevance of working with Ugandan research assistants in order to contribute to building their capacities and skills.

In spite of such positive assumptions, this form of cooperation can also be questioned regarding possible challenging implications or the sustainability of the involvement of 'assistants' (Doná 2007: 214; Chiumento et al. 2015: 4). From a practical point of view, simultaneous translations tend to interrupt conversation flows (Söderström 2011: 158). All translations contain a certain level of interpretation of what has been said, and content can – (un)consciously or (un)intendedly – be lost. When translators or assistants are biased, risks for participants can emerge, impacting on the process and integrity of interviews as well as the selection of participants (Mackenzie et al. 2007: 304; Harrell-Bond and Voutira 2007: 293, 296). Especially in cases where translators or assistants have similar regional origins to participants, political, social, economic, or cultural lines of conflict can occur which foreign researchers may not be aware of. For example, participants may associate the name, language or appearance of 'local' staff with groups they are afraid of. This can affect interviews and the wellbeing of participants and thereby influence the collected data (Kabranian-Melkonian 2015: 717). Besides, all persons involved in interviews receive access to sensitive material which can imply security risks for respondents if not treated appropriately (Zwi et al. 2006: 367).

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[20] See also Sanjek (1993) as well as Temple and Edwards (2002) on the role of assistants and interpreters.

> *When refugees are interviewed, the information they reveal can be used against them either in the camp or in their areas of origin. Refugees and IDPs can become stigmatised or targeted if certain information is known about them, for example, that a woman has been raped or that a refugee has access to particular resources. In focus-group discussions there can be no confidentiality, and what is inadvertently revealed — even when questions are carefully designed — cannot fully be controlled even by diligent researchers. Problems of confidentiality also arise when local researchers, especially those who are also refugees, know the subjects. The risks associated with local researchers and the potential for placing them and the research subjects in compromised positions should be carefully assessed.* (Jacobsen and Landau 2003: 193)

These different challenges show the necessity of reflecting on the role, composition and possible impact of research teams. They also show the importance of discussing the research project, with its aim and questions and training methods, with all team members. Such deliberations can be part of a structured Do No Harm analysis by means of which dividing and connecting factors are systematically examined prior to and during fieldwork. As noted earlier, the analysis could also be undertaken together with the peer researchers, assistants and interpreters to investigate and explore possible consequences.

With a focus on training, Brounéus (2011: 136) suggests practicing translation processes with interpreters prior to interviews, only translating short sequences of interviews to not lose too much information, and discussing the indispensability of participants' anonymity, rights and data protection with them. Horst (2009: 128) conducted training for fieldwork with refugees in Dadaab, Kenya and in Norway, and held meetings to reflect on research questions and literature. During research in Uganda, I also organised workshops and training sessions with the research teams to first speak about the research projects, aims and overarching questions, and then the research contexts and methodological approaches. We took several days together to elaborate how we can best move forward together and a crucial part of these discussions were invested in ethical concerns.

But can such cooperation with 'local' researchers be sustainable? What obligations do principal investigators have towards them? In her article about the silenced assistant, Turner (2010a) questions the visibility of local interpreters and researchers after fieldwork is finished. Through her experiences in Vietnam and China, she sheds light on the personal stories of assistants and how they perceived the process. In Uganda, I was able to work with well-qualified researchers and assistants who spoke several languages, had suitable academic backgrounds of, e.g., clinical psychology, social work and international relations, as well as valuable personal skills of sensitivity and self-reflection. Our cooperation helped to capture some information given between the lines and thus note what might have stayed unnoticed. Hence, the teamwork with our 'local' colleagues has been greatly beneficial for the research, participants and researchers themselves by facilitating improvement in their methodical skills and knowledge about academic debates on forced migration. I also learned much from our cooperation and through our discussions, academically and personally.

As this close teamwork turned out to be fruitful – and other scholars describe similar cooperation (Horst 2009; Turner 2010a; Doná 2007; Halilovich 2013) – one may argue from a (post)colonial perspective that the 'knowledge of domination' was reduced. But was it really? Doná (2007) demonstrates how it is not only about cooperating with 'local' researchers but how a wider net of parallel and intertwined strings of communication and power influence teamwork and field research:

> *Not only were there continuous translations to and from Kinyarwanda, French and English but most significantly parallel translations and back-translations between academic, non-governmental, governmental and UN 'languages'. In the course of the research, different discourses on fostering, accompanied by distinct institutional practices, surfaced. […] Our task was to interpret and integrate these discourses, so that others could use them. In this process, the research team became one of many organizations in a net-like system, and was a vehicle for the circulation of power.* (Doná 2007: 225)

In Uganda, I experienced similar translation processes on different levels including policy and research, ethics, interviews and data use. In contrast to overcoming a (post)colonial 'knowledge of power', I analysed data and published works by myself[21], without peer researchers and assistants from Uganda. While I acknowledged their support, and thanked all participants in my publications, neither my colleagues nor refugees can be part of its outcome, e.g. discussions with other scholars or humanitarian actors. Our cooperation has been limited to the time of field research – attempts to receive additional funding to employ them longer and engage them in the data analysis has so far remained limited. The question of post-employment responsibility is therefore not only an individual one of researchers but also a structural one of academic funding schemes.

3.3.2 Research about *or* with *refugees? Refugees as peer researchers*

For years, forced migration and refugee studies scholars have been discussing the relationship between researchers and 'those researched', and research *about* refugees is increasingly criticised for creating a strong asymmetry of power. Scholars in general but 'western' scholars in particular can acquire dominant roles which can be critically reflected on from a (post)colonial perspective (Marmo 2013). Moreover, by focussing on refugees' hardships only, researchers are on the verge of reproducing victimising notions of refugees and therewith contributing to concepts of vulnerabilities which the international refugee regime uses (Turner 2010b: 43ff). By seeking scholarly abstractions, refugees can be portrayed as collectives with similar experiences but little or no regard to age, gender, and background, depriving them of a sense of subjectivity and imposing passiveness (Agier 2011: 149; Lubkemann 2008: 16; Turner 2010b: 3). Individuals can become hidden in plain sight, merely objects within a specific surrounding but not actors able to impact on them – i.e. impacting on context and research.

It seems that refugees are often deemed to be 'invisible' actors in research (Harrell-Bond and Voutira 2007; Gifford 2013). As scholars have increasingly explored refugees' activities and agency in recent years, they reveal how they see themselves (Clark-Kazak 2014; Krause 2016a), and how they cope with difficult circumstances (Ensor 2014; Gladden 2013). In spite of numerous other examples in which scholars reflect on how refugees challenge their imposed identity as 'passive masses' in their publications, writing about refugees as actors and involving them in research processes are two different issues. Refugees' invisibility in research processes is rather linked to questions of power and representation, of speaking *about* or speaking *for* them, working *on* or working *with* them (Eastmond 2007; Doná 2007: 220; Kaiser 2013: 118). And this involves questions not only about an ethical code of conduct but also especially about normative reflections.

To counteract and overcome strict hierarchical structures, scholars increasingly call for and implement a shift towards research with refugees instead of about them, through bottom up and

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[21] Most of my works are published in German to promote discussions which have thus far focused on refugees in Europe, neglecting that most displaced persons are outside of Europe.

participatory approaches.[22] Participatory approaches are understood to minimize risks and ethical challenges (Block et al. 2012: 72), strengthen “ethical and methodological precision” (Ellis et al. 2007: 471), reduce power and knowledge divides, contribute to mutual understanding and promote opportunities of participants’ empowerment (Zwi et al. 2006: 271-272). For example, McMichael et al. (2015: 246) state about their participatory longitudinal research on refugee settlement in Australia that “[t]he project fostered a supportive environment in which participants could engage with researchers and practise and develop their English […], and the range of research activities supported participants’ interest and engagement in the project”.

Participatory approaches can also be seen critically for maintaining power asymmetries and making them less or not visible. Beyond forced migration studies, Jack D. Douglas criticises in his 1976 book on *Investigative Social Research* how it “involve[s] infiltration of the setting, establishment of feelings of trust, creation of situations which facilitate the divulgence of information, and use of an adversary approach for gathering information” (Douglas 1976: abstract). Although participatory approaches may not entirely prevent power asymmetries since researchers remain in decision-making roles, they may help to increase awareness of and alleviate hierarchies. A participatory approach is used throughout by Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh as she cooperates with refugees in all stages in her project *South-South Humanitarian Responses to Displacement from Syria*. She also engaged in other spheres of cooperation by discussing ‘voicelessness’ (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2016) as well as the concept of the ‘third voice’ (Qasmiyeh and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2013) through which she neither speaks ‘about’ nor ‘for’ refugees but rather together ‘with’ them. The ‘third voice’ is therefore conceptualized as a joint voice which emerges in the process of shared experiences, collaborative interpretation and analysis of data.

It is not my intention to assess different bottom up or participatory approaches often embedded in particular disciplinary debates. My interest rather lies in general levels of including refugees in research. One way to subdivide such general levels is the involvement of people through hearing their voices and stories to gain first-hand information, through collaboration in data collection, and through jointly conceptualising the research process in the field. Whether by providing people a platform to speak, involving them in data gathering, or working with them to design processes, for each level of engagement ethical considerations are necessary. For example, in interviews as discussed above, informing participants about the research project and their rights, fostering a trustful environment, and ensuring voluntary participation are crucial. While interviews may be most common in qualitative research, the central part here is to give people the opportunity to speak, and to provide time and space for them to raise their standpoints beyond research questions. Crucially, when participants can speak out about issues that are relevant for them, they are not treated as ‘data sources’ but as persons.

In addition to these standards, in the course of collaborative data collection as well as consultative design of research processes, agreements and mutual understanding of teamwork have to be negotiated. When collecting data in collaboration, principal investigators should give an introduction to the objectives and questions of the project in order for everyone to grasp the scope of research. They should provide input on ethical considerations and practice the application of methods. Principal investigators remain in the decision-making position about the project whereas refugees’ roles could be described as ‘assistants’ with limited impact due to their engagement to support data collection. However, it is up to principal investigators to create space for them to provide input and subsequently adjust approaches.

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[22] See, among others, Halilovich (2013); Voutira and Doná (2007); Hugman et al. (2011a); Doná (2007); Harris and Roberts (2011); Moran et al. (2011); Van der Velde et al. (2009); Ellis et al. (2007).

When jointly conceptualising research, refugees have an influential role. Either based on specific previously developed research questions and aims or with an overall subject in mind, scholars consult with refugees on the way forward, which may include specifying issues to be analysed, whom to speak with and how to do that (manner and methodical approach) and where to go. Research processes are therefore designed in cooperation. For such endeavours, scholars need time, must know the context and people well already, and have built trusting relationships. Moreover, those who are part of the team effort need to have knowledge about academic work. Due to their influential roles, it is important to ensure that consulting groups are well balanced and include people with different backgrounds to prevent biases and harm.

During previous research endeavours with Congolese refugees in Uganda, we worked on all three levels (with limited scope). We gained first-hand data and encouraged participants to speak about different aspects by using ero-epic dialogues which constitute conversations instead of sheer inquiry-response cycles. We furthermore conducted a survey in which we collected data together with refugees as peer researchers; after a week of training in which we introduced the project, debated and adapted the prepared survey questions, and spoke about research ethics, we collected data in collaboration. In this context, we not only informed them about content but through the emerging discussion entered a joint process of re-conceptualising the research. In addition to precise and sensitive phrasing of questions, we elaborated ways to approach people and received advice on whom we should conduct individual dialogues with.

These levels of involvement[23] go beyond a disciplinary focus but remain general and abstract, and offer benefits as well as difficulties. As a basic principle, trust is necessary in all three levels and scholars are responsible for maintaining impartiality and preventing biases. While refugees are actively involved in different ways, they can make their voices heard and dynamically impact on research instead of 'passively enduring' questions. However, research contexts may not allow for long interview sessions or collaborative data collection to work. In (post-)conflict regions, people may face consequences for supporting research or feel pressured to take part in it. Moreover, the approach of jointly framing research in particular encounters fundamental difficulties; in an ideal setting, such an open process may be feasible but scholars have regular time-consuming schedules, require funding for their research[24], and need ethical approvals to carry it out. Travelling to communities who may be far away to only then figure out what to do, and how, may therefore be complicated, although preliminary research trips are common in anthropology. Besides that, questions arise of how sustainable such procedures can be, how data is eventually used, and who may receive credit for it.

In spite of the challenges, Harrell-Bond and Voutira (2007: 296) note that refugees' research engagement is necessary although it constitutes "the ultimate Herculean labour". Marlowe et al. (2015) summarize the benefits:

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[23] Among others, the aforementioned project *South-South Humanitarian Responses to Displacement from Syria*, led by Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, and the *Humanitarian Innovation Project*, led by Alexander Betts, worked with refugees.

[24] For all levels, respective funding is necessary. While larger research projects may have sufficient funds and some flexibility, especially smaller projects or PhD candidates with limited budgets and time constraints may face restrictive boundaries.

> *The fact that peer researchers from refugee backgrounds are more likely to be seen as insiders (due to their forced migration experiences, linguistic capabilities, local connections and cultural background) offers important relational and methodological resources to a particular project. These resources can be complex and the additional research relationship that a person has with a potential participant needs careful consideration.* (Marlowe et al. 2015: 393)

4 Research ethics after fieldwork?

Ethical discussions often concentrate on the phase of field research but they are relevant before, during *and* after it, and should therefore be part of the entire research project. The need for ethical considerations after data collection is revealed when exploring possible consequences of non-anonymised data use. As participants might have provided potentially sensitive information, disclosing their identity can place them in a vulnerable position (see Hugman et al. 2011b: 1277). Thus, it is crucial to anonymise data to guarantee the safety of participants. This said, Gerver (2013) amplifies discussions about generalised anonymisation by commenting that this can trigger more harm than benefit in specific cases, and suggesting that participants be explicitly asked if they want to stay anonymous. In her research about status determination of refugees in Israel, she stresses that even if disclosed names can produce risks, they can also provide opportunities for securing living conditions, protection and autonomy which is why the decision should be made by participants individually.

Another important ethical subject after fieldwork is how data is used. While "a major challenge [of researchers] concerns the ability to translate personal narratives into theoretical debates taking place within disciplines" (Harrell-Bond and Voutira 2007: 292), I will discuss the transfer of findings in this part of the paper. The well-known concept of dual imperative by Jacobsen and Landau (2003) serves as a point of departure which aims "to satisfy the demands of academic peers and to ensure that the knowledge and understanding work generates are used to protect refugees and influence institutions like governments and the UN" (Jacobsen and Landau 2003: 186). Whereas debates have arisen about the need for independent research not determined by policies as well as for 'policy-irrelevant research' (Bakewell 2008; Van Hear 2012), the idea of sharing findings to improve refugees' protection and living conditions is widely reflected on.[25] Already in 1996, Turton wrote:

> *I cannot see any justification for conducting research into situations of extreme human suffering if one does not have the alleviation of suffering as an explicit objective of one's research. For the academic, this means attempting to influence the behaviour and thinking of policy-makers and practitioners so that their interventions are more likely to improve than worsen the situations of those whom they wish to help.* (Turton 1996: 96)

However, concentrating on translating research findings into policy advice to advance refugee aid bears the risk of knowledge staying among "powerful interest groups that respond to it" and (re)producing an "authoritative voice of hard science" (Rodgers 2004: 48). Refugees would therefore be excluded, although it could be argued normatively that scholars have a similar obligation to also share results with the people who participated in the research. Based on that, I

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[25] See, among others, part three in Block et al. (2013); Black (2001); Doná (2007); Harrell-Bond and Verdirame (2005); Tait (2011).

propose to extend the dual imperative by including the need to inform participants about the outcome of research.

4.1 Policy advice

Transferring research findings for practical application aims to influence developments and processes in humanitarian refugee aid in a way that marginalised people – in this case displaced persons – can receive better protection and have improved living conditions. Although working procedures of humanitarian actors and scholars differ, Jacobsen and Landau (2003: 186) emphasise that scientific and policy work may not be 'mutually exclusive'. On the contrary, in social science, scholars gather rich data based on rigorous empirical foundations which can be relevant for operational actors. From a normative or moral perspective, it could even be argued that social scientists have the obligation to share research results outside their academic circle and contribute to improvements.

However, what do we know about policy relevance? How can data be translated into implementable measures and who should conduct such a translation? These questions may seem rudimentary but they are vital when calling for transfer of results. Practitioners might operate in technical fields and are hesitant about social science's suitability, or they may not be interested in scholars' comprehensive findings but rather in academic evidence to support their already set strategies. Scholars may not have an understanding of the complexity of everyday issues or the functioning of humanitarian organisations, or they may (understandably) not be willing to fit their research findings into political agendas. I worked in international aid for several years in the past and gained an understanding of operational issues. While I strongly believe in the idea of the dual imperative, I have come across colleagues (from both sides) who enthusiastically call for, but also entirely reject, a transfer of research findings. I have also come across researchers who have approached practitioners with great confidence – or arrogance – striving to tell them how to do their jobs, although they may not know enough about it to do so and fail to listen to the other side.

While the relationship between humanitarian agencies (including governments) and scholars is complex, it can be shaped by dependency, e.g. of access to the field, or tensions (Janmyr 2014: 87). When humanitarian institutions practice political hierarchies and power over scholars, e.g. through funding means, scholars may not know how their findings will be used and will thus be reluctant to (fully) share them. This can contribute to relationships of "deep-seated mutual distrust" (Schmidt 2007: 89). However, relationships can also be fruitful and of benefit for researchers, practitioners and refugees. An example of a well-functioning policy- and practice-oriented research institution is the Refugee Law Project[26] in Uganda. It is part of the School of Law at Makerere University in Kampala and focuses on diverse fields in forced migration studies (see Harrell-Bond and Verdirame 2005: 15f; Janmyr 2014: 88).

However, what do we know about policy relevance and who decides if something is 'relevant'? Schmidt (2007: 88) argues that sometimes research findings "are already known by some or many" aid workers. This may not necessarily mean that they are irrelevant. While Schmidt notes hesitation to work with the information, I add that organisations may not have the capacity to work with it at that moment, that the information may not be found important enough, or that scholars may have spoken with practitioners who are not in decision-making positions. When referring to 'humanitarian agencies', we essentially speak about numerous individuals working for them. And it would be incorrect to generalize because practitioners approach and/or are willing to work with researchers

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[26] See http://www.refugeelawproject.org/

differently, and vice versa. It is therefore less a question of whether or not something is believed to be relevant but whom researchers speak with, how and when.

This brings me to the next set of questions: how can data be translated into implementable measures, and who should undertake the translation exercise? As noted above, scholars might have insufficient understanding of the daily functioning of organizations or the design of aid projects, with indicator and outcome sheets, implementation plans, monitoring and evaluation procedures, but through their research they generate results pertinent for projects and/or functioning. As a basic principle, sharing research results with operational actors is not a one-way street but based on respect, willingness and mutual understanding – similar to field research with participants. Practitioners and researchers might use similar terms but often speak different languages and have different workflows, and to cooperate by sharing findings, this needs to be clarified, negotiated and understood. To prevent frustration on both sides, mutual openness is important in order to discuss and disclose dividing procedures and requirements, and thus to pave a way in which both sides can learn from each other and use results effectively. For example, aid staff might have limited or no use for scientific results as provided in research articles; with little time on their hands, they probably lack the capacity (or interest) for reading a several-page article searching for something of practical relevance. For aid workers, summarized versions of results with tangible and perhaps implementable recommendations are more useful. However, such strong reductions can be challenging for scholars, since research is not only about the results but also about the processes and related theoretical and methodological reflections. Hence, to share findings, practitioners and researchers have to be willing to listen and find common ground.

The transfer of research findings can be accomplished in various ways, among others, personal dialogues, strategy advice or policy papers. A fairly common approach is the concept of policy papers written by scholars, which often include policy advice in bullet points – short and precise. However, although they provide information on paper that is often widely accessible, they can drown in everyday routines and workloads, and end up unused. In the past, I have had good experiences with open, problem-oriented discussions in the contexts of workshops. While I was given time to present my findings to staff of NGOs, international and governmental organisations, they were able to ask questions and add examples of what they are already doing and how the findings link up with this. Based on that, we could discuss the different aspects and distinguish possible consequences for aid delivery together, which included what my findings meant for humanitarian measures and how they could be used in implementable recommendations. However, these open and critical workshops were only possible due to established contacts which I had and maintained over years.

4.2 Feedback to refugees

But what about refugees, the participants in research? While the dual imperative mainly focusses on sharing results with scholars and humanitarian actors (Jacobsen and Landau 2003), participants can be excluded and “a highly problematic distinction between the ‘us’ […] and ‘them’” created (Rodgers 2004: 48). My proposal to share findings with participants also relates to manners of interaction; in lieu of ‘handling’ participants as ‘data sources’ to treat them respectfully and truthfully. The importance of transferring results back to communities is underscored by quotes from refugees in Thailand and Australia which Pittaway and Bartolomei (2013) gained.

> *They [researcher] send long questionnaires about trauma to people without support and never follow up to see if it upset them. (Refugee man resettled to Australia, 2005)* (Pittaway and Bartolomei 2013: 156).

> *If we had a copy of every PhD, every report people had promised to send us - of every photo they had taken, this hut would be so full - so what do you see? Nothing! (Refugee woman, Thai-Burma Border, 2003)* (Pittaway and Bartolomei 2013: 154).

These quotes highlight the anger people feel about not hearing back from researchers, but also about scholars' assumed indifference to how their research and questions might have affected participants. During my stays in Uganda, participants often asked me how data would be used and how this might influence their living conditions. I often found myself in the position of explaining the process of academic publications as well as my intention to use results to inform policies and humanitarian projects, but this felt vague. In turn, I felt obligated to go beyond that, to follow up and give feedback on research results – not only for reasons of fairness but also so members of communities could use the results.

Several times throughout the paper, I have emphasised how important ethical considerations are, particularly due to conflictive contexts and the possibility of causing harm. Is it necessary for scholars to travel back to disseminate results with communities? Zwi et al. (2006: 268) stress the necessity for scholars "to be realistic about the extent to which they will be able to follow-up at a later date, and […] to look for ways to provide some immediate benefits or feedback while researchers are with the community, rather than promising post-research dissemination, which may not be possible". In addition to possibly challenging settings, communities might have moved on by the time results are developed, especially considering the long 'time to market' duration of academic publishing. A more pragmatic aspect is financial coverage of dissemination trips; when research sites are far from the workplaces of scholars, trips can become very expensive, and with limited research funding, it just may not be possible to realize them.

In spite of such challenges, it is understood that providing feedback is important. The manner of disseminating results could be personal and perhaps also 'virtual'. Personally sharing findings can be conducted in the form of group discussions with participants and refugees who worked on the projects. In addition to receiving reports, those attending discussions can act as multipliers to inform members of communities about results. Working with multipliers can be necessary when a great number of people participated in research who cannot be informed individually. In these group discussions, the meaning of findings for communities can be deliberated so that it is not only about scholars informing participants about 'their' results but rather for communities and scholars to speak about them and perhaps discuss ways in which they can be useful.

Another possibility to provide feedback is 'virtual', by using information and communication technologies to share findings. This may involve, for example, sending reports via email and setting up (internet) calls with, again, former participants or refugees who worked on projects. Similar to the personal exchange, being in touch with people who can act as multipliers can be beneficial to disseminate information in communities widely. While the idea of employing internet technologies may seem strange at first considering the remote regions where refugees often have to live, phone and internet connection may also be part of their daily routines. Such technology can thus be employed to stay in touch with participants and share findings at the end. As we lacked funding and time to travel to Uganda to share results with communities, we tried to initiate this virtual approach – however, with little success so far. The people we came close to and stayed in touch with had left the sites, they were either resettled or moved to other places in Uganda. Although we have been unable to establish new contacts with people to dissimilate our findings, we are still exploring ways (such as Facebook) to do so.

Should findings be shared although they may cause distress or conflicts in communities? Research results may involve aspects which are critical, possibly contributing to frictions in communities. Discussing such results is therefore challenging and problematic, however, it may not be impossible as findings can be explained in various ways and it is the responsibility of the researchers to determine an appropriate way. This may include avoiding direct confrontation with assumed hard 'facts' but describing broader terms and successively shedding light on results.

5 Brief excursus: ethics committees or platforms for exchange?

Institutional ethics committees (IECs)[27] serve to review research projects with human subjects regarding their anticipated procedures to ensure ethical practices, protection of participants, and safety of research teams. IECs and ethical review processes are widely discussed and criticized. Although forced migration and refugee studies constitute an inter- and multi-disciplinary field, looking into arguments for and against IECs from a social science perspective helps to narrow them down.

Arguments against institutionalized control procedures through IECs in social sciences include their historic foundation in biomedical sciences insufficient for qualitative and quantitative research (Wynn 2011; Murphy and Dingwall 2007), and their counterproductive and unsuitable processes (Richardson and McMullan 2007). Sometimes they are even observed as "a major threat to the social sciences" (Dingwall 2006: 51) because IECs practice "scientific governance" (Braun et al. 2010). Schrag (2011: 120) summarizes that "1) ethics committees impose silly restrictions, 2) ethics review is a solution in search of a problem, 3) ethics committees lack expertise, 4) ethics committees apply inappropriate principles, 5) ethics review harms the innocent, and 6) better options exist".

In contrast to these and other critiques, the central argument for review processes by IECs is their means for quality control in line with ethical standards (Schönhuth et al. 2001). Some scholars oppose the idea of biomedical models in IECs based on a misinterpretation because diverse disciplines and approaches are represented in committees and therefore also taken into account (Hedgecoe 2008: 874, 878). Multi-disciplinary IECs are thus believed to provide advice, recommendations and information to researchers as well as ensure compliance with certain norms (Witte and Heitkamp 2005: 2).

Discussion about IECs may be endless and while researchers can benefit from well-prepared research plans and feedback, IECs may be limited in their scope of control and support as they are not part of the actual fieldwork, and not adhering to recommendations would have little institutional consequences on research and for scholars (Murphy and Dingwall 2007: 2231). However, in personal conversations with colleagues, they often expressed worry or even fear of the review and not receiving approval. This could lead to scholars not laying out their procedures as planned but as likely to be approved, and IECs would not be able to provide feedback as perhaps required.

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[27] As noted in the introduction, in German academia such institutional review procedures are not standardized and applied in all disciplines.

Fear and limited scope of support are the two central reasons that lead me to suggest exceeding institutionalized structures. During fieldwork, scholars – regardless of their positions as PhD candidates, post-doctoral researchers or professors – can be confronted with numerous ethical questions they are interested in or even need to discuss to proceed. Such questions may include methodological or everyday matters like manner of interaction with participants or dangerous situations. Finding time, space and people to voice worries and challenges, and think of possible ways forward is essential. It operationalizes the paired understanding of research ethics in this paper not only as a code of conduct but also as a framework for normative scrutiny of research in a broader sense.

Peer groups can be helpful to speak about such questions. They can be flexibly set up with colleagues who are at different academic stages and working in diverse disciplines but conducting similar field research. This is important to create mutual understanding. A peer group surrounding may not solve issues or ensure ethically correct processes but it offers researchers a platform for exchange, and it is this platform that is fundamental for normative scrutiny of research, fruitful debates and sharing experiences. In the past, I have been part of such peer groups with colleagues who worked in similar contexts but focused on different fields including transitional justice, genocide studies, and peace and conflict studies. In spite of differences, I was able to explain thoughts and worries, discuss them critically and openly without fear of consequences or embarrassment, but also do the same for peers and by that learn. And I found that sometimes it is not about receiving the 'right' answer or finding the 'best' solution but about being able to speak, forming thoughts into words and being heard, or to only listen.

While peer groups can be beneficial for individuals and groups, they can be limited through their loose setups, limited time and perspectives. It is eventually up to individuals to initiate and maintain groups, find time and topics to speak about, and it requires trust to raise critical or perhaps personal questions, which needs to be built. Browne and Moffett (2014: 234) also write about support systems in the form of "an inter-disciplinary qualitative field research network amongst doctoral candidates in the university in order to bridge this gap and to offer mutual support for early career researchers engaging in similar challenging fieldwork". While most scholars probably have peers whom they can approach with diverse issues, my understanding of peer groups focuses on several members at different stages (i.e., PhD candidates, post-doctoral researchers and professors) which can facilitate a more stable support system as well as more nuanced and challenging discussions due to different experiences. Especially for early career researchers who might engage in field research for the first time, these groups can be helpful.

6 Concluding thoughts

In this paper, I have aimed to discuss ethical considerations when carrying out research with refugees. Research ethics I have understood as a code of conduct for scholars as well as a framework for normative scrutiny of research in a broader sense. That ethical considerations before, during and after fieldwork are not only bound to researchers' individual commitments is underlined by recent developments which go beyond forced migration and refugee studies: due to their bad experiences, the San people in South Africa issued their own code of research ethics[28] highlighting respect,

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[28] See http://www.sciencemag.org/news/2017/03/san-people-africa-draft-code-ethics-researchers

honesty, justice, fairness, care and transparent processes of researchers towards them. Thus, they have set standards for research procedures to protect themselves from inadequate processes.

A number of subjects were touched upon in this paper through which I hope to spark discussions. Among the overarching aspects of harm and participation, further questions arise which relate to possible divides between harm and protection as well as how far cooperation with refugees should go: Is there a difference between doing no harm and protecting refugees who participate in research, and if so, how can researchers proceed? Is refugees' involvement in research limited to data collection or should scholars strive to also analyse data and publish results with them? Such questions require further discussion.

Moreover, in this paper, I did not question the current boom of fieldwork in social science, also in fields such as (post-)conflict and forced migration, although I find it highly questionable. From my perspective of working at a German university, this boom not only exists among scholars but also students. But should students be allowed and/or expected to carry out research on highly sensitive issues in insecure regions? Do they have enough training? Do lecturers have sufficient capacity to supervise all projects appropriately and to support students? Or are students responsible for their actions and for acquiring skills? Considering the contexts and possibly traumatised people involved, I believe research should *only* be conducted if it is in fact required to respond to a research question and if researchers – regardless of their position – have the knowledge, training and capacities to do so. Carrying out fieldwork in 'difficult' environments due to an interest in seeing adversity, misery and suffering, the adventurous search for experiences on the edge, self-discovery or pure curiosity about foreign, 'exotic' countries does not just go against the efficient use of research funds. First and foremost, it bears the risk of causing harm for participants and researchers, and contradicts ethical standards in academia.

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