Developing ethical guidelines for research

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The IASFM has agreed an international code of ethics to guide research with displaced people. Challenges that arose during its development merit continued discussion.

Despite the depth and breadth of the field of forced migration studies, until recently there were no specific ethical guidelines for research with displaced people. While the Refugee Studies Centre at the University of Oxford had adopted Ethical Guidelines for Good Research Practice,[1] these drew on existing general provisions from the Association of Social Anthropologists of the Commonwealth and were not specifically adapted to forced migration contexts. There is an important emerging literature on ethics in displacement[2] but researchers lacked a practical, comprehensive set of guidelines on which there was inter-disciplinary and cross-sectoral consensus.

This gap became apparent to Canadian-based researchers in the context of the resettlement of Syrians to Canada in 2015–16. Increased public, media and government interest, combined with a proliferation of research projects with Syrians, revealed a gap in understanding around how the general ethical principles of voluntary informed consent, respect for privacy and 'do no harm' should be applied to forced migration contexts. In particular, many academic and community-based researchers who had not previously worked with refugees lacked awareness of the specific ethical challenges posed by non-citizens' precarious legal status and their dependence on private sponsors, governments and service providers.

In response, York University's Centre for Refugee Studies, the Canadian Council for Refugees (CCR)[3] and the Canadian Association for Refugee and Forced Migration Studies (CARFMS) partnered to develop ethical considerations for research with refugees[4] plus tools for community organisations and refugees who are asked to participate in research[5]. Building on these Canadian-specific guidelines, the International Association for the Study of Forced Migration (IASFM) undertook to develop a broader code of ethics[6] which was adopted by the membership in November 2018 and is reproduced below.

From the development of these documents in Canada and internationally, several lessons can be drawn. First, widespread consultation and collaboration were essential in order to understand the perspectives and needs of displaced people, non-governmental organisations (NGOs – who are respondents, gatekeepers and researchers), and researchers. Workshops at CCR, CARFMS and IASFM conferences allowed us to reach a range of stakeholders and build consensus despite diverging perspectives.

Second, it was important to strike a compromise between colleagues who were sceptical of 'guidelines' and 'codes' as inherently limiting, and those who wanted practical, prescriptive tools that would guide them when faced with ethical dilemmas in research. At the international level, this challenge was compounded by the acknowledgement that ethics are culturally constructed and thus context-specific. As a result, the Canadian documents are more detailed and audience-specific, while the IASFM code of ethics is more normative and principles-based.

Third, the development of these documents required those drafting them to squarely address power inequalities in the production of knowledge. There were frank conversations about the relative privilege of researchers, particularly those based in the Global North who had no personal experience with forced migration. In the Canadian context, inspiration was drawn from efforts to de-colonise methodologies in indigenous research, including the development of ethical guidelines for research with First Nations, Métis and Inuit people. Despite these efforts, the lead drafter of all the documents is a

white Canadian and the resulting resources inevitably reproduce unequal power relations. The Canadian and IASFM documents are framed as 'considerations' and 'critical reflections', respectively, to highlight the fact that ethical research is an ongoing process and they should thus be seen as starting points for ongoing reflection and action.

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1. Refugee Studies Centre (2007) 'Ethical Guidelines for Good Research Practice', *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, Volume 26, Issue 3, pp162–172 https://academic.oup.com/rsq/article/26/3/162/1590874

2. The contributions to this FMR issue are some recent examples; see also those listed at the end of the ethical guidelines cited in note 4.

3. An umbrella group of NGOs working with refugees.

4. Clark-Kazak C (2017) 'Ethical Considerations: Research with People in Situations of Forced Migration', *Refuge*, 33(2), pp11–17 bit.ly/Refuge-ClarkKazak-2017-ethics

5. https://ccrweb.ca/en/ethical-considerations-research

6. *IASFM Code of Ethics* (2018) bit.ly/IASFM-code-ethics

IASFM Code of Ethics: Critical reflections on research ethics in situations of forced migration

Context:

Research with people in situations of forced migration poses particular ethical challenges because of unequal power relations, legal precariousness, extreme poverty, violence, the criminalization of migration, politicized research contexts, the policy relevance of our research and/or dependence on government and non-governmental services and funding. However, Research Ethics Boards (REBs) are not always aware of these particular ethical issues; some countries and institutions do not have REBs; and some kinds of research are not subject to REB approval. In this context of heightened risks of research, and uneven institutional accountability for research ethics, the International Association for the Study of Forced Migration (IASFM) hereby proposes this code of ethics for research with people in situations of forced migration. Similarly to how Indigenous research methodologies incorporate a broad, engaged and critical notion of ethics that recognizes power differentiations and the agency of the participants within exploitive research histories, this document sets forth principles that are starting points for respectful research.[1] It is intended to reflect the broad diversity of our membership, including those involved in gathering information – whether in an academic or community setting – as well as those who are asked to take part in research. That being said, we acknowledge that this is not a comprehensive nor exhaustive document, but rather a starting point for active, critical engagement with ethical issues.

1. See Kirkness V J and Barnhardt R (1991) 'First Nations and higher education: The four R's—Respect, relevance, reciprocity, responsibility', *Journal of American Indian Education*, 1–15.

Definitions:[2]

Research is defined as any activity that involves data collection and knowledge creation for, with and by people in situations of displacement. This includes, but is not limited to, interviews, focus group discussions, surveys, experiments, observation, and access to case files and administrative data. While not all of these activities are necessarily subject to formal ethics approval, this document contains important principles that apply to anyone involved in research-related activities with people in situations of forced migration.

A **researcher** is anyone who conducts research, including: students, academics, scholar-practitioners, and service providers collecting data for accreditation, reporting, analysis and/or evaluation.

The term **"people in situations of forced migration"** includes a broad spectrum of displacement, including asylum seekers, refugee claimants, those with refugee status, people whose refugee claims have been rejected, trafficked persons, and internally displaced persons. This document applies to research with all people who have been forced to leave their homes – regardless of the reason for their displacement – and therefore is not just focused on those who have refugee status.

A **gatekeeper** is anyone who formally or informally controls access to people in situations of forced migration. Examples include: government authorities; (self-)appointed "leaders" of groups; service providers; and heads of family or household.

2. This definitions section is adapted and reproduced, with permission, from CCR, CARFMS and CRS (2017) 'Ethical Considerations: Research with People in Situations of Forced Migration – Executive Summary' bit.ly/ethics-summary

Code of ethics

We will uphold, apply and adapt the key ethical principles of voluntary, informed consent; confidentiality and privacy; and "do no harm" to the specific contexts of forced migration. We also commit to work towards ensuring that our research improves people's situations whenever possible. We acknowledge that the heightened risks that forced migration poses to both participants and researchers (as well as people who identify as both) requires proactive, thoughtful engagement and continuous critical reflection.

In particular:

Genuine **voluntary, informed consent** can be challenging to obtain in forced migration contexts due to unequal power relations and dependence on service providers, who may also act as gatekeepers and/or researchers themselves. The psychosocial impacts of forced migration, as well as cultural and linguistic differences, may affect people's ability to understand the consent process in order to make an informed decision about their participation in research. Researchers need to think carefully about how consent applies when dealing with documents and data produced by professionals, volunteers, authorities and others, which are based on information and stories that are not their own.

Confidentiality and privacy are particularly important where the immigration status, liberty and safety of participants and their friends, families and associates can be jeopardized by research findings. Researchers should pay attention to online methods for data collection, which may be subject to interception, as well as specific legal contexts which may require reporting of illegal or harmful activities. Interpreters, research assistants and gatekeepers should be made aware of these confidentiality and privacy issues, and, where appropriate, sign a confidentiality agreement.

"Doing no harm" in forced migration research means proactively prioritizing the dignity, safety and well-being of participants, partners, research assistants, interpreters and researchers. Particular attention should be paid to the ways in which research – directly or indirectly – can (re)traumatize, as well as contribute to racism, xenophobia and the criminalization of migration. Researchers should think carefully about the messaging that will be disseminated through interactions with media and policy makers. Researchers must also consider how their mere presence in a specific location might heighten risks for workers and those in situation of forced migration.

In applying research ethics, we will uphold the following principles:

Autonomy: We will respect and promote the right of people in situations of forced migration to make their own decisions about their lives, their participation in research projects, and the way they are represented in research findings. We acknowledge that too often forced migration researchers are positioned as "experts" on other people's lives and experiences, and too often speak for, or in the name of, people in forced migration.

Equity: We acknowledge intersecting, unequal power relations, which are exacerbated in forced migration contexts, and will take steps to mitigate their effect on research relationships and results. We are mindful that power relations can never be fully resolved, but commit ourselves to actively challenging repressive social structures.

Diversity: We recognize the diversity of experiences of forced migration and culturally specific research ethics. We will include a multitude of perspectives and proactively seek out those who are marginalized or excluded from decision-making and research processes.

Competence: We will use methodological approaches that are adapted to the cultural contexts in which we work, as well as the specific opportunities and challenges of forced migration. We will ensure adequate training for all involved in research projects, including students, research assistants, interpreters and gatekeepers.

Partnership: Forced migration scholarship often disproportionately benefits those who are least affected by displacement. To mitigate this problem and to promote maximum benefit from participation in research, we will include relevant partners throughout the research process, including formulating the research question, design, data collection, analysis and dissemination. Research project budgets will include funding for all partners to reflect the time, talent and contributions to the research. Researchers may also consider actively contributing their time and labour to projects, activities, events or actions which are unrelated to the research, but are undertaken by partners or the communities where research is being conducted.