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Ethical and Methodological Considerations in Research with Asylum-Seeking and Refugee Youth in European Cities

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Abstract: Research about the lived experiences of asylum-seeking and refugee youth can evoke powerful emotions for those involved. Young people who escaped perilous situations often bear strong emotions linked to their experiences of migration and displacement, as well as their encounters with disorientation, insecurity, isolation, discrimination and racism in unfamiliar contexts in the host society. Such emotions and emotionally charged places can be challenging to work with as researchers and require reflexive and situated methodological and ethical judgements. This paper investigates the emotional complexities of fieldwork with vulnerable young people by reflecting on (dis)comfort and discusses how to negotiate these issues with care and consideration. It draws from qualitative participatory and creative fieldwork experiences using story mapping, photovoice, walk-along and community theatre approaches in Amsterdam, Brussels, Leipzig and Newcastle-Upon-Tyne. It reports on a range of critical ethical and methodological issues that arose in our work that address meaningful relationships, reciprocity and trust, understanding the field, positionality and reflexivity, and challenges around the co-production of knowledge and leaving the field. Throughout, the paper flags various complex and, at times, ambiguous ethical and methodological issues that emerged throughout the research process and argues for research approaches that are sensitive to the contextual and multi-faceted nature of investigating young refugees and asylum seekers in European cities.

Keywords: research ethics; methods; asylum seekers and refugees; emotional fieldwork; reflexivity; positionality

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1. Introduction

In recent years, the presence of young asylum seekers and refugees[1] in many European cities is problematised in media and political representations that often portray them as incompatible with or a threat to urban resources, relations and identities (De Backer et al. 2023; d'Haenens et al. 2019). Many papers on ethical and methodological dilemmas focus on issues related to asylum seekers and refugees in the context of humanitarian work or refugee camps, where power imbalances and vulnerabilities may be more apparent. In contrast, less attention is given to ethical issues concerning refugees who

have settled in European cities, where these dynamics might be less visible. Forcibly displaced young people, however, often endure severed people–place relationships, unstable housing situations, employment restrictions, financial hardships and a fragile sense of emotional and social connection to their new and often unfamiliar environment (Darling 2014; Huizinga and van Liempt 2024). Partly due to a lack of privacy in their domestic accommodation, they spend considerable time in urban public space and neighbourhoods in often more deprived areas of cities. These conditions may generate negative social outcomes for wellbeing and personal aspirations, and educational and job opportunities (Finlay et al. 2022). This is highly problematic in European cities and societies where anti-migration and anti-refugee sentiments are on the rise, and increased societal polarisation puts a strain on social and cultural identities and relations. In fact, it neglects the prime role young migrants such as asylum seekers and refugees can play in the development of society, its politics and economy.

To explore and understand young refugees and asylum seekers' own histories, voices and agencies, and the ways in which they give meaning to and transform functional and convivial spaces, participatory research and creative methods are increasingly utilised to trace personal geographies and emotional relations to place (e.g., Hunt 2023; Kirndörfer 2023; MacKenzie et al. 2007; Miled 2020). These approaches take asylum-seeking and refugee youth as agentic actors by foregrounding their subjectivities, voices and experiences, rather than common representations of young refugees and asylum seekers that are often constructed around the 'crisis figure' (Lems et al. 2020). Such opportunities hold particular significance for young people since creative expressions like music, visual arts, dance, theatre and movement can help them maintain their cultural identities and communicate their migration journeys—past and future—in ways that are easily relatable. Moreover, within these sites of emotion, young refugees and asylum seekers have the chance to participate in creative activities that might nurture a sense of belonging and attachment to place. At the same time, participatory research approaches do not necessarily translate into empowering and transformative experiences for refugees (Doná 2007). Gibbes and Skop (2020) argue that the values of participatory research often conflict with the everyday realities of individuals and cultural and artistic organisations involved with forcibly displaced people. However, the everyday politics within such organisations as spaces of belonging, intimacy, comfort and hope remain underexplored.

This paper problematises these issues by examining where and how key ethical and methodological issues emerged in participatory and creative research projects with asylum-seeking and refugee youth. It draws from empirical research conducted within a broader research project involving researchers from Newcastle University, University of Bonn, Utrecht University and Vrije Universiteit Brussel (see Section 3, where we elaborate on the research project). In doing so, it provides a range of strategies to foster ethical practice and methodological validity. Although working towards comfortable research spaces and relations is an established consideration of ethical research practices when working with vulnerable groups, Owen et al. (2022) note that discomforting situations and spaces should not always be avoided and can be incorporated into the research methodology. Rather than minimising discomfort, they suggest identifying moments and spaces in which researchers and participants are affected by awkwardness, distress, reassurance, uncertainty, insecurity and surprise to embrace discomfort as a condition for reflexive learning. Askins (2018), for example, writes about admitting misunderstandings and uncertainties throughout the research to identify the researcher's positions of privilege. Nagar (2014) points at the awkwardness and insecurity involved in collaborative methodologies that seek to unpack subjectivities and power relations in the development of knowledge. The paper contributes to understandings of methodological and ethical debates in researching migrant youth

by reflecting on privilege, vulnerability and discomfort in qualitative and participatory fieldwork. In particular, it examines the emotional geographies in fieldwork in the context of forced migration and settlement and offers insights into how to navigate opportunities and challenges with care and consideration. Although it focuses on personal and everyday geographies, we embed these issues within broader negotiations of socio-spatial and economic justices and injustices (De Backer et al. 2023).

The next section traces developments and insights into ethical and methodological complexities in research involving asylum-seeking and refugee youth. Then, echoing the work of researchers who demonstrate that key ethical and methodological issues surface throughout various stages of the research process, including the design and dissemination phase (e.g., Bilger and van Liempt 2009; Darling 2011, 2014; Hopkins 2008; MacKenzie et al. 2007), the paper is structured alongside four phases of the research process. First, we discuss approaches to design and set up the research, the importance of understanding the field and issues around ethical clearance. Second, we discuss challenges on navigating the field with an emphasis on building and maintaining relationships. Third, we make more explicit how emotions operate in the field due to discomfort and positionalities. Fourth, we talk about research dissemination and suggest ways to leave the field with care. Taken together, our reflections demonstrate that continuous negotiation of emotional politics and other power relations is required to work towards safe and just research processes in research with asylum-seeking and refugee youth. In doing so, the paper aids social science researchers to develop a more rigorous conceptualisation and research design, appropriate methods and starting points to address ethical issues when researching vulnerable communities.

2. Researching Asylum-Seeking and Refugee Youth: Ethical and Methodological Quandaries

In the past twenty years, social science researchers have contributed to an emergent body of literature seeking to understand the ethical quandaries involved in doing research with asylum seekers and refugees (Bilger and van Liempt 2009; Block et al. 2013; Clark-Kazak 2017; Darling 2011, 2014; Doná 2007; Hopkins 2008; Huizinga 2024; Kohli 2006; MacKenzie et al. 2007; Müller-Funk 2021). Other work has sought to advance approaches to working with asylum seekers and refugees by using innovative artistic and creative methods to explore the potentialities of other ways of knowing and engaging with uneven relations and power hierarchies inherent to forced migration research (Grabska and Clark-Kazak 2022; Hunt 2023; Kirndörfer 2023; Miled 2020; Vachelli 2018). Except for notable exceptions (e.g., Block et al. 2013; Hopkins 2008), children and young people as a specific sub-group have mostly been absent in this literature. We address this gap by investigating where and how notions of solidarity and responsibility, trust and hope, vulnerability and reflexivity emerge throughout various stages of the research process, and what examples of concrete action and reflection may lead to emancipatory intentions, practices and spaces rather than the perpetuation of existing inequalities.

Our reflections on ethical and methodological quandaries are rooted in the work of feminist researchers who regularly report on issues related to core values, political beliefs and challenges around solidarity in research (Askins 2018; Nagar 2014; Sultana 2007). This builds on seminal work by Katz (1994), who conceptualised fieldwork research—both in and out of 'the field'—as complicated, messy and, at times, contradictory due to the various identities, relations and lived experiences involved. Ongoing reflexive practice—as a distinctive feature of critical feminist research—is required to maintain an internal dialogue around positionality issues and to consciously acknowledge and engage with the researcher's position in the research process and its outcomes (Pillow 2003). Goerisch (2016)

illustrates that practicing reflexivity in the field or participating in research-related activities might lead to realisations that go against the researcher's beliefs, morals or values. At the same time, critical reflexive practice into such experiences of discomfort in the field provide openings for nuanced and reflexive (un)learning due to direct experiences with the ways in which power and privilege operates in the field due to emotional entanglements (Huizinga 2024; Laliberté and Schurr 2016; Pillow 2003). Navigating the field thus requires a critical awareness of situated vulnerabilities and a commitment to think through care and caring despite the politics in the field (Darling 2014).

We build on these feminist critiques to question how researchers, participants and communities are embedded in structural realities of fieldwork shaped by socio-political, cultural and emotional hegemonic positions and relationships (Laliberté and Schurr 2016; Nagar 2014). An important starting point here is the work of Mayblin et al. (2020), who connect the intentional impoverishment of asylum seekers and refugees with the idea of 'slow violence', i.e., a type of violence which come about gradually but routinely through processes of racialisation and racism in everyday life. We follow Fisher (2015, p. 468), who states that "the pervasiveness of race and racialisation continues to inflect social interactions, including research interventions". As authors, we are aware that reflexive practice in itself cannot remove persisting injustices and normalisation discourses, but may lead to emotions of discomfort and learning to make these visible (Owen et al. 2022). Many young asylum seekers and refugees in European cities encounter structural oppressions and injustices such as racism, sexism, ageism and poverty. Other work demonstrates how professional urban 'refugee supporting' spaces perpetuate harmful binaries between young asylum seekers and refugees as 'helpseekers' and those who are there as 'providers' such as volunteers, social workers or researchers (Benwell et al. 2023; Kirndörfer 2023; Kox and van Liempt 2022).

The paper engages with these issues by identifying and reporting on experiences of research with young asylum seekers and refugees in four European cities. Discussions within these lines of research mostly address the ambivalent relation of asylum seekers and refugees with agentic capacities on the one hand and experiences of vulnerability on the other (Bilger and van Liempt 2009; Ghorashi 2005; Clark-Kazak 2017; Müller-Funk 2021). Kirndörfer (2023) points at the hierarchical organisations of formalised arrival spaces that keep in place representations of young asylum seekers and refugees as solely 'in need'. Although considerations of refugees' vulnerable conditions are crucial, authors have highlighted ways of doing justice to the messiness of the field rather than adhering to universities' Ethical Review Board protocols and expectations of 'good practices' by involved organisations, funding agencies and academic communities (Huizinga 2024). To go beyond formal procedures, Guillemin and Gillam (2004) have proposed the idea of 'ethics in practice' to offer a more hands-on approach of a caring in-place compatible with the complexities and inconsistencies of fieldwork. The paper builds on this work to carve out how and where participatory and creative research practices can help to understand the agentic capacities and intersectional vulnerabilities in the everyday lives of young asylum seekers and refugees.

3. Introducing the Studies

This paper reports on qualitative participatory and creative research projects that were part of a larger project investigating the everyday life experiences of asylum-seeking and refugee youth in Amsterdam, Brussels, Leipzig and Newcastle-Upon-Tyne. In total, nine female and five male researchers contributed to the development of the projects. As white university researchers with secure citizenship status in the respective countries we studied, a key commitment was to engage with the uneven way we connected to the participants.

In the research design phase, the whole research team participated in training activities organised by some of the cultural and artistic organisations we worked with. One of these was a storytelling workshop in which team members shared personal life stories to identify individual histories and multiple positionings. A second workshop focused on 'encountering difference', which explicitly focused on issues around positionality, representation and power in research projects. Emotionally charged workshops and training activities like these were organised throughout the iterative research process to allow for discomfort to emerge, write against power relations and mobilise experiences from multiple locations.

Overall, 145 asylum seekers and refugees participated in the various research activities across the countries, and 128 stakeholder interviews were conducted with frontline practitioners, representatives of social and cultural organisations, and local artists we worked with in the four cities. Participants were aged between 16 and 30 years. Our project takes a broad definition of age, as migration can sometimes speed up transitions into adulthood for some but might also postpone life course advancement or delay the transition into certain life phase stages. As a socio-spatial construction (Evans and Holt 2017), the period of being young is thus fragmented and extended (see also Hopkins et al. 2015), which is important to consider when designing the research. The sample was diverse. Most participants came from African countries such as Eritrea, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Somalia and Sudan, or Arabic-speaking countries such as Iraq, Palestine and Syria. Others came from Afghanistan, Iran, Turkey or Ukraine. Their life stories, however, reveal rather complex migration backgrounds and trajectories, and multiple experiences of arrival, as some had to travel through various countries. In the end, the sample included slightly more women (79) than men (65), as some of our projects focused particularly on female urban experiences. Most participants were recruited through initial contact with organisations in the cities in which this research was taking place. We recruited participants by taking part in activities hosted by the organisations we worked with, including art events, workshops or consultation meetings. They were selected through an intensity sampling procedure to capture variation within refugee and asylum-seeking youths' experiences (e.g., gender, class and religiosity), as well as to gather an information-rich group sharing commonalities and common experiences. Pseudonyms are employed in this paper when quoting young refugees to ensure the protection of their confidentiality. To respect their privacy and trust, we have retained the actual names of some organisations while using pseudonyms for others. Organisations with less secure financial and/or political support were more hesitant to have their names mentioned in critiques, whereas other organisations saw it as an opportunity to increase their visibility and outreach.

Our reflections involve a broad range of qualitative participatory and artistic methods that were carefully selected by working closely together with participants, cultural and artistic organisations and researchers in-place, depending on community desires, needs and interests. Due to different constellations of tensions (issues such as access, recruitment, over-research, reciprocity, etc.), various methods were employed, including in-depth interviews and focus group discussions; the production of story maps to understand imaginings mobilities and experiences in urban public spaces (see next section for an illustration); walk-along interviews to generate rich data on the non-verbal and sensorial elements of everyday places; and arts-based methods such as photography and community theatre to engage with issues of trust, reciprocity and empowerment, and foreground the political subjectivities of participants. These primary research methods often reveal valuable insights into asylum seekers and refugees' lives and subjectivities by highlighting personal testimonies. Next to primary data collection methods, other approaches such as a discourse or media analysis play a vital role in painting a broader picture of the local socio-political context surrounding asylum debates in the cities in which we conduct research. To better grasp the conditions

under which arrival processes unfold, media analyses were conducted in all cities prior to primary data collection. Of the four case study cities, Amsterdam and Brussels, both capital cities, are larger, more cosmopolitan, and home to ethnically and religiously diverse communities. Leipzig and Newcastle-Upon-Tyne are more regional and smaller cities and are in many ways less diverse compared to Amsterdam and Brussels. All cities, however, have a multilayered migration history and bring with them an important background of providing sanctuary to asylum seeker and refugee communities.

4. Setting Up the Research: Research Design, Ethical Clearance and Understanding the Field

Methodological decisions determine what stories are being told, how and to whom they are told and to what extent they give a political voice to people and communities we engage with. The way asylum seekers and refugees' arrivals are portrayed in media coverage significantly shapes citizens' knowledge of the topic and influences how communities perceive and respond to potential challenges immigration might bring forward (Mistiaen 2019). Framing refugees in a negative light, for instance associating them with criminality or resource extraction, can heighten public anxieties about the presence of asylum seekers. While it is challenging to isolate the direct causal effects of media imagery, there is a common understanding that media content and narratives influence public perceptions of refugees and help steer the political agenda (d'Haenens et al. 2019). Ethically, journalists, as well as researchers, have a responsibility to represent more diverse images of refugees' subjectivities and lived experiences to move beyond the singular and uniform representations described above. This can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of relevant localised challenges to asylum and arrival. It is paramount for researchers to evaluate the variety of data and methods available to ensure a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the topic at hand.

In the Netherlands, a media analysis was conducted by the Dutch research team around the arrival of refugees during the 'refugee crisis' (Kox et al. 2023). A national newspaper ('de Telegraaf') was compared with a local newspaper ('het Parool'), as we assumed that the representations of refugee arrival would differ between national and local media. Our findings indeed emphasise that there are differences; at the local level, refugees were more often humanised and more attention was paid to everyday experiences and situations of inclusion and exclusion. National newspapers conveyed images related to criminalisation and the de-humanisation of refugees by focusing more on quantifiable one-sided indicators to report on refugees' lives. While refugees might not fully realise how they are represented in media narratives (Lams 2018), negative portrayals can generate unease and anxiety, complicate their arrival and settlement experiences, and undermine their sense of inclusion and overall wellbeing. This reveals the ethical risks of such representations, particularly since refugees' early encounters with these narratives may shape their integration trajectories over time (Ghorashi 2005). Incorporating media analysis into research provides a more comprehensive understanding of the practical, ethical and discursive aspects of the reception environment for refugees.

Methodological and ethical issues involving these methods are exemplified by reflections on the story mapping method in the Leipzig-based research (Kirndörfer 2023). Throughout a series of workshops, the team aimed to generate a sense of safety, mutual care and empowerment. Participants were invited to share stories around personal landmarks and meaningful places in Leipzig, which were then identified, documented and visually represented on a shared map. The activity had two key components: a 'story-reflection' segment, and then a 'story-circle' exercise followed up by a mapping session. In doing so, the workshops sought to reveal how asylum-seeking and refugee youth perceive and en-

gage with the city of Leipzig through complex sensory and emotional dimensions, guided by questions inspired by the 'collective biography' method (Hawkins et al. 2016). They reflected on places in Leipzig that were significant to them, recalling their experiences, associated smells or tastes, and the emotions these places evoked.

During the workshop preparation, some concerns and reservations about this approach were mentioned within the team. To sensitively have participants re-connect and re-engage with their past experiences directly related to the research aim as intended, we questioned if the chosen method would provide the right balance of structure and guidance. In addition, there was uncertainty about whether the exercise would be sufficiently flexible and open to ensure that it was accessible and respectful of participants' autonomy and independence. Through collective reflexivity (Kohl and McCutcheon 2015), we refined our method to prioritise safety and comfort and develop a space where our participants would feel at ease sharing personal stories and sensitive topics that might trigger negative emotions. We recognised the inherent risk of causing harm when inviting participants to share or inadvertently triggering distressing memories. At the same time, we felt supported in our approach, as researchers have also documented how such research encounters under these conditions might be experienced as therapeutic or cathartic (Kohli 2006; Huizinga 2024).

Some weeks later, we were struck by the sense of unity and compassionate listening we experienced during our 'story-circle'. Participants often produced interactions of counselling ('which places to go to in the city') and suggesting ('how to deal with racism'), as well as empathetic retrospections, in the sense of "Ah yes, I remember, it was the same for me at the beginning. . .". We noticed that this atmosphere became particularly tangible when experiences of racial discrimination and exclusion were shared in the story circle and the listeners could show empathy and compassion to each other through 'silent acts' of encouragement and solidarity (Kohli 2006). The sharing of differently weighted knowledges of a racialising social system created a closeness that required no explanations or justifications. The story circle became a peer-to-peer conversation in which our presence as researchers—who have never experienced racism—temporarily receded into the background, and we took on the role of listeners, learners and translators. We could perceive how, in listening attentively to each other, laughing together and feeling each other's anger, the beginnings of a collective emerged that was based on shared experiences of the violence exerted by asylum and arrival.

The design of the workshop was also partly responsible for this development of collectivity and intimacy, as the narrative impulse, as we had formulated it, seemed to be perceived as compact and feasible. It respected the participants' agency, as it was up to them to choose the story and control its content and the 'dose' the intimacy they were willing to reveal. Our request to share a small, spatialised memory with the group created a degree of (narrative) safety and a closeness beyond 'risky', i.e., a situation that could potentially damage the group's sense of intimacy. The fragmentary nature of precisely these small stories prioritised the voices of participants, in contrast to an interview situation. Their intimate and embodied knowledge of an urban society took centre stage and highlighted the right to spaces that participants had to fight for anew every day in the context of consistently effective orders of race and difference. The small stories created a fragile balance between vulnerability and empowerment.

The examples above illustrate the complexities and uncertainties of designing participatory research projects with young asylum seekers and refugees, especially when it comes to emotions and discomfort. The reflections also provide insights into how researchers could approach these issues and handle them with care and consideration. For a relatively long period, considering ethical quandaries in research involving human beings was primarily confined to medical studies (Bilger and van Liempt 2009). Although university

Ethical Review Boards across social sciences are increasingly leaning more towards making researchers think through potential methodological and ethical issues rather than prescribing strict procedures, there often remains an ambiguous relationship between 'ethics in practice' (Guillemin and Gillam 2004) and receiving ethical approval from review boards (Hopkins 2008). Our reflections demonstrate the value of involving communities and organisations in the design to build support and to avoid taken-for-granted human subject definitions, categories and assumptions about agentic capacities (Ritterbusch 2012).

5. Working with Local Organisations: Establishing Meaningful Relationships, Reciprocity and Trust

Building and securing meaningful relationships with local cultural and artistic organisations and communities that support young asylum seekers and refugees was key to our projects, especially to avoid over-research of vulnerable communities. Most had prior volunteer experience with these community groups. Where this was not the case, researchers dedicated time to these organisations to cultivate rapport and establish meaningful relationships. Diverse forms of "relationship-forging in community settings" proved a key role in the development of our research projects due to the intersubjective nature of experiential learning (Blazek and Askins 2020, p. 1). Depending on the role we take on in such organisations, it is common that participants can grow accustomed to ways of interacting and relating to one another. Consequently, care is needed when it comes to broaching the topic of a possible interview or focus group and the signing of a consent form, especially given the negative experiences asylum-seeking and refugee youth have in interview situations with border control staff or other authorities.

All the Newcastle team had either volunteered with refugee community groups in the past or were actively volunteering during and after fieldwork. They were 'volunteer practitioners' (Blazek and Askins 2020, p. 464) with political and activist interests in asylum issues (see Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly 2021). This was crucial for building rapport, gaining insight in the everyday experiences of research participants and spaces, and fostering reciprocal partnerships, but it was important to acknowledge the power imbalances and hierarchies that nevertheless remained. Following Faria and Mollett's (2016) ethical call to action, it was critical for us as three white men to reflect on our whiteness and the various positions of privilege we take up compared to our participants, for instance secure citizenship status and the multiple powerful positions we held as employees of a U.K. university. Moreover, following Goerisch (2016, p. 311), "there needs to be more discussion regarding the duality of the researcher and volunteer in the field, as these roles might come with separate—and competing—agendas and objectives". Critical reflection also comprised negotiating our volunteering/activist and researcher identities even though boundaries between these were not always that clear.

What has received less attention is how to write (for academic and non-academic audiences) about third-sector organisations, such as those working with people who are refugees and seeking asylum. Whilst we saw it as important to act as critical friends, offering constructive critique of the organisations we researched and volunteered with, we also recognised (and saw firsthand) the very difficult political, social and economic contexts they operated within. The multiple constraints associated with repeated rounds of austerity politics and the U.K.'s 'hostile environment' made it extremely challenging for many of these organisations to continue functioning (Benwell et al. 2023). For example, organisations initially established to provide artistic and sporting activities or conversation practice increasingly arranged, in rather improvised ways (and sometimes without requisite training for volunteers), essential life support to those attending. Although we could have

focused our critiques on the ways these organisations worked, we decided to focus our writing on the structural pressures that underpinned these decisions.

This raises questions regarding our role as volunteer practitioners and whether it impeded the extent to which we felt able to criticise the third-sector organisations we worked with. Indeed, as a project team, it was important for us to constantly reflect on the duality of our identity, not only during the data collection but in the writing-up phase of the research project. This generated discussion among members of the project team about the target of our critique, and this was undoubtedly informed by our embedded role within some of the organisations we worked with and the greater understanding this provided of their circumstances. Ultimately, we took the decision to foreground the chronic contraction in state support and the 'slow violence' (Mayblin et al. 2020) of an asylum regime designed to be unconcerned with the academic critique pointing at the ongoing suffering of those in search of citizenship, acknowledging that volunteers of third-sector organisations were often doing their best against the odds. More informally, we committed to offering insight and constructive critique from our research findings to some of the third-sector organisations we worked with to encourage further reflection on the ways they operated.

Although constrained by the limitations placed upon us by university finance regulations, to support local organisations whom we worked with, we engaged in a form of 'reparative theft' (Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly 2021, p. 88), which is where anti-racist scholar activists use the financial or other resources of the university—alongside their symbolic power as researchers—to challenge racial injustices. We put this in practice by supporting third-sector community groups to encourage them to charge us room booking fees, allowing the university to direct funds to their organisations. Additionally, we contributed by purchasing stationery for asylum organisations and facilitating the booking of university spaces for these groups to host meetings and events.

Alongside negotiating various roles, we regularly reflected on the difficulties we encountered in building relationships to establish familiarity and a sense of trust. Collaborative research involves building trust and rapport with community organisations, their communities and other gatekeepers. As has been documented earlier, negotiating access to the field with gatekeepers can be complex (Gibbes and Skop 2020). Disagreements or frictions may emerge due to incompatible interests, timelines or expectations. What characterised our projects was a commitment to research based on participatory care ethics (Ritterbusch 2012). In our research, we considered research encounters as a form of emotional or practical exchange to construct relationships of care with and between communities, organisations and other actors. This included introducing participants to relevant social services or embedding the community organisation with which we worked within our institutional networks to increase their reach and visibility. As Ritterbusch (2012) points out, thinking through and establishing networks of care throughout the research cycle may help to construct sustainable support structures and deal with diverging interests in order to avoid conflict. This is highly important in an ongoing research relationship that remains in place after a project is finalised.

In the Brussels case, an organisation agreed to become a part of the consortium and grant the researchers access to its communities. The Brussels research team were new to this organisation and deliberately chose to be visibly present to establish rapport with staff, service users and members. The researchers also took up some responsibility in the functioning of the organisation, in effect taking on the dual role of volunteer–researcher. The approach in Brussels involved the attendance of team meetings and regular talks with the staff members, to become aware of the organisation's needs and priorities. There is a tendency to approach research participants and community organisations solely to gather

data, which risks perpetuating an image of academic research as extractive. So-called 'helicopter researchers' swoop in to collect data and then abandon the research site without giving back anything substantial for the long term. They are often not concerned with capacity building, recommending change, and the sharing of funding. To avoid such an extractivist logic, a more collaborative approach is necessary, yet participatory research is a continuum; participants and gatekeepers can be involved in all stages of the project, or in only some of them.

The reality of doing participatory research, however, is often 'messy' and unpredictable compared to the original planning of the proposed research project (Gibbes and Skop 2020; Sultana 2007). Previously established agreements might also change due to changing leadership within organisations and changing priorities due to financial or ideological constraints as described above. Shortly after the research funding for our project was approved, the Brussels team learned that a new director was installed at a collaborating organisation. This newly appointed director held a firm belief that research initiatives should originate only from the participants themselves. As a result, she was uneasy about being involved in a research project she had neither agreed to nor supported, as it conflicted with her core principles regarding how the organisation should foster and facilitate participant-driven ideas. In fact, she perceived universities as influential institutions that tend to operate based on their own ambitions and priorities. The way out of this predicament consisted of numerous conversations, touching base as to what, at that moment, were the needs of the organisation, spending more time than anticipated, being patient and showing flexibility. The initial idea of doing a collaborative documentary or engaging in storytelling was abandoned. Eventually the group decided to learn to do live radio, ultimately allowing the researcher to understand their everyday experiences as artists with a refugee background, their artistic practices in the organisation, and their emotional–affective links to the organisation and its workspaces.

6. Negotiating Informed Consent with Participants

Another recurring theme related to the organisation of emancipatory relationships in the field concerned issues and challenges around gaining informed consent. No research should involve human beings without their voluntary participation (Hugman et al. 2011). While spending time to obtain informed consent is a fundamental aspect of ethical practice, it is often more intricate than it initially appears, as researchers might not have sufficient time or lose sight of relationships throughout the research process (Grabska and Clark-Kazak 2022). Moreover, migrant groups, particularly those who are anxious about their legal status or residency, may have concerns about the visible use of research documents like consent forms, information sheets or interview guides (Clark-Kazak 2017). These worries might be further amplified when asked to record conversations or using devices like dictaphones. Formal interview encounters might evoke painful or traumatic memories associated with negative experiences with police or security staff, or with immigration or border control, and so may act as a trigger for re-living previous traumatic life experiences (Hopkins 2008). We now consider key ethical quandaries we navigated when seeking to secure consent from young asylum seekers and refugees to take part in the various research activities across the projects.

Having to ask for written informed consent forms might function as another obstacle to research participation, which stimulated us to think of other ways of gaining informed consent. Suspiciousness about a formal document can result in participants refraining from participation, or, if they continue to participate, being overly guarded in the experiences they wish to share. The common approach in our research projects was to use oral informed consent rather than gaining written consent. Facilitated by the qualitative and participatory

approaches in our projects, and the multiple repeated research encounters that took place, we worked with informed consent in our research projects as an ongoing, dynamic and integral process of the research instead of a procedure that can simply be ticked off before starting the inquiry. Multiple contact moments contribute to the confidence with which it can be concluded that both participants and researchers properly understand the aims and meanings of the research, and the implications of participation for ethical aspects such as privacy, confidentiality and anonymity (Hugman et al. 2011).

This was illustrated by the fieldwork in Amsterdam, where a local partner provided the research team with opportunities to participate in their community activities and by engaging in voluntary work. This included participating in language cafe meetings, bingo sessions, cooking classes or simply hanging out. Through informal conversations, we befriended many of those participating in these activities, and, as such, learned about the lived experiences of young asylum seekers and refugees, community workers and volunteers. Similarly, the young asylum seekers and refugees visiting these events got to know us personally, but also frequently asked us about our work as researchers and our interests in their lives and wellbeing. Hence, they had slowly come to understand the aims of the research project and what participation would entail. The support of a local partner herein was crucial for potential participants to work with a sounding board and validate what we had said. Obtaining verbal informed consent hereafter proved more comfortable and meaningful due to higher levels of familiarity and trust.

Relationships in the field, however, are subject to change given the dynamics of the situations and topics we are working with. In Amsterdam, we noticed that, over time, this may cause confusion or disagreement about consent. Even when signed consent forms were in place upon entering the field or commencing research activities (this was a requirement of the organisation we worked it), we realised that committing to ethically just research practices entails a constant negotiation of consent. Negotiating consent can, therefore, also be frustrating and time-consuming, given that it allows participants to change their views on participation as the research develops. What we also observed was that in some cases, it can also be disruptive to informal conversations when we checked in on participants' consent, as we felt it 'suddenly' formalised the relationships due to changing roles and the frequent presence of the researchers. At times, this instantly drew up boundaries between us and participants, and frequently reminded participants about the duality of our role and, therefore, our relationship. This led to requests for interviews being regularly experienced as different and more formal, which sometimes created more reluctance to proceed. It is important to reserve time so that potential doubts participants might have can be discussed and to provide a space that works towards care and self-determination (Clark-Kazak 2017).

7. Handling Emotions in the Field: Positionalities and (Dis)Comfort

The production of academic knowledge is deeply rooted in the ordinary experiences and activities of daily life. Feminist scholars significantly contributed to recognising and understanding this connection, drawing attention to reflexivity and the importance of examining how researchers navigate their complex positionalities in the field with care. This involves reflecting on how identity markers—such as gender, race, class, age, sexual orientation, migration status and so on—may affect research relationships and the data produced. While such complexities cannot be fully predicted and understood, and reflexive practices have their constraints, considering the purpose and outcome of the research remains critical. At the same time, reflecting on one's role in the research is deeply confrontational and emotional (Pillow 2003; Sultana 2007). Nevertheless, being mindful of these diverse power relations enriches the research process, adding analytical depth and ethical consideration that would otherwise be absent. One way of inviting emotions in

thinking about research and research practices is through discomfort. For Owen et al. (2022), discomfort is both an ordinary and universal embodied experience, but also an important condition of learning and unlearning (Pillow 2003). The researchers in this project engaged in arts-based activities and discussions on positionality to collectively explore and confront themselves with issues around whiteness, privilege and bias.

From the beginning, the Leipzig research team prioritised and incorporated critical reflexive practice on positionality as a key component of the research project. Drawing on feminist discussions about positionality and reflexivity (Kohl and McCutcheon 2015; Nast and Pile 1998; Sultana 2007), we explored the concept of 'embodied reflexivity' (Nast and Pile 1998, p. 82). This approach prompted us to examine moments where 'others' constructed their views of [team members] based on their bodies, behaviours, perceptions and values (Nast and Pile 1998). From the start, we were hesitant about undertaking a research project framed around the hierarchical term 'refugee', aware of our privileged positions as white German citizens and the potential limitations imposed by these categories on the scope of the research. One interview, with a young man who had fled Iran for political reasons years ago but was denied refugee status, starkly underscored these concerns. This moment brought us face-to-face with the realities of our own citizenship-, class- and race-based privilege and the inherent tensions of conducting research informed and shaped by the 'nation-state migration apparatus' (Bilger and van Liempt 2009). This system risks perpetuating the very categories and normalisations it seeks to study. The interviewee viewed our work as part of a system that racialises and exploits non-white individuals, stating, "This voluntary work—so many people here use our situation to benefit themselves. So many. They approach you wanting something, like, I'm sorry to say this, an interview, or for you to engage in volunteer work". This interaction left us with a pressing question: How can the discomfort we felt in these research encounters inspire a deeper commitment to conducting politically meaningful and ethically sound research?

One approach to addressing this issue was to recognise interviewees as experts of their own lived experiences and as analysts of overlapping systems of boundary-making and exclusion. Through our research, we came to see our participants as individuals who have developed the ability to interpret and navigate the ways that racializing systems shape urban encounters, personal and social relationships, self-perception and the use of public spaces. Another strategy to reduce hierarchical dynamics in knowledge production was our dedication to the partner organisations and initiatives involved in this project. This commitment allowed us to frame research as a dialogical and reflexive process, one that could acknowledge failures, adapt and evolve as needed. While this could not eliminate the structural power imbalances embedded in the project's design, our aim remained to foster (self-)critical reflection that contributes to dismantling European postcolonial power dynamics, both in our research settings and in academic practices (see also Nagar 2014).

Another example of the practice of balancing research and activism occurred in the Leipzig case study in late autumn 2020, when the field researcher reconnected with a participant from a theatre research project. He had shared a photo of a letter he had received from the National Agency for the Management of Migration [Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge]. Rather than the three-monthly residency permit, the letter issued a directive for him to leave the country. The researcher recorded in her field diary: "Although we had already scheduled a meeting for an interview, when Lucius arrives at my place our meeting will not revolve around the interview. He is in panic of being deported, extremely tense, which in turn is exacerbated by his suffering under the living conditions in the camp. In the coming hours, we sit on the sofa in my living room and conceive a letter to the Federal Minister of Integration in Saxony. Lucius tells me his story. The reason he had to leave Nigeria, about his two-year-old daughter, his wife and family,

but also what he faces in the camp in Leipzig. For now, we focus on securing residency for Lucius". Surprisingly, Lucius got a written response only two days later. A person in charge of the Commission for Hardship Cases in Saxony recommended that he reach out to him if his case was denied once more. Ultimately, thanks to massive collective support of our application to the Commission for Hardship Cases, Lucius received a residence permit. This experience shows how research has to be negotiated in the context the 'slow violence' that asylum infrastructures produce (Mayblin et al. 2020), and the structural conditions of arrival and resettlement are marked by racialisation and injustice. Being entangled with these power-laden processes demands to step back from an output-oriented agenda and engage in acts of mutual care and friendship (Huizinga 2024).

Research with refugees frequently poses ethical dilemmas and moral complexity (van Liempt and Bilger 2018). A particular challenge is when refugees disclose information about difficult life situations and vulnerability, leaving researchers with the ethical dilemma about how to respond. Role confusion can be experienced by researchers, and scholars have discussed the tension between the researcher as an observer and the ethical obligation to provide practical support and advocacy (MacKenzie et al. 2007; Block et al. 2013). In the Newcastle–Gateshead case study, the socio-economic precarity and poor-quality living conditions experienced by many asylum seekers and refugees meant that concerns about the wellbeing of participants was a recurrent aspect of the research. Indeed, there were certain participants who revealed particularly challenging circumstances, and while researching and documenting these experiences were very important, we often felt that the research alone was insufficient and that we needed to provide more practical support. This resulted in a certain level of uncertainty about what our role was as researchers and what support was ethically appropriate for us to offer. This was not uncertainty in relation to providing general advocacy and support, which we believe is an important aspect of research when working with vulnerable populations (MacKenzie et al. 2007). Rather, we had concerns about helping without proper training in fields such as mental health or trauma response, and the possibility of providing inadequate and unsuitable assistance. Therefore, we aimed to strike a balance between providing support and advocacy while maintaining professional boundaries. Of course, when conducting qualitative research and forming rapport with participants, these boundaries can be blurry, but nonetheless, they are important to try to maintain, especially when vulnerable people appear in need of professional support and care.

The need for researchers to respond to situations that develop during the research process links closely to what Guillemin and Gillam (2004) call 'ethics in practice'. This is further illustrated in the following occurrence experienced by the Newcastle research team. During a COVID-19 lockdown, we conducted an online interview with a male asylum seeker who was residing in dispersal accommodation. Over the course of the interview, the man expressed the profound combined effects of the lockdown and the U.K. asylum system on his life, revealing that his mental health and overall wellbeing had significantly deteriorated in recent months. As with many asylum seekers (Finlay et al. 2021), he became more socially excluded and socially isolated during the pandemic, resulting in difficult feelings of depression, anxiety and loneliness. Given his poor mental health and general wellbeing, we were compelled to provide support, while being aware that we did not have the professional skills to provide the necessary assistance that he required. Therefore, to help him access adequate support, we provided him the contact details of various free mental health services, such as the Samaritans and Mind support line. We also informed a refugee community group about his difficulties, and they confirmed that they would provide regular check-ins. In addition, we held a follow-up online conversation one week after our research interview, allowing us to see how things were progressing and that he was

accessing support. Although this experience involved ethical uncertainty, we ultimately believed that assisting his access to adequate professional support, while maintaining appropriate professional boundaries, was the most ethical response. 'Ethics in practice' comprise the everyday issues and dilemmas that can occur when examining the lives of vulnerable populations, the assessment of appropriate responses and the decision to take a certain course of action (Guillemin and Gillam 2004). As such, when working with refugees, researchers need to be prepared to respond to not only formal ethics procedures but also to unpredictable ethical challenges in practice.

8. 'Leaving the Field': Dissemination and Managing Expectations

At some stage, researchers must conclude their data collection and transition out of the active 'fieldwork' phase of their study. This transition is sometimes called 'leaving the field', although some contend that researchers continue to interact with and maintain ties to the field even after data collection has officially ended (see Katz 1994). Not much has been written about ways of being cognisant of leaving research projects and fieldwork sites, and how this may affect the wellbeing of participants, communities and societal partners. Leaving the field can have a significant impact on both the research relationship and the emotional wellbeing of young refugees and asylum seekers involved in the study. This transition is often accompanied by intense emotions as the dynamics of these connections evolve. Effective communication plays a crucial role here, including setting expectations about future interactions and ensuring that participants know how to stay in contact with researchers if they choose to do so. Additionally, participatory and creative research offers opportunities to publicly mark the ending of a project by means of an exhibition or performance.

There is a tendency in research involving vulnerable groups such as asylum seekers and refugees to consider the research relationship solely in terms of direct contact. Consequently, exiting the site of research is often overlooked. Hugman et al. (2011), however, argue that participants often see themselves as continuing to be part of the research, whereas some researchers seem to treat them merely as data sources once they leave 'the field', rather than as individuals with whom an ongoing relationship persists. Following the departure of the research team members from the fieldwork site in Amsterdam, some participants posed several questions such as "Do you want to come to my aunt's place to have a coffee together?", "Shall we go for dinner again at an Eritrean restaurant?" or "When are you at the community centre again to have a chat?". They had grown accustomed to regular interactions, whether through in-person chats or WhatsApp messages. However, maintaining such frequent communication is not always feasible and, in certain situations, may even be inadvisable, given the adverse conditions and hardship that asylum-seeking and refugee youth may endure. This can be challenging, as close and emotional bonds frequently develop during participatory research with vulnerable populations, which may also cause confusion with researchers. Although this necessitates a thoughtful strategy for concluding fieldwork activities and exiting the field, in practice, this is often not that simple. As one of the members in the Amsterdam research team reported: "To be honest, I am still struggling for the best strategy, despite what might be said in methods guides and toolkits. During the research, I tried to manage respondents' expectations by regularly highlighting my role as a researcher, pointing out my temporary presence in the field and explaining what I can and cannot do as a researcher, both during and after the fieldwork. At the same time, I tried to establish a close relationship with respondents and to help them where possible, for example by assisting in writing a CV or making a difficult phone call with authorities. I however referred them to organisations for more comprehensive and structural forms of support". The field diary note illustrates the various struggles involved

with managing expectations and frustrations in the field. The best advice here is to stay in contact and, if necessary, use one's access and network as a researcher to stay committed to caring responsibilities (Huizinga 2024; Nagar 2014).

In Amsterdam, the research team co-convened a workshop at the fieldwork site to finalise the study and present our preliminary findings. Over a shared dinner, the workshop gave research participants, volunteers and employees from the partnering community organisation the opportunity to respond and discuss these results. We had envisioned this event as a way to mark the conclusion of our work and to formally exit the field. The event was well attended—however, mostly by volunteers and others involved in the community organisation. With only a few participants attending, it became clear that this was not the most effective way to bring the research to a close. Informal chats and personal meetings afterward clarified that their absence did not signify a lack of engagement, but rather hinted that the event was too much of an 'academic' space and appeared to adhere less to the interests and needs of participants. We have found that the requirements for a successful exit from the field are shaped by the specific context, and that keeping strong lines of communication with all involved is required to identify the specific desires and needs of community members and to ensure that potential harm is minimalised. Importantly, potential academic 'failures' thus also occur after exiting the fieldwork site even after careful consideration of how to approach this. Goerisch (2016) emphasises how uncritical explorations of reciprocity in volunteering and research spaces may lead to misleading ways of 'giving back' due to different ethical moralities in the field. It is important to actively listen to needs and preferences of participants, and to discuss with and learn from organisations in the field how best to approach ethical issues related to leaving the field.

Lastly, an important part prior to leaving the field is to critically consider dissemination strategies and how to ensure that organisations and participants know where they can learn about the research project. Clark-Kazak (2017) draws attention to considering different outlets to publish findings and highlights the importance of thinking about language. In our research project, we produced a plain-language report in the national languages of the countries under study, as well as in languages dominant in the communities we worked with, such as Arabic and Amharic. We took into consideration the importance of non-verbal communication by developing accessible knowledge clips suitable for participants and organisations, but also for teaching purposes. Many of our participatory research projects came to an end through co-creation with partnering organisations, community members and participants. An example of this was the co-organisation of the project's closing conference at the venue of one of the organisations we worked with. The conference programme combined academic presentations and a roundtable discussion with all cultural and artistic partner organisations to collectively reflect on the various collaborations. This gave them a space to inform local policy makers about the complex challenges faced by cultural and artistic organisations working with asylum-seeking and refugee youth. The programme also included activities such as a cooking and a media-making workshop led by young migrants. These 'non-academic' activities momentarily fostered encounters and intimate relationships between participants, which, we argue, can be seen as acts of quiet care and solidarity (Askins 2015). Moreover, this created a site where young asylum seekers and refugees could express their political voices in socially and culturally differentiated ways and provide a space for engagement.

9. Conclusions

In this paper, we reflected upon some of the key ethical and methodological issues we encountered throughout our research with young asylum seekers and refugees in four European cities. Our reflections critically considered the extent to which participatory and

creative approaches to researching young asylum seekers and refugees' lived experiences foster just, reciprocal, forward-looking and co-creative spaces. The discussion addressed various understudied stages of the research process in research with forced migrant youth, namely 'research design and entering the field', 'navigating research relationships' and 'emotions in the field', 'leaving the field and dissemination', including writing up the findings. The insights highlight issues around trust in emotionally charged places often characterised by mistrust and uncertainty, the importance of involving communities and organisations throughout the research process to establish and maintain support, and the abstinence from simplified categories and assumptions about young asylum seekers and refugees' agency. Throughout, we emphasised that our reflections and thoughts are not a comprehensive set of rules or blueprints. Rather, they are context-dependent considerations aimed at providing insight into the nitty-gritty of doing research with vulnerable young people such asylum seekers and refugees. Although it is well established that ethical quandaries may surface throughout several phases of the qualitative research cycle (e.g., Bilger and van Liempt 2009; Hopkins 2008; Sultana 2007), our paper contributes to this literature by highlighting patterns of relatedness between different phases and the ways in which they are subject to change.

The paper further argues that emotional contestations about being comfortable or being made uncomfortable are as much about questioning privilege and vulnerability in research relationships as they are about challenging dominant and oppressive relations within society and communities. It follows Pillow's (2003, p. 193) call to offer more 'messy examples' of the emotional and uncomfortable work that goes in engaged participatory and creative research and identify where the presence of the researcher intersects with "people's struggles for self-representation and self-determination". Hence, our paper emphasises that direct engagement with emotions and the politics of discomfort in research with vulnerable youth is fundamental to make what Darling (2014) calls 'situated judgements' during research and when or where to deviate from ethical standards (see also Hopkins 2008). Hence, it illustrates how thinking through discomfort stimulates ethical and methodological reflexivity, fostering a deeper commitment among researchers to social change (Owen et al. 2022).

Lastly, the sections in this paper flag a series of ethical and methodological challenges that reveal the tensions between standardised ethical principles and generic guidelines, and an 'ethics in practice' (Guillemin and Gillam 2004) that is sensitive to the uncertainties and ambiguities of working with young people in vulnerable conditions. They demonstrate that autonomy and self-determination of young refugees and asylum seekers is relational, whereas ethical review boards and handbooks mostly highlight autonomy of participants as an individual condition. Although the scope of our experiences and reflections are limited due to our positionalities and the paper's focus on asylum-seeking and refugee youth in European cities, the paper offers detailed reflections and concrete starting points for other researchers interested doing research with vulnerable and marginalised young people. Following Grabska and Clark-Kazak (2022), we hope that this paper meaningfully contributes to discussions that seek to align procedural and relational ethics depending on the context-specific aspirations and needs of those involved.

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Note

[1] According to the UNHCR, an asylum seeker is a person who has applied for or has the intention to request refugee status. We use the term refugee to refer to someone who has legally obtained refugee status according to the 1951 Refugee Convention.

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