

Educational Research in Contexts of Forced Migration: HDR Student Reflections on Ethics-in-Practice

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As researchers, our ethical decisions are informed by a range of considerations, including the purpose of the inquiry, the nature of our research settings, and the characteristics of our participants. Institutional ethics procedures can play a critical role in ensuring that research practices are respectful and socially just. However, translating universal codes of ethical research practice in specific contexts remains a challenge, especially for research students who study educational issues in forced migration settings. Navigating the ethical complexities of such settings can be particularly difficult for new researchers, and supervisors may also have limited experiential knowledge of how to navigate “micro-ethical” (Doná, 2007) moments in these complex research contexts.

This presentation draws on a pilot study that investigated HDR candidate experiences anticipating and attending to ethical issues in research undertaken in forced migration settings. In documenting the preparation of HDR students for ‘ethics-in-practice’ (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004) in these ‘fragile contexts’ (Fox et al., 2020), relevant data were generated through a literature scoping study, an institutional audit, and semi-structured interviews with three HDR candidates and one supervisor. Here, we report preliminary findings from our interviews with HDR candidates, focusing on perceptions regarding preparedness to engage with ethical issues in research with people with refugee and asylum seeker experiences.

HDR candidates identified their supervisors, institutional ethics procedures, and their own experiences in communities as valuable sources of information regarding ethical practices in research. However, candidates also described a range of unanticipated “micro-ethical” (Doná, 2007) issues associated with their research, and identified the need for greater institutional processes and educational resources that better reflect the nuances and complexities of their research settings. Interviewee accounts also suggest that, while institutional ethics committees may offer valuable guidance on ethical research practice, we should not assume that guidelines fully reflect the dynamics of fieldwork.

Participants also called for greater recognition of candidate ‘insider’ knowledge, particularly in cases where the candidate is also a member of the intended research community. In such instances, HDR candidates with lived experiences of displacement or extensive experience researching in these contexts may have particular insights into the ethical complexities involved. Overall, our initial findings suggest that, in making ethical choices throughout their research, HDR candidates must continuously consider situational factors, and to this end, require capacity-building resources to enable the responsive navigation of “ethical spaces” (Bannister, 2018) in forced migration settings.

References

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