

# Reflections of methodological and ethical challenges in conducting research during COVID-19 involving resettled refugee youth in Canada

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## ABSTRACT

Research involving migrant youth involves navigating and negotiating complex challenges in order to uphold their rights and dignity, but also all while maintaining scientific rigour. COVID-19 has changed the global landscape within many domains and has increasingly highlighted inequities that exist. With restrictions focusing on maintaining physical distancing set in place to curb the spread of the virus, conducting in-person research becomes complicated. This article reflects on the ethical and methodological challenges encountered when conducting qualitative research during the pandemic with Syrian migrant youth who are resettled in Canada. The three areas discussed from the study are recruitment, informed consent and managing the interviews. Special attention to culture as being part of the study's methodology as an active reflexive process is also highlighted. The goal of this article is to contribute to the growing understanding of complexities of conducting research during COVID-19 with populations which have layered vulnerabilities, such as migrant youth. This article hopes that the reflections may help future researchers in conducting their research during this pandemic by being cognizant of both the ethical and methodological challenges discussed.

## INTRODUCTION

An increasing number of children under 18 are globally displaced due to armed conflict, sociopolitical destabilisation and climate change. Involuntary youth migrants face challenges in their journey, such as forced marriages, health complications and child labour.<sup>1–5</sup> Researchers and related bodies (eg, United Nations), have turned to address the aforementioned concerns and provide support. However, their status and layered vulnerabilities places them at risk within the research context, such as for parental coercion and obtaining informed consent.<sup>6–7</sup> McLaughlin and Alfaro-Velcamp<sup>8</sup> define three vulnerabilities specific to migrants: lack of access of the legal system; dependency on agencies for resources; and precarious legal status. Jacobsen and Landau<sup>9</sup> argue there is a 'dual imperative' in migrant research, as it should be scientifically rigorous, but also have policy applications. However, flawed methodological and ethical practices render findings impractical, thus further attention should be given to these domains.<sup>9–10</sup> Research involving migrant youth is described as an 'active reflexive process', as guidelines adapt from ever-changing circumstances.<sup>11–13</sup> While methodology and ethics are distinct elements of research, they are essential and interwoven.<sup>14</sup>

Research ethics boards (REBs) have a biomedical lens given their creation in response to immoral medical experiments.<sup>15</sup> Pollock<sup>16</sup> criticises REBs by arguing they do not cover issues from qualitative research.<sup>16</sup> While procedural ethics are familiar, such as gaining consent via signatures, microethics should also be emphasised to acknowledge that research is influenced by complex real-world contexts.<sup>16</sup> REBs guidelines focus on legalistic means and not examining accountability socially.<sup>17</sup> To move beyond, cultural reflexivity should be emphasised as it is an iterative process attending to inequities from power. Thus, microethics should include cultural reflexivity. This aims to ensure vulnerabilities of migrant youth are not exploited as a result of the researcher's failure to identify power imbalances that may limit voluntary and informed consent.<sup>6–8</sup> By focusing on culture when developing a study's methodology and navigating ethical considerations, a positive experience can be produced for the participants, and meaningful data can be derived.<sup>6–7, 19</sup>

COVID-19 has presented unique methodological and ethical challenges for conducting research. Canadian REBs in March 2020 mandated researchers under their jurisdiction to halt or apply for amendments in order to align with local public health measures.<sup>20–21</sup> In person data collection no longer was an option to ensure participants are not harmed.<sup>20–21</sup>

The goal of this article is to contribute to understanding the complexities of research involving resettled migrant youth. The article draws from a study exploring the coping experiences of teenage Syrian migrants in Canada. An emphasis on cultural reflexivity will be discussed in the context of methodological and ethical challenges, layered with COVID-19, along with insights that emerged. The areas of reflection that will be discussed are: recruitment, informed consent and managing the interviews.

## BACKGROUND: THE RESEARCH STUDY

A total of nine participants, aged 16–18, were recruited from a city in Canada, and all were government sponsored refugees. Among them, six identified as male and three as female. Recruitment occurred April 2020, shortly after provincial measures were enacted. Limitations placed by the REB meant meeting in person was not possible in order to not endanger the health of participants. To overcome this methodological challenge, interviews were conducted through Zoom,



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an online videoconferencing software endorsed by the REB as it met privacy guidelines. Participants also could interview via phone, but none selected this. The interviews were audio only to provide privacy and reduce connectivity issues. This was also under consideration for female participants who wore the hijab that would be reluctant to show their faces and hair in case they were not wearing it since they were in the comfort of their home. For Muslim women who wear the hijab, it is recommended they cover their hair for non-immediate family.

With the participant's permission, the audio was recorded. They were transcribed by the primary investigator (PI) for analysis, and only they had access.

The interview guide was developed to be easy to understand, as the population would have varying levels of English language proficiency. The framing of the language requirement was not based on criteria used within the Canadian school system. Instead, it stated participants must be 'comfortable speaking in English'. As an unfunded study, a translator was not hired. A Syrian Arabic translator would have been beneficial, as many participants may have been excluded due to the English requirement.<sup>9 22</sup> Their inclusion in the study potentially would have led to the identification of new themes due to cultural factors being preserved, which could have been lost when translating to English.<sup>14 22-24</sup>

Compensation was selected to prevent undue influence, specifically during a pandemic where economic precarity has intensified.<sup>24 25</sup> What determines appropriate compensation for migrants and youth is contested, as it should not be considered as a way to overcome power imbalances. Head<sup>25</sup> suggests it should be relevant and useful to the participant's context. The compensation for the study was 20 Canadian dollars and two community service hours, which would go towards their volunteering requirement of their Ontario Secondary School Diploma. Participants had the opportunity to receive their financial compensation in any electronic form.

In what follows, the practical and ethical considerations used for recruitment, informed consent and managing interviews for this study are discussed.

## Recruitment

Two recruitment methods were used to optimise recruitment. A flyer was emailed to local organisations focusing on newcomer Canadians or youth from culturally diverse populations. Initially, the goal was to recruit participants from these centres and interview on-site. The PI also contacted local sociocultural and religious community leaders to inform them of the study, and invite them to identify participants as many community-led groups are involved with helping newcomers resettle.<sup>7 26</sup> However, these avenues posed ethical concerns due to intersecting vulnerabilities of this population (eg, relationships and privacy). In this subsection, practicalities in recruitment will be focused on along with ethical concerns.

Due to COVID-19, recruitment through local organisations was not successful since they were closed. One organisation declined, as Zoom was not appropriate based on their guidelines. Ethical issues related to this will later on be elaborated. It was also Ramadan, when Muslims fast and engage in religious devotion. Emphasis was given to contacting sociocultural and religious community members who had ties to the population, such as by providing support to resettled Syrian migrant families. The PI belonged to this religious community within the city, and was therefore a trusted individual through personal connections.<sup>14 24</sup> This was advantageous, as community members were supportive in providing information of guardians of adolescents

for potential recruitment. Liamputtong<sup>27</sup> argues that an outsider is the most 'dangerous' as they can continue to marginalise the community. However, Connolly and Troyna<sup>28</sup> state an 'insider' can cause harm due to confidentiality risks. Ultimately, to minimise harm, it is important the researcher is cognizant of power they hold in a community.<sup>24</sup> Birman<sup>29</sup> posits the 'insider' and 'outsider' dichotomy is not appropriate as no one truly is representative, but the identity of a 'cultural insider' should be conceptualised along a continuum. Instead, one can be a 'partial insider' by sharing the same identities (eg, language, religion and social class) and still have easier access to a community.<sup>29</sup> Since the PI belonged to the same religious community, this was a point of connection as some participants discussed using religion to cope.

Only phone numbers of fathers were provided and this may have been because the community members were male, and gender mixing is typically discouraged due to sociocultural norms. The PI was to let the fathers know the community member provided their phone number to establish that the PI was a trusted person.<sup>24</sup> When fathers were contacted, they were greeted by a salutation used by Muslims (As-salamu alaykum, Peace be on you) and wished a happy Ramadan to convey respect based on sociocultural norms.

Fathers initially were sceptical about being contacted, but were reassured when the name of the community member who referred them was provided. Some even provided the phone numbers of friends who had teenagers which could potentially participate.<sup>30 31</sup> While the majority were positive interactions, some fathers ended the call once they were made aware of who provided their number or assumed the PI worked with the government.<sup>6 14 24 30 31</sup>

During these interactions, some families said they had previous experience in participating in research conducted by local groups.<sup>32</sup> Concerns of research fatigue emerged, as the community may be exhausted by repeatedly being recruited.<sup>32 33</sup> When researchers vaguely say their study will help improve something, Omata<sup>33</sup> notes the use of this statement breeds mistrust as often no immediate change is made. Researchers thus have the ethical duty to be transparent about their work's utility and purpose. The community in the study is unique, as the local university and other institutions conducting community-led studies produce immediate results. This might have influenced fathers' willingness to participate, as one stated it was his 'duty to help each other' and therefore participating in research was important. What referenced as 'each other' was in regard to the broader Syrian migrant and Muslim communities.

This was a small community where people were well acquainted, but the ethical implications of this should be emphasised, as this implied potential risks to privacy for those recruited and also impacting the community.<sup>18 24 34</sup> For example, if a family was aware that a family they referred did not participate, this might cause tension within their relationship. In the context of participants being aware that a community leader referred them, they might feel as if they have an obligation to participate due to previously existing power dynamics and relationships.<sup>24 35 36</sup> It was apparent that community leaders helped the families within the resettlement process, either financially or socially, and these families were dependant on them to some extent.<sup>24 35 36</sup> In accountability within migration research, Bloemraad and Menjivar<sup>15</sup> argue that researchers must recognise that harm not only affects the participant, but can also expand into their community. Thus, conceptualising a participant as a separate entity is ethically inappropriate.<sup>16 24 36</sup>

Fathers questioned the PI about their identity. While the PI was truthful, this experience calls attention to the importance

of transparency within recruitment.<sup>14 37–40</sup> For example, the PI's degree was questioned, as some assumed they were a social worker who could help bring family to Canada. This has also implications for deception, such as misinforming the participant that the PI is from the same background. Fathers asked if the PI could speak Arabic or was of Arabic descent, which might have been implied by the religious greeting or through the contact which had referred them. Additionally, with COVID-19 restrictions in place to minimise the spread of the virus, this became more complicated. Therefore, establishing transparency of one's identity and intent is crucial. Overall, the interactions were pleasant, and some fathers said that they were grateful that 'someone was looking out for them'. This highlights research as opportunities for empowerment for migrants. However, it raises issues of therapeutic misconception if researchers are not attentive.<sup>41</sup> This will be discussed in detail in the following subsection.

### Informed consent

Informed consent is described as 'ongoing' in every aspect of a study. In this study, it included simplifying the consent forms, respecting cultural norms and addressing therapeutic misconception.

Language used in the consent form was selected to be easy to read to accommodate varying levels of English proficiency. This was also to prevent misinformation. In both the consent form and interview, participants were told of their rights: they could end the study at any moment; they did not have to answer anything they did not want to, and their participation was voluntary. Frequent breaks were taken during the interview and participants were asked if they wanted to continue to maintain ongoing consent. Obtaining consent through signing a form is a default method REBs use. Other methods, like verbal consent, are viewed as exceptions that must be justified, such as someone being illiterate. Wynn and Israel<sup>42</sup> state defaulting to written consent is akin to a 'fetish', and it disregards histories of colonial land acquisition, authoritarian states or surveillance regime which are issues familiar to migrants. While a consent form becomes a legal document to protect from litigation, this operates under the assumption that the participant has the same access or knowledge of the legal system.<sup>42</sup> For fathers in this study to be wary, this is a legitimate fear through their experiences from the Syrian civil war.

The participants recruited were aged 16 and over, and therefore parental permission was not required by REBs guidelines. However, the PI informed the fathers of what will be asked of their teenager during the interview.<sup>14 24 39</sup> A few fathers did not wish their teenager to participate once they were informed of what was expected of them.<sup>34</sup> The concept of autonomy operated differently within these interactions, as the father was making decisions on their behalf, and this may have also pressured them to participate given norms of parental authority.<sup>34</sup> Providing consent based on a certain idea of autonomy imposed by REBs is also problematic. Autonomy is defined by sociocultural beliefs, and Ellis *et al*<sup>36</sup> argue it is shaped by Western concepts based on values of individualism, neoliberalism and self-determination, which do not apply to other cultures. As discussed above, the fathers were gatekeepers. Nakkash *et al*<sup>34</sup> point to upholding ethical principles appropriate to the local context to obtain informed consent in a meaningful way. Within their experiences of working with youth in migrant camps, patriarchal rule and the idea of parents knowing best were two factors shaping a youth's ability to consent voluntarily.

Participants were made aware, both in the consent form and verbally, that there would be no immediate benefit to them

through this study and the findings may potentially be used in providing nuance to the existing research in which the study was situated in. This was to avoid therapeutic misconception, where the participant may be led to believe that an intervention can cause individual benefit.<sup>14 39 41</sup> Being reflective of this is an important aspect of obtaining informed consent, as researchers could mislead participants and exploit them.<sup>41</sup> When fathers inquired about the PI's credentials, this was also part of obtaining informed consent as to make certain participants are aware of the role of the researcher and the study's objectives.

### Conducting the interviews

As Zoom was easy to navigate for participants, a caveat was that this excluded potential participants who did not have adequate access to technology like stable internet.<sup>20 21</sup> Zoom was endorsed by the REB, but this brings concerns of data privacy. Behnam and Crabtree<sup>43</sup> and Molnar<sup>44</sup> state that ownership and legal regulation of data is concerning, specifically for migrants as it becomes a tool for surveillance. Within the context of the present study, participants belonged to a Muslim community. For Muslim diaspora, there is a heightened concern of government surveillance after the events of 9/11, as simple tasks (eg, calling family back home) can lead to terrorism charges, investigation, or deportation.<sup>45</sup> As referenced before, the organisation potentially may have declined to help recruiting in order to protect their clients given their legal status and identities.

Under Zoom's data sharing policy from June 2021, it states data may be transferred to or stored in the USA, as well as countries outside of the European Economic Area, Switzerland and the UK. Given the present study was conducted within Canada, there is an obvious risk as Zoom is a cloud-based service. Truly, this limits the extent of confidentiality and privacy that is guaranteed, as power belongs to the company. While internet-based videoconferencing is advantageous, it also redefines ideas of privacy. This was further concerning since some participants were under the age of 18; therefore, legally classified as minors in Ontario, Canada. A section in the consent forms explicitly stated the potential of a privacy breach, and alternative arrangements can be made. A link to Zoom's privacy policy was also provided. Zoom's recording feature was not used out of concerns of data privacy, but a separate audiorecorder was used to minimise risk.

For some, being interviewed in the comfort of their home was a positive experience. However, this may be an issue where the emotional climate is negative or tense, and participants may have to police themselves. The issue of privacy became complicated as sometimes participants were in households with little to no privacy. Some participated with their siblings in their bedroom or while helping their mothers cook. This highlights complexity of privacy and confidentiality, as a family member may listen to a conversation, and potentially affecting what the participant might want to say. When working with youth, Webber<sup>46</sup> and Bassett *et al*<sup>47</sup> noted parents may be concerned about what their child would reveal about their home lives. Within the present study's context, asking participants about stressful experiences may put them at risk of potentially disclosing something deemed inappropriate to share with someone. This was supported when participants said there are some problems 'to be kept home' when discussing using social supports for coping.

It was not expected that participants would share events related to their migrant journey, as the prompt of the interview asked to share any stressful event. It was assumed that participants would discuss stressors of living in Canada. The ethical implications in asking recollections of stressful events, or traumatic ones, is something that has been highly debated within both the trauma

and migrant literature.<sup>48</sup> Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used as the selected methodology given that the study focused on understanding experiences of stress and coping, IPA became an important tool as it focuses on the individual. The interviewer does not interrogate the participant's telling, but only helps to explore it in a compassionate manner.<sup>7</sup> Thus, it becomes a sensitive methodology to allow participants to share their experiences on their own accord.<sup>7</sup>

In preparation, a resource sheet was made due to the subject matter could potentially cause distress and consequently lead to retraumatisation.<sup>2 7 18 48</sup> The sheet listed psychological and social services and aimed at youth. They were selected on the following criteria: non-denominational; work with culturally diverse populations; and be free or affordable. In lieu of COVID-19, virtual resources accessible by smartphone were also included. Participants were given this at the end, in hope that they would find them helpful if needed. The PI also has relevant experience from community-based educational sexual violence programmes aimed at young adults, and specifically has training in dealing with distress. However, since the video was turned off, it was difficult for the PI to discern as bodily cues can be indicators of discomfort. Attention to voice and tone was given through the interviews. This was done by frequently checking-in and asking the participant if they wished to continue. Participants shared stressors involving their migrant journey in varying detail.

At the end, participants were asked if they would like to add to the stories they shared, and many took the opportunity to thank the PI for providing them space to share their migrant journey. Some stated this was their first time disclosing these events or someone asking about their lived experiences related to the war.<sup>7 18 48</sup> As Field<sup>49</sup> posits, oral historians are not healers for participants, but they can offer opportunities for regeneration and agency.

## CONCLUSION

While this study was conducted in Canada, the challenges align with what has been documented in the literature regarding resettled migrant youth. Although the sample size of nine may be considered small, it is within the guidelines of IPA to focus on depth rather than quantity.<sup>50</sup> All participants were Muslim, belonged to a nuclear family, and recruited from the same city, and therefore, this also limits the applicability of the findings to be applied to other contexts. With COVID-19, it became evident that complications of privacy and confidentiality are heightened, from recruitment to conducting interviews.<sup>20 21</sup> The growing concern of data ownership is also highlighted, as this may become a surveillance tool used against migrants. As the pandemic has shaped life for the foreseeable future, some of the concerns raised may be unavoidable. Particular attention was provided to cultural factors within ethics and methodology, as they were influential in conducting effective research with this migrant youth population. Even after data collection, cultural reflexivity must be maintained in order to minimise harm.<sup>17</sup> In the present study, pseudonyms were not assigned, as a name may have been religiously or culturally inappropriate. As general guidelines exist on 'best practices' regarding research with migrant youth populations, it is important for researchers to be aware how these may not be contextually, or culturally, appropriate due to their study's circumstances.<sup>9 12 19</sup> Cultural reflexivity plays a role in formulating effective research, but also signals to move beyond procedural ethics and focus on microethics, as unexpected challenges may emerge in cross-cultural settings, specifically layered with structural issues from COVID-19.

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