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CHALLENGES OF ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH WITH WAR MIGRANTS FROM UKRAINE*

In this short reflection on ethnographic research with forced migrants who arrived in Poland after February 24, 2022, I would like to address some issues that seem crucial to me, an anthropologist, Ukrainian studies specialist and researcher of Ukrainian communities in Poland, including war migrants. These are primarily issues related to research ethics, particularly in the context of difficult research in cooperation with potentially traumatised people who have been positioned by popular discourses as refugees and victims of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In addition, my reflection concerns the researcher's involvement and responsibility, the specificity of the situation in which this research is conducted, as well as the problems and challenges involved in archiving and representing research. I will indicate the risks to war migrants that researchers must take into account, such as revictimisation, lack of psychological tools and the burdens of the researcher, and the further life of the constructed ethnographic knowledge, built on the experience of war migrants from Ukraine. I also include some practical advice on designing conversations with war migrants that may be of benefit to those working with vulnerable research associates.[1]

Let me start with the term used in relation to my Ukrainian research associates in Poland, "refugee", and its stereotyping, which deprives people of agency and positions them in power relations, by first clarifying the legal definitions that apply to Ukrainian newcomers in Poland. The most relevant point of reference is the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees ratified on July 28, 1951.[2] Events that confer the right to seek international protection within the terms of the Convention include conflict, violence or "other circumstances seriously disturbing public order".[3] Before February 24, 2022, this was the legal definition of a refugee in force in the

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[1] The author would like to thank the editor Keith Egan for his valuable suggestions on earlier version of this article.

[2] Commonly known as the Geneva Convention or the UNHCR Convention (as the body entrusted with the implementation of the provisions of the Convention).

[3] https://www.unhcr.org/pl/365-plwiadomosci2016uchodzca-czy-migrant-tlumaczymy-roznice-i-wy-jasniamy- ich-sens-html.html (accessed: 15.02.2023).

Republic of Poland. However, mere weeks after the outbreak of a new phase of the war, the adoption of the so-called Special Act altered this legal definition significantly. According to the Special Act, a refugee from Ukraine is now considered to be any Ukrainian citizen who came to Poland on February 24th, 2022 or later. This means extending the definition of a de facto refugee to all those arriving from Ukraine without the need to formally apply for refugee status within the terms of the Geneva Convention.[4] However, even before the Act was adopted, the term refugee began to function as a kind of shorthand for Ukrainian citizens arriving in Poland who were being forced to flee by the Russian invasion. On the one hand, "refugees", used in the colloquial sense, helped to distinguish these arrivals from earlier migrations of Ukrainians to Poland, it also specifically indicated their forced characteristics arising from warfare. However, the unconsidered use of the term became abusive. In practice, only a small number of refugees from Ukraine, especially in the weeks and months following the war, took advantage of the refugee procedure and applied for international protection.[5] Moreover, in the context of the humanitarian crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border and ongoing media and political discussions, the term refugee has acquired an evaluative connotation. As some researchers dealing with migration and refugee studies point out (e.g., Allwood 2010; Bragg 2022; Ghorashi 2005; Malkki 1996; Renkens, Rommes & van den Muijsenbergh 2022), the term refugee positions a person as passive, deprived of agency and the ability to act, dependent on institutional actors, on legislative solutions defining their status and on humanitarian aid. The term refugee also imposes a monolithic, homogeneous view of forced migrants, which does not take into account, for example, class issues. Equally it positions them solely as beneficiaries of basic forms of assistance while at the same time reducing their aspirations and agency. War migrants in Poland, however, perceive themselves differently, and in different ways. Some may identify themselves with the term refugee, for instance, but others prefer the term "displaced persons", or, as many of my research participants said, simply "a person who intends to wait until the war is over". Therefore, in the context of the arrival of Ukrainian citizens to Poland, the general terms "forced migrant" and "war migrant", imperfect though they may be, are still much more precise and also less stigmatising than "refugee".

To a certain extent, researchers follow aid organisations, volunteers, institutions and sponsors who have somehow been taking care of forced migrants and whose contacts preceded any research encounter. It is important, then, to position research goals and interests to ensure the research does not become exploitative, while care-fully distinguishing the researcher's activities from various forms organizational aid. We should be particularly sensitive so as not to place our field collaborators into the victim schema, reproducing power relations, or positioning "refugees" as passive

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[4] I.e. the Act of March 12, 2022 on assistance to Ukrainian citizens in connection with the armed conflict on the territory of this country; Cf. Dz.U. 2022 r., poz. 583.

[5] https://udsc.prowly.com/224477-ochrona-miedzynarodowa-w-2022-r-ponad-dwukrotny-wzrost-rozpatrzonych-wnioskow (accessed: 12.09.2023).

victims needing help. The universalist, homogenising, even orientalising categories of refugee, victim, vulnerable person, or beneficiary of help, all position a person as disempowered. Van den Hoonaard (2018) draws attention to the medical research ethics codes context in which the term and the concept of *vulnerability* refer to the ability of a patient/ research participant to give informed consent to research. There are consequences, too, in a facile application of this term in the social sciences, one which blurs its precision, makes it "fixed and unmovable". Once labelled vulnerable, a "refugee" may find it difficult to recover their agency before the institutional gaze. Moreover, his/her fluid experience of everyday life is reduced to this immutable category, that lingers as they try to recover the sense of a life more fully lived in a foreign place. Also, it ignores the research participants' own perspectives on their lives.

What characterises research conducted in cooperation with forced migrants from Ukraine is the simultaneity of the events: the war is on-going. Although some war migrants have been staying in Poland for many months, they are still suspended between their old lives and their new ones, lives which they are trying to tame and settle in a foreign country. In addition, they may be in the war trauma. Even if researchers try to focus on other issues, for instance, those related to how war migrants in Poland are adapting to life there, it is quite likely that conversations will include images of war events and embodied experiences, often of suffering and violence. Most often, the collapse of the known world, a loss of sense of security, predictability of life, acting according to well-known cultural and societal scripts are more pressing than the researcher's own project in such conversations. These stories do not have to be direct observations or experiences of violence to bear witness to suffering. All this means that we are dealing with an extremely delicate, fragile and abuse-prone accounts.

Since most of the qualitative research conducted since February 24, 2022 in cooperation with war migrants from Ukraine in Poland is based on substantially formalised interviews, including those of a documentary nature, I will focus below on a few issues related to the ethical and methodological challenges of such research.[6]

ENSURING COMFORT, REDUCING RETRAUMATISATION

Researchers should provide as much comfort as possible and create an atmosphere of understanding and trust, acceptance and empathy, as well as clearly present the long-term goal of our research to our research participants. What exactly our research is to be used for must be communicated, whether we are collecting personal testimonies of the wartime experiences of ordinary people or evidence of crimes and legal testimonies of these crimes. Also, we must explain where and what will

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[6] Because of limited space, I only indicate two examples: *24.02.2022, 5 am: Testimonies from the War*, IFiS PAN, https://swiadectwawojny2022.org/; *Migranci i migrantki przymusowe z Ukrainy w Krakowie w świetle badań jakościowych* (2022*), Multiculturalism & Migration Observatory*, https://owim. uek.krakow.pl/index.php/publikacje/ (accessed 17.11.2023).

be published: popular book, newspapers, legal documents, political policy-making, etc., as well as who will read the story.

It is absolutely necessary to invite into our research only such people who have left Ukraine several months previously and who have already received basic psychological support as needed. The assessment of risk and well-being depends on the researcher's skills and relies on accurate self-reporting by potential research participants. It is also a challenge for researchers, because it requires a quasi-therapeutic vigilance. A referral to a psychologist after the meeting may not be enough, because it requires extra effort from the interlocutor, who may nevertheless require therapeutic support during the meeting, not a few days after. Researchers should at least establish some regular channel of trusted communication between a Ukrainian-speaking/Russian-speaking psychologist and researcher to facilitate ethical and sustainable interviews, possibly where after interviews the participants may talk to a psychologist. However, the interlocutor's psychological condition may also change at any time during the meeting. Perhaps an ideal model is the solution proposed by Hasan Hasanović, head of the Oral History Project at the Srebrenica Memorial Center,[7] a psychotherapist is available in the next room at the project office. This, however, leads to the next question about finding suitable spaces for meetings with war migrants, whether the participant feels the need for the psychologist to be close, or whether a cafe is better or an office space.

Suitable places may be a cafe, an office in a Ukrainian organisation or other aid organisation, a playground (as many of war migrants have children; if there inter-locutors' children are nearby, then this should be agreed upon separately), or even a beauty salon. Wherever the research associate feels safe and at ease, any place that they are familiar with can work as a venue to meet. Of course, ethnographers strive to create a bond that distinguishes their fieldwork from one-off interview meetings in quicker qualitative research. In the case of cooperation with war migrants, this requirement should be even more stringent: the need to ensure a kind of intimacy and commitment, which is very difficult to achieve in a single research encounter, even a very intense one. Therefore, it may make sense to deepen informal contacts, spend time with research participants in places they are familiar with, where they feel comfortable, before embarking on a formal interview or a more structured conversation that is guided by the researcher's questions. Also, we need to consider how much time we can give ourselves and the interlocutor. How many meetings do we anticipate? Do we assume we will return to this person in a year, two or three?

Another important solution related to the protection of the research participant against the potentially retraumatising effects of the conversation is the assumption that our interview scenario is not immutable, that it can be modified not only from interview to interview, but also during a single meeting. It is necessary to have

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[7] *Testimonies about the war in Ukraine: How to conduct interview-based research*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BYswk0T8yUI&ab_channel=Deutsch-UkrainischeHistorischeKommission (accessed 15.02.2023).

a dynamic, movable research tool that enables us to respond to the interlocutor's story, instead of a highly-structured one. An open-ended and flexible tool would create space for choice for the interlocutors, whether to talk about personal experiences or not. Finally, attention should be paid to the limitations of the voice recorder. The research participant may find it difficult to consent to record.

Each question/topic must be assessed for potential harm to the research participant. We need to consider which questions are for now and which should wait for the next meeting. There is always a risk that asking about aspects of their lives before the changes, including childhood, work and home, may direct the research participant to the most painful areas of their experiences. We should not ask if our interlocutor has lost a loved one, about Ukrainian-Russian relations or plans for the future as these issues seem to be the most painful and acute or difficult to imagine It is also probable that we will meet someone from eastern Ukraine who has experienced the war since 2014.

Researchers from Ukraine who are active in Poland, have war experience and can build a community of experiences with research participants are to a greater extent situated as insiders. Researchers from Poland will always be outsiders, because they simply cannot establish this community of common, war experiences, even if they have suitable language skills (Ukrainian and/or Russian is indispensable). However, our involvement in aid activities as volunteers may be helpful for establishing rapport. My experience shows that it is much easier for the war migrants to become research participants of someone whom they already know, whom they have trusted, with whom they have regular contact. This does not necessarily mean dependence or a sense of duty, compensation for the care shown. Such experience offers much greater psychological comfort and trust, which are difficult to foster through quick contact, where additionally there may be a relationship of a certain dominance of subject-positions: a "victim-refugee" who is "given a voice" and a researcher who "represents the institution" (although, of course, the care relationship itself does not remain untouched by asymmetry or power relations). It is imperative, then, to build rapport, lasting bonds, trust and comfort in this relationship, even after the end of the interview and to avoid a one-off, formal meeting, during which we "jump" into someone's experience, only to leave that person with open wounds as we "jump out" again.

THE ETHICS OF A NARRATIVE AND THE POSITIONING OF A NARRATOR

Interviewing always carries the risk of rapid, dirty ethnography that exploits the interlocutors and distances us from what is non-verbal and non-declarative, and therefore remains unrecognised during a formalised meeting. After all, we know that many experiences may not be structured in a language. While building their story, the narrators encounter emotions, often facing their own unforeseen reactions. They also perform cognitive work on an ongoing basis, transforming experiences

and emotions into a narrative structure, into a commentary on events, giving a verbal shape to what is an array of emotions. This difficult task additionally requires meeting the expectations of the researcher who comes with questions and whose mere presence gives a frame to the story. But what if the interlocutor has no skills to tell a story smoothly? And what if the entropy of experiences is so pervasive that it cannot be arranged into an orderly narrative? What if the experiences are inexpressible or the interlocutor who cannot uncover a deep sense of him/herself in the presence of the researcher, what if there is no flow between them? The researcher must be prepared that the story will be fractured or fragmented, where the speaker is maybe not ready to tell the story. Additionally, the recorder may be an obstacle to the interview, therefore, the researcher must be prepared to make detailed notes.

When researchers look at a transcript of such an interview, in which the narrative breaks, the story is somehow torn and there are gaps or obscurities. The nascent order that they had hoped for is missing; such a narrative may be disappointing, at least after a while. A way to avoid undermining it may be reading the transcript and listening to the recording at the same time, or just listening to it. Then we can see again what the transcription has flattened and blurred.

Researchers perform a kind of mimicry in the Derridian sense, transforming living people into ghosts, providers of voices, reports or testimonies. After the narration, each transcript is a further decontextualisation of experiences, and the next stage of decontextualisation is archiving. It takes a lot of effort and research reflexivity not to lose the narrator in this multi-stage decontextualisation, so that people's voices are not trivialised. And that the war told would not be trivialised.

RESEARCHER'S INVOLVEMENT

Another issue is how dialogic the interviews are and how deeply the researcher becomes involved. Does s/he just listen? Does s/he react, or share his/her feelings? Are any means taken to disturb the asymmetry between the silent researcher and the research participant's effort? How much of the researcher can be heard in the recording/seen in the transcript? What kind of reactions does s/he allow? Are they verbalised, like the narrator's story, or do they take place at the level of looks, gestures, nods, disbelief expressed when our eyes meet? And is empathy, immanent in such research, visible or audible? The researcher must be active to remain ethical; a researcher must be more than just present, more than just a listener for two, equally ethical, reasons. The first has an internal dimension and is associated with the need to show the researcher's empathic involvement in the story – active listening instead of interrogation. The second can be described as external, and concerns the potential future use of our materials, especially when we are conducting a documentation project. This solution speaks to the researcher's ethical signature, indicating the ethical solutions adopted and included in the recording so that they are "readable" for the listener or reader of the transcript.

FURTHER USE OF NARRATIVES AND THE PROBLEM OF REPRESENTATION

Since the time of Franz Boas, we have known that we rely on culturally produced forms of knowledge, arrange them into structured and recognisable prototypes. In case of projects in cooperation with war migrants from Ukraine, our professional culture may easily become less so by making classifications that are too superficial, too quick and too rigid, even before the research questions are asked, simply by imposing the form and subsequently the way of communicating of it.

If the project is based on recorded narratives, it usually means that language is reduced to transcripts. This will be a serious limitation for the voice of the narrators. Will we be able to see again the woman and her life turned upside down in this transcript? Will we understand what she went through? How many of these experiences and images are inaccessible to us due to the choice of a research tool? A narrative should not become more important than the narrator her/himself. The anonymisation, documentation and generalisation result in silencing *individual* experiences and subjectivity, and limits the possibility of being heard with one's distinctive story. Individual fates disappear in the archive. The form of representation is always epistemologically violent in some way, imposing the categories and tactics of the representer, not the represented. How to show these experiences so as not to flatten them into one polyphony? How to remain humble in the face of experiences and the need to tell stories, in order not to fall into a somewhat violent empiricism and a kind of "phantomisation"? How to preserve the subjectivity of these voices?

We take responsibility for evoking a narrative about someone's suffering. And we have to have an idea of how to handle it as researchers, but also as people responsible for these narratives. We keep releasing them. And now they belong to more than just the narrator. We work with people who have escaped the war that we can only think about and try to represent, while they retain this experience in their heads and in their bodies. The researcher must, therefore, be a listener and learner, not an expert, also in the field of ethics and methodology. The ongoing war that affected war migrants' lives must force ethnographers planning research in cooperation with them to rethink and radically raise the ethical standards in our discipline.

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Key words: war migrants, Ukraine, ethics, ethnographic fieldwork

This short reflection on ethnographic research with forced migrants who arrived in Poland after February 24, 2022, addresses topics that are crucial in designing a research project in cooperation with people who fled from Ukraine. Issues related to research ethics, the situation of difficult research in cooperation with potentially traumatised people, positioned by popular discourses as refugees and victims of the Russian invasion of Ukraine are explored here. In addition, my reflection concerns access to the site, the researcher's involvement and responsibility, the specificity of the research situation, as well as problems and challenges facing their archiving and representation. I indicate research risks such as revictimisation, lack of psychological tools and burdens of the researcher, and the further life of constructed ethnographic knowledge that is built on the experience of war migrants from Ukraine. This reflection text also includes some practical advice on designing conversations with war migrants from Ukraine. In addition to the indicated challenges of ethnographic research in cooperation with forced migrants from Ukraine, the paper contains an appeal for a radical increase in ethical standards in a situation of war and forced migration.

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