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Reflections on research ethics in the case of Syrians in urban spaces in Jordan and Turkey

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## Abstract

When studying a population in a vulnerable condition and with limited rights, several questions must be raised, in particular questions pertaining to ethics. This brief discusses the incompatibility of certain requirements by institutional ethics review committees, such as the written recording of consent, with the need to protect research participants' identities. Following guidelines designed for research projects 'in general', may at times intimidate and jeopardize the safety of participants.

## Introduction

When studying a population in a vulnerable condition, with limited rights, several questions must be raised, in particular questions pertaining to ethics. Requests for an interview, taking pictures, using a consent form, everything must be thought through. A growing body of literature proposes a critical reflection on research ethics. Authors have analysed the unequal nature of the relationship between the researcher and respondents. Maitilasso, for instance, following E. Goffman, A. Blanchet and J. Gumperz, recalls that ‘this division of roles always implies an asymmetry of positions accentuated by a social and cultural distance that often plays in favour of the investigator’ (2013, p. 4). Others have proposed a reflection on the relation between the comprehension of suffering and the ethical interpretation of data, or yet a reflection on the preconditions of research such as free choice (i.e. : Bourgeois-Guérin, Beaudoin, 2016 ; Halse and Honey, 2005 ; Clark, s. d.). In sensitive contexts, Emmanuel Nal have for example proposed an analysis on how ‘it is possible to reconcile *care*, understanding and a scientific (...) conclusions about what is lived by those who are interviewed’ (2015).

In the context of exile specifically, Cabot has for instance criticised what she describes as ghostliness of refugee voices (2016, p.05). Pittaway and others (Pittaway, Bartolomei and Hugman, 2010; Krause,2017) have also discussed these ethical issues. Within a context of growing bureaucratisation of research ethics (Sleeboom-Faulkner, Simpson, Burgos-Martinez and McMurray, 2017), researchers are increasingly asked to comply with highly detailed and strictly defined requirements on how to ethically conduct research, without taking into consideration the ethics they encounter “in the field.” This bureaucratisation gives an assuring image of the research process, with an aura of objectivity, despite tackling ethics out of context and frequently letting academics believe that the mere compliance with those norms are enough to ‘ethically’ conduct a study. However, as Pittaway et al. (2010) recall, the responsibility of the researcher must go beyond the preoccupation with a rigorous methodology and the compliance with notions of only doing ‘no harm’:

What does "informed consent" mean? What are the precautions one must take whilst photographing people in a situation of exile, when people are desperate and find themselves in extremely unhealthy conditions, frequently living below the poverty line and without rights? What does it mean to sign a consent form when someone is confronted with safety problems of all kinds: food, economical and physical? Would this someone do anything in the hope of improving his/her situation? I thereby intend to reinforce those voices that call for a reflexivity of research in order to improve our practices.

This paper draws on a fieldwork experience conducted in Jordan in 2016 and in Turkey in 2017 while researching the strategies developed by Syrians in a context of urban exile. Based on the experience of this



project, this contribution proposes a reflection on the existing ethical guidelines relating to research with displaced people and its use within different circumstances.

### **A multi-located field: multiple methods**

Access to the field was quite difficult - Turkey for instance had forbidden research with Syrians<sup>1</sup> since 2015, making necessary the division of the survey into two phases. The collection of data was carried out over a total period of six months, between 2016 and 2017. The study was based on a series of semi-structured interviews, conducted with Syrians of different backgrounds in both countries. Most of the interviews were individual, but depending on the context, some were also collective, which often enriched the data collected. Studying Arabic at beginners' level helped me to introduce myself during the interviews, building trust and also showing respect to the respondent by making an effort to pick up at least some of the language. In many cases, a person who could translate worked also as a facilitator. A preference for a female interpreter in interviews with women whenever possible was implemented. Some interviews were also conducted without the intervention of a facilitator / translator, which was a way of measuring the impact of the presence of a third person during interviews, ensuring the objectivity of the analysis. Photos were rarely taken, as they could pose a risk to refugees, raise suspicion and also contribute to their stigmatization, according to a 'convenient image (label) constructed of them by humanitarian agencies' (Zetter, 2007, p. 173).

One of the concerns in the interviews was representativeness, to prevent research from contributing, even involuntarily, to silencing the voices of people who are often already in the shadows (Krause, 2017, p. 9). As a result, I used snowball interviews in different contexts and cities. Since the population is difficult to identify in urban spaces, this approach has also helped us to ensure greater participation. In addition, the method proved to be relevant for assessing the importance of networks (solidarity, friendship, professional, family, etc.) and, more specifically, what Pierre Bourdieu (1980) calls the social capital in the construction of strategies in exile. The biggest challenge was to interview the first groups in each town / village. It is important to note that the condition of the exile - marked by limited rights - makes people less willing to talk. In addition, as in any social interaction, once there are no previous connections enabling an environment of trust to naturally emerge, dialogues are always harder to flourish. Finally, the constraining contexts such as Jordan and Turkey create an environment of mistrust. But once these challenges were overcome, notably by openly talking about the research and about me, reassuring refugees of my identity and of the objectives of the study, the first respondents helped us to identify other members of the community, who, in turn, were asked to identify other people who might be interested in participating, and so on.



This methodology is complemented by an anthropological / ethnological approach of these urban spaces in Jordan and Turkey: in particular, to support the work of local NGOs; observe spaces of socialization; make visits to Syrians in their homes. The use of semi-structured interviews and participant observation were complementary in a multi-located field in order to analyse the agency of refugees.

In Jordan, a total of 54 semi structured interviews were conducted, while in Turkey, a total of 33 interviews were conducted with Syrians. The lower number of interviews conducted in Turkey, compared to Jordan, is due in part to the constraining nature of the field at the time of the research, for both the researcher and Syrians. In addition to the ban on research with Syrians, in 2017 the country was still suffering from the consequences of the coup attempt of July 2016. Arbitrary arrests, including of academics and refugees, closure of NGOs have become a commonplace. The climate of suspicion was particularly high. Mistrust, however, did not come only from the institutions, but also from Syrians. In this case, they were rather afraid of being "trapped" by the Turkish authorities or to be caught by the Syrian government. The refusals also provided data on the nature of the field and the constraining condition of Syrians in exile.

***"I trust you, no need to sign anything!": Reflexivity of the fieldwork***

On top of other procedures<sup>ii</sup> (such as the review and approval of an ethics committee), the consent form has for any years been used to ensure the good practice of researchers working with human participants and to ensure the supposed voluntary and informed participation of the interviewees. The idea is that the interviewee will have sufficient information about the research, the use of the data, his/her rights and in this way will be able to judge the interest, between costs and benefits, of his/her participation (Krause, 2017, p. 10). In practice, it consists of a document often in paper format but also dematerialised which must be signed by the researcher, the respondent and ideally at least one witness. Apart from criticisms already raised regarding the use of these forms with illiterate people who put their trust in the interviewer reading the form (Krause, 2017), the indefinite use of these forms within different contexts should also be questioned.

In the context of Syrian exile, the value of the form is doubtful. In addition the forms unrestricted use could reveal a lack of knowledge not only concerning the field but also the population studied. The vast majority of Syrians who left the country did so without leaving a trace, not using a passport, for example. Apart from the fact that most Syrians did not have this document or any other, notably because they fled a war, leaving traces about their location could represent a threat to their lives. Many of those who have left the territory are now seen as enemies of Syria (SNHR, 2019). Thus, signing a document, whatever the nature, means leaving some evidence that at some point could be used against them. In addition, to keep their word "is a sign of honour" for many Syrians ( *"I trust you, no need to sign anything!"*<sup>iii</sup>). Asking them to sign a



document that confirms an agreement between the researcher and the respondent might represent an offense that the researcher is questioning their honour. In Jordan and Turkey I used consent forms in an initial phase of the project. However, it quickly became clear that most of the respondents were not interested in signing these documents. Reflecting on the use of such forms, it appears that in the context of exile using such forms constitutes another type of symbolic violence: they are often intimidating for refugees and further exacerbate their vulnerable condition.

In the context of urban exile in Jordan and Turkey the form has no other function than to protect the researcher and/or institution, rather than helping the refugee. If the practice of well-informing the respondents is respected, the imposition of a consent form in an environment of the above mentioned restrictions and tension, in nothing beyond a formalisation intended to guarantee a proof of ‘good-practice’ rather than being one. Refugees frequently reject to sign the form. Should they wish not to, the researcher could make recourse to an oral consent, based on a relational approach, where the interviewee keeps the researcher's personal and institutional contacts, in case he / she decides to withdraw their participation post-interview. Oral consent proved itself to be relevant notably in the context of working with illiterate people, who no longer felt embarrassed not to be able to read. It is important to highlight that the absence of educational diplomas can represent a stigma in an unequal society, impacting negatively the experience, including during an interview, of those who lack these formal tools of recognition of cultural capital. Oral consent was also useful during interviews with people who are persecuted in Syria, who felt much more comfortable and less constrained to share their stories. It also affected the research positively as it was able to create a bond of trust between the researcher and the respondent that goes beyond a formal contract.

In some cases, other Western research guidelines that are very common in other contexts, such as isolated individual interviews have been questioned in the field. Conducting interviews with mothers and homemakers in exile, for instance, would not be possible if one were expecting perfect conditions, completely cut off from the outside world and their relationships, as can be seen in this abstract of a note from the fieldwork, in Mafraq Jordan, from October 2016.

*"(...) conventional research guidelines are impossible to achieve in such an environment. Although the isolated interview was suggested, respondents said they prefer to talk together, that there is not a problem. They might feel more secure under these circumstances. Many people are talking at the same time, they want to talk. It's the collective, the house is transformed into a public space during a visit. And all that it is mixed with their intimacy. As we were only women, they allowed themselves some intimacy in front of me, such as breastfeeding babies, removing their veils, etc."*<sup>iv</sup>



Although circumstances were not ideal - children would play around, scream, the interview would be interrupted many times - it allowed us to analyse the environment in which interviews took place, relationships within these spaces and between individuals that enriched the data collected. The most important aspect is that the respondents felt safe surrounded by their children and some other family members<sup>v</sup>. In a study conducted during the same period as this research but with displaced Syrians in Lebanon, Akesson and others have resorted to a similar approach, which they described as collaborative interviews (Akesson et al., 2018). Although they recognise that these “living situations” present less privacy than many traditional approaches, they state they are more natural and respectful of refugee’s living environment and habits, which reinforce our assumptions.

Studying refugee strategies in exile poses many challenges. Working with disadvantaged populations who live in extreme conditions under strong control regimes, one can fall into the normalisation and legitimacy of quite unacceptable situations. These ethical questions are difficult to answer. In the effort to recognise the "agents", we risk to erase the hierarchies and relations of power that condition their actions. While the guiding principles proposed in the institutions of the North are crucial to guide the fieldwork, they remain as ideals from a certain point of view. While implementing these recommendations, we cannot neglect the feeling of respondents, neither the contexts underlying these projects. There is not only one way of conducting research, and the better should be the one that preserves the respondent’s interests and will.

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<sup>i</sup> Nothing was formally established in the laws, but in April 2015 the Turkish Ministry of the Interior informed the academicians that from that date they would need prior authorization before conducting research with Syrian refugees living in the country. In practice, it was a ban, with many academics reporting that their research was blocked. The government justified the measure by announcing that it was to protect the Syrians, the academicians denounced however an intellectual control and the silencing of any opposition to the policies of the government towards Syrians.

<sup>ii</sup> These protocols may vary slightly depending on the country.

<sup>iii</sup> Interviewees used that argument many times.

<sup>iv</sup> Notes from fieldwork 01/10/2016

<sup>v</sup> This approach must be adapted in relation to the subject and population studied, interviewing victims of sexual violence or mental illness for instance might require different approaches and methods.

