Addressing ethical and methodological challenges in research with refugee-background young people: reflections from the field

Abstract

Ethical complexities associated with research involving vulnerable and marginalised population groups are well recognised, while practical solutions to these challenges are somewhat less well described. In this paper we focus on strategies for addressing interrelated practical, methodological and ethical issues which may arise during research with refugee-background participants considered vulnerable. The paper draws on a study exploring the impact of social networks and supports on the resettlement experiences of newly-arrived migrant youth of refugee background in Australia. Three key sets of issues are discussed: developing research processes that maximise the benefits of involvement for participants while reducing potential harms; enhancing capacities for participants to give informed consent; and adapting research methods to heighten their relevance to circumstances of participants’ lives and enhance their engagement in the research. We argue that promoting ethical practice and methodological validity are mutually reinforcing objectives and illustrate how processes of ethical reflexivity were applied to resolve methodological challenges, promote autonomy and capacity of research participants and enhance the potential for outcomes to be rigorous and useful.

Keywords: ethics, informed consent, reflexivity, methodology, cross-cultural research, vulnerable, youth, social networks, refugee settlement
Introduction

To a greater or lesser extent, participation in research influences the lives of participants. Moreover, the ‘research process itself has the potential to transform the very phenomenon being studied (Finlay 2002: 531). This insight informs the ethos that involvement in research should be a positive, even beneficial, experience for participants, while potential risks must be curtailed. These aims are directly relevant to the minimum ethical obligations of researchers, but also exceed them. The Australian National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007: 11) asserts that ‘at all stages, human research requires ethical reflection’ informed by ‘core values of respect, research merit and integrity, justice, and beneficence.’ Translating these values into practice requires attending to a range of methodological and practical issues associated with the conduct of research. Further, ‘ethical questions are not static’, and need to be considered and reflected upon from the time a research project is conceived until its findings are presented in the public domain (Bilger & Van Liempt 2009: 13). Processes for gaining institutional ethical approval to conduct research are clearly aimed to uphold these core principals and promote the ethical conduct of research. However, existing ethical guidelines cannot cover all the concerns which arise when researching complex social problems (Czymoniewicz-Klippel, Brijnath, & Crockett 2010), and identifying and responding to emerging ethical challenges in the processes of research requires on-going vigilance on the part of the researchers.

Recognising these complex dimensions of research ethics, Guillemin and Gillam (2004) distinguish between ‘procedural ethics’, which involves formal processes of gaining consent through ethics committees, and ‘ethics in practice’, which involve responding to the everyday issues that can arise in the processes of research. Processes of gaining formal consent to conduct research are guided by broad consensus regarding the generalised and context independent risks of research. ‘Ethics in practice’ involves identifying and responding
to context dependent circumstances and ethical contingencies – or ‘ethically important moments’ - that arise over the course of research projects. Such moments may occur when a remark or a situation, or perhaps just a growing sense of unease, disrupts the planned research procedures, revealing an ethical complexity which demands a response from the researcher. In a similar vein, Swartz (2011) has described ‘ethical red flags’ that presented themselves in the course of her research among vulnerable young people in South Africa. While procedural ethics requires researchers to adhere to documented processes outlined in ethics applications, ‘ethics in practice’ – also referred to as ‘microethics’ - is achieved through ethical reflexivity which requires researchers to adopt a ‘continuous process of critical scrutiny and interpretation’ with respect to themselves and the research situation (Guillemin & Gillam 2004 : 275). Processes of ‘ethics in practice’ ensure that research practices are sensitive to the shifting contexts of research encounters.

Ethical reflexivity is arguably essential when researchers and research participants have disparate lifeworlds. The risks of asymmetries in power between researchers and research participants have long been noted. Bourdieu, in his essay entitled Understanding (1996), suggests that research may inflict ‘symbolic violence’ through misunderstanding or misrepresenting research participants. Potential for misrepresentation arises through the difficulties of communicating when researchers and research subjects occupy different positions within social structures. Accordingly, the most disempowered participants are the most vulnerable to being subjected to symbolic violence through research. Bourdieu advocates reflexive practice of research and ‘a relationship of active and methodical listening’ as critical strategies for minimising the latent harms of research (Bourdieu 1996: 18-19). He elaborates on the conditions that may exert symbolic violence as follows:
It is the investigator who starts the game and who sets up its rules: it is most often she who, unilaterally and without any preliminary negotiations, assigns to the interview its objectives and uses, and on occasion these may be poorly specified – at least for the respondent. This asymmetry is underlined by a social asymmetry which occurs every time the investigator occupies a higher place in the social hierarchy… (Bourdieu 1996: 19).

Bourdieu also underscores the importance of rendering the research process meaningful for the participant and rejects the idea of neutrality in research in favour of familiarity and solidarity as necessary conditions for ‘non-violent’ communication (Bourdieu 1996: 20).

The kinds of reflexive practices advocated to minimise the risks of research, particularly for research participants rendered vulnerable through their relative powerlessness in encounters with researchers, serve to dissolve distinctions between ethical and methodological issues. Promoting ethical practice and methodological validity are mutually reinforcing objectives. In this paper, we discuss the intersection of practical, methodological and ethical challenges in a project evaluating the impact of a support program on the resettlement experiences of refugee-background youth in Australia. The project raised ethical issues that inevitably confront researchers working with vulnerable population groups (See for example Snelgrove 2005): the impact of disparities in power between researchers and participants; negotiating informed consent; and the need to ensure that the benefits of participation outweigh any potential risks. While these challenges were anticipated and addressed in ethics protocols submitted to, and approved by, the University’s ethics committee, the proposed methods were soon found to be lacking in the research field. We first briefly review the array of ethical concerns which frequently confront researchers working with refugee populations, before exploring the processes of ‘ethics in practice’ that
were used to further refine and adapt research methods in order to generate robust data and maximise the benefits of involvement for the young participants in this project.

**Methodological and Ethical Considerations in Research involving Refugee Populations**

A number of researchers have discussed methodological and ethical concerns when working with refugee populations (Birman 2006; Bloch 2004; Doná 2007; Edwards 1998; Ellis, Kia-Keating, Yusuf, Lincoln, & Nur 2007; Gifford, Bakopanos, Kaplan, & Correa-Velez 2007; Goodkind & Deacon 2004; Guerin & Guerin 2007; Hopkins 2008; Hugman et al., 2011; Jacobsen & Landau 2003; Liamputtong 2008; Mackenzie, McDowell, & Pittaway 2007; Pittaway, Bartolomei, & Hugman 2010; Rodgers 2004; Voutira & Dona 2007). Collaborative and participatory methods are proposed as a potentially appropriate way to address some of the ethical issues that are raised in research involving marginalised and disenfranchised groups (Ellis et al. 2007; MacLean, Warr, & Pyett 2009; Pittaway et al. 2010). Such methods are explicitly orientated to reducing power differentials, however Doná’s examination of participatory research examples with refugee populations cautions against automatic assumptions that ‘participatory’ research is necessarily an ‘empowering’ experience for participants. This is particularly the case if the aims of research stop short of advocacy for political or social transformation (Doná 2007).

Approaches to research involving newly-arrived refugee youth are discussed at length by researchers involved in the *Good Starts Study* investigating psychosocial determinants of health and wellbeing for young refugees during resettlement in Australia (Gifford et al. 2007). Piloting methods of data collection is recommended in order to adjust research activities to some of the logistical challenges posed by working with young people with ‘disrupted schooling, varying levels of literacy in their own language, a limited comprehension of English, and no prior experience of being involved in research’ (Gifford et al. 2007: 420). Although Gifford and colleagues focus more overtly on the practical, rather
than ethical, challenges encountered, they make the point that innovative approaches combining both qualitative and quantitative methods are required to engage young people with refugee backgrounds in meaningful reflection on their lives while simultaneously producing findings of relevance to policy makers and service providers. The need for methodological innovation is also highlighted by other researchers who make the point that standardised research instruments may be invalid when applied to different cultural groups and may even be attempting to measure social constructs that do not exist in different cultures (Birman & Chan 2008; Ellis et al. 2007).

While disparities in power between researchers and research participants need to be considered in all stages of the research, from design to dissemination, the issues that it raises are particularly acute when it comes to negotiating informed consent (Ellis et al. 2007; Mackenzie et al. 2007; Pittaway et al. 2010). Clearly, processes of obtaining consent that involve providing written explanations and consent forms are inappropriate for populations or individuals who are likely to have low literacy rates, or may be reluctant to sign documents (Czyoniewicz-Klippel et al. 2010). Other commentators go further than this in arguing that the very concept of informed and voluntary consent inherently involves ‘culturally bound, western values of individual autonomy, self-determination, and freedom’ which may defy cross-cultural translation (Ellis et al. 2007: 467-9). Participants’ lack of familiarity with research processes and evolving research directions point to the need to gain informed consent at more than one stage. Mackenzie and colleagues (2007: 310) argue that in order to avoid eroding ‘participants’ capacities for self-determination’ consent needs to be ‘iterative’ or involve ongoing negotiation. Rather than a standard research model, where consent is a single event – indicated by the signing of a consent form – ‘iterative models of consent start from the assumption that ethical agreements can best be secured through a process of
negotiation, which aims to develop a shared understanding of what is involved at all stages of
the research process’ (Mackenzie et al. 2007: 307).

A number of authors consider the tension between seeking to maintain
methodological neutrality in research and a belief that research should have an explicitly
political or moral stance (Jacobsen & Landau 2003; Landau & Jacobsen 2005; Rodgers 2004;
Voutira & Dona 2007). Jacobsen and Landau are critical of what they describe as a tendency
towards ‘advocacy research’ in refugee and humanitarian studies, ‘where researchers already
know what they want to see and say, and come away from the research having ‘proved’ it’
(Jacobsen & Landau 2003:187). They argue that much of the research resulting from this
approach is methodologically and ethically ‘suspect’ and results in flawed data and
subsequent policy conclusions (Jacobsen & Landau 2003:185). Others have rejected their
argument on the grounds that these kinds of commentary amount to criticisms of small scale,
qualitative studies that present subjective perspectives of the issues (Rodgers 2004). For
many, the often desperate plight of refugees renders any position other than overt solidarity
as ethically inappropriate and these researchers vigorously defend the propriety of a nexus
between scholarship and advocacy in refugee research (Voutira & Dona 2007). Mackenzie et
al. (2007) endorse this latter position and maintain that ‘wherever possible, social researchers
should aim to develop research projects that not only identify problems … but that help to
promote autonomy and rebuild capacity.’ On the contentious issue of scholarly neutrality
versus advocacy, these authors argue that:

When a human being is in need and the researcher is in a position to respond to that
need, non-intervention in the name of ‘objective’ research is unethical. Further, it
could be argued that if researchers are in a position to assist refugees to advocate on
their own behalf . . . that it is morally incumbent on them to do so (Mackenzie et al.
2007: 316).
For the most part, it is accepted that to be ethical, research must not only be methodologically rigorous but also of value to recipients. Debates over the rigour of ‘advocacy research’ notwithstanding, there is certainly in principle agreement that research must do no harm and that the *outcomes* of research should be of value. These issues are linked to the methods, ethics and the ethics-in-practice of research and it is the intersections between these methodological and ethical concerns which are scrutinised in this article.

Refugee-Background Youth in Australia: the Study Context

Young refugees currently arriving in Australia are confronted by social and cultural conditions and systems which are radically different from their past experiences. The refugee experience can also render individuals vulnerable in a number of ways. By definition, all have recently undergone trauma-precipitated migration and many have been subjected to violence or have witnessed extreme violence. Most have spent long periods of time – frequently many years, and in the case of some young people, their entire lives - in refugee camps or countries of first asylum (effectively in flight). Social networks are inevitably disrupted. Many young refugees have lost family members including parents, while others have family members still living in dangerous situations or scattered to various parts of the globe. Some will be experiencing physical and mental health problems associated with trauma and deprivation or be living with and supporting others with such problems. Despite these experiences, most refugee-background youth arrive in Australia with an enormous sense of optimism and determination to succeed, yet must come to terms with significant barriers to achieving social inclusion associated with disrupted education; challenges of learning to speak English; few housing options; poor employment prospects and discrimination.
In Australia, standard on-arrival programs provide up to twelve months of English language tuition before placement in mainstream education. Despite many young people and families with refugee backgrounds having high educational aspirations, difficulties may be encountered within mainstream education settings. These include a lack of awareness within institutions of the particular challenges faced by refugee-background students and a mismatch of age with educational level and experience. These situations leave individuals at high risk of disengagement from formal education, and subsequent welfare dependency leading to social exclusion with its attendant poor health outcomes (Refugee Education Partnership Project 2007; Turner & Fozdar, 2010).

The study described here has been conducted in collaboration with Foundation House (Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture), which, in partnership with other service providers to young refugee populations, has developed an innovative intervention program named Ucan2, aimed at supporting mental health and wellbeing and improving settlement outcomes for young people with refugee backgrounds. The Ucan2 intervention addresses the multiple and interlinked causes of social exclusion and targets young people between the ages of 16 and 24. The intervention is situated within the standard on-arrival English language program, and comprises classroom and extra-curricular activities one day per week over six-months. Program activities offer psychosocial support, promote social networking beyond existing community boundaries and provide relevant experiences in terms of employment-focused language acquisition, skills and work experience. Staff also actively link program participants with local agencies such as those providing housing or other relevant support. Involvement of volunteers from the host community in weekly program activities and the promotion of opportunities for participants to engage in part-time work in a retail environment are two strategies aimed at developing social connections between young refugees and other young people within the Australian community. An additional rationale
for part-time work is that it may provide a means of financial support during the many years it will take for young refugees with disrupted schooling to achieve their educational goals.

The study discussed here involved an evaluation of the UCAn2 intervention with an exploratory component to gain improved insight into the settlement experiences of young people. The evaluation and exploratory components were integrated in the study design and involved ethnographic and longitudinal methods. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected through participation observation in classroom activities, social network mapping, wellbeing surveys, focus groups and individual in-depth interviews. Data collection, involving 215 students from 15 UCAn2 groups across eight different sites, covered the period 2009 to 2011. Focus group discussions were conducted with each of the 15 groups towards the end of the UCAn2 program, and individual interviews were conducted with a subsample of participants once the program was completed, to explore the ongoing impacts of the intervention on settlement experiences.

Addressing Ethical Complexity in Practice: Responding to Anticipated and Emerging Challenges

It was clearly imperative that for the evaluation research project to adhere to core ethical principles of non-maleficence; beneficence; respect for autonomy and promotion of justice (Beauchamp & Childress 2001), we needed to use methods that allowed a flexible, reflexive and empathetic approach, sensitive to the circumstances of participants. In particular, we anticipated methodological and ethical challenges posed by cultural and linguistic differences between the researcher and participants and the young people’s marginalised circumstances.

These concerns guided our research design and preparation of the ethics application for this project. It was determined that a researcher would spend time in the UCAn2 classroom to build rapport and trust with teachers and research participants. Research data were not formally collected during this period (as appropriately informed consent would not yet have
been possible), however, the opportunity to gain clearer insight into program contexts and to establish relationships with staff and participants, built a critical foundation for subsequent research activities. An additional anticipated benefit of embedding the research process in the classroom was that if research participation revealed unmet needs for personal or social support services then Ucan2 resources would be available for follow up. Low levels of fluency in English among participants were also considered in designing the research and it was decided that interpreters and/or written translations of research-related material would be used where required. These issues were all addressed in our research proposal, which received approval from the university ethics committee thus satisfying the requirements of ‘procedural’ ethics.

Initial program cycles provided an opportunity to pilot data collection methods and consent processes and it became apparent that practical, methodological and associated ethical issues still needed further consideration. Fine-tuning of methodological and ethics issues was required to respond to unresolved challenges of participants’ limited English proficiency, their lack of familiarity with research processes, emerging potential for research-related harms, capacities to give informed consent, the range of planned research activities, and the quality of data being collected.

While we had broadly anticipated these kinds of issues, ‘microethical’ complexities in the research field necessitated adapting the methods and approach. The next section of this article explains how we adapted the research processes following the pilot phase to address these issues and enhance the relevance and potential benefits of the research to the circumstances of the young people. Three key sets of issues are discussed: repositioning research and intervention activities to maximise benefits of involvement for participants and reduce potential harms; enhancing the integrity of the process for gaining informed consent;
and adapting the focus group method to heighten its relevance to circumstances of participants’ lives and enhance their engagement in the research.

1) Repositioning intervention and research activities: the benefits and risks of social network mapping

An important aim of the Ucan2 program is to promote broader social connections. To capture the impact of these initiatives on participants’ subjective wellbeing and social networks, evaluation methods included a social network mapping activity and administering a subjective wellbeing survey (International Wellbeing Group 2006). For the social network mapping activity, participants were asked to write down the important people in their ‘social circle’ (Adapted from Gifford et al., 2007; Heikkinen, 2000), differentiating between social contacts who are family or friends; living in Australia or overseas; and for friends, whether they are Australian-born or overseas-born. They were also asked to indicate whether contacts were associated with the Ucan2 program, which contacts provided social or material support, and which contacts were seen as sources of information and advice on education and/or employment matters.

From the start we were concerned that participation in the research process ought to develop potential for autonomy and inclusion. In regards to the network mapping exercise this involved contributing to building a sense of trust and mutual respect within the group, ‘normalising’ refugee experiences and promoting participants’ capacities for reflexive and strategic involvement in social networks. However, the process needed to be adapted to enhance the benefits and minimise potential risks. Disrupted and sparse social networks are a feature of this population, rendering this activity far from benign. A large proportion of the students have few connections within Australia and many also have close family members, including parents, who are overseas, missing or deceased (See Figure 1 for a typical example of a social network map). While these circumstances were anticipated, the extent of young
people’s social isolation was profound. Although the network mapping exercise had been piloted, once in the field, we were concerned that it had the potential to leave a considerable number of participants feeling confronted, inadequate or distressed. Further, ethical protocols that had been developed to address this contingency, in which young people would be offered access to counselling as required, was clearly an insufficient response. These concerns were discussed at length with Ucan2 program staff and the following modifications to the exercise were devised.

**Insert Figure 1 about here**

The first remedial step was to enlist the active assistance of program staff and ensure that the social network activity was always conducted in the Ucan2 classroom during the period allocated to providing psychosocial support. We also realised that young people needed better understanding of the aims of the exercise. We changed procedures to begin by providing a rationale for the network-mapping activity, explaining that one of the key aims of the Ucan2 program is to assist participants in meeting new people, and why it might be helpful to think about the range of supports provided by one’s social network. The researcher would then draw a hypothetical example of her own social network circle on the board leaving some gaps and including relatives overseas as would be the case for most of the participants. Once students completed their maps, the Foundation House staff member who was working with the class each week, and whose role was to provide psychosocial support to the students, spent some time discussing with the group how they might feel after doing this activity. Staff acknowledged that many students had important people in their lives who were absent and that it could be distressing to think about family and friends not with them in Australia. The group would also discuss the ways that different people in the class dealt with these feelings and the methods they used to keep in touch with others overseas, including
email, *Facebook* and telephone. The students would then complete the short demographic and wellbeing survey.

Inclusion of this ‘group debriefing’ located the activity conceptually within the part of the program aimed at normalising the refugee experience, acknowledged the losses that these young people had experienced, and enhanced the potential for program staff to provide follow up and psychosocial support to students. This process provided a potentially empowering opportunity for participants to discuss the significance of relationships and the potential for social networks to be conceptualised as resources that can be strategically fostered in the future - to look forward, as well as looking backward at lost networks and relationships.

2) *Enhancing the Integrity of the Consent Process*

There were several obstacles identified in this study to the researcher obtaining informed and *meaningful* consent from students. The classroom setting meant that students were potentially ‘captive research participants’ in which disparities in power between students, program staff and the researcher may have meant that students would feel that they had little choice but to participate. The modification to the processes for gathering social network data had the effect of further blurring distinctions between program activities and research which, in turn, heightened ethical concerns regarding participants’ capacity to give their informed consent to participate in the study. It became even more important that students involved in the Ucan2 program grasped that electing to participate in the research was voluntary and there would be no negative consequences in declining to participate. Linked to this, students needed clear understanding of when they were consenting to be involved in research-related activities.

Along with limited understandings of research processes, the diversity of cultural and language backgrounds and generally low levels of English-language proficiency contributed to challenges in obtaining informed consent. Participants in the evaluation research spoke a
total of 38 different first languages. Even if (resources permitting) it were feasible to translate information sheets into most of these languages, interrupted prior education meant that a substantial proportion of students were not literate in their first language and some students came from communities where languages exist primarily in oral forms. Another option was to use interpreters, although the logistics of conducting group conversations with multiple interpreters working simultaneously limited the potential for this being a practical alternative. The use of interpreters can also increase the distance between participants and researchers and we recognised that while participants might understand the words that were being used, they could still struggle to understand concepts such as ‘voluntary’ and ‘confidential’ that were being invoked. It has already been noted that culture-bound notions of autonomy and individual rights may have little meaning to participants from very different cultural backgrounds and whose life experiences have in many cases entailed abuses of these rights. Disparities in power between researcher and researched may even be further complicated by interpreters; particularly in the case of newly arrived communities where the small number of available interpreters are likely to occupy positions of higher status, class and therefore power than research participants.

As the research was taking place within the English language program it was agreed that using English to communicate with students was the most practical option, and also respectfully acknowledged their developing proficiency in English-language skills. Nevertheless, as the program was being offered to young people who had been in Australia in most cases for between six and twelve months and were studying in a level two language class (where level three is considered ‘functional English’), this necessitated effort to find the simplest and most accessible terms for explaining the consent process and conducting the research itself.
When we first piloted the social network mapping exercise, we had asked students to sign a consent form prior to undertaking data collection tasks, but it was evident that participants found this consent procedure confusing. Although most were willing to sign the consent form - perhaps indicating the success of the trust building phase of the research - it was apparent from the blank looks and confused questions that many students were struggling to comprehend the significance of this unfamiliar activity. Their bewilderment clearly raised an ‘ethical red flag’ (Swartz, 2011). Despite adhering to formally approved ethics procedures, we were uncomfortably aware that students were consenting to participate without fully understanding what that meant.

The social network data collection activity involved modifying a previously-used program activity and it therefore had intrinsic value in relation to the Ucan2 program. In consultation with program staff, we therefore decided to reposition the formal component of the research consent process so that it occurred after the exercise was completed. It should be noted here that the Ucan2 program has its own process for progressive consent to participation in program activities whereby it is clear to students from the outset that they need not participate in any activities if they prefer not to, or if they find them uncomfortable. Indeed, a small number of students chose to exercise this option and did not participate in the network mapping exercise.

Building on these program processes, the revised procedure for gaining informed consent to participate in the research involved seeking permission to use the information contained in the maps and surveys for our evaluation after they had been completed by students. We reviewed with the students the purpose of the evaluation: to find out more about what is important for young people settling in Australia; how Ucan2 helps (or not); and to help make Ucan2 better by telling us what is good about it and what else it could do. We would only then hand out the research information sheets and consent form. After
apologising for the formidable amount of writing that students are presented with, and which
despite our best efforts to simplify remained difficult for many to easily understand, the
researcher provided students with verbal explanations of key issues in the documents.
Particular emphasis was given to explaining the voluntary nature of consent and the meaning
of confidentiality, and students were encouraged to ask questions if there was anything they
didn’t understand. They were then asked to sign the consent form if they agreed that the
information they provided in their maps and surveys could be used for the research and
reassured that if they preferred not to sign the consent form, then their data would not be
used. The researcher also offered to discuss any issues that individual students may have or
give students additional time to read the documents.

These changes to the consent process increased the potential for the research to boost
the autonomy and capacity of the participants, by empowering them to make decisions that
were appropriately informed. The opportunity to pilot the methods had demonstrated that
standard protocols and requirements such as introducing the research through a
comprehensive information sheet or ‘plain language statement’ (whether delivered verbally
or in written form) served to confuse rather than enlighten the research participants. Asking
participants to sign a consent form before undertaking research activities proved a feasible
and relatively simple way to satisfy formal ethics committee requirements. It was
subjectively experienced in this study however - at least by the researcher - as a process
which simultaneously reaffirmed the power imbalance between researcher and participants
and failed to respect autonomy or enhance capacity to understand and take part in unfamiliar
processes such as research in a way that was appropriately informed. When working in
settings where there are language barriers and understandings of research are likely to be
limited it is critical to allow sufficient time for the consent process. This revised protocol for
gaining informed consent enhanced participants’ understanding - evidenced by the increased
pertinence of the questions asked of the researchers in the course of the process. A large majority of the students consented to us using the data they had generated for the research. In practice, the changes resulted in the kind of iterative consent process that is advocated by Mackenzie and colleagues (2007), whereby students assented informally to undertaking the research-associated activity and then consented more formally to having the resultant data included in the research project and evaluation. Subsequently, students were again given the opportunity to opt in or out of the research when invited to participate in focus groups or interviews.

3) Adapting focus group methods to the population

The next research activity comprised focus groups which aimed to explore the young people’s shared ideas concerning constituents of, and supports needed for, ‘successful’ resettlement. Again, initial focus groups were used as opportunities to pilot the processes for facilitating discussions involving participants from diverse language and cultural backgrounds. Participants were happy to take part in the discussion but open-ended questions tended to produce limited responses dominated by a few respondents. These responses indicated inadequate understanding by many in the group of what it was that the researcher might be interested in hearing as well as of the unwritten ‘rules of engagement’ of the focus group. Some participants carried on conversations in other languages, and a common reply to the questions posed by the researcher was a polite, but opaque, reassurance, ‘All is good, teacher!’

We were reluctant either to accept the limitations of the data collected in this way or to abandon the focus groups altogether, particularly as focus groups had been carefully chosen as an appropriate method in the first instance. It was anticipated that group discussions would complement the group activities of the program and provide students with
a potentially useful forum for sharing common experiences of settlement and of the Ucan2 program.

In addition, focus groups are considered to be a valuable method for working with disadvantaged and vulnerable groups. They have the potential to be empowering, as their relatively loose structure may enable participants to have more control over the research process and to bring new and unanticipated issues into analytic frames (Warr, 2005). However, as Snelgrove (2005) warns, where understanding of research and/or language are limited, stimulus topic questions are likely to produce limited responses. Moreover, ‘simply talking . . . does not constitute engagement with the disempowered “other”’ (Snelgrove 2005: 319). While focus groups were anticipated to be procedurally suitable for eliciting the views of vulnerable participants; in practice they failed to do this in a meaningful way. The conventional approach to focus groups was eliciting simplistic responses, which rendered the complex experiences and opinions of participants in one-dimensional ways. These limitations have ethical as well as methodological implications as the risk of perpetrating ‘symbolic violence’ through tokenistic consultation is real.

Our aim that participation in research should have empowering potential reflects the ideals of methodological approaches such as Critical Communicative Methodology (CCM). Proponents of this approach contend that researchers should aim to bring about social transformation by making academic knowledge available to participants. Knowledge provided by researchers can help participants to ‘reinterpret their lived experiences and work as tools for change in participants’ lives’ (Gómez, Puigvert, & Flecha 2011: 238). Techniques are described for ‘communicative focus groups’ in which ‘The researcher is not [just] one more participant in the conversation but someone responsible for contributing the background of the study and the knowledge from the scientific community’ (Gómez et al. 2011: 240). This methodology differs from more traditional inductive qualitative research techniques
which imply that the researcher should avoid leading participants in predetermined directions.

After considering the limitations of the first few focus groups, we decided to modify the method in an analogous way to that advocated by CCM by incorporating visual prompts to stimulate discussion on issues of interest. Ager and Strang’s (2008) conceptual framework, which defines core domains of integration for refugees, informed the themes that were explored in the group discussions. Sets of laminated picture cards were made, representing each of the framework’s core domains, supplemented by the addition of other domains that had emerged in earlier discussions. This resulted in a set of 13 cards that depicted and labelled the following: ‘Learning English’; ‘Getting a job’; ‘Studying for a career’; ‘Good health’; ‘Family and friends’; ‘Getting to know other people in Australia’; ‘Having a home to live in’; ‘Feeling safe’; ‘Australian citizenship or residency visa’; ‘Religion – church, mosque or temple’; ‘Computers and the internet’; ‘Sport’; ‘Help with looking after children’. (See Figure 2 for examples of the pictures that were used)

**Insert Figure 2 about here**

Participants were asked to gather in small self-selected groups to choose the picture-cards which best represented the things that were most important for them to be able to settle and live happily in Australia. In most cases, this process resulted in much animated discussion in multiple languages within the smaller groups. Participants then reconvened to discuss why they chose particular picture cards, as well as whether, and how, they thought the Ucan2 program helped with those aspects of settlement. This method produced much greater engagement by the participants in the group discussions and assisted in participants articulating considerably more sophisticated views of concepts such as safety and belonging than had been elicited by open-ended questions. Issues such as rights and citizenship that had not emerged in the pilot discussion groups also now transpired as important to the young
people. Standard verbal prompts or questions had failed to engage young refugee-background participants, whose previous experiences may have entailed relatively few opportunities for their opinions and thoughts to be heard and valued. The use of theoretically informed visual stimuli, and the opportunity to begin with small group discussions (often in a more fluent language) proved a respectful means of eliciting participants’ views and provided opportunities to give feedback on the Ucan2 program. The revised method was potentially empowering, providing participants with academic knowledge and tools, which developed their capacity to both reflect on and discuss their circumstances. Moreover, enhancing the method of data collection to make it more meaningful for participants, addressed both the methodological challenge of collecting valid data that reflects the views of participants and the ethical risk of inflicting harm (through symbolic violence).

**Conclusion: using reflexivity to translate core ethical principles into ethical practice**

The methodological adaptations detailed in this paper represent a way of operationalising Bourdieu’s exhortation to practise ‘active and methodical’ listening which presents the possibility of understanding across social (and cultural) distance. We contend that academic rigour is attained, not through an attempt at value-neutral or objective collection of data which may afford only a superficial understanding of the lives of others. Rather, a rigorous ethical reflexivity that recognises the inherent (and frequently unacknowledged) risk of ‘symbolic violence’ when conducting research with marginalised or excluded populations and simultaneously addresses practical, ethical and methodological challenges can produce research which is more transparent, valid and reliable. We have demonstrated how we reflexively developed an ethically and methodological rigorous approach to research that sought to provide deeper understanding of the lives of refugee-background participants and the challenges which they face. Furthermore, this approach is capable of responding
appropriately to what we might term a ‘triple imperative’ in research with marginalised populations. Building on the ‘dual imperative in refugee research’, identified by Jacobsen and Landau (2003) – to be both academically rigorous and policy relevant – it incorporates a third obligation which others have advocated; that research should also promote autonomy and rebuild capacity of participants (Mackenzie et al. 2007). In the case of the young participants in this project, this was achieved by empowering them to make appropriately informed decisions and providing conceptual tools and opportunities to reflect on and discuss constructively the circumstances and challenges that they face. Conversely, failure to implement a rigorous reflexivity is likely to produce only a superficial understanding of lives that are very different from our own.

The principles discussed here, concerning research with refugees, are equally relevant when working with other vulnerable or disadvantaged populations, so frequently the target of social research. While the specific methods and strategies adopted will differ according to the context and age of participants, this study has highlighted the importance of designing research activities that are themselves useful and empowering for participants rather than simply seeking data for our own purposes. To this end, we need to continue to refine, debate and share innovative methods which support rather than erode participants’ autonomy. As social science researchers committed to addressing inequity and disadvantage, as well as advancing knowledge and understanding of the world, reflexivity and flexibility are essential tools for adapting ethically and empathetically to particular features of a research population.

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