A critical self-reflexive account of a privileged researcher in a complicated setting: Kakuma refugee camp

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Abstract
As a white, Western-educated man, undertaking research in Kakuma refugee camp, Kenya, I encountered ethical dilemmas related to my privileged racial and gender status. These include power imbalances between researchers and refugees and conducting research in the face of human suffering. Through critical self-reflexivity, I analyze my own experiences to reveal the personal and professional vulnerabilities that researchers from high-income countries (HICs) may encounter when working in contexts where oppression and forced displacement are prominent. I conclude that researchers who work in contexts of forced migration must extend beyond the boundaries of procedural research ethics and include components of relational ethics. This involves close collaboration with refugee participants to develop more culturally relevant research ethics guidelines for refugee-specific populations.

Keywords
Relational ethics, refugee research ethics, self-reflexivity, privilege, refugee camps

Introduction
As a white, Western-educated man, I embody privilege. As such, engaging in an independent 5-month research project in Kakuma refugee camp, Kenya, I...
encountered ethical dilemmas related to my privileged racial and gender status. These include power imbalances between researchers and refugees and conducting research in the face of human suffering (Lammers, 2007; Lokot, 2019). To complicate matters further, the project explored research ethics with refugee young people living in Kakuma refugee camp. Given the power inequities ensconced in the research context, coupled with my research topic, the research experience was tension-filled. As a researcher studying the moral underpinnings of research ethics, my attempts to explore the complexity of research ethics as a privileged outside researcher engendered many research ethics-related dilemmas. In this paper, I identify and confront the asymmetrical research relationship between the “I” (researcher) and “Other” (researched) (Vervliet et al., 2015) in hopes of expanding scholarly discourse around assuaging power inequities in refugee research.

The project incorporated components of critical autoethnography to examine how refugees, who had previously participated in research and lived in Kakuma refugee camp, negotiated, and made sense of their previous research experiences. As a nascent researcher in this refugee community, I sought to ascertain the perspectives of those living in the camp. My objective was to understand and engage in culturally-sensitive research practices from the perspectives of refugees. Via semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, we explored the following research questions: Why do research participants participate in research studies? How does research impact research participants upon its conclusion? How do young people living in Kakuma refugee camp understand concepts such as “respect for persons,” “do no harm,” and “reciprocity”? While the project addressed these queries, this conceptual paper is not driven by data (see: Bilotta, 2020). Instead, I shift the gaze back on myself to reflect upon how I navigated research ethics in Kakuma refugee camp. By so doing, I analyze the personal and professional vulnerabilities that researchers from high-income countries (HICs) may encounter when working in contexts where oppression and forced displacement are prominent. Furthermore, I illustrate two ethical conundrums that I experienced during my time in Kakuma refugee camp. Through self-reflexive journal entries, I documented ethically precarious interactions with two participants during (a) a research interview and (b) an exchange following a semi-structured interview.

This manuscript exposes my vulnerability and uncertainty in order to be relatable for other researchers who might find themselves in a similar environment. I argue that researchers who work in contexts of forced migration must extend beyond the boundaries of procedural research ethics and include more components of relational ethics (e.g. respect and reciprocity). Furthermore, I argue that researchers must collaborate fully with refugee participants to develop more culturally-relevant research ethics guidelines for refugee-specific populations.
Although ethics codes and guidelines are essential for navigating research with refugees, they are simply one component of a complex research ethics nexus (Vervliet et al., 2015). For instance, like all research with humans, research with refugees demands communication between the researcher and participant for informed consent (Kabranian-Melkonian, 2015). However, even the most well formulated process for seeking consent may not prepare a researcher to respond ethically when an HIV-positive young refugee mother asks for “anything to help her baby.”

This paper provides a brief description of Kakuma refugee camp, followed by an exploration of what constitutes ethics in the context of research with refugee communities. The manuscript includes examples of my personal insecurities through self-reflexive journal entries while striving to maneuver respectful and reciprocal relations while in Kakuma. Finally, recommendations for other researchers are proposed.

Kakuma refugee camp

Established in 1992, Kakuma refugee camp is located in the semi-arid region of northwest Kenya. It lies approximately 100 km south of the South Sudan border and 1000 km northwest of Nairobi (Ohta, 2005). The protracted refugee camp encompasses four zones (Kakuma I-IV) and a new settlement called Kalobeye. The camp itself is over 10 km wide and houses roughly 195,000 refugees (UNHCR, 2020). Residents of the camp are nationals of South Sudan, Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eritrea, Uganda, and Rwanda. Like other refugee camps, Kakuma is host to many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community-based organizations (CBOs) that provide services from health care to vocational training to counseling services. Residents’ length of stay in the camp ranges drastically. While many refugees spend months to several years, others have lived in the camp since its inception.

The weather in Kakuma is arid and hot. With flat and barren terrain, temperatures regularly exceed 40°C, and the yearly rain accumulation is only between 7 and 15 inches (Ohta, 2005). In spite of this, when the rains arrive, one can expect severe flooding in homes and inaccessibility of roads throughout the camp. Dry riverbeds traverse the camp and infrequently rage with polluted water from random flash-flooding. During my time in Kakuma, rushing rain water in one riverbed took the lives of several South Sudanese young children attempting to enjoy a swim. Following heavy rains, navigating the contaminated sewage, rubbish, and watered streets of the camp is a significant challenge. Most residents live in durable tents provided by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNCHR) or mud-brick housing that they construct themselves.
Relational ethics

Social science research protocols specific to refugee populations are abundant (Block et al., 2013; Clark-Kazak, 2017). In common with other fields, theoretically-based literature has deconstructed and analyzed the role of researchers associated with respect for participants (Lawrence et al., 2013), dominant positions (Marmo, 2013), do(ing) no harm (Hugman et al., 2011) and reciprocity (MacKenzie et al., 2007). Although I familiarized myself with respect, reciprocity, and doing no harm literature, practically applying or implementing such concepts proved to be a distinct challenge in Kakuma. I ascertained that navigating the underpinnings of respectful and reciprocal relationships within the socio-political terrain of Kakuma was far more taxing than intellectualizing them via scholarly literature. Consultation between researchers and refugee participants is critical to ensure a climate of culturally-responsive respect and reciprocity in the research context.

In social sciences research, scholars frequently distinguish between procedural and relational ethics. The former represents established mechanisms for ensuring ethics requirements such as informed consent, privacy, and confidentiality, the right to withdrawal, institutional ethical approval, dissemination, etc. (Vervliet et al., 2015). Relational ethics emphasizes the agency of research participants while striving for dignity and connectedness between the researcher and participant (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004). Relational ethics stresses the importance of value and respect (Vervliet et al., 2015), reciprocity (Chilisa, 2012), and the deconstruction of the researcher’s power and positionality within the research process (Marmo, 2013). Relational ethics includes collaboration with community members and other actors in research participants’ lives. This paper seeks to spotlight the importance of relational ethics considering that this aspect of research ethics is (a) less understood and appreciated than procedural ethics in research with refugee young people (Clark-Kazak, 2017) and (b) essential for alignment with the values and worldviews of participants in Kakuma (and elsewhere).

Also, of relevance is ethics in practice or situational ethics. Situational ethics refers to the unpredictable, everyday ethical issues that surface during research encounters (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004). Embedded in situational ethics are ethically important moments in research (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004) where a researcher’s response may have consequences at an ethical level (Vervliet et al., 2015). This paper provides two examples of situational ethics to illustrate the nuances that procedural ethics often do not address.

Critical self-reflexivity

Although the research project included components of critical autoethnography (see: Chang, 2016; Jones, 2018), this paper does not provide an expansive
description of the methodology. Instead, this section summarizes the methodology and the nature of self-reflexivity, an integral aspect of critical autoethnography.

Autoethnographies centralize the researcher as they describe their experience within a distinct setting (Madison, 2012). Of special note is the value that autoethnographers place on self-analysis and personal information. Critical autoethnography is a form of autoethnography that enables researchers to incorporate data from their own life stories, as situated in sociocultural contexts, in order to interpret society through the unique lens of self (Chang, 2016). Furthermore, critical autoethnography seeks to interrogate the social conditions that give rise to ethnography and autoethnography (Holt, 2003). As such, the methodology legitimizes first-person accounts of oppression and privilege while critiquing colonialism, racism, sexism, regionalism, ethnocentrism, etc. (Boylorn and Orbe, 2014). Some even suggest that critical autoethnography researchers embody an ethical responsibility to address processes of injustice within a particular domain (Madison, 2012).

To fully embrace the ethical components of critical autoethnography, I engaged in consistent self-analysis via personal narratives while analyzing my experiences in Kakuma. Dispersed throughout this paper are sections from my personal journal entries written during my time in Kakuma. These brief narrative accounts illuminate the interplay between self-conscious and introspective explorations combined with the institutional, historical, and contemporary oppressions embedded in Kakuma refugee camp and Kakuma town. However, self-reflexive journaling processes on their own are not a solution for navigating ethical dilemmas (Probst, 2015). Research with refugee communities has demonstrated that research ethics concepts such as respect and reciprocity are not universal but context and culture-specific (Heins and Unrau, 2018). While self-reflexive journaling processes can be critical, qualitative researchers should also collaborate with research participants to ensure culturally-sensitive notions of research ethics, including respect and reciprocity.

Reflexivity constitutes a researcher’s prudent reflections on how they construct knowledge throughout the entirety of the research process (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004). This involves a shift in the researcher’s gaze. It represents a turning back on ourselves, as researchers, while examining the complexities of our social identities and positionalities and how they holistically relate and traverse the research experience (Madison, 2012). Reflexivity in critical autoethnography is extending beyond other forms of self-reflexivity as one attempts to intersect with institutional and societal oppression (Chang, 2016). Due to my privileged status, it was obligatory that I deconstructed how such positionalities affected not only my research but, perhaps more significantly, my daily interactions (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012), especially as a researcher studying research ethics.

Isn’t the simple idea of my entrance into this camp studying research ethics as a Western researcher an oxymoron? After all, I am an outside researcher aiming to learn about research ethics with outside researchers! Do I really . . . anticipate research ethics protocols in refugee
This journal entry provoked a two-step thought process. First, by unpacking my position as a Western-educated white man, I contemplated how these identities may have allied me with previous researcher-participant engagements in Kakuma. Although my project sought to expose power inequities in research, I wondered how my social identities may have superseded my research objectives. Secondly, in order to gain deeper insight into this perspective, it was essential to discuss notions of power and identity with research participants. This reflection, therefore, initiated a collaborative and transparent communication process to gain participant perspectives on research in Kakuma.

**Relational research ethics in Kakuma refugee camp**

**Respect and reciprocity in Kakuma refugee camp**

Research with humans is rooted in a commitment to respect (Pelzang and Hutchinson, 2017). Respect recognizes that each participant has value, and respect for this value must inform all interactions between the researcher and the researched (NHMRC, 2015). Respect implies that researchers design projects where participants’ values are not compromised by the aims of the research, the mechanisms to conduct the research, or via dissemination strategies (NHMRC, 2015). A respectful researcher must attend to participants’ sensitivities and vulnerabilities (Dickert, 2009) while reflecting on one’s powerful positions as a researcher. Lawrence et al. (2013) posit that respect in refugee research is the ability to recognize the value of all persons and refugees’ particular needs. Ensconced in respectful research is the notion of reciprocity (Chilisa, 2012).

Respect and reciprocity are interrelated. Indeed, application of reciprocal research practice constitutes respect (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). Reciprocal relationships in research convey a continuous process of exchange between researcher and participant. The goal of reciprocal research is to maintain equality or feelings of connectedness between researcher and participant; it ultimately aims to eradicate the desire for power or hierarchy imbalances (Chilisa, 2012). Moreover, adopting a reciprocal approach suggests equality of benefits for both parties of the research (Pelzang and Hutchinson, 2017). In reciprocal dialog, the relationship between actors is based on mutual trust, honor, and integrity; this relationship underlies the core of every ethical approach in research (Yassour-Borochowitz, 2004).

Although seeming straightforward, abiding by respectful and reciprocal practices in Kakuma was layered and complex. For instance, I wondered whether I...
participated in respectful or reciprocal interactions, especially in response to participants. Do I operationalize respect and reciprocity similarly to those who reside in Kakuma? How do I act or respond to “participants” feedback as a critical autoethnographer during the interview? This question is connected to the concept of “emotional labor,” which is embedded in critical autoethnography. Emotional labor consists of a process that may elicit particular feelings or emotions in oneself as a researcher and research participants (McQueeney and Lavelle, 2017).

This was most evidenced in an interview with a 21-year-old Somali woman, only weeks after the U.S. president, at the time, initiated a ban on all Somali citizens from entering the U.S. As a U.S. national, I was outraged by the blatant discriminatory act. Furthermore, the mere fact of hailing from a country that viewed this participant as a safety threat reinforces an “array of cross-cultural postcolonial issues, where the researcher dominates the subject and is seen as belonging to an ethnically or socially privileged group” (Marmo, 2013: 95). Although the interview was unrelated to the travel ban, I wondered if my presence, as an American, would designate me as a colluder with the ban. The following journal entry illustrates the contention I experienced following the interview.

*It is clear that my behavior with (participant’s name) was considerably less “intrusive” than with other participants. I mean, I didn’t always ask her to expand or follow up too much on some responses, like I may have with others. I feel that I was overly concerned with my positionalities, most specifically as an American white man. Did she think I aligned with the president of the U.S.? How would this potential travel ban affect her future? (journal entry, February 12, 2017).*

Ultimately, I opted against sharing my authentic feelings with the research participant. During the interview, I felt that if I shared my disdain for the travel ban, it would have been rooted more in my insecurities as a white man and U.S. citizen facilitating research in Kakuma. In other words, had I shared my feelings, would that demonstrate that I was divorced from Donald Trump’s ideology and I was, ostensibly, *better* than him? Yet, both Trump and I exhibit significant power as White American men. Considering my research was distinct from the travel ban, I wondered if sharing more of *me* would have impacted the research interaction unnecessarily. I considered how sharing my feelings might have steered the interview away from the original research topic.

On the contrary, by not engaging in transparent discourse, I noticed a subtle insecure and uncomfortable disposition throughout the interview. Considering my interview tactics with this participant were less intrusive and comprehensive than with other participants, I debated whether I was facilitating respectful research. For instance, by not sharing my perspectives on a life-altering policy for my research participant, I passively altered my research interactions; I was my inauthentic self. A lack of authenticity inevitably engendered a disposition, albeit an implicit one, that suggests a lack of respect in research. Without a level of respect,
I could not call my research interview with the Somali woman reciprocal. Ostensibly, such a lack of transparency in research interactions suggests a lack of respect and reciprocity. Had I engaged in a transparent discussion about the travel ban with the participant, we would have learned each other’s perspectives, which may have facilitated a more respectful and reciprocal interaction.

**Respect and reciprocity beyond the research relationship**

Ethical challenges also surfaced with participants beyond the research context. Throughout my experiences in Kakuma, I was commonly referred to as ndugu yangu (my brother) or friend. I queried whether my relationships were real or authentic. Was I actually able to become friends with participants or was I simply acting friendly? Should I try to befriend participants? And, ultimately, who gets to decide if a friendship is authentic? Ellis (2007) acknowledges wrestling with the notion of participant friendships by claiming, “We [researchers] became friends with those we studied because we couldn’t help ourselves . . . however, friendship was secondary to our research purposes” (p. 10). Friendship as a method (Owton and Allen-Collins, 2014) recognizes the complexity of navigating this delicate terrain. For instance, participating in friendship with participants is said to assuage the inherent power imbalances between the researcher and researched (Owton and Allen-Collinson, 2014). Based upon my privileged social identities, however, I realized that in Kakuma refugee camp, power inequalities appear blatant, despite a friendship status.

I ruminated on whether I was excessively laboring on the idea of acting as a friend during my time in Kakuma. Several factors, including my white American status and my intimate or friendly relationships with participants, sparked numerous requests. These included my support for access to resettlement in a third country, laptops, school fees, money, education, connections to UNHCR, financial assistance for refugee-driven initiatives, employment in the HICs etc. Clearly, reciprocating in a way that benefited the requestors would have exceeded my financial and emotional capacities.

To abide by the notion of respect, however, should I have considered fulfilling the requests that I was monetarily able to? Or, does that exceed respectful research boundaries? Where is the line drawn between respect and reciprocity and the implementation of a “white savior” (Cole, 2012) ideology? I contemplated how fulfilling or denying a request would impact the research relationship. This was evidenced when one participant asked me to pay for her daughter’s malaria medication in the days between our first and second interviews. I wondered how my response would impact our succeeding interview. Before I could even formulate an answer in my mind, I stated, “Yes,” and we walked to the pharmacy to purchase the medication.
I bought malaria medication for (participant’s name) daughter. Was that ethically "okay"? Would it have been disrespectful to deny it? And, if I denied her request, would it be related to the fact that I wouldn’t want to "break" research ethics protocol? Also, if I denied it, would it impact our second interview, which is to take place next week? What if other participants make similar requests in the future? Where do I draw a line? Or do I? How do I create a boundary? (journal entry, March 13, 2017).

Upon reflection, I do not regret my decision in that moment as I was monetarily able to purchase the medication and understood her daughter’s health to be far more significant than my research questions. While retrospectively unpacking my response to this research participant, I was unable to identify respect or reciprocity scholarship that addresses interactions outside of interviews. Mackenzie et al. (2007) argue that “respect for persons entails a responsibility on the part of researchers to try to understand and engage with the different perspectives and life experiences of research participants and to construct research relationships that are responsive to their needs and values” (p. 301). Although the participant and I discussed the procedural benefits and expectations of our roles as researcher and participant, she exceeded our agreed-upon research protocol by requesting assistance. I perceived her request to extend beyond our research relationship. I understood this participant was willing to request non-research related support if (a) one’s health is compromised and/or (b) they have a “relationship,” albeit research-initiated, with a privileged researcher.

However, what if instead of immediately responding “yes,” the participant and I engaged in a discussion regarding how my decision would impact a respectful or reciprocal relationship? Or, would that have been disrespectful given her daughter’s health was at risk? Although I did not directly engage in discourse with this participant, I did communicate the situation with a non-research participant and resident of Kakuma, who explained

‘It’s just in some ‘people’s DNA that white people are here [in Kakuma] to solve problems. . . but, this woman had a sick child, and you have the money to help her, so it’s good that you did help her. You know, when we [residents of Kakuma] are able to help each other out, we try to do our best. Even us here in this camp, when I have extra, I share, and when I don’t, I can’t share (personal communication, April 6, 2017).

This conversation supports the argument that by being more inclusive with refugee research participants, researchers may engage in more culturally responsive ethical research relationships. For instance, had I not sought the opinion of this resident, I would have continued to reflect on whether my interaction with that mother was respectful. However, as previously acknowledged, the reality of fulfilling reciprocity with many refugees’ requests in Kakuma would have exceeded my financial and emotional disposition. Therefore, determining how to reciprocate respectfully in such encounters was based on each unique context or situation.
For instance, I found it less complicated to explain my inability to provide resettlement for refugee participants. Once it was clear that I was not partnered with the United Nations, the requests for assistance with resettlement often ceased.

**Moving forward: Beyond reflexivity**

By sharing my existential and practical challenges, I identify important considerations for researchers and humanitarian workers in refugee camps and other contexts of forced migration. First, while research ethics boards can formally approve the conduct research in refugee camps, this is simply not enough. By prioritizing procedural ethics, such documents do not prepare researchers for addressing the complexity of situational and/or relational ethics. As this paper has demonstrated, relational ethics in refugee research must be valued as tantamount to procedural ethics. Furthermore, constructs of ethical research, including concepts such as respect and do no harm must be explored in culturally-sensitive engagements between researchers and participants (Bilotta, 2020).

Secondly, culturally-sensitive definitions of “respect” and “reciprocity” must be determined in collaboration between researchers and research participants. As the manuscript has illustrated, I left several research interactions feeling conflicted and confused about whether my interactions and behaviors were respectful and reciprocal. While reflexive processes are encouraged in academic scholarship (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004), this practice should not be viewed as a panacea to the myriad of challenges associated with facilitating research in refugee contexts. Finlay (2002) equated excessive reflexivity to a confusing landscape of self-analysis and “narcissistic . . . deconstructions of deconstructions where all meaning gets lost” (Finlay, 2002: 226). In addition, excessive reflexivity has been likened to “navel-gazing” and researchers’ “self-indulgence,” which prioritizes the researcher and shifts attention from the participants or phenomena being studied (Probst, 2015). As such, reflexivity must be exercised with balance and nuance because reflexivity focuses primarily on the researcher. Indeed, reflexivity offers very little guidance on how research participants understand power and privilege in a refugee camp.

Chilisa (2009) posits that researchers from colonized countries generally adopt an I/we relationship in contrast to the Western concept of the I/you individualistic perspective. This may explain why I repeatedly questioned whether I was engaging in respect and reciprocity during the research. Without ascertaining participants’ comprehension of these terms, it was unclear whether I was engaging in respectful research relationships. Had I unpacked these relational constructs with research participants, I would have either (a) engaged in culturally-aligned respectful research or (b) explained why I was unable to fulfill participants’ constructions of respect or reciprocity. Whether incorporating critical autoethnographic
Methodologies or not, qualitative researchers have a responsibility to understand the role of the self in the creation of knowledge and biases (Berger, 2015) and engage with research participants about these ethical concepts. By situating myself in a formerly colonized society, I examined how my power manifested in my everyday surroundings and ultimately affected my work. However, without discussing my perspectives, I could only theorize about how participants understood the constructs of respect and reciprocity. Future empirical research should consider how notions of respect and reciprocity are both understood and implemented from the refugee participants’ perspectives. This may enhance existing understanding of how respect, reciprocity and ethics generally, may unfold in real-world refugee camps, and other similar contexts. A lack of respectful collaboration can exacerbate the convolution between culture, power, and inequity in research projects with refugee communities.

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