



## ***To Whom Does the Knowledge Belong? The Researcher-Researched Relationship and Vulnerability in Refugee Studies***



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**Abstract:** Research ethics address concerns related to power imbalances. These dynamics are particularly prominent in refugee camps, where the contemporary 'protracted' state (UNHCR, 2004) turns them into quasi-laboratories, where refugees are subjected to scrutiny, measurement, observation, and analysis by researchers, NGOs, and governmental organizations. Researchers typically conduct brief field trips to perform predetermined scientific activities, limiting their comprehensive understanding of the subject under study. Fieldwork conducted in Nakivale Refugee Settlement (Uganda) since 2019 has highlighted an often-one-way communication dynamic between researchers and refugees, where refugees rarely receive feedback on the information they provide. Consequently, refugees develop a lack of trust towards researchers, impacting their subjectivity and self-esteem. They perceive themselves as information providers rather than owners, lacking simultaneous access to that information. The concept of power-knowledge (Foucault 1980) is instrumental in understanding this issue and reflecting on researchers' responsibilities in studying vulnerable populations.

**Keywords:** Knowledge ownership; researcher-researched relationship; protracted state; power-knowledge; vulnerable population; Nakivale.

### **Introduction and Objectives**

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the current refugee population includes approximately 6.6 million individuals residing in camps, constituting around 22% of the total (UNHCR 2022). Although refugee camps are perceived as temporary settlements, they often transform into long-term residences over time. For instance, the Somali refugees in Kakuma camp, Kenya, have been living there for multiple generations, while the Nakivale Refugee Settlement in Uganda, established

in 1958, continues to accommodate a diverse population for extended periods (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Loescher, Long, Sigona, & Kibreab 2014; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Loescher, Long, Sigona, & Milner 2014). The prevalence of long-term refugee camps highlights the broader challenges faced by the global asylum system and the limited effectiveness of durable solutions for refugee situations<sup>1</sup>.

Research conducted in refugee settlements encompasses a wide range of disciplines, including environmental studies, media analysis, social sciences, political science, sociology, studies on identity, belonging, racialization, encampment, education, and others. The diversity of studies reflects the diverse social realities and the multitude of camps existing worldwide. Research, comparison, and evaluation of refugee life span from the Greek islands to the largest camp in Bangladesh, extending through various facilities and settlements across Ugandan soil. This examination is carried out by researchers, international organizations, government institutions, local-led organizations, and refugee-led community-based research initiatives.

These scientific endeavors contribute to our understanding of camp environments and the complexities of refugee experiences. However, all research conducted within the spatial reality of refugee camps must be grounded in ethical principles (Betts 2015). Adherence to these principles is typically overseen by scientific institutions, which evaluate scientific projects based on their objectives, methodologies, data collection techniques, and ethics. These assessments encompass fundamental questions related to the who, what, when, where, why, and how of the study<sup>2</sup>.

However, ethical committees primarily validate research based on procedural ethics rules (Deps et al. 2022). These principles emphasize that ethical correctness hinges on a decision-making process founded on fairness and transparency. Procedural ethics mandates meticulous documentation and verification of the research process. Nevertheless, addressing dilemmas in field research within refugee settings requires an approach that goes beyond strict adherence to procedural rules.

Consequently, the concept of 'relational ethics' was developed (Clark-Kazak 2021) along with a set of guiding principles. These principles include 'do no harm' (Hugman et al. 2011) and reciprocity (Mackenzie et al. 2007). Researchers should maintain a narrative account that addresses their positionality, dominance, and relationships with research participants based on the values of respect (Lawrence et al. 2013; Marmo 2013). Furthermore, scientists must be conscious of the potential indirect consequences their studies might have on the individuals being studied. Some scholars argue that solely adhering to the 'do no harm' rule is insufficient and advocate for active engagement in

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1 Despite the increasing prevalence of 'permanent camps', the belief is that these spaces are meant to be temporary, serving as a stopgap measure while long-term, durable solutions such as resettlement to a third countries, repatriation to the country of origin, or local integration are pursued.

2 For instance, in Uganda, entry into refugee settlements is regulated through specific procedures. Researchers are required to obtain appropriate approvals from the Research Ethics Commission and the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology.

applied science to address systemic dysfunction and promote positive transformations (Hugman et al. 2011).

The pivotal inquiry that arises is whether researchers contribute to mitigating the consequences of prolonged displacement in the lives of refugees. Do they adhere to the principle of ‘do no harm’? Alternatively, does their research perpetuate a cycle of dependency, further eroding the self-perception and agency of refugees?

Drawing upon Foucault’s concept of power-knowledge, we will critically examine the dynamics between researchers and the participants, shedding light on its dysfunctions. By enhancing awareness of prevalent errors, we aim to propose strategies that can improve research practices, thereby fostering more effective and ethically grounded studies. Leveraging our fieldwork experience in the Nakivale Refugee Settlement, we attempt to enrich the ongoing discourse on the merits and challenges of participatory research approaches<sup>3</sup>.

## I. The State of Knowledge

Ethical considerations surrounding power relations and the purpose of research have prompted an increasing demand for a reflexive approach in refugee studies<sup>4</sup>. Various methodologies, such as community-based research, participatory research, participatory action research, co-production of research, action research, emancipatory research, community-based participatory research, constructivist research, and feminist research, have been developed to establish anti-reductionist research structures and mitigate dehumanizing practices toward study participants. However, not all these practices are synonymous, and further distinctions need to be made between concepts and methodologies.

Commonly, it is agreed that what differentiates these approaches is a particular emphasis placed during the research process. Participatory action research (PAR) focuses on the potential for transformative action and engages with community members to identify social issues requiring mitigation. Community-based research considers research participants’ voices and perspectives, while community-based participatory research includes community members at all stages of scientific inquiry, from the development

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<sup>3</sup> Our study involves a collaborative effort between a researcher from Europe and a researcher who holds refugee status and resides within the camp. This approach seeks to provide a more inclusive framework for conducting research, wherein the peer-researcher is not merely perceived as a field assistant but rather as an engaged and active partner throughout the entire research process.

<sup>4</sup> Olivier Bakewell (2021) explores the dehumanizing aspects of social research in his article titled “Humanizing Refugee Research in a Turbulent World.” Bakewell suggests that social research, in its essence, is a dehumanizing practice as it simplifies and reduces human experiences into analyzable categories. Researchers often adopt established assumptions and theories to understand social reality, inadvertently creating a divergence from reality. Author highlights the practice of classifying and labelling refugees, which reduces individuals to stereotypes, while researchers focus on generalizations of behaviors and assumptions.

of research ideas to planning, data gathering, and acting on findings as a “partnership approach to research that equitably involves community members, organizational representatives, and researchers in all aspects of the research process” (Cornwall & Jewkes 1995; Coughlin et al. 2017; Amauchi et al. 2022; Israel et al. 1998).

The growing popularity of participatory methods has led to them being seen as a study requirement as if the mere idea of participatory research makes it ethical. This has spurred discussions on requirements and methods for financing research, potentially leading to stricter regulations in the future (Ellis et al. 2007; Jacobsen & Landau 2003). Despite the increasing application of participatory approaches, a consensus on the definition and understanding of these methodologies has yet to be achieved. While they all share a principle of involving community members in the research process and prioritizing their roles as co-researchers or active participants, rather than ‘research subjects’, their imperfect practical application emphasizes the ongoing importance of the discussion surrounding the relationship between the researcher and the participants.

For example, José Wellington Sousa (2021) argues that the interaction between universities and communities still often reflects the traditional researcher-researched polarity, where scholars maintain a dominant position despite the egalitarian goals of community-engaged studies. Sousa points out that the university sometimes constructs the community and its marginality as a means of exercising power and controlling knowledge. This leads to the establishment of a margin-center relationship, wherein certain groups must claim their marginal status to access resources and opportunities (such as research skills and information) from the center, represented by the university. The university and the community can be seen as identities and subject positions that individuals adopt within these dynamics.

Moreover, in a self-reflexive account of a study conducted in Rohingya Refugee Camps in Cox’s Bazar (Hoque et al. 2023), the authors reflect on their use of participatory action research and its potential to challenge Western-centric modes of knowledge production. They acknowledge that it is rare for community researchers to engage actively throughout the complete research cycle, spanning from project conception to data collection and analysis. They highlight that, particularly in humanitarian contexts, the study process typically adheres to a one-directional course where researchers have limited accountability to the respondents.

These challenges are part of the reason the relationship between the researcher and the participants must be rethought. Several important articles have challenged this power relation in the field.

In *Participating in Social Exclusion: A Reflexive Account of Collaborative Research and Researcher Identities in the Field* (Newitt & Thomas 2022), the authors provide an example of how research based on the participatory action research approach exerts control over meaning in practice, administering and reutilizing sentiments of failure and marginalization among participants, including the ‘professional’ researcher. There, they

touch upon a number of areas of consideration, including the researcher's positionality between the importance of performing a task, the time needed for its execution, and the needs of participants in the project; the problem of reimbursement and payment for research participation, especially in the context of personal experiences when the group meetings were interrupted by co-participants' "absence, routinized lateness, and their ability to sleep through much of our time together" (Newitt & Thomas 2022). A similar reflection was emphasized in *Relationship in Qualitative Research: Shifts in Positions and Researcher Vulnerability* (Råheim et al. 2016). The authors stress the importance of reflexivity in describing the relationship between the researcher and the researched. This theme is recurring in numerous studies, consistently underlining the privileged position of the researcher concerning the subjects of their research. Neil Bilotta (2021) calls for action, stating that when conducting research in forced migration contexts, investigators must go beyond the bounds of procedural ethical standards and incorporate elements of relational ethics, which require close cooperation with refugee participants.

Scholars consistently underscore the persistent power dynamics present in refugee studies. These dynamics favor institutions, development organizations, and universities (Castleden et al. 2012; Stoecker 2009; Travers et al. 2013). While participants from vulnerable populations may contribute to knowledge production through their involvement in various capacities, they do not possess equal influence over knowledge ownership. Consequently, the existing system of knowledge construction and diffusion in refugee studies falls short of empowering research participants and engaging them in making informed decisions based on the generated knowledge.

It is evident that the ethical challenges in refugee studies extend beyond a mere understanding of rules and best practices; we already possess a good understanding of these. The challenge lies in their practical application, which too often falls short of expectations<sup>5</sup>. Instead of seeking solutions solely within established ethical guidelines, we argue that attention should be directed towards the fundamental nature of scientific inquiry.

## II. Theoretical Background

The ethical concerns in refugee studies, as discussed in the literature, primarily revolve around power dynamics. To address it effectively, it is necessary to delve into the underlying motivations that drive our actions. This approach enables us to reevaluate the concept of an ethical approach to working with various populations.

Michel Foucault's theory of power-knowledge comes to mind as a useful framework

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<sup>5</sup> An example can be provided by our own experience. The authors of this article come from both the global North context (European-based academia) and the Nakivale refugee settlement. Our cooperation is based on rules that have evolved from experiences gained through collaboration with other researchers who used to come to Nakivale to conduct their studies. However, the ethics of their research raised concerns.

of interpretation. Foucault's definition of power, not as an external force acting upon individuals, but as an intrinsic element within their mental, discursive, and behavioral patterns (Foucault 1980), provides a valuable perspective for understanding the ethical challenges in refugee studies. For example, by applying Foucault's theory of power to our subjective experiences, we can attempt to decode their nature and offer more practical and insightful recommendations, as well as warnings, regarding ethical practices in refugee studies. The utility of this approach lies in examining power, not externally, in institutional and organizational forms of hierarchy and discipline, but internally, through the microphysics of our everyday interactions and perceptions – the subjective mental patterns of our behaviors applied in various research contexts<sup>6</sup>.

Foucault's perspective on power and knowledge reveals their interconnectedness and the consequences that arise from their interactions: power and knowledge work as mutually constitutive and inseparable forces. Foucault highlights a shift in society where power is no longer the sole domain of a select few but is manifested within a network of relations in constant tension and activity:

We should admit (...) that power produces knowledge (and not simply by encouraging it because it serves power or by applying it because it is useful); that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations (Foucault 1977, 27).

Foucault's perspective suggests that knowledge can function as a causality that forms agency and, in turn, produces power. For example, within community-based participatory research, co-constructed knowledge forms the framework for the formation of agency and the manifestation of power among those most interested in it – refugees engaging with research. Based on the gathered knowledge, these individuals can influence their lives, the structure of the camp, and the overall character of humanitarian and development policy.

(...) it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but (...) it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms of knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be thought of as a productive network which runs through the whole social body (Foucault 1980, 119).

However, it is important to acknowledge that this view is not entirely accurate. Participatory research encounters practical implementation and knowledge-sharing limitations. Foucault's theoretical framework can explain these challenges by examining the self-disciplinary forces observed in institutions like prisons and clinics (once again, power perceived internally). Foucault introduces the concept of regulated discourse and emphasizes:

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<sup>6</sup> This critical approach to the nature of our own interactions can serve as a source of information about personal motivations for research and provide empirical findings to support our recommendations.

This discourse provided, in effect, by means of the theory of interests, representations and signs, by the series and geneses that it reconstituted, a sort of general recipe for the exercise of power over men: the 'mind' as a surface of inscription for power, with semiology as its tool; the submission of bodies through the control of ideas; the analysis of representations as a principle in a politics of bodies that was much more effective than the ritual anatomy of torture and execution (Foucault 1977, 102).

Although the theoretical concepts of participatory research may appear to offer an almost perfect ethical model for knowledge production and sharing, the idea of power-knowledge reveals its deep-rooted dysfunctions. Knowledge can be wielded as a coercive and disciplinary force, like how it can be exerted over prisoners in a prison<sup>7</sup>.

However, a question arises: Can we discover a way out of this predicament? While Foucault's perspective sheds light on the frequently discussed power imbalances in refugee studies and why even meticulously crafted research methodologies often fall short in practice, we must contemplate whether there exists a path to differentiate ourselves from these power structures in the pursuit of a more egalitarian model of inquiry.

Engaging with Foucault's ideas within this context raises two fundamental issues. First, his worldview tends to be deterministic, offering little room for personal agency. His concept of power permeates all facets of human existence and manifests as a formidable force that is not easily cast aside. We may remain unaware of the extent to which it influences our behavior and cognitive processes in day-to-day research endeavors. Furthermore, Foucault's understanding of shifting meanings and his relativistic perspective on truth – where truth is contingent upon the exercise of power and its attribution to those who define reality, primarily the researcher in the framework under examination – presents a somewhat pessimistic outlook regarding the feasibility of effecting change and embracing a more grassroots approach to research. In other words, Foucault might contend that even the most well-intentioned models of co-constructed knowledge, such as community-based research, remain tainted by the original sin of power and discourse<sup>8</sup>. Roger Sibeon rightly observes that Foucault tends to downplay subjectivity and agency, dismissing their potential autonomy from the overarching structure (Sibeon 2004, 74).

Consequently, our application of Foucault's concepts for this paper demands a more deliberate and critical approach. Although he did make attempts to reintroduce a degree of agency (for example in *The History of Sexuality*), his overall conceptualization of subject within social structures is at times essentialized and undeniably deterministic. It seems necessary to reach two key conclusions.

Firstly, Foucault's idea of power in the context of the scientific co-construction of knowledge compels us to carefully examine our positionality and our approach to

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<sup>7</sup> Foucault's understanding of this relationship aligns with the criticism that, despite discussions about the need for changes in research practices, much of it continues to adhere to the established paradigm between the university (which possesses knowledge and power) and the research subjects.

<sup>8</sup> In this sense, discourse significantly influences actions and represents a force largely beyond our control.

research practice<sup>9</sup>. It also offers us a framework of interpretation for understanding the root causes of ethical problems in research that extends beyond the scope of procedural or reflexive models.

However, it will be of little use if we intend to make progress. For this purpose, it is imperative to scrutinize practices and frameworks that might offer a more equitable conception of agency. A deontological approach to ethics may hold the potential to provide some clarity, a perspective we will delve into in subsequent sections of this paper.

### III. Methods

The data collected for this article originates from a 4-year doctoral project and several months of fieldwork conducted in the Nakivale Refugee Settlement in Uganda. The research focused on refugees' hybrid identity patterns and their ability to rebuild their living conditions<sup>10</sup>. For this project, we employed the constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2000), utilizing participatory and bottom-up methodologies<sup>11</sup>. This inductive approach emphasizes the development of a new and innovative theory, with a focus on issues central to human life, rather than adopting pre-imposed concepts.

Importantly, the nature of the data gathered for the initial research project and, consequently, for this article, is rooted in the constructivist paradigm. This paradigm questions the existence of an absolute reality accessible through "objective methods." This means that the data for this research is co-constructed (rather than discovered), with the active involvement and influence of the researcher(s)<sup>12</sup>. We align with Harding's (1991) conceptualization of reflexivity, which calls for contemplation of our roles as researchers in relation to our positions, research goals, and the impact of social research systems from the participants' perspective.

It is essential to acknowledge the validity of Julia Elizabeth Janes (2016) assertion that no researcher is innocent, and all of us engaged in knowledge production must be mindful of this fact. Therefore, this article has limitations, most of which are a result of the biases mentioned above that were encountered during the research process. These biases existed due to power dynamics but were also related to language barriers (the research

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9 That said, as will be explored in a later part of the paper, we might concur with Foucault that power and discourse will inevitably influence our actions. As will be discussed in the findings section of the paper, my (the first author's) research ethics were far from perfect, and most of the power imbalances I inadvertently created could only be understood in retrospect.

10 Official approval to conduct the research was obtained from Makerere University's Research Ethics Committee and Uganda's National Science and Technology Council. In addition, the Ugandan Prime Minister's Office has granted permission for fieldwork in the Nakivale refugee settlement.

11 The methods employed included participant observation, interviews, focus groups, thick description and the autoethnographic method. The data gathering took place in April and October 2022, as well as from January to the end of March 2023.

12 The utilization of the constructivist paradigm leads to the conceptualization that the specific findings and data are valid in a temporal and spatial setting of the Nakivale Refugee Settlement and are not open to universalization.



process was conducted primarily in English, although French or Swahili were the first languages of research participants), cultural differences, and the overall complexity of capturing subjective experiences, which demands specific cognitive competences. To mitigate these challenges, I adopted specific methodologies and research practices<sup>13</sup>.

The methodology employed in this article draws inspiration from similar work conducted in the Kakuma camp in Kenya (Bilotta 2021). It is based on a participatory research approach and ethical reflexivity, with both authors of this article acting as co-authors: (1) an external researcher (the first author) and (2) a local expert from the Nakivale camp community – having been involved in several research projects. We engage in self-reflective analysis, employing a critical autoethnographic methodology that focuses on our experiences as researchers working within a specific spatial and temporal context (Madison 2005). Adopting self-reflective subjectivity (Archer 2007) becomes an integral dimension, enabling critical reflection on how knowledge is constructed and analyzed during the research process (Guillemin & Gillam 2004).

The construction of our findings relied on two pivotal elements. Firstly, ongoing conversations throughout the research project, as well as frequent group discussions organized by the Nakivale Researchers Network. During these deliberations, we reflected on ongoing research conclusions and our respective positions, perspectives, and ethical concerns, undertaking activities such as reviewing the research questionnaire, sharing experiences, and addressing any emerging issues. The form of these discussions derived from specific types of conversations classified as dialogical techniques or conversational analysis. They combined semi-structured interview techniques (as they had their initial structure and plan), but quickly transitioned into an informal interview framework, with a free flow of information.

In the second part, we engaged with the practice of autoethnography through a phase of individual self-reflection. As researchers, both of us undertook the task of analyzing our experiences, notes, records, and identities. These factors influenced the way the research was conducted and provided insights into our roles as researchers within the study.

#### **IV. Research Findings**

The findings of this paper are organized into sub-topics, each highlighting potential analysis challenges encountered during our work in Nakivale settlement.

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<sup>13</sup> The project was conducted following community-based participatory research approach, through formulating the conceptual idea of the research with the co-author of this article, during our initial meeting in September 2019 and with the cooperation from the Nakivale Researchers Network, a research team that provided crucial organizational and substantive support throughout the project. Their contributions included assisting with interviews, consulting on the results, engaging in discussions and analyses of sub-data, and contributing to shaping the research's stages and directions.

#### IV.1. Power and Influence of the Researcher

From our initial meeting, we exchanged our perceptions of the value of research and concurred that it plays a pivotal role in providing valuable insights into the complexities of the refugee context<sup>14</sup>. The research illuminates often-overlooked aspects that may have eluded previous researchers or those dependent on inferential studies. As Dieudonné emphasized:

Research in a refugee camp is important because it sheds light on the right information. It develops an attitude of not easily believing everything that is readily available and following a single track (...) Research improves services and treatment not only for the current generation but also for future generations within the camps. Through research, refugees may gain access to treatments that are not yet readily available to the public.

This statement corresponds to the causative dimension of knowledge, as per Foucault. In this reference, scientific research (knowledge) acts as a co-productive form of power, empowering individuals to effect change.

The specific power imbalance between the researcher and the researched is twofold. When foreign researchers approach Nakivale, they enter an environment that they do not fully understand in terms of culture, geography, and linguistic complexities. Nakivale is a highly diverse settlement housing six nationalities. While walking through the settlement, one can easily encounter places where Kinyarwandi is the everyday language, while in another area, it may be Swahili. Therefore, as Dieudonné states, foreign researchers need the assistance of local refugee researchers. He shares an example:

Once, a family lost a loved one. According to their culture, after the burial, they observed a mourning period of five days. One researcher was interested in understanding the cultural aspects of this ritual, but he was advised against pursuing it. Can you imagine how the family would react to the researcher's inquiry?

During his (the first author's) research in Nakivale, I developed assumptions about the relationships within the settlement. Building upon a study conducted in Kenya on the reasons for protracted stays (Lusiola et al. 2022), I aimed to investigate the impact of conflicts in the country of origin on the protracted stay in Nakivale. Specifically, I wanted to explore the extent to which cultural conflicts, such as those based on ethnicity, could explain the prolonged stay in Nakivale. In one of my conversations with a refugee who had moved from Nakivale to the capital city of Uganda, Kampala, he mentioned facing discrimination based on his nationality as one of the reasons for leaving Nakivale. I further investigated and discovered a case of violent clashes between Somali and Congolese players during a football match in 2010, resulting in the death of a Congolese individual.

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<sup>14</sup> The importance of education and its value is evident from both of our perspectives. In Nakivale, it is common to hear children repeating and singing the phrase "education is key." Parents view education as a path forward in life, a valuable resource for breaking free from the sense of being "stuck" (Hage 2009) and experiencing liminality daily.

However, through conducting interviews with refugee leaders and local organizations, I realized that the extent of the conflict was smaller than my initial assumptions, and it failed to fully encompass the intricate nature of ethnic and national relationships within Nakivale<sup>15</sup>.

The significance of knowledge production and Foucault's insights once again take center stage. When engaged in fieldwork and data collection related to a research problem, the researcher wields specific power. This is because they can shape the narrative and discourse surrounding refugees, contributing to the construction of the context through which refugees are "analyzed." The knowledge generated through these efforts directly impacts the perception, representation, interpretation, and understanding of the generalized category of '*refugees*' and has the potential to influence policy decisions and the overall design of interventions.

#### **IV.2. Establishing Cooperation with Trusted Individuals**

Engaging with local communities and refugee researchers is crucial, but several key considerations must be addressed beforehand. First among them is the involvement of camp residents in providing translation support during interviews with the local population. Drawing from our collective experience, we encountered challenges when collaborating with camp residents who assisted with translation, and these challenges had the potential to compromise confidentiality, competency requirements, legitimacy, and other ethical considerations.

Fortunately, I had the privilege of being accompanied in my research by a member of the refugee-led research organization, called Nakivale Researchers Network (NRN). Each member of the organization is respected within Nakivale, both in their respective communities and throughout the settlement. This allowed me to gain the trust of many influential individuals simply by our association. We also invested a significant amount of time in building our relationship, extending beyond the scope of research. We lived in each other's houses, provided support in times of need, and shared quality family time.

In this sense, I was privileged to have a translator whom most of the people I collaborated with trusted. However, in some cases, I consciously requested individuals to provide their translator, especially when they were sharing sensitive information about political and social abuses in the settlement. In such instances, the interview always took place with a person they trusted. This often occurred organically through a snowball effect. For example, my friend from NRN introduced me to a trusted individual with whom I conducted an interview. Building on the trust established between my friend and

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<sup>15</sup> It would have been relatively easy for me to gather information on the ethnic divisions and conflicts in Nakivale and make arguments that these conflicts are the source of their prolonged stay in the settlement. However, such a conclusion would reveal relatively little about the complex causes of the refugees' prolonged existence, which requires further research. This realization underscores the importance of allocating more time for in-depth research and the value of cooperation with the research participants.

me after that interview, that person then connected me with another individual facing a highly precarious political and security situation. During my conversation with the latter, the trusted individual translated. Through this cooperation, my network expanded.

However, the situation was not always straightforward. When sensitive issues arose during the interviews, such as cases of rape, torture, or political persecution, one-on-one communication became essential. These situations require alternative methods that align with research ethics guidelines. Therefore, researchers must exercise caution and ensure that the translator is trustworthy from both the researcher's and the participants' perspectives.

Furthermore, the ethical considerations related to interviews become even more significant when we consider the prolonged presence of researchers in the field. This was particularly vital for me and my friends who hosted me. A white person in a refugee camp is an uncommon sight. Furthermore, I was one of the very few researchers who moved around Nakivale without a guide, freely navigating day, and night, often alone. People were aware of my presence and my whereabouts. Any inappropriate behavior on my part could potentially harm the friends who generously provided me with a place to stay. This situation is closely related to Foucault's theory of power-knowledge.

In his *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Foucault draws a parallel between disciplinary mechanisms and the power of visibility and surveillance. In Nakivale, as a highly visible person, I held an influence that extended beyond the control of my friends and the individuals hosting me. Any breach in established cultural relations could potentially impact them more than it would affect me. The visibility, combined with the lack of anonymity in the settlement, illustrates how power dynamics are shaped by the ability to observe and be observed.

Given that Nakivale is a communal environment, breaching confidentiality between researchers, research assistants, peer researchers, and the local population can have damaging consequences. It can perpetuate stereotypes, disrupt trust-building efforts, and negatively affect the perception of future research endeavors. There were even instances where suggestions were made that because I am a white person staying with refugees, those refugees must be wealthy and must take financial advantage of me. These power differentials emphasize the importance of making efforts to empower and include refugee voices and perspectives throughout the research process, aligning with Foucault's call for resistance and the subversion of power through acts of empowerment (Foucault 1990).

### **IV.3. To Whom Does the Knowledge Belong?**

One of the most common problems facing the relationship between researchers and local researchers is the failure to share feedback with the refugees, leaving them curious and uncertain about the information they provide.

Dieudonné shared a story to highlight this issue:

Research is attractive. Many refugees in Nakivale have cooperated with different researchers from abroad and shared their data. However, they never received any feedback about how the data was used. One lady saw and told me that we have bothered them every time we ask them questions and respond to all questions, but there is no feedback. They sacrifice their time as if it passes in vain.

The absence of feedback and communication significantly impacts the positionality and power imbalances between the researcher and the researched. Firstly, it becomes evident that the researcher holds greater authority, access to information, and control over the direction and scope of the study. The power disparity inherent in this dynamic can influence the knowledge generated during the study process. The framing of the research, the selection of areas of study, and the interpretation and communication of results can all be influenced by the investigator's position of power.

Furthermore, leaving refugees curious and uncertain about the results of cooperation and gathered data not only perpetuates power imbalances but also serves as a coercive mechanism through which researchers influence the self-esteem, confidence, and self-perception of the research participants. In other words, a lack of ongoing collaboration can lead to local researchers feeling undervalued, fostering negative thoughts and power imbalances. We repeatedly encountered cases and heard stories of researchers making false promises, implying that, for example, participation in research would lead to resettlement. Some individuals even perceive researchers on short, few-day trips as engaging in "bad research" because they see no results from their presence. They also remark on the swift and abrupt conclusion of their cooperation with external scientists. It is also uncommon for researchers to acknowledge the collaboration and contribution of local researchers by issuing certificates or recognizing their involvement and value.

The examples provided highlight the interconnectedness of power and knowledge. Researchers possess the authority to access information and the power to determine how knowledge is disseminated. However, the lack of feedback and communication with the research participants reinforces the power differential.

#### **IV.4. The Role of the Nakivale Researchers Network**

To enhance and promote better research practices, the Nakivale Researchers Network (NRN) has been established and registered as a company with a guarantee. NRN's mission is to promote research by facilitating the sharing of refugee perspectives and experiences, fostering enhanced research collaborations among all stakeholders, and striving for continuous engagement before, during, and after the phases of data collection, interpretation, and community mobilization.

The Nakivale Researchers Network was established as a direct result of research practices by external scientists, whose actions raised concerns related to its ethical proceedings and the quality of their study results. These concerns include short research

trips, engaging in a highly selective process of data collection, providing financial incentives for participating in the interview process<sup>16</sup>, failing to protect privacy and information by involving individuals who are not trusted or do not maintain appropriate professionalism in their translation of interviews, and not offering feedback to the Nakivale community members who participated in the research.

However, the presence of refugee-led research organizations raises another ethical issue related to research conduct and the distribution of power, specifically the issue of positionality. In several cases, including my personal experience, illustrate, the level of access and opportunity to conduct research was much greater for me as a scholar representing a European university than for refugee-led organizations. An unfortunate example that underscores this issue is the first magazine published by the Nakivale Researchers Network (NRN). Although NRN printed copies and made them available in the Nakivale library, it was disappointing to learn that the magazines were not accessible to the public. When an NRN member inquired about the reason behind this, the person responsible for the library mentioned concerns regarding certain information contained in the magazine that criticized some institutions operating in Nakivale<sup>17</sup>.

This starkly contrasts with how researchers from outside Nakivale could conduct their research. For example, I was free to engage with any institutions in Nakivale during my stay and address even highly controversial topics, such as corruption, with little fear of prosecution. Even access to data, which would be useful for other refugee-led organizations, such as education, school systems, financial or organizational statistics, or aid operations, was much easier for me to obtain than for them.

This emphasizes the challenges that refugee researchers face in gaining recognition and wider dissemination of their work. Efforts should be undertaken to address these barriers and ensure that their valuable contributions receive recognition. It is more important that, for example, access to data concerning the conditions in refugee settlements, such as Nakivale, is of utmost importance for the refugee-led organizations.

## **V. Explanation and Discussion**

Our observations contribute to a broader discussion on research involving vulnerable populations. Drawing from Foucault's concept of power and knowledge, we uncover key aspects that highlight the practical dynamics of the research relationship.

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<sup>16</sup> Members of the Nakivale Researchers Network often noted that foreign researchers, with their financial resources that allow them to provide financial reimbursement to interview participants, can hinder the work of refugee-led research organizations. This is because the latter do not possess the same level of financial resources to offer as incentives for participation in the research process. Furthermore, they questioned the quality of interviews, suggesting that participants often provided those researchers with the "information they wanted to hear" since they were paid for it.

<sup>17</sup> Writing articles provides them with a means to address issues when they are unable to voice them directly due to power dynamics and protection concerns. However, their inability to reach the audience with their work undermines their efforts.

First, an evident imbalance of power and position emerges in the researcher-participant dynamic, reflecting the intertwined nature of power and knowledge, as described by Foucault. This power imbalance influences various aspects of the research process, including resource access, research objectives and questions, as well as the nature, timing, and stages of the study. We demonstrate how this imbalance can impact the knowledge produced and the interpretations given to the collected narratives and data. Recognizing this relationship is vital from an ethical standpoint, allowing for a nuanced understanding and interpretation of the research problem.

Furthermore, our reflections emphasize the researcher's role in knowledge production and its influence on narratives and discourses surrounding refugees. Critical considerations regarding who conducts the research, how it is conducted, why it is conducted, and where it takes place to shape the overall interpretation. The knowledge generated through research has the power to shape perceptions, understanding, and representations of refugees. Field researchers must critically assess the implications of their work, as it can impact policy interventions and public attitudes<sup>18</sup>.

While the Foucault perspective towards power-knowledge applied in this paper helps shed light on the intrinsic relationship between the researchers and participants, it offers little insight into the way forward. The specific reason for this limitation can be attributed to Foucault's deterministic stance on agency and structure and the limited reflexivity attributed to the subject. Foucault believed that the problem of power permeates so many layers of human existence that often we may not be fully conscious of the effect of our actions. Although it does align with the subjective experiences presented in the paper, it does not present us with a solution.

Rather than seeking a way forward in Foucault's writings, we argue that adopting a more reflective approach when collaborating with refugees is necessary. It might seem that the solution to the power imbalance in the researcher-researched relationship can be remedied by a more deontological approach to the ethics of refugee studies. This approach directs attention towards self-reflection on the moral reasons that guide research conduct (Tiedemann 2021). It focuses on the potential harm our presence can cause in the studied environment and our moral obligations towards research participants rather than the research itself. The deontological approach, which emphasizes the prohibition of harm, brings to the forefront critical reflection on who, and under what circumstances, has the right to conduct research.

Finally, while some of the elements we highlight and the recommendations we

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<sup>18</sup> An example of this can be found in Uganda. Alexander Betts and Paul Collier's book *Refuge: Transforming a Broken Refugee System* highlights Ugandan "exceptionalism" (Betts & Collier 2018). They describe Uganda as a success story, exemplifying the potential outcomes when refugees are granted basic socio-economic freedoms. They specifically highlight the success of Nakivale, one of Uganda's largest and oldest settlements, acknowledging its harmonious coexistence among diverse nationalities. However, it's essential to argue that while Nakivale may appear exceptional in terms of overall quality compared to other refugee camps in Africa, many refugees within the settlement still face harsh conditions and limited prospects.

propose have already been addressed in the existing literature (see Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2020; Bernard 2011; Pincock & Bakunzi 2021), we aim to draw attention to the persistent nature of these issues<sup>19</sup>. By integrating these considerations into research practices, we can contribute to more ethical and inclusive approaches to research with vulnerable populations, empowering them to have a meaningful voice and challenge dominant narratives. This collaborative and reflective approach holds the potential to generate grounded, comprehensive, and transformative knowledge, striving for a research landscape that supports the well-being and agency of refugees while challenging existing power structures.

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<sup>19</sup> Dieudonné's perspective is particularly valuable as it identifies the errors that result from detachment from existing knowledge and emphasizes the significance of foregrounding personal experiences. It is necessary for academia to actively support the involvement of co-researchers, peer-researchers, and research assistants from refugee communities in the research process.



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