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Exploring the Challenges of Working with Migrants, Migrant Organisations and Migrant Communities: an Ethnography of Participatory Action Research Projects

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Abstract

Research with migrants, particularly sanctuary seekers, can result in exploitation due to power differentials between researchers and participants. Participatory Action Research (PAR) has been suggested by academics as a way of addressing these differentials. However, there are also concerns of increased exploitation by shifting the research burden onto participants. Using organisational autoethnography, I examined whether PAR could help address the risk of exploitation in projects with three Afghan and Iranian organisations that aim to help migrants in the UK. My data collection included ethnographic observations, "opportunistic" ethnographic interviews, documents, and reflective notes made during PAR projects. Ethnographic analysis generated three main clusters of themes on addressing exploitation in migration research using PAR: 1) Researcher's community understanding before PAR; 2) PAR principles can conflict with organisational hierarchies; 3) PAR can ameliorate and exacerbate power inequalities. I argue that, for PAR to be effective in reducing exploitative power dynamics, migration researchers could offer participants a choice of approach as well as the possibility of discontinuing research; consider challenging organisational hierarchies when appropriate in terms of their positionality; unravel exclusionary cultural assumptions around participant cultures, and recognise and incorporate migrant community ethical values where possible.

Keywords
Participatory, Action, Ethics, Migration, Cross-Cultural

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Introduction

Mental health research, particularly at the intersection of psychology and sociology, has historically harmed the wellbeing of disenfranchised communities through coercive and discriminatory practices (e.g. Opiela 2020). Communities harmed by research include racialised minorities, LGBTQI+ people, sex workers, prisoners, and migrants (ibid). Research has also been used to exclude and marginalise, for example, by labelling dissent and difference a mental disorder (Dhai 2017). Modern criticisms of mental health researchers include that they can be voyeuristic and distant (Ellis et al. 2007).

Migrants and sanctuary seekers may be at risk of being exploited by mental health researchers given the rights-impoverished environment they often live in. The associated deprivation and societal discrimination can lead to stark differences in the status, income and social capital between migration researchers and participants (Jannesari 2022). This can lead to a range of issues around ownership, retraumatisation and impact. Pittaway et al. (2010), for example, reported that the research experiences of people in refugee camps on the Thailand-Burmese border included false expectations, the unauthorised publications of sensitive information, and a lack of follow up. This underwrote a feeling that researchers were there to steal people's stories, giving nothing back.

The cross-cultural context in which migration and mental health researchers work can increase risks further. Critics have argued that research can take on a colonial dynamic. More powerful researchers with "expertise" from Western institutions can pathologise participants from poorer countries and explain how they should feel, in the process dismissing non-Western mental health conceptions and knowledge (Marshal and Batten 2004). Jannesari (2022) demonstrates these practices can harm sanctuary seeker perceptions of their identity and undermine their mental health coping strategies.

The charity and community organisations researchers partner with can also increase the risk of exploitation. Though well-intentioned, these spaces can be disempowering. For example, Darling (2011) describes a drop-in centre, which appeared generous and hospitable but was partly 'conditioned by an asymmetrical relation of "giving" which may… replace care with charity' and 'reproduce a politically passive and marginalised vision of the asylum seeker' (p. 411). Rainbird's (2011) ethnographic work found that charities framed people seeking asylum as dependent and excluded them from decision-making processes. People then conformed to this framing 'to receive assistance'.

Drawing on the above criticisms, this paper defines exploitation in migration and mental health research as coercive, paternalistic practices that exclude, harm and stifle migrants. In contrast, beneficial research is defined as research that promotes migrant agency, has a long-term positive impact on the conditions migrants live in, and respects migrant knowledge. Researcher power, the key factor that underlies exploitation and benefit, is defined as the use of social, political and cultural capital to control the research process, its participants and its outputs.

Participatory Action Research (PAR) aims to provide helpful insights to address power inequalities and reduce exploitation in migration research. PAR seeks to raise the collective consciousness of all those involved in research to name the issues facing participants and improve their conditions (Freire 1970). PAR seeks to equalise researcher-participant power dynamics and address power imbalances in other areas of people's lives. Fals Borda and Rahman (2001) state that PAR has three main foci, 'research… adult education… [and] sociopolitical action'. These combined aims enable oppressed groups 'acquire… creative

and transforming leverage' and 'produce and develop sociopolitical thought processes' (p. 4). The latter involves 'learning to know and recognize themselves as a means of creating... power' (p. 7) and relates to Freire's consciousness raising.

Within PAR, there are a variety of approaches, some of which are designed to tackle particular power inequalities. For instance, Reid and Frisby (2008) developed the idea of feminist PAR. Dimensions of feminist PAR include 'centring gender and women experiences... accounting for intersectionality... [and] reflexivity' (p. 93). Feminist PAR begins with a focus on 'women's divergent daily experiences as embedded in larger relations of power'. Similarly, in her PAR work in the context of the US post-9/11, Varcoe (2006) advocates for an 'explicit commitment to the goals of an anti-racist intent' (p. 525). This included using her power as a researcher to involve 'racialized and immigrant women'. Varcoe implies that this premeditated use of power might be at odds with standard PAR approaches.

Since the turn of the century, there has been a rapidly increasing number of migration-related studies using participatory research approaches, including participatory action research (see Mata-Codesal et al. 2020). The researchers behind them are unlikely to identify as migration studies researchers. Rather, they come from a range of traditions including feminism, sociology, action research, and scholar activism (ibid). This has produced several important insights. For instance, sociologist Francisco (2014), found that PAR principles 'can be maximised in immigrant communities if it asserts migrants' lived experience as "expertise"' (p. 78). However, this has meant that PAR methods have not been tailored to the specific circumstances of migration and sanctuary seeking. Mata-Codesal et al. argue that, compared to other fields, participatory research in migration studies is relatively underdeveloped.

Those migration researchers who have used PAR, have often found it difficult to implement in practice, due to limited time with participants (Khanlou et al. 2002) as well as a lack of political knowledge and experience (Cuthill et al. 2016). Another difficulty, beyond migration studies, is the trend towards neoliberalism in universities which may undermine 'major PAR concepts such as Freire's "education for freedom" and Stenhouse's "the teacher as researcher"' (Fals Borda 2001, p. 132). Relatedly, Cooke and Kothari (2001) warn of the dangers of participation undertaking 'ritualistically', highlighting the disconnect between participant experience of participatory research and the 'received wisdom about the overwhelming benefits of participation in development' (p. 2).

This study conducts an autoethnography of PAR projects with and within UK-based migrant organisations working to support sanctuary seekers and migrants. It aims to investigate the role that such method can play in addressing power imbalances. This study aspires to the PAR approach emerging from the writing of foundational author Freire (1979), centred on consciousness raising, challenging power structures and providing participants as much control over the research process as possible. Using this "pure" version of PAR will help identify how it may need to be modified to suit a migrant and sanctuary seeker context.

My focus is on sanctuary seekers, defined as 'people who have fled their country and are asking another country for safety and residence' (Jannesari et al. 2020, p. 4). This includes people who have applied for asylum, have refugee status, and are undocumented. Findings are drawn from an autoethnography of three participatory action research (PAR) projects conducted with staff, volunteers, and service users at Iranian and Afghan non-profit organisations. Iranians constitute the largest refugee nationality in the UK over the last 15 years, and Afghans are in the top five (Home Office 2021). Both groups have diverse migration histories and have undergone several waves of migration over the last half century (see Putz 2015, Hakimzadeh 2006).

Summary of PAR projects

PAR projects were started with one Iranian (referred to as the IR1 project) and two Afghan (AF1 and AF2) non-profit organisations. Organisations were chosen based on location, services offered, and service-user demographics. Specific criteria have been withheld to protect the anonymity of organisations. The IR1 and AF1 teams each met across an

18-month period; depending on the research cycle, teams met anything from once or twice a week to once a month. The collaboration with AF2 broke down before a team could form. This was because of logistics. As the collaboration ended early in the project, consent was not obtained for AF2 ethnographic observations and only one small personal reflection is included in this paper. Each PAR project was hosted in a different organisation, with different team members and different research questions. The process and the content of the IR1 and AF1 projects are described in this section.

IR1 and AF2 were hosted at migration charities employing a few staff members and several volunteers. Both charities were headed by managers with substantial power. PAR projects were approved by these managers and then monitored by the staff who joined the PAR team. AF1 was a community association with an elected hierarchy. The PAR projects were approved by the committee who then formed almost all the members of the PAR team.

After organisational gatekeepers approved the collaboration, discussion events were held with staff, service users, and volunteers to establish mental health research priorities and preferences. I chose mental health as a focus for PAR both because it coincided with my research expertise and because of its links with issues of marginalisation (e.g., Selten et al. 2013). A PAR team was formed in each organisation from interested event attendees and a research topic chosen that reflected event discussions. Participants were eligible to join the PAR team if they were over 18, could provide informed consent, and were involved with the organisations as staff, volunteers, or service-users.

IR1 meetings were typically attended by nine people, mostly middle-aged women. Meetings were usually composed of at least two members of staff, two long-term volunteers, three people transitioning between service user and volunteer, and two service users. Staff and long-term volunteers had been in the UK for an extended period, spoke English fluently and had permanent status. Services-users typically spoke limited English and had precarious immigration status. A mix of English and Persian was spoken during the meetings, as some service-users were keen to improve their English language proficiency. The IR1 project focused on personal development (e.g. improving self-confidence, independence and adaptability) comprising a questionnaire returned by 60 organisation members and six focus groups (48 people). Details are available in an online report (Iranian Association 2020).

AF1 meetings were typically attended by around five people, mostly middle-aged men. There was usually at least one woman present. Three members were from the organisation committee, with two occupying senior positions. Almost everyone in both groups had sought sanctuary in the UK, been granted permanent status and were in meaningful employment commensurate with their academic qualifications. Most group members were fluent in English, and this was the main language of the group. The AF1 project focused on adapting a mental health measure for use with the Afghan diaspora. It included a preliminary questionnaire on what would be a useful topic to research (returned by 11 community members).

This paper reports on the ethnography of the PAR projects, rather than on the PAR project findings themselves. Accordingly, members of the PAR team are not co-authors on this paper. However, those who expressed an interest were given the opportunity to review this paper and raise objections regarding misrepresentation. Seven team members did so, though no one asked for changes to be made. Those who gave permission are included in an acknowledgements section in this paper, along with their organisations. While I facilitated the PAR process, PAR team co-researchers were integral at all points of the research process, including formulating questions, providing time frames and deadlines, collecting and analysing data, and delivering outputs.

Methods

Study design

Given the key role migrant organisations play in the conduct of PAR (i.e., arranging, facilitating, recruiting, hosting, providing resource for the research, as well as constituting the cite or mechanism of action), an organisational autoethnography approach was adopted. Ciuk et al. (2017) state that organisational ethnography aims to 'understand social practice and processes' (p. 270) in organisational settings through observation and other ethnographic methods such opportunistic interviews. In organisational ethnographies, the everyday and the mundane are critical. The power and politics within an organisation form other key nodes of analysis (ibid).

The organisational ethnography was autoethnographic. Autoethnography can be defined as research which 'connects the personal (auto) to the cultural (ethnos), placing the self within a social context' (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 145). In autoethnography, the researcher is part of the observed population. Though I was the only academic researcher participating in the research, I was part of the PAR team and, in the IR1 context, part of the wider diaspora community. Therefore, it was important to study myself as well as others in the PAR team.

Data collection

At the end of each day spent with a PAR team, I noted the day's events, conversations (including body language, and emotive or unusual phrases) and actions. I observed interactions between myself and PAR co-researchers, between PAR co-researchers, between myself and organisation members, and between PAR co-researchers and organisation members. Notes were taken during PAR meetings, but also in non-PAR elements, such as volunteering and organisation events. Preliminary notes were written up within a day of any interaction and iteratively added to, with later observations inspiring new understandings of previous ones. Notes were supplemented by email records, social media messaging in our PAR team WhatsApp group and organisation literature.

After notes were written, I wrote interpretations on what events, conversations and actions meant for how people perceived the PAR, implications in terms of social relationships and to identify sources of power. I wrote self-reflections on my own feelings towards the research, identity changes and developing relationships.

During the breaks in the research process, three 'opportunistic' interviews were conducted with participants. Opportunistic interviews are 'impromptu' interviews carried out during an ethnography if time permits (Militello et al. 2014). They were only conducted during lulls in PAR work, so as not to disturb the natural flow of the projects and were kept to a minimum so as not to place an undue burden on participants. They were used to delve deeper into observed interactions and events.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity is vital in autoethnography and might reduce the risk of narcissism some academics have associated with autoethnography's introspective and individualist style (See Sparkes 2002). Reflexivity is crucial to improving the quality and sincerity (Tracy and Hinrichs 2017, Berger 2015) of qualitative research.

I began the project by centring my experiences as a volunteer and migrants' rights activist and communicating this to my co-researchers. In these roles I had been approached many times by researchers with spurious and potentially harmful research requests. I tried to distance myself from my research identity and share in organisation scepticism. This made me more trustworthy, as I was attuned to common issues when researchers worked with migrant charities. However, at this point, I did not reflect on the potential disadvantage of this position; that it would be difficult to secure PAR team buy-in for the benefits of research.

My decision to work with Iranians, in specific, was related to my Iranian heritage and previous work with Iranian migrants. I had seen many people come to the UK and be ground down by the asylum process, while simultaneously being judged by the established Iranian diaspora. I attempted to soften my frustration with the diaspora by remembering that they had given rise to many Iranians involved in pro-migration work. In terms of working with Afghans, the cultural and language similarities with Iranian helped me connect with people. Yet, in my experience, Afghans in Iran face heavy discrimination and I was wary that I might have a cool response from some partners. I therefore decided to directly raise and affirm this issue in discussions with Afghan groups.

Analysis

Angrosino (2007) provides a broad guide to ethnographic analysis that recommends a process of 'data management', 'overview reading' and 'clarification of categories' (p. 73). During this process, the analysis moves from the descriptive to the theoretical. I have used this as a basis for my analysis. I have supplemented it with Roper and Shapira's (2000) understanding of coding. They describe how initially, coding involves 'condensing… data to a manageable size' and may relate to descriptions around 'setting', 'activities', 'events', 'general perspectives', and 'specific perspectives related to the research topic' (p. 94). Then, as analysis approaches a more theoretical stage, codes are refined to reflect increasingly conceptual ideas.

Though Angrosino (2007) provides advice and activities on identifying patterns in the data, he presents limited information on how to move from a descriptive analysis to a theoretical one and produce conceptual themes. It is useful, therefore, to draw on Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis in the latter stages. They provide detailed guidance on generating, reviewing, defining and naming themes on a conceptual level. A summary of my analytical method is below:

Step 1: Creating a data management system, organising field notes and uploading data onto NVivo 12, scanning in materials such as flyers and questionnaires when necessary.

Step 2: Thorough reading of the data, adding a few more reflections while reading.

Step 3: Line by line coding of one third of ethnographic notes using 16 a priori codes from Nelson et al.'s (1998) and van der Velde's (2009) research around PAR and creating new codes where necessary. There were 62 codes in total.

Step 4: Refining codes, recoding data and then continuing to code new data. This was a fluid, iterative process. Refining initially reduced 62 codes to 46, finally settling on 57 separate codes.

Step 5: Categorising codes and searching for commonalities. This created eight overlapping descriptive groupings that were then explored for patterns using Angrosino's (2007) suggestions of hierarchical trees, informal hypothesis, metaphors and matrices.

Step 6: The patterns identified in Step 5 were used to rearrange the codes into more analytic groupings. The codes in each new grouping were then re-read and re-arranged to ensure internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidance. Themes were broken down, adjusted and merged during this process.

Step 7: Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidance, themes were assessed as to whether they reflected 'the meanings evident in the data set as a whole' (p. 91). Themes with strong links were grouped together to arrive at fundamental theoretical dilemmas.

Ethics

Ethical approval was obtained from the King's College London Psychiatry, Nursing and Midwifery Research Ethics Subcommittee. Ethical approval was obtained for every element of the process including the autoethnography, opportunistic interviews and the two successful PAR projects. Participants were made continually aware that I was collecting notes and observations. It was, for instance, raised at the start of most PAR meetings, in a process of ongoing consent recommended by Mackenzie et al. (2007). The ethical process is discussed in depth in the results below.

Results

The analysis generated three main groups of themes on addressing exploitation in migration research using PAR: 1) Researcher's community understanding before PAR; 2) PAR principles can conflict with organisational hierarchies; 3) PAR can reduce and exacerbate power inequalities. These thematic clusters are described below. All participant names below are pseudonyms.

Thematic cluster 1: Researcher's community understanding before PAR

I began collaborations with misconceptions about the Iranian and Afghan diaspora and, therefore, struggled to implement PAR principles and reduce exploitative power dynamics. Community dynamics were difficult to navigate due to a lack of researcher understanding, and more recent migrants were quieter during the PAR. Moreover, the ethical principles diaspora communities held sometimes clashed with university ethics, further stymying the implementation of PAR. Navigating these issues and enabling PAR, required flexibility and negotiation with participants.

Misconceptions about diaspora communities

Facilitating the PAR projects was initially difficult because of several misconceptions about how Iranian and Afghan communities defined themselves. I needed openness and flexibility to work through this. In my research with the Afghan community, I started with an insular Persian-centric view, stating that I was only looking to work with Persian speakers. However, AF1 emphasised the need to include all Afghan ethnicities and languages from the start. I accepted this flaw in the research design, and we attempted to reach out to a broader range of ethnicities, particularly in our community survey.

> AF1 reflections: *'I was glad that the group came from a range of Afghan backgrounds, and I shouldn't have focussed on Persian speaking in the first place'*

With all PAR groups I assumed that people knew about and identified with "asylum seeker" status. However, people rarely talked about the asylum process, and it was not a label team members wanted to be identified by. Again, my research expectations had to shift. I dropped my fixation with the asylum process and expanded the research question to cover how researchers could work with migrants and sanctuary seekers.

> IR1 notes: *'We discussed how to divide up the focus groups. It was suggested that it wouldn't be good to split up people into those with and without status... talking about status appeared to be something relatively taboo [and] we decided to simply have one group of men and one group of women'*

Sometimes, correcting my misconceptions meant changing and expanding the scope of my PhD, something I felt I had limited control over. For example, I did not recognise the extent of Iranian and Afghan diaspora transnationality. I was unprepared, therefore, when AF1 asked to include data from Afghanistan and produce work benefitting people there. Instead of accommodating the request, I referred to my PhD aims and declined the offer.

> AF1 notes: *'Tuba said that she was going to Afghanistan again tomorrow and if there was any basic research she could do or questions that I should ask, that I should send them to her'* .

I did try, however, to adopt a research process more suited to transnational communities. International travel required timeline flexibility and ways for people to contribute remotely. There were often long breaks when team members returned to Iran or Afghanistan.

> IR1 notes: *'Nasrin [said] she could still help with such things even from Iran. I appreciated Nasrin's gusto and even suggested that she could Skype into the meetings from Iran'.*

Empowering quieter voices

There was a community tension between established migrants (e.g., those with employment, language skills and cultural knowledge) and newer arrivals that filtered into the PAR projects. This made it difficult to equalise researcher-participant power dynamics because established migrants felt more powerful than recent arrivals. Established migrants in IR1 sometimes criticised the life choices of newer migrants. This criticism was targeted at an Iranian straw man figure: the lazy migrant, coming to the UK for welfare and under false pretences, unwilling to culturally integrate into a new, more "enlightened" way of life. I felt that this narrative meant that newer migrants were less likely to contribute and feel ownership during the process, because it eroded people's self-worth.

> IR1 notes: *'Shirin mentioned how people come here now and watch Iranian cable TV all the time. She contrasted this with her experience always trying to speak in English and watch English TV… these comments always seem to be with Nasrin in mind'*

In AF1, newer migrants could be indirectly excluded from the group through language, limited organisational relationships and a lack of introduction. When a less established migrant was invited to the group, their involvement could feel tokenistic and superficial. This was because they were not offered adequate support before attending meetings (e.g., a conversation to explain the research process and aims, help with being able to access and respond to emails), during meetings (e.g., consistent and verbatim translation rather than paraphrasing), or other avenues to contribute (e.g., by offering their opinions in writing, or proposing resources such as. religious texts that might inform discussions at the meeting).

> AF1 notes: *'When Asghar joined the conversation, Qais suggested that he and Rashid will translate for him. Their translations were very short and infrequent however e.g., "he agreed" after a good minute of talking'*

It was difficult to authentically discuss power dynamics and internal oppressions in the group context. Towards the beginning of the research, I attempted to raise these issues by speaking about our team's composition. We discussed who is in the room and who needs to be invited so that the group reflects the range of experiences and privileges in the Iranian diaspora. However, partly because of the respect that group members had for established migrants, in IR1, these discussions resulted in a call for more established migrants to take part.

> IR1 reflections: *'I began the meeting talking about who needs to be here, concerned about the lack of service users in our group… Reza [a service user] said that we need more practitioners… I felt that the staff were dominating. But there was a sort of acceptance about this domination. Reza said that people like him didn't have the whole picture on the situation and it felt as if he was degrading his experience and value.'*

A few recent migrants took part in the PAR to resist their exclusion and negative characterisation in British society. PAR offered people a chance to impart knowledge and reclaim social and professional status that may have been lost on arrival to the UK. This opportunity took place in the meetings, but also during data collection and presentation, where PAR team members explained and conducted research with the wider organisation.

> Opportunistic interview with IR1 team member: *'In that [PAR] meeting I could feel that I still have knowledge, that I am still educated and that I can do something. And it helped me until I got to a better place… it is really difficult; I think people need support at this point. We need something to feel that we are educated, someone who can be relied upon. And that's how the meetings made me feel that I could have helped.'*

Balancing research and community ethics

The PAR process was often frustrated by university ethics requirements. In some instances, this was due to the time taken to adhere to such requirements. For example, the lengthy and time-consuming nature of informed consent processes was a source of resentment for some. Based on the advice of my supervisors, I repeatedly placed ethics on the meeting agenda and tried to explain how ethical requirements were to protect participants. However, this felt disingenuous, did not convince any PAR team members and took up group time. Ultimately, I apologised for the inconvenience and convinced people to pay heed to the ethics requirements as a personal favour.

> IR1 notes recounting an argument between a staff member and I: *'Minoo said "If you keep entertaining [questions on the study] people will ask questions forever." I said, "That would be fine!" … She replied, "I run this group and know how to deal with them"'.*

At times, the terms of my ethics committee approvals felt paternalistic and culturally discordant. In requiring external organisations to adhere to the terms of my university ethics committee approvals, I felt I was imposing the university's authority on team members that already knew how to work with their people. Where possible, therefore, I tried to remove university symbols from project materials. In presentations where external people were present, I emphasised how my partner organisation was leading the PAR.

> AF1 reflections: *'I found it interesting how the ethics committee wanted KCL [university] logo everywhere. I had taken it off because I didn't want to impose my control over the project'.*

During the study, I observed that ethical principles in the diaspora communities I worked with centred on engagement, responsibility and personal relationships. People existed in and were supported through the community, and everyone had to contribute however they could. People therefore felt that if someone attended an event or received a service, it was only fair that they gave something back – for example, by filling out a survey or form. Some PAR team members grew frustrated when participants asked questions around the information sheet and did not feel that consent forms were necessary. This caused tensions in the PAR, as team members felt I was unnecessarily increasing the research burden and imposing methods that were not suited to their community.

> IR1 volunteer helping out with the discussion event: *'There is no such thing as a free meal… if it were me, I would obviously take part in the research and sign the consent form'.*

In this context, consent to participate as a member of the PAR team was secured via personal relationships, with seemingly little weight attached to university procedures designed to protect research participants. For instance, an IR1 team member had signed a consent form for the opportunistic interviews and understood the information sheets. However, when interviewing them, they implied that their confidentiality was maintained due to the trust between us and characterised our interview as a friendly chat. For them, our research was conducted in the context of our relationship, not the other way around.

> Opportunistic interview with IR1 team member: *'Interviewee: I don't want my name coming out from this interview… Interviewer: 100% I will not use your name anywhere… and if this happened you can go to my university and ruin me. Interviewee: No, of course not! I have trust in you, there is no problem. Just, in some way, this was a friendly talk'.*

For PAR to work well, I needed a deep understanding of the Iranian and Afghan diaspora in London. This involved awareness of oppressions embedded in marginalised communities, as well as the tact and bravery to confront them. It also comprised of an understanding of diaspora ethical values and how these could be bridged with university ethical requirements.

Thematic cluster 2: PAR principles can conflict with organisational hierarchies

Following PAR principles required a dedication to bottom-up research and to equalising the researcher-subject relationship into a coresearcher-coresearcher. The aim was to create a research environment where people were empowered as knowledge creators, lived experience was centred, and the group critically reflected on their realities and oppressions. However, these principles were undermined and disrupted by the hierarchical structure of host organisations. Senior organisation members held the ultimate decision-making power with regards to whether, how, and when the research was conducted. Power was exercised through controls on access to space and to staff.

Recognising organisational hierarchies

PAR principles were undermined from the outset of this project due to organisational practicalities: decisions to collaborate in the research process rested with one or two gatekeepers rather than with the wider organisational staff and service-users. These gatekeepers led their organisations and encouraged their members to take part throughout the PAR. Thus, a few team members, particularly staff, may have attended not because they believed in the value of the research, but because their manager told them to. I continually emphasised to all parties that participation was completely voluntary, however, I could not account for workplace discussions.

> IR1 reflections: *'I was surprised by the swiftness by which [the manager] agreed to the project… this speaks to hierarchical nature of the organisation'.*

During the projects, I observed clear organisational hierarchies among staff, volunteers, and service users. It became clear that any deterioration in my relationship with higher-level organisation members could result in the termination of our collaboration. This threatened my AF2 partner after, what I perceived to be, a small misunderstanding. Ultimately, I exercised my power to unilaterally end the collaboration. My unilateral decision to end the collaboration undermined participatory principles. However, because of the extremely hierarchical structure of the organisation, I felt that the conditions for PAR were not present.

> Reflections after AF2 figure threatened to end the collaboration: *'I went in front of everyone… [and had to] apologised for my "silly Iranian jokes"… I really dislike being cowed… it was the beginning of the end in a way'.*

The hierarchical structure of the collaborating organisations was mirrored by the research team; members in regular contact with central figures wielded substantial influence. I tried to circumvent this power by setting up a team WhatsApp group and encouraging PAR team members to write in this group if they were communicating outside the team meetings. However, this was not effective as people were meeting in-person almost daily, and the WhatsApp group was rarely used.

> IR1 notes on a date change for our research event: *'Maryam [a staff member] briefly came in saying that we needed to let her and Sadar know when is good for an event. Although this happened last meeting and we very clearly said Friday'.*

Engaging with organisational power

Organisations exercised power over the conduct of the research in multiple ways, including through access to organisational resources and space. I observed that attitudes towards the research were reflected in how space was made available, and that availability gradually diminished over time.

> IR1 notes: *'Maryam mentioned that [the organisation was] in the church on Monday... initially suggesting that we should cancel. But I thought we could just go to the church and that was fine in the end. It struck me that if I hadn't come to [last week's organisation event] I wouldn't have known this.'*

Partly because staff controlled the space, meetings were arranged around staff time. The implicit thinking seemed to be that this arrangement would make participation accessible to staff who were very busy. Yet, as the research progressed through data collection and analysis, demanding an increasing time commitment from PAR team members, even this did not suffice. It also exacerbated attendance issues at IR1 meetings, with less established migrants dropping out due to our inflexible meeting times.

> IR1 team member in opportunistic interview: *'It was a little difficult, because it wasn't flexible and at that point, I was going to hospital work experience... if it was Tuesdays, then things would differ a lot. I would be able to take part'.*

Conversely, creating space to work outside of organisational settings helped increase the voice of less established migrants. In IR1, two team members and I worked on the ethics application together in a café. The conversation was much more relaxed, and a usually quiet team member was noticeably more talkative.

> IR1 notes café meeting: *'I had enjoyed being with services users and took the opportunity to ask them what they thought of the wider meetings. Shaparak and Simin said that in the bigger group... the conversation will reflect the agenda of [the staff]'.*

The Iranian and Afghan community organisations I worked with were organised very hierarchically. PAR would have been more effective at equalising power between myself and my co-researchers if I acknowledged this from the start and recognised that a "pure" version of PAR was not possible. This required an appreciation of all the different ways organisations can exercise power, for instance through space.

Thematic cluster 3: PAR can decrease and exacerbate power inequalities

I aimed to equalise researcher-participant power using PAR. However, some PAR team members felt I was imposing participatory methods on them, especially established organisation members who were frustrated at the time commitment needed. It meant that the work became more extractive and exploitative, counteracting the intentions I began with. Financial compensation may have lessened these frustrations. Instead of aiming for a researcher-researcher relationship, which not every participant sought, I learnt to seek more equitable relationships in which people could contribute in their own terms.

The burden of participatory research

Team members generally wanted to serve as guides, facilitators, assistants and advisors to the research, dropping in and out to assist me whenever they could. Tensions continued and even grew over time. After the IR1 data collection, I started changing my approach, conducting research tasks with one or two particularly interested members. We would then share the results with the rest of the group for comments.

> IR1 team member in opportunistic: *'Someone should coordinate... the project and everyone involved and divide the responsibilities. Yes, it should be everyone's responsibility but there should be like the conductor of an orchestra. Without one, everyone does their own thing'.*

> IR1 reflections: *'I emailed beforehand asking if people would like to chair the next meeting, explaining that it was part of giving away power and linked to the methodology I was trying to create. As I suspected, this went unanswered'.*

Team members sometimes felt that PAR was slower and more exploitative than standard research methods. Established organisation members wondered why I, as the expert researcher, was not doing more of the researching instead of "taking time away" from their work. Members of the PAR team were also organisation volunteers and they appeared conflicted between putting time into the PAR, with a longer-term, potentially intangible benefit, and administrative volunteering for the organisation, with a direct and immediate benefit.

> IR1 reflections: *'I got the general feeling that perhaps people felt I was going a little too slow. I was going slow to ensure that people remained onboard. I was guarding against the intermittent expectation that I would conduct all the research'.*

Financial compensation was vital in addressing concerns around the exploitation of PAR team members' time. Although a few established AF1 members asked for money to recognise their work, I had limited funding and could not pay people for their time. However, in response to these requests and discussions, I was able to donate to the organisation and this was well-received. Financial compensation seemed less important for less established members of the organisations. They typically explained that the potential benefit to their community was enough to warrant their commitment. They felt more ownership, were keen to quicken the pace of research and take action.

> AF1 reflections: *I still wanted to do right by the [organisation]... I thought that making a donation... was only fair. This resulted in... a much more positive, not to mention immediate, response'.*

> AF1 notes: *'I asked Tuba about whether they would like to be compensated for their time... [Tuba said] that it wasn't a problem to contribute for free as the work would be benefitting the community'.*

Those in the organisation who could not be involved because of their time commitments, were informed about PAR work in the discussion events, presentations at AGMs and wider organisation events updating on our progress, and through question-and-answer sessions during the data collection.

Moving from relationships of equality to equity

As I reflected on the progress of the PAR projects, I concluded that by pushing PAR team members to take up the role of co-researchers and adhere to my vision of PAR, I had inadvertently diminished the expertise I brought to the collaboration. This reduced the acceptability of the research and of my role in the process. Relatedly, PAR team members, particularly established migrants, were not interested in receiving research training, they implied that they already had the skills necessary for research through their casework and by organising social events.

> IR1 reflections: '*Rather than equalising the boundaries all I fell I've done is lower myself to the dishevelled and disorientated child playing at research'.*

Eventually, I aimed for a situation of equity rather than equality. I acknowledged that people did not need to participate in the same way and realised that, in focussing on the team's research skills, I was dismissing other ways in which people could contribute. In doing so, I expanded my understanding of what a co-researcher was. Thus, I tried to facilitate team member inclusion on their terms. I did this by arranging one-on-one conversations with PAR team members to try and understand their motivation better. For instance, an IR1 member was keen on making a positive contribution to the community and were very well-connected in the diaspora. I relied on them as a recruiter and fixer.

> AF1 reflections: *'It was a really excellent presentation [from the AF1 team member], which I should have really listened to more... I didn't see the nuance or recognise the expertise.*

Though PAR can help reduce researcher exploitation, it can also have the opposite effect. For example, PAR places a significant burden on co-researchers, some of whom would instead prefer to be involved in an advisory capacity. Rather than the absolute equality of "pure" PAR, it is better to aim for equity where every member of the team can contribute according to their capacity and desire.

Discussion

Through an organisational autoethnography of three PAR projects with Iranian and Afghan organisations, I explored how PAR might help to reduce exploitative power dynamics in migration research. Results described three main groups of themes: 1) Researcher's community understanding before PAR; 2) PAR principles can conflict with organisational hierarchies; 3) PAR can decrease and exacerbate power inequalities.

Unravelling oppressions within the PAR team

Results show that researchers can hold unhelpful assumptions on how a community is defined, potentially excluding marginalised members, reproducing divisions, and reducing the power-equalising impact of PAR. This replicates the experiences of Letiecq and sociologist Schmalzbauer (2016) in their work with Mexican migrants in the USA. During PAR, I found that continuing cultural discussions to unravel researcher assumptions was vital to ensuring that all relevant groups were included. Flexibility was also required to adapt the research to meet newly understood conceptions of community.

Embedded oppressions in the Afghan and Iranian diasporas excluded or undermined the opinions of less established migrants and made the implementation of PAR difficult. Embedded oppression is a topic rarely addressed in the PAR literature. Though Freire (1970) described how the oppressed can become sub-oppressors '[submersed] in the reality of oppression', he offers little concrete advice on what to do aside from the broad notion of education. Revilla's work with migrants' rights activists (2012) suggests that a shared intersectional political vision will help overcome divisions. But again, it is unclear how to facilitate the development of this shared vision. Future research could focus on the role of embedded oppressions in PAR and how to address the issue effectively and sensitively.

The challenge of organisational hierarchies

My results demonstrate the ways in which the hierarchical structure of migrant community organisations can impact PAR and limit the voice of less powerful participants. In their reflections on PAR work with an 'immigration settlement organization' Zhu (2019) similarly describes how team discussions were 'restricted by the [host] organization's rules, policies, and regulations' (p. 69), particularly around sensitive topics such as family relations. As Cooke and Kothari (2001) suggest, participatory decisions in the group context can entrench power. It was only in more private spaces, away from established migrants, that this power was broken down a little. The Inclusive Research literature offers a wealth of ideas to empower and amplify quieter voices. Nind and Vinha (2016) suggest including 'stimulus materials' like photos, stories and concept maps, playful 'verbal and visual metaphors' and I-poems – structured poems 'narrated in the first person' (p. 14).

I agree with Gaventa and Cornwall's (2001) appeal to challenge hierarchical structures during participatory research rather than 'simply adding a new set of tools and methods to existing institutions, which themselves may be hierarchical, inflexible and non-participatory' (p. 77). When doing so, migration researchers could consider the colonial legacies and orientalist framings centring knowledge, authority and morality in Western institutions (see Said, 1978).

A choice of research approach

Gaventa and Cornwall (2001) caution that 'when participatory methods are employed by the powerful… [they can become] rushed and superficial' (p. 73). Though they refer to large institutions and governments, my results indicate that their concerns are relevant to small community organisations and projects. Genuine participation can be undermined even through the exercise of relatively limited power and there may be a widespread problem in participatory research with migrant communities. As with this study, none of the 13 studies in a review on participatory methods in mental health and migration (Omar et al. unpublished) offered participants a choice of research approach or emerged from within the community. Even in Parson's (2019) 'strategies for conducting research as a privileged outsider' offering choices of approach is not mentioned.

This resonates with Ozkul's (2019) reflections on the often one-sided nature of participatory research. They argue that with participatory methods, the research is still the one who '"invites" participants to work together' and still 'allows the researcher to decide "how to empower" the communities concerned' (p. 231). This one-sided nature is part of an academic and funder trend of glorifying participatory methods as 'innovative' and 'creative' without applying a sufficiently critical lens. I fell into the trap Ozkul describes by focussing too much on replicating exactly what I perceived as the PAR method, rather than critically assessing whether PAR is helping with power dynamics.

My data remind researchers that choice could include the option not to conduct research. This understanding subtly conflicts with Parson's (2019) discussion on positionality in the context of research with 'marginalized, or minoritized groups'. She states that 'choosing not to do research' is not a satisfactory substitute to confronting the challenges around research identity and power (p. 30). My results suggest an examination of positionality may lead to a choice not to begin or continue a research project. Even once an approach such as PAR has been chosen, adaptability is vital. Findings question the value of labelling an approach, lest it constrain researcher flexibility. This resonates with activist research values that allows for varying levels of participation. Activist researchers Gutierrez and Lipman (2016) state that 'at times, community organizations do not have the capacity to take on research roles and need us to shoulder that work' (p. 1242).

The tension between researcher ethics and community values

Finally, findings highlight how the imposition of university ethical principles can undermine PAR attempts to equalise researcher-participant power dynamics. Some participants, for instance, prioritised the collective interests of the community over individual autonomy. Though many participants were not religious, such a stance corresponds broadly with the Islamic principle of Maslaha (Jahangiri, 2020; Moosapour et al. 2018). The values I encountered also emphasised deontological understandings of ethics; an ethics based on duty, moral responsibility and clear rules. It bears similarities to some versions of the Islamic dedication to Sharia (Moosapour et al. 2018). This mirrors differences found in other ethical frameworks. Gyekye (2010) describes an "African ethics" 'founded on humanism' where social community is an inevitable consequence of being human and that there is a 'social morality, the morality of the common good and the morality of duty' (pp. 16-17).

My findings suggest that mental health researchers could reduce the risk of exploitation by acknowledging, understanding and trying to satisfy different community principles and ethical priorities, while also maintaining bioethical standards. Without an appreciation of community ethics, communities may seek to abide by their own principles and potentially even undermine bioethics values. Community ethics may already be working effectively, and respecting community ethics might make implementation easier. Relatedly, the imposition of research ethics can imply a moral superiority. Equally, without preserving bioethical principles, the relationship and community ethics of the Iranian and Afghan diaspora might result in participant harm if these relationships are unhealthy.

My work relates to Friesen et al.'s (2017a) concerns that the Belmont report, an important basis for modern Western bioethics, fails to account for community level harm. My suggestions build on Msoroka and Amundsen's (2018) 'universal research ethics with diversi-

ty' where researchers draw on culturally relevant ethical frameworks to adapt bioethical rules when required. Msoroka and Amundsen aim to acknowledge that multiple ethical frameworks exist, maintaining the tension between cultural relativism and universality. I build on their work by suggesting that community ethics could be more than a 'detour' from bioethical principles. That researchers could strive for an amalgamation of bioethics and community ethics, preserving key principles from both.

Building community input into ethics

Research could begin with a process of negotiation between researcher ethics and community ethical values. This could comprise knowledge-sharing around community ethics and bioethical principles, as well as understanding community interpretation and priorities regarding bioethics. Barman and Hendrix (1983) describe how to explore bioethical issues in a classroom setting by completing a value inventory, using a decision-making model, and completing a case study exercise. These ideas could be usefully adapted to a migrant community setting. So too, could exercises from the People of the Global Majority (unpublished) who ran series activities around defining community culture and values. These included a food journey, participatory discussions and imagining a future through playdough.

However, in the Afghan and Iranian diasporas few, if any, institutions exist to maintain and promote a culturally sensitive researcher code of ethics. Elsewhere, the Six Nations Elected Council (2015) in Canada created a Research Ethics Committee to 'approve and monitor' research conducted in the area. They ensure that research conducted in their land fits their values. Others have sought to provide guidance. The Nunavut Research Institute and Inuit Tapiriit Kantami, for example, created a guide (2006) for researchers working with Inuit communities. It covers 'community concerns', 'appropriate levels of community involvement', and the process of 'negotiating a research relationship'.

Hull and Wilson (2017) draw attention to Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) in the US run by different American Indian and Alaska native tribes. These boards can 'conduct local community-based governance and oversight of research conducted on their land and with their citizens' and more tribes are interested in setting them up. Friesen et al. (2017b) discuss how the tribal IRBs model can be expanded to other populations that are not federally recognised, citing the Bronx Community Research Review Board as an example. This board is 'composed of volunteer community residents and representatives who work toward two goals: reviewing community-based research protocols and educating the community about clinical research' (p. W6).

The creation of a joint community and researcher code of ethics could be facilitated through community ethics boards and guides; resources that require ethical considerations additional to university ethics committees. There is a delicate balance to be struck between avoiding a patchwork of many community boards with different standards and having broad boards that dilute expertise and might overlook marginalised groups in their communities. Community ethics boards do not necessarily have to be formed around national or ethnic identities, and people may organise themselves around a shared migration experience. For instance, Freedom from Torture supports Survivors Speak OUT (2020), an advocacy network of survivors that could be well-placed to consult on research ethics with migratns who have experienced torture.

Concluding Reflections

The research was a transformative personal journey and an exploration of my heritage. My relationship with the Iranian and Afghan diaspora changed through this journey, influencing the nature and focus of ethnographic self-reflections. I chose to work with the Iranian community because I saw it as my community. I was, to an extent, making an identity claim. I attempted to move from the loose identity of second generation Iranian to the more solid identity of Iranian diaspora member. This is something that I could have been explicit with at the beginning of the research, to build up trust with PAR team members.

During the research, my identity was continually scrutinised by the Iranian community and Persian speaking Afghans. These criticisms undermined the protective prestige of my researcher identity. The criticisms felt like a continuation of the personal difficulties I have had integrating into the Iranian diaspora and the family arguments I have around presentation and image in Iranian culture. I did not anticipate how personal this research would be and the complicated issues it would bring. Though I drew on my family for help and support, I should have begun the research with a series of conversations with them about these personal issues and the challenges I might face working with the diaspora.

At the end of the research, I felt accepted by the Iranian organisations and diaspora. This was partly because of my improving language ability, but also due to growing friendships, familiarity and research outcomes. Yet, this acceptance contributed to a realisation that I prefer an international identity where my Iranian diaspora and community connections are important, but do not define me. This journey demonstrates the importance of being open to, and prepared for, identity transformations as a second generation migrant researcher working with diaspora communities.

I take pride in, and the study takes strength from, conducting several PAR projects with separate groups. Learnings from one group were quickly and regularly transferred to work with the other groups. For example, IR1 group members requested research method handouts and once provided, commented on how useful they were in understanding potential PAR options. I then used modified versions of the handout at the next AF1 meeting. The research also resulted in tangible actions and benefits to IR1, an area where migration PAR has sometimes struggled.

However, the reality of what transpired during the research projects and my attempt at PAR, did not reflect my initial vision or my theoretical readings. The major limitation was the fact that limited time and resources were available to conduct the PAR. Partly as a result, two of the projects did not reach the data collection stage and the remaining project only went through one PAR cycle. The other project was dissolved before it started in earnest. This was a very disappointing outcome and one partly related to my naivety around Afghan diaspora dynamics.

This study aimed to assess the suitability of PAR in addressing potentially exploitative power differentials in mental health research with sanctuary seekers. I found that PAR had the potential to aggravate researcher-participant power differentials. It is a lesson that Oliveria and Vearey (2020) also emphasise in their reflections of work with migrants in South Africa. Equally, however, I found that PAR could be effective at reducing the risk of exploitation, but only if used in a critical and flexible way. This involved recognising the organisational and community context within which it was implemented and adjusting expectations accordingly. It also required a move away from a dogmatic understanding of PAR to one where the general spirit of PAR is applied. That is, a spirit of equity, meaningful relationship-building and respect for participant ethical values.

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