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Qualitative Migration Research Ethics: Mapping the Core Challenges

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Abstract

When conducting qualitative research, migration scholars are often confronted with particular ethical issues. Since migration researchers often work on vulnerable, hard-to-reach, and sensitive populations, the protection of participants and their information may become a challenging task. The exploratory and flexible nature of qualitative research proves that standardized codes of ethical conduct cannot adequately address emerging issues during the qualitative research process. This article aims to map current ethical challenges that migration scholars often face as well as to provide some guidance while acknowledging the fact that many researchers deal with ethical challenges on a case-by-case basis. It starts by placing qualitative migration research ethics (QMRE) at the crossroads of qualitative migration research and research ethics debates and reviewing the main issues of this emerging literature. Then, we map ethical issues involved in different research stages including before, during, and after the fieldwork. We conclude insisting on the particularities of the critical ethical consciousness in migration studies. We also claim the need to incorporate these ethical issues in higher education programs and the need of teaching the best ethical principles in classroom environments to young migration researchers.

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Introduction: What is research ethics in general, in Qualitative Migration Research in particular?

A consolidated debate on ethics in conducting Qualitative Research (QR) already exists. Just this last decade, Sage Publishing has promoted several volumes in its methodological book series (Miller et al., 2012; Hammersley & Traianou, 2012; Flick, 2018; Iphofen & Tolich, 2018). A debate on migration ethics also exists since the path-breaking article of Carens (1987) on "open borders", which is followed by some reference books such as Gibney (1988), the edited book by Barry and Goodin (1992), and the more pragmatic focus from the same Carens (2013) or the special issue edited by Zapata-Barrero and Pécoud (2012) among the others. But an ethical debate linking QR and MR is certainly a recent area of reflection, directly related to the development of migration studies and the emerging complex and often unpredictable legal, political and social agenda on migration dynamics and governance.

The first works on Qualitative Migration Research Ethics (QMRE) often has an "ethical biographical character". In this "ethics-awareness" process, the researcher confesses to having regulated his/her own behavior in how to relate to the research context. In migration studies, this context often involves being in contact with people who have experienced war, abuse, torture, or other traumatizing events. In a majority of these cases, QMRE requires researchers to have ethical virtues, such as empathy to understand for instance the psychological and cognitive realities of displacements. Researchers must be aware that the individuals being studied may have serious negative pictures, history of mistrust of the environment, a survival logic of mobility etc. Most of the ethical cases also confirm what Düvell and Triandafyllidou (2010) pointed out some years ago while ethically assessing their own research on irregular migrants: that researchers rarely discuss where they should draw the ethical lines. These questions now need to be considered as key-issues belonging to the same research design process: How do we ethically carry QR with migrants? How to solve particular ethical situations and dilemmas? How do we identify and manage ethical risks in conducting QMR? What has to be the reference framework for assessing ethical risks? Do these ethical considerations affect the quality and objectivity of the research? Are universal ethical codes of conduct applied to QMR enough for dealing with particular situations? These are the main

questions that this first literature addresses.[1] In this review we will argue that QMRE needs to be considered as an "ethical radar alert" that the researcher must always cluster through the research process. Our particular purpose is to identify the first patterns of this emerging debate and to map a framework for ethical scrutiny of QMR.

The emergence of this debate today is directly linked with the vulnerability of most migrants, reinforced by the state security narrative environment, and the uncertainties and complexities of the governance of refugees' and large-scale displacements. This current migratory scenario stimulates humanitarian ethical thoughts and heightens the need to consider positionality and reflexivity. The concept of positionality helps us to directly address questions about the place of the migration researcher, as a social scientist, in the immediate external and internal surroundings of the migrants being researched. The neutrality, impartiality and/or involvement in the future of the participants are directly addressed. In this regard, it is particularly relevant to consider Weber's point (1949, p. 60) that "[a]n attitude of moral indifference has no connection with scientific 'objectivity.'" This epistemological awareness is directly linked to questions related to the way researchers collect, analyse and use the data produced through qualitative research techniques e.g. participant observation, interviews, discussion groups (see: Zapata-Barrero & Yalaz, 2018). QMRE issues related to confidentiality, the public and private divide, information-production, and information-dissemination frame epistemological ethical thinking. Here, considerations come about on whether all the information collected can be shared or not, used during the interpretative process or simply neglected as to respect personal privacy or even because of it containing some information that may identify the participants, which could lead to further persecution or reveal clandestine channels and strategies for crossing borders. In other words, ethical questions directly related to confidentiality become prominent. Combining positionality and the reflexivity towards ethical thinking carry on necessarily a critical conscience (Aluwihare-Samaranayake, 2012). Ethical perspectivism is then necessarily critical towards migrants' objective and subjective environment, and self-critical about how oneself conducts the research.

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[1] This review article particularly refers to the recent literature. But we must also acknowledge that van Liempt and Bilger's edited book (2009) and the work of Düvell and Triandaffyllidou (2010) are exemplary seminal works addressing directly such questions.

The literature review also shows us that QMRE is multilayered (Vervliet et al., 2015). This perspective goes against the assumption that there is just one way to deal with ethical challenges and defends a pluralist view on how to solve an ethical dilemma. The two usual perspectives, the consequentialist or utilitarian, and the deontological or principled ethical approaches, are sometimes mentioned but not applied. This gap is probably related to the fact that most of the works we have read place this ethical thinking within situational and relational ethics (Hammersley & Traianou, 2012; Mauthner et al., 2002; Reid et al., 2018), and even an ethics of care (Wiles, 2012). This allows us to emphasize that when applied to migration research, ethical thinking is a "moment-to-moment" decision-making process (Kaukko et al., 2017), always dependent on the specific contextual circumstances and personal perspectives of the participants.

In this framework, the purpose of this review article is to spark ongoing discussions following two main parts. We will first outline the main trends in the QMRE debate, focusing on what has been discussed so far. This will allow us to single out ethical areas that have been identified in the emerging literature. We will then go to the second part, where we map ethical issues found in different research stages including before, during, and after the fieldwork. We will draw some final concluding remarks with the issue of teaching the best ethical principles in classroom environment to young migration researchers.

1. Outline of qualitative migration research ethics: What has been discussed so far?

Ethical decision-making helps to self-regulate the research behavior of the social scientist. The distinction arises from what is also particular in migration research: its specific context. Reviewing the emerging literature allows us to identify some patterns. The first pattern probably explains why today there is a growing interest in developing QMRE. Namely, there is an obvious relationship between ethical reflexivity and studying the so called hard-to-reach migration populations, basically related to the extreme discrimination, vulnerability, inequality and power relations (involving sometimes exploitation and domination), but also physical gender and sexual violence in refugee camps for instance, as so many works show (Allotey & Manderson, 2003; Birman, 2006; Block et al., 2013; Clark-Kazak, 2017; Krause, 2017; Siegel & Wildt, 2016; van Liempt & Bilger, 2012). This high reflectivity is probably caused by the wide distance between

the researcher's (privileged) position and the participant's vulnerability. This also suggests that it can be misleading to generalize when we speak about QMRE, since migration studies is a broad area of research covering a large array of topics, not always related to hard situations of exclusion and vulnerability.

Second, there is also another relation that stems from an already established debate. Thinking ethically is always a balancing exercise between the quality and objectivity of the research on the one hand, and fulfillment of the three main ethical universal provisos, on the other: do no harm, respect autonomy, and ensure equitable sharing of benefits (Flick, 2018 among others).

Thirdly, and probably as a correlate of the two former literature patterns, ethical considerations on how one conducts QMR combine positionality and reflexivity. Formulating this idea in a more straightforward way, not "anything goes" in doing QMR; we need to take into account the values and principles that derive from applying positionality and reflexivity. Even if it is for the sake of knowledge production, we need to restrain this knowledge production combining transparency, objectivity and, of course, quality.

A final trend of the emerging debate is the shared recognition that ethical issues arise unexpectedly during the research process and are often not anticipated. This signals not only the emerging character of this QMRE debate, but also the fact that ethical thinking is still viewed, for most of migration scholars, as an ad hoc activity. This leads us to claim the need to recognize the transversal nature of this substantial area of research, beginning in research design going ahead during the fieldwork and continuing during the dissemination process, as we will see in the next section.

The purpose with this review article is also to understand the nature of the ethical decision-making of the researcher and its role in research ethics. This allows us to stress one of the golden rules of QMRE: "any research decision is an ethical decision". To speak about research ethics is to speak about researchers' responsibilities towards information collection and production and how one relates with participants. This is probably why the first QMRE literature shows us that current universal ethical principles, dominated by a positivist view of reality, most of them coming from medical ethical considerations, and readapted to qualitative research, are necessary but not enough to capture the complexity of the reality under ethical scrutiny. There is a shared view that we must be reluctant to

blindly follow abstract principles without considering the context. This situational ethics can help us to graduate the application of abstract ethical principles and also help us to be aware that QMRE is not a binary yes or no matter but rather it must be interpreted in gradual terms. The same ethical universal proviso needs to be interpreted and applied according to the specific circumstance of the researcher and the participant. It is probably based on first dissatisfaction about the application of abstract ethical principles that we may find the distinctive features of QMRE. These first premises allow us to set the focus of this literature review.

If we try to figure out the conceptual landscape of QMRE, we first find key-concepts related to ethical standards that become ethical areas of reflection. Transparency, confidentiality, consent, autonomy both of the researcher and of the participant. We also find keywords related to certain particularity of migration research and to particular status and target groups: irregular migrants, refugees, exclusion, exploitation, coercion, vulnerability, children (refugee, irregular, unaccompanied). Finally, we find core concepts underlining what is distinctive to QMRE, virtue ethics issues, such as cultural sensitivity, cross-cultural relations, inequality, discrimination, power relations. In fact, as this first literature shows, most of the ethical reflection areas arise in issues related to inequality and power relations, the two basic pillars of migration research, and in topics related to legality, identity and socio-economic personal circumstances.

There is probably also a lack of analytical distinction in this first emerging literature between an information-based and participant-based approach to QMRE. That is to place the centrality of QMRE either on information collection and management, or on the human relation of the researcher with the participant. Both are obviously interrelated but raise differentiated sets of ethical questions that need to be distinguished. Our intention is not to promote a single research approach or best practice, but rather to encourage further discussion and attention to the ways we collect, produce and use data-information that become at some point knowledge. In fact, most of the emerging literature focuses on research-to-participant relation rather than complementarily considering also research-data/information relations. These epistemological aspects are directly related not only to the quality of the research and its objectivity, but also to how the researcher collects and analyzes information. This unturned stone probably explains that the mainstream focus on ethical standards is more centered on consent rather than

confidentiality and transparency where we still do not have many articulated first reflections.

Finally, let us also underline what we may call "ethical conundrums" or "unresolved dilemmas" that the literature usually identifies. The first is framed within the research-to-participant relation. It has received different degrees of conceptualization: the research and engagement nexus (to different degrees some others speak about research/activism nexus, or in a more traditional formulation, the research/policy nexus) (Pickering & Kara, 2017). The second one more focused on the researcher-to information relation is less developed in the current QMRE debate, but nonetheless important: the public and private nexus. That is, which information must be public and which private, since doing research on international irregular migration may provide information to public authorities and may even harm the actual participants or others following the same routes.

The research and engagement nexus suggests that migration research is not a value-free activity. It refers to conscious social and political engagements. This focus reflects a balancing between risks of harm and benefits for participants (whether the potential social, political, legal benefits for participants outweigh the potential social, political, legal harm). The particularities of migrants are certainly due to their specific legal environment. This nexus also shows that ethical thinking becomes more urgent when researchers conduct their studies in a particular environment where there is a violation of human rights. In other words, to interview an irregular migrant may potentially be very dangerous for that person in certain countries, such as Italy. This process may be less problematic in other cases, such as when it concerns the incorporation of migrants into the mainstream of society. This too, however, may be full of obstacles and pitfalls, mainly related to ethics and legality, ethics and racism and discrimination, and ethics and power relations. The degree of ethical tensions always depends on the specific migrant subjectivity that may be difficult to share with an unknown researcher. This first review of the literature shows that much of the works are mostly focused on the specificity of target groups under research, mainly related to children and refugees, and they share the view of these particular trajectories and subjectivities.

Considering now the second ethical conundrum, without entering into the specificities of the goals of migration studies, we can say it is to produce knowledge about

migration dynamics and governance. The ethical reflection on the purpose of migration studies necessarily positions us between two avenues: either we answer that it is the production of knowledge by itself, following objectivity and quality, or we add that apart from scientific purposes, other goals may be pursued such as improving some aspects of the reality or contributing to social change or even influencing policy and social decision-making. When incorporating an ethical reflection, one necessarily sees knowledge production not as an end in itself but an instrument or mediator with some other public goals (Boswell, 2009). It is this avenue that pushes most of the migration research towards a situational ethics (or even occupational ethics). An ethical reflection on migration research necessarily goes beyond the simple knowledge-based approach and invites us to think about the value-relevant knowledge we may produce for public use. At this level, ethical criteria are applied to migration research as a whole social science area of knowledge, rather than the same process of migration research. It is much more, and ontological view of the meaning and sense of migration research per se.

What we may infer is that both ethical conundrums are directly related to one of the most important parts of research design. Thinking beyond the research arena implies thinking about the social and political impact of the research, about the influence our research may have on social change, and on the impact it may have in modifying particular migrant circumstances. In other words, it is a combination of engagement and public mindedness (the two ethical conundrums).

Let us end this first outline by pointing out the need of working the link between ethics and ideology. This nexus is probably invisible in the current emerging QMRE literature because most of the works are done at the micro level. Meso level analyses that exclusively promote reflections on the relation between researchers with NGOs and CSOs, and even political parties are extremely rare. For instance, consider that we are conducting research on xenophobic political parties, which may involve interviewing and carrying out participant observation with extremists with anti-migrant agendas. This is an excellent environment where ethics meets ideology. Ideological considerations may be linked to ethical considerations in the sense that researchers may directly oppose the xenophobic narrative but must follow the criteria of objectivity and quality of information beyond this ideological consideration. We can even add that ethical issues arise with the amount of attention being given to different groups. This is something that many

journalists are also confronting with far right groups that benefit from the attention they are getting even if it is in the form of negative coverage.

It is here that one must be ethically aware that one cannot offer biased information and analysis, and act following the universal ethical rules of transparency and confidentiality. These ideological ethical considerations can also come when one realizes someone is not telling the truth and manipulating the migration-related reality. All these ideological specific ethical issues could better arise at the meso and macro levels and it is completely under-researched. The micro focus often leads researchers to follow a much more service and assistance driven view of ethics or what is now being called ethics of care. To think in terms of the tension between ethics and ideology would probably force us to also go beyond this situational ethics.

2. Ethical issues at different research stages

After mapping the particularities of QMRE, let us now go into identifying ethical challenges at different research stages: before, during, and after fieldwork. Our objective is not to provide an all-inclusive list of ethical challenges in the field. This would not be feasible considering the fact that each research is unique and requires tailored ethical attention. But this may help to develop critical ethical consciousness.

2.1. Before the fieldwork

The selection of certain topics, framing research questions, and conceptual choices and their definitions have significant effects on the research process and its outputs. Therefore, the research design, even before having contact with participants, includes various ethical dilemmas. The urge of knowing "everything" without critically reflecting on what to study, how, and why may be more harmful than beneficial (van Liempt & Bilger, 2012, p. 455). These dilemmas are more pronounced in research with migrants, who often occupy precarious positions in their host societies and live at the edge of political, social, or economic discrimination. When human suffering in any form is at the core of what is being studied, academic sophistication is necessary but not a sufficient condition that justifies the research. As David Turton argues, researching other people's sufferings can only be justified if the research explicitly aims at alleviating that suffering (Turton 1996, 96; cited in Jacobsen and Landau 2003).

Knowledge production in the area of migration research cannot be isolated from the current political conflicts and controversies. In this sense, migration research is often a double-edge sword: developing rigorous knowledge that is intended to guide relevant actors' endeavors to improve migrants' vulnerabilities comes at the risk of being used and abused by anti-migrant forces. For instance, studying the topic of undocumented migrants becomes an ethical question in itself, since some argue that states and their security agents have an inherent interest in the findings. Producing knowledge on irregular migration routes and strategies harms irregular migrants by making this information available to security agencies as well. On the other hand, others point out the importance of societal benefits of such research outweighing potential risks (Düvell et al., 2010). As this example shows, even selecting a research topic in migration studies brings up complex ethical questions.

Theoretical and conceptual choices, categories, and their definitions matter. They shape the overall research perspective and therefore conclusions. Migration scholars often criticize the use of national and ethnic lenses to conceptualize migration and migration-related processes. Yet, ethical issues involved in "methodological nationalism" and "methodological ethnicity" are often overlooked. Methodological nationalism is defined as "an ideological orientation that approaches the study of social processes and historical processes as if they were contained within the borders of individual nation-states" (Glick Schiller, 2008, pp. 3–4). It assumes a "supposedly natural congruence between national, territorial, political, cultural and social boundaries" (Dahinden, 2016, p. 3). Ethnic groups are perceived as "logical" units of analysis under methodological nationalism (Glick Schiller, 2008, p. 3). In this respect, migration-related differences are naturalized and normalized. The category of migrants assumes their inherent and eternal difference from the host-society and is understood as a problematic "exception to the rule of sedentariness within the boundaries of the nation-state" (Wimmer & Schiller, 2003, p. 585). In this sense, the nation-state vision of society is likely to suffer from describing migrants "as political security risks, as culturally others, as socially marginal, and as an exception to the rule of territorial confinement" (Wimmer & Schiller, 2003, p. 599).

While the usage of the category of migrants within the paradigm of methodological nationalism involves ethical issues, abandoning this category would also turn a blind eye to existing sufferings, social inequalities, discriminatory processes, and the instrumentalization of the migration topic by far-right wing actors. As the French

context shows "choosing not to use ethnic and racial categories" in social scientific research will carry the risk of "remain(ing) ignorant of discriminatory processes, in order to support a colorblind society" (Amiraux & Simon, 2006, p. 204). Classifying the ethnic groups under study is a necessary tool for constructing equal opportunity policies and fighting against discrimination and racism (Jacobs, 2018, pp. 135–136).

Classification and categorization of ethnic groups must be a critical and self-conscious process. While migration is under political scrutiny and at the center of public debates, it may not be the relevant framework that explains the social phenomenon under the study (Dahinden, 2016, p. 7). The category of migration intersects with other categories such as gender, social class, education, and age. Exploring the dynamics of this intersection may provide a better analytical tool than solely relying on migrants as unit of analysis. In this way, migrants can be studied not as "a homogeneous and solidary group" but as "heterogeneous category" (Brubaker, 2013, p. 7). This critical and self-reflexive stance towards our categories not only would help us produce rigorous analyses but contribute to the ethical self-consciousness that we develop throughout the research.

2.2. During the fieldwork

All research designs -from pure document analyses to ethnographic studies-regardless of their degree of human contact include ethical issues that need to be considered. Yet, research with human participants give a special dimension to research ethics, since it may include serious risks that may risk the welfare of people joining the research. Research ethics during qualitative fieldworks include various issues such as entry to the field, recruitment of participants, the role of gate keepers and key informants; potential power asymmetries and their consequences; autonomy of participants, voluntary participation, and informed consent; confidentiality and anonymity; research transparency and trust; and potential harms, risks, and benefits. These ethical issues become even more pressing when participants are migrants who try to establish new lives in often unwelcoming host societies. Pre-given ethical prescriptions, while providing some standard for good research practices, are usually far from addressing the complex ethical issues emerging during the fieldwork. Therefore, ethical research becomes the one that is capable of evaluating each research instance from an ethical lens, reflexively responding to unexpected situations, and as Webster et. al. (2014, p. 78) argues "developing an ethical consciousness that puts participants' interests at the heart of decision-making".

Access to the field and recruiting participants: A smooth entry to the field is the first condition to succeed with empirically grounded qualitative research that includes human participants. The importance of recruiting a representative sample that reflects the general characteristics of the population under the study has been one of the well-established methodological rules. However, achieving a representative sample also becomes an ethical challenge in QMR, since sloppy sampling strategies carry a high risk of recruiting the most available and accessible participants while leaving the most vulnerable and hard-to-reach people outside of the research radar. Therefore, ethical issues do not only require protection of participants from potential harms but also include the researchers' responsibility to enable the participation of those disadvantaged groups that can easily be overlooked and stay out of the research. In other words, ethical qualitative research must include "diverse views and not just the easiest to reach" (Webster et al., 2014, p. 103).

Snowball sampling strategies and the sampling through gatekeepers are often seen as effective solutions for including hard-to-reach and hidden populations to the research. Yet, migration researchers show the limits of these traditionally adopted sampling strategies, when the targeted population is vulnerable migrants (Dahinden & Efionayi-Mäder, 2009; Jacobsen & Landau, 2003). First of all, some migration research contexts are logistically inaccessible. For instance, any sampling strategy may fail in refugee camps or in detention centers where researchers are unauthorized or in conflict zones under authoritarian rules where researchers face life-threatening risks. In these extreme settings, negotiating access becomes both a practical and an ethical challenge (Vogler, 2007). Secondly, both snowball sampling and gatekeepers can end up with biased selection of participants. Snowball sampling already has a bad fame for producing unrepresentative samples with tendency to homogeneity depending on the researchers' entry point. Gatekeepers may mediate the participant selection process in different respects and may lead to biased sampling as well. This is why multiple snowball entries and working with diverse gatekeepers becomes important for ethical research. Third, the issues of confidentiality and anonymity can become problematical in such sampling strategies. The breach of confidentiality can become particularly problematical in the case of migrants, especially when they have precarious legal status. Fourth, the role of gatekeepers always needs to be watched critically. Power relations between the key actors and the rest of the group can result in pressure to participate (or not participate) and can

influence the authenticity of responses. Fifth, snowball sampling is particularly challenging for highly mobile populations, since the participants might not know the exact names and contact information of their acquaintances (Dahinden & Efionayi-Mäder, 2009).

Voluntary participation and informed consent: One of the key pillars of ethical research practice is ensuring voluntary and informed participation. Informed consent draws on the principle of respecting people's decision-making autonomy. It is based on the research participants' right to know that they are taking part in research, right to be informed about the nature of research, its main objectives, expected benefits and potential risks, funders, the research process, right to withdraw without a cost, and the right to know how the collected data will be protected and archived (Ryen, 2016, p. 126). While informed consent looks like a straight-forward issue at first sight, it includes many intriguing questions such as how to ensure that the consent is voluntary, how much information to give for participants to be informed, how to prove the consent if written-consent is not available, and how to gain consent in "street ethnography" type of research (Shaw, 2008).

QMRE shows that the standard interpretation of informed consent is not sufficient in working with migrants. The first issue that migration researchers need to tackle is the informed consent across different cultural and linguistic contexts. Language barriers between the researcher and participants can pose important challenges to the process of informed participation (Hunter-Adams & Rother, 2017; Watkins et al., 2012). Even though "getting lost in translation" can be alleviated through local researchers and translators, the cultural differences in understanding and interpreting the informed consent still confront migration researchers. Existing research already documents the problems in comprehension of informed consent in non-Western contexts. For instance, acquiring first-person informed consent from each participant becomes a problematical issue in group-oriented societies with traditional authority like tribe leaders (IJsselmuiden & Faden, 1992). Cultural norms of hospitality may promote apparent consent without true voluntariness (Akesson et al., 2018).

Informed consent in migration research has further challenges that go beyond cultural and linguistic differences. For instance, research with "unaccompanied" and "separated" children makes the ethical requirement for obtaining the parental consent

impossible. In the absence of parents, many legal contexts deem local social workers as responsible adults. Yet, this might create ambiguities as researchers try to determine which social workers are actually present in the lives of these children (Hopkins, 2008).

As many ethical guidelines point out the asymmetrical position between researchers and participants put the voluntariness of informed consent at risk. This ethical problem is further pronounced in research with migrants. Migration scholars such as Hugman (2011) and Mackenzie *et. al*. (2007) criticize individualistic and liberal notions of autonomy that informs research ethics and propose the idea of "relational autonomy". In this point of view, autonomy is "a socially acquired capacity, its development can be thwarted or stunted by oppressive or abusive relationships and by oppressive social institutions, norms and practices." (Mackenzie et al., 2007, p. 310). Traumatic experiences of vulnerable migrants and/or their non-Western background do not take away their competences to understand the principle of giving and withdrawing consent. Yet the stark power differentials and the extreme conditions that these migrants are living may force them to consent the research (Hugman et al., 2011, p. 1278). The issue of voluntary participation becomes even further complicated when researchers' requests for participation creates illusion of some sort of assistance to their desperate situations. Mackenzie *et. al*. (2007) defends the need of "iterative consent" that includes establishment of ongoing ethical relationships throughout the research, where participants can refine and re-negotiate the terms of the project. Iterative consent is based on the idea of "the research as a partnership", which enables "refugee participants and communities to play a more active role in setting the research agenda so that it answers better to their needs and respects their concerns and values" (ibid. p. 307).

Anonymity and confidentiality: Confidentiality means not disclosing the identity of who has taken part in research and not disseminating the specific data that can help identify the participants unless they specifically prefer to be identified. While confidentiality is one of the basic pillars of research ethics, it is recognized that under certain circumstances researchers may need to breach confidentiality intentionally. Intentional breach of confidentiality stems from either a legal duty to disclose crime-related information or a moral duty to disclose information for protecting participants who are being victims of a crime (Wiles et al., 2008). Regardless of its causes, breaching confidentiality deliberately is a highly contested topic and researchers can take different positions depending on their epistemological perspectives on the researchers' role, their

ethical reasoning, and their personal values (Surmiak, 2019). The issue becomes particularly controversial in research with undocumented migrants, refugees, and asylum-seekers who live in precarious legal status. In this respect, migration researchers may encounter more instances where "law-first" perspectives that subjugate ethics to law come into conflict with "ethic-first" perspectives where researchers hold an ethical course of action at the cost of defying a court order or engaging in civil disobedience (Lowman & Palys, 2014). For instance, Bernhard and Young (2009) mention how the Canadian legal framework undermines "absolutely guaranteed confidentiality" in research, since the courts can issue subpoena (a writ that compels testimony) to the researchers. This legal regulation becomes particularly detrimental for research on migrants living with precarious legal status, since the legal obligation of disclosing information about the participants can end up with their detention and deportation; or researchers' disobedience with the court order can result in going to jail. As a result, Bernhard and Young report how they changed their research design to avoid any risk of legal obligation to disclose information.

Not all breaches of confidentiality are intentional. Sometimes researchers unintentionally disclose information that can reveal the identity of participants. Qualitative research faces greater risk of unintentional breach of confidentiality considering its in-depth and detailed data and small number of cases (Webster et al., 2014). In migration studies, qualitative research on migrant elites, relevant stakeholders, and NGOs can be more exposed to such risks because of the small numbers of the potential participants.

Some extreme migration research settings demonstrate that blindly following procedural ethical principles of confidentiality might actually harm the participants. Akesson et. al. (2018, p. 30) note that "(i)n often crowded and watchful refugee settings, the act of entering a private space with a research participant can be a very visible and public act", which can pose higher risks to the participants. Their research once more confirms that migration scholars need to take active and self-conscious ethical decisions depending on the unfolding research setting, rather than blindly following pre-given principles.

Minimizing risk and maximizing benefits: The other pillar of QMRE is researchers' duty of balancing the risk of harm against the potential for benefits. While

scholars argue that the risk of harm in social sciences is relatively lower compared to biomedical research (Wiles, 2012, p. 55), this argument may not be valid for migration studies. Especially, research with vulnerable migrants since it can expose the participants to a range of risks including physical and mental harm. While "do not harm" is a golden rule of research ethics, migration scholars argue that it is insufficient (Block et al., 2013; Hugman et al., 2011; Mackenzie et al., 2007; Pittaway et al., 2010). Firstly, blindly following procedural no harm procedures can still cause harm to sensitive populations, if researchers do not critically evaluate the rising ethical issues. As mentioned earlier, Akesson et. al. (2018)'s concerns about following confidentiality procedures in "crowded and watchful" setting of refugee camp exemplify this situation. Secondly, "do not harm" procedure, while passively protecting participants, it does not contribute to *enable* participation of vulnerable and hard-to-reach populations. In this respect, migration researchers have the ethical duty of not only protect but also empower migrants to enable their participation in research.

Fair distribution of risks and benefits is another issue that particularly challenges migration researchers. The ethical principle of *justice* poses the questions of who will carry the research's burden and who will benefit from the research. Migration studies requires some additional consideration around this issue. As Leaning (2001) states high levels of fluidity and mobility of migrant participants reduce their chances of directly benefitting from the research. In other words, when the research is completed and has an impact on policymaking, the very participants of the research may no longer be residing in the research's locality. If there is such a risk, migration researchers must inform the participants about not being able to benefit from the research directly.

2.3. After the fieldwork

Ethical issues do not end with the fieldwork. The stages of analysis and interpretation of data, and dissemination of findings have their own ethical issues in QMR. It is often stated that "all representations are partial, partisan, and problematic" (Goodall 2000, 55 cited in Davila 2014). In other words, representations only partially tell the truth, are always mediated by researchers' interpretative authority, and can never guarantee how they will be understood by different audiences. That is why there has been increasing scholarly attention on the "ethics of representation" (Pickering & Kara, 2017) . Beyond these general problems, representations pose some specific ethical challenges in migration studies. Researchers working on politicized topics such as migration have

further ethical duties, which demand that their representations would not cause harm on the lives of participants. As "data do not speak for itself", migration researchers need to evaluate their findings critically and be aware that the way they represent their findings can fuel anti-migrant rhetoric or even reinforce security or reactive policies. QMR can do more harm than benefit if the research output perpetuates stereotypes and render migrant groups essentialized, homogenized, timeless, and voiceless. Linking migration to security threats, crime, welfare sponges, and/or non-integrable groups who are in constant conflict with their host societies would make migrants' lives even harder. Therefore, migration researchers need to carefully evaluate which information to release and how to frame it.

At the post-fieldwork stage, connecting back with participants and taking their feedback on findings and how they are interpreted support the ethical values of respect and reciprocity. Sharing the results with people who helped to produce them is a way of "giving back" to the community under the study. Researchers must be ready to hear about the disagreements and critical opinions raised by the participants. In case of the rapid and significant change in the field context or plans for new uses of the data, researchers would need to re-seek participants' informed consent in the post-field period (Knott, 2019). For instance, diaspora studies might need to confirm participants' consent during the post-fieldwork if researchers suspect that recent developments (e.g. sudden regime changes or democratic crackdowns happening back in homeland) would pose new risks of harm on the participants. Evidently, seeking re-consent has a short time limit. Once the research is published and becomes publicly available, the post-fieldwork consent confirmation will not be possible. Migration researchers face some additional challenges when they intend to engage back with their participants, share the findings and re-seek their consent, because of the participants' potential mobility. When migration researchers return to the field, there is a high chance that their participants already moved somewhere else. Therefore, as stated earlier, migration researchers must inform their participants about the risk of not being able to engage back when they first seek their consent.

As ethical guidelines instruct, migration researchers are also responsible for securely protecting and archiving the data. Some key principles include storing participants' personal information separately from research data and storing the files in lockable cabinets or password protected devices. Data protection becomes a more complex issue in cross-border research, as different legal systems might have different regulations. Data protection also poses new challenges in the context of online cloud storage. Data encryption as well as online storage in secure servers become important

ethical practices. Details of how the data will be archived must be explained during the fieldwork while getting the informed consent.

Recently, there has been an increasing demand -especially by the research funders- to provide open data access in order to ensure research transparency. Promotion of data sharing intends to provide methodological and substantive insights from already existing research, avoiding duplication of research efforts, and achieving better value for research funding (Wiles et al., 2008, p. 88). However, data sharing raises important ethical challenges for QMR. First, small sample size and in-depth accounts put confidentiality at risk, even though data is fully anonymized. Second, not having the control of how the data will be used in the future, by whom, and for which purposes challenges the initial informed consent. The politicized nature of migration issues and the sensitivity of migration research data elevates the significance of these ethical concerns.

Once the research is completed and publicly disseminated, researchers would have even less control over how the information is used (or mis-used). Politicized topics such as migration attracts even more audience. Results of migration research do not exclusively stay in academic surroundings but are heard by diverse actors. As migration issues have greater media coverage than before, journalists are more interested in reporting about migration research. Yet, it is already known that media reporting often favors negative and distorted representation of migration issues, as opposed to providing thorough and complex perspectives. The link between mediatization and politicization of migration issues is evident today (Triandafyllidou, 2017). Düvell et. al. (2010, p. 235) report that QMR tends to receive relatively little negative media attention, as journalists are more eager to quote statistics and quantify the social phenomena. Yet, qualitative migration researchers still need to be careful in their engagement with media.

3. Conclusion

There has been a rising interest in ethical issues in all fields of social research. This is particularly evident in the rapid growth of procedural research ethics including an unprecedented expansion of research ethics boards, ethical codes and guidelines, and standardized ethics-checks requirements by the funding agencies. The previous disastrous breaches of ethical values such as the Tuskegee Syphilis study (1932-1972) or Milgram's experiment on obedience to authority (1963) have shown the importance of formalized ethical procedures and review processes. Currently, there are ample ethical guidelines and

codes provided by various social science organizations and professional associations such as the Economic and Social Research Council, Market Research Society, and the British Psychological Association. While they take different perspectives depending on their area of expertise, these guidelines identify important and hard-to-question ethical principles that must guide research practice such as respect for *autonomy* of participants (the importance of voluntariness, informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity), *beneficence* (the responsibility to do good), *nonmaleficence* (the responsibility to avoid harm) and *justice* (the importance of the benefits and burdens of research being distributed equally).

Despite the prevalence of standardized ethics regulations and reviews, there have been increasing concerns and doubts about their role in the field of qualitative research (Laine, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1989; Lincoln & Tierney, 2004; Mauthner et al., 2002). Fixed ethical rules are often found unsuitable to the flexible and responsive practice of qualitative research (Webster et al., 2014; Wiles, 2012). As qualitative researchers make their decisions dynamically and respond to emerging situations, many new ethical dilemmas can arise that cannot be predicted at the outset. Therefore, ethical dilemmas are thought to be situational and contextual, that cannot be addressed by pre-fixed answers, but requires researchers' active ethical consciousness and "continuous moral responsibility" (Ryen, 2016, pp. 133–134). The formalized guidelines may become insensitive to "the inherent nature of tensions, fluidity, and uncertainty of ethical issues arising from qualitative research" (Aluwihare-Samaranayake 2012, 66; also in Denzin and Giardina 2007). Blind adherence to pre-given ethical codes are thought to harm especially some areas of qualitative research, as they become off limits e.g. investigative/covert research, studies of illegal activities, vulnerable groups, or publicly accountable elites (Shaw, 2008). Research Ethics Committees (RECs), despite their important role in ensuring researchers' compliance with ethical procedures, are criticized for developing into an "ethics creep". This is because they expand their mandate beyond original research ethics formulations (Haggerty, 2004), increasingly impeding certain forms of innovative, qualitative, or critical social scientific research and alternative epistemological perspectives (Lincoln & Tierney, 2004). As well as for forcing researchers to reframe their research needs according to the formal regulations but not according to the needs of their fieldwork (Bernhard & Young, 2009), and for paternalistically deciding participants' competences for risk taking (Edwards et al., 2004).

Therefore, the ethics of qualitative research designs is considered to pose distinctive demands and special considerations.

In the context of this debate, this article has shown how much we need distinctive ethical considerations that go beyond pre-fixed and standardized guidelines for Migration Studies. The European Commission's *Guidance note — Research on refugees, asylum seekers & migrants* (2014) points out that "Research on refugees, asylum seekers and migrants concerns a *particularly vulnerable group* which needs *particular safeguards* in terms of research ethics". The standardized guidelines may be either too broad to address the specific ethical challenges stemming from this vulnerability or may even misguide the researchers when they do not properly address to the specificities of migration research contexts. Qualitative migration researchers must actively engage in ethical considerations and take decisions at all stages of their research. The very politicized nature of migration in today's world gives extra responsibility to researchers to consider how their research topics and questions will influence the public and political debates and whether the produced knowledge may be used and abused by the anti-migrant forces. Standard ethics guidelines on confidentiality and anonymity may become insufficient and sometimes misleading as researchers deal with unpredictable ethical challenges of migration research. Special research settings such as refugee camps and detention centers may make the act of entering in a private conversation potentially dangerous for some participants (Akesson et al., 2018). Different languages and cultural backgrounds may make the informed consent procedures more complicated for migration researchers. Returning the benefits of the research to the participants becomes more challenging in the case of mobile populations. For these reasons among others, it becomes an important task to explore particular ethical characteristics of QMR, and last, but not least, to include it as compulsory dimension to be covered by Higher Education Programmes. Young scholars must be quickly aware of the ethical implications of their research, and as early as they develop their critical ethical consciousness, the better for the ethical requirements of whatever QMR. As we put forward at the outset: "any research decision is an ethical decision".

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