Action Research and Academic Skills: Co-Creating with Refugee Women

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The suffering of refugees, stateless, asylum seeking and undocumented people have been broadcast widely in the media. Their grief, pain and loss commodified, packaged and sold as shocking news meant to appeal to our better instincts at best, and at the worst meant to awaken our collective fears of the unknown stranger, an invasion of the other. Glimpses into their lives, perspectives and experiences are rarely given in their own voices. Often their suffering and pain is placed outside the realm of our (usually Western audience's) understanding. This basic inability to connect emotionally and empathetically with forced migrants' hopes and suffering denies them (and perhaps ourselves) access to a basic shared humanity. If we cannot connect with their stories, can we truly understand them? More worryingly, are the stories which are seen in the media actually representative?

During the past 6 years on my PhD, these observations required me to ask; how can we find better pathways for refugee self-representation both in the media and perhaps also within academia? I started this process by asking myself how I might make the dissemination, from my own PhD, more inclusive. And thinking more widely, how (as academics, researchers and practitioners) we can increase the space for connection and co-creation of ideas, articles and images.

In this special issue for Displaced Voices we bring together four refugee women community leaders in Kuala Lumpur; Naima Ismail, Sharifah Shakirah who translates for Syedah Husain, Parisa Ally and Arifa Sultana. Their writings are based on their experiences of refugeehood in Kuala Lumpur. Their stories and perspectives highlight their advocacy and activism to support their communities as well as the real challenges and hardships of the women they work for. Alongside their papers we bring in the work of Amin Kamrani as a photographer, who has worked with the refugee communities and documented their lived realities and ability to create change. In this issue we present some of his photography as well as his article that stresses the lack of visibility faced by refugees in the media.

In this article I will document all our writing journeys these past 6 months. We hope to show how the collaboration between Paul Dudman of the Living Refugee Archive, Amin Kamrani, Arifa Sultana and myself as a Doctoral researcher in Law and Development worked to create this issue. The past six months have been a testament to the importance of listening and patience as well as important lessons in learning from participatory and inclusive practices in academic publishing.

I'd learned from my work with refugees previously and my PhD participatory action research (PAR) project that marginalised groups have little space to have a voice in public spaces; academia, the media or at policy-levels. I hoped through applying PAR to discover ways to be more inclusive not only in my research but also in academic writing, collaborations

with other researchers or spaces where decisions are made that impact refugee communities. This meant, of course, finding ways to be co-creative, inclusive and participatory outside the scope of my own PhD. Leading me to work with the participants to generate project ideas, potential ways to disseminate with a greater sense of ownership.

By connecting with the Living Refugee Archives, through Paul Dudman, I was able to consider how applying PAR in publishing with participants can ensure that research outputs are more representative. These outputs, however, did not need to be limited to the scope of my own findings, but also be considerate of where the participants found themselves now years after my fieldwork ended. When working with marginalised or vulnerable communities, it is important to have and maintain trust. And, this trust I found is not easily cultivated nor kept. As a researcher, it meant needing to be reflexive and even challenging of my own practice both during and long after the fieldwork. In this dissemination, I was consistently questioning whether I was 'taking over' in the writing process or if we were working together to communicate an authentic message based on the participants' goals, desires and needs. It is easy even with the best of intentions to overwhelm another's voice.

We hope despite the difficulties we can demonstrate how using this approach can benefit how we communicate research ideas, broadening our ability to connect and make impact with the communities who are often the focus of our research (though not often included in how we speak of the outcomes). The final important message I would like to communicate is that the standards of academic writing do not need to be an impediment to including refugees as writers of their own stories. Indeed, academic communication can allow for inclusive spaces for marginalised communities to strengthen their voices as well as disseminate the messages from our research findings.

Action Research in Malaysia

From 2017 to 2018 I conducted a participatory action research project where I trained and worked alongside community leaders from the Afghan, Syrian, Somali and Rohingya communities. I arrived in Malaysia in 2017 to conduct the fieldwork for my Doctorate in Law and Development (under the EDOLAD programme with Tilburg University). I went to Malaysia with the hope to gain a greater understanding of the lived experiences of the forced migrant community development actors despite the legal difficulties which formed their context. To understand their voices, perspectives, motivations and daily lives as they fulfilled the roles they had assigned themselves in providing services or support to their communities. Despite its history of hosting refugees, Malaysia is not a state party to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees nor its' 1967 Protocol. This means for the many thousands of refugees, asylum seekers and stateless communities living in Malaysia they have limited access to healthcare, education and public services. The right to work is restricted, leaving people to rely on cash in hand employment and often 3D work (Dirty, Dangerous and Difficult or in some cases Demeaning). It was during my action research fieldwork, I first met and got to know Naima Ismail,



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Photo Credit: Amin Kamrani, 20/20 Exhibition

Photo Titled: Photo No. 4: After the rain

Taken in: Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Hosted through collaboration between Amin Kamrani (photographer) and the Living Refugee Archives 20/20 Photos are available for purchase with 60% percent going to refugee communities in need

20 copies of 20 photographs taken in the year 2020

...With the last train
they arrive home
Her eyes,
At the time of farewell,
Turn larger and blacker
In the blackness of her eyes,
And
Blackness of the night,
They walked up
the wet stairs…

Ahmadreza Ahmadi

Sharifah Shakirah, Parisa Ally and Arifa Sultana. I learned how, despite the lack of legal status for many, they were able to develop their communities and work towards shared common goals of inclusion, provision of basic services, sharing of resources and social support. I conducted training where we discussed how research is created and how they might input more community and academic approaches into their own work. We connected on experiences of shared trauma and emotional challenges. We worked together closely over the period of 11 months. We jointly conducted interviews, focus groups and discussed how they might use this information for themselves. Due to the strong participatory ethos of action research, I kept contact with many of the participants and interviewees after returning from the field to the Netherlands. I continued to work with them and provide support or listen as they required. As the result of numerous discussions, we finally came to the idea of publishing this short special issue. With the aim being to provide a platform for the women who are often hidden in the view of the media to have a greater voice.

Originally our project aimed to produce a photovoice issue. This photovoice project hoped to provide a space for the forced migrants to self-direct how they are represented, frame their own stories and resilience in dealing with the current crisis. We wanted to show the need for a participatory approach in modern-day Malaysia to be an antidote to ongoing media backlash against refugees and worsening political and financial situation as a result of COVID-19. Unfortunately, however the worsening spread of the virus and the Movement Control Orders placed by the Malaysian government meant it became difficult to connect with the communities. The forced migrant communities were placed under an extreme stress; more vulnerable to the spread of COVID-19 and lack of work meant many families needing to rely on emergency food supplies from local community organisations and NGOs. There is a worrying undercurrent within Malaysia's media reporting and social media discourse blaming and discriminating against forced migrants. This alongside the increase of government crackdowns has meant the communities are living with increased fear for their safety. Unfortunately, in our project this meant having to pull the photovoice project.

Moving on from the photovoice I instead chose to return to the basic principles of PAR practice and reconnect with the women leaders who I had worked with during my fieldwork. We rethought how we could allow space for self-representation and voice within the journal and use storytelling to our advantage to communicate what they felt was important.

Inclusive Publishing: Academic Skills and Co-Writing

An important lesson we have had to learn is that you cannot give anyone a voice. We have made and allowed space for those on the margins to speak, and to actively listen as they share their experiences. We tried to remember sharing experiences allows the possibility for collective action, but we cannot expect to place the burden for change on the most marginalised alone. Instead we need to be proactive to find ways to listen. We used this as a baseline philosophy in trying to find a new way forward.

I got in touch with the refugee women who I interviewed and trained in my doctoral project. Here we picked up the conversation of what their interests might be and what they wanted to communicate to a wider audience. Drawing on my experiences as an academic skills lecturer, I pulled together a plan where the leaders would be able to write their ideas and I would be able to support them through editing and teaching some basic academic skills. All the women wrote their own first drafts, chose the themes and final message. Ultimately, we had 4 editing stages, after this first draft was written. We gave support on narrative and structure, creating a flow through sentence structure, peer review and making the message clear. As a final stage myself and Paul Dudman edited the final typos and grammatical issues, but remained careful of changing the meaning.

As editors we never choose the main message or conceptual frameworks. I spent time to speak with women on their aims and message, ensuring that we made the words in the papers as close as possible to their ideas and voice. When clarifying issues related to grammar and vocabulary, we would explain and allow opportunities for the participants to respond. At times, we would spend hours on a video call to discuss how their message was being communicated and how they could become clearer in writing what they hoped to achieve. During the peer review stage the writers were able to read each other's works and use the same editing tips and advice. In the papers you will see where we have been included as either co-writers or as editors. As editors, this is in addition to the usual editorial duties but took a more active approach. The paper was primarily written by the participant and we would support them through the stages to think of structure, language and with questions to deepen their ideas. As co-writer, I often had to support them a little further in thinking on sentence construction and work with them to reorganise ideas. The primary drafts were always entirely their own as was the main message pf the paper. At times, they were unable to articulate, or needed some support to clarify their ideas. Here is where they spoke and I wrote, and we then compared how close to the meaning they wished to convey, I had made the words on the paper. Rather than rely on formal academic writing and editing processes, with this special issue we felt better to trust the creative, learning and collaborative journeys we all found ourselves on. Simply our editing process involved some 'teaching' but mostly asking questions and listening deeply. We chose to forego traditional citation and referencing (not because we do not believe the importance of this) but to allow the writers to have more control of their own writing style and voice.

In keeping with the theme of the original photovoice approach, we reached out to the writers to provide images that were meaningful to them. The images in the articles were chosen with the women and depict something that connected with them from either their own experience or came from moments in my research project. Unfortunately, we were unable to achieve our full objective of a photovoice issue, which would have involved the refugee contributors staging, framing and creating the images with us. We are the first to admit our process is not without its challenges. We hope, however, that in the following papers you can see the individual narrative style and voice of the refugee women who have shared their stories.