**Research with Formerly Abducted Mothers and Fathers in Post-conflict Northern Uganda: A Plea for Transparency**

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**The Reference List at the end of this chapter needs attention. I wrote to her and suggested she sends the amended list directly to you Joel.**

**Abstract:** Doing research with participants who have experienced traumatic events as a result of collective violence is fraught with methodological and ethical challenges. This chapter reflects on fieldwork undertaken with formerly abducted women and men in Kitgum District, Northern Uganda, who were forcibly recruited by the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) and became parents while in captivity. Based on these experiences, the chapter considers the methodological and ethical questions associated with ‘getting in’, collaboration with research brokers, autonomy, the agency and vulnerability of participants, narration, power and privilege, and data collection. Both the need for and limits of a reflexive and relational stance are explored, illustrating and underscoring the importance of being open about the choices, decisions, achievements and failures encountered in fieldwork and how these come about. Not being transparent about choices and decisions potentially limits the scrutiny and evaluation of research projects by all parties involved or engaged in the research.

**Introduction**

When setting up and implementing a research project, the researcher is ethically obliged to “guide, protect, and oversee the interests of the people he or she is studying” (Neuman 2011, 58). Moreover, doing research with participants who had experienced traumatic events as a result of collective violence is fraught with methodological and ethical challenges because of the many constraints in conflict and post-conflict settings (Balami and Umar, this volume; Clark-Kazak 2021; De Haene, Grietens, and Verschueren 2010). Researchers run the risk of potentially violating the ethic to ‘do no harm’, since they could expect participants to recount traumatizing experiences, the reliving of which can lead to distress, further trauma, and even re-victimization (El-Khani et al. 2013; World Health Organization 2007). Research among people whose social positions are precarious, such as former child soldiers and victims of sexual and gender-based violence, can expose personal histories that they would prefer to keep hidden from their families and communities, and revealing these experiences could exacerbate their distress or initiate discrimination and marginalization (Apio 2016; Balami and Umar, this volume; Kohrt, Rai, and Maharjan 2015; Quirk, Bunting, and Kiconco, this volume).

Having few financial and social resources can also impede participants’ autonomy in deciding to voluntarily participate in a research project (Atim, this volume; MacKenzie, McDowell, and Pittaway 2007; Schiltz and Büscher 2018). Participants may feel forced to participate and feel that they need to answer all the questions posed during interviews, hoping that full disclosure would increase their prospects of securing material support. Sometimes they may not have (full) access to sufficient information to understand the implications of their participation (Wessells 2009; World Health Organization 2007). On the other hand, scholars also point to the need to respect “participants’ capacities for self-determination and their agency and resilience and [to] avoid paternalism” (MacKenzie, McDowell, and Pittaway 2007, 309). They observe that participants could also perceive the research process as a way to have their voices heard and even become agents of advocacy for themselves and their peers (De Haene, Grietens, and Verschueren 2010; Wood 2006).

There will always be challenges associated with the potential extractive character of research, especially when projects are implemented in the Global South by researchers, institutions and funders from the Global North (Clark-Kazak 2021; Okyere, this volume; Quirk, Bunting, and Kiconco, this volume; van den Berg 2020). All too often, researchers enter the research site with pre-defined projects, collect data, and disappear without further communicating their findings or generating “knowledge which has value to the communities from which it came” (Bunting and Quirk 2020, 9).

So how do we act given the unpredictability of the many methodological and ethical issues encountered before, during, and after fieldwork—which can be even more complicated in (post-)conflict settings? Notwithstanding any number of guidelines and ‘best practice’ models, ”the bad news is that there are no definitive rules or universal principles that can tell you precisely what to do in every situation or relationship you may encounter, other than the vague and generic ‘do no harm” (Ellis 2007, 5). Researchers consequently need to reflect on the potential harm and benefits at every stage of the research process and be ready to adapt in ethical, moral and responsive ways to unforeseen circumstances (Lahman et al. 2011).

Choices and decisions are continuously made by research teams and responded to by participants and their environments. Often, however, these choices and decisions are not openly shared in research publications, that is, “ethics and methods are usually addressed in relative brief and frequently perfunctory terms (assuming they are explicitly addressed at all), which reflects their status as a prelude to the main event” (Quirk, Bunting, and Kiconco, this volume). This lack of description and reflection limits the scrutiny and evaluation of research projects by all the parties involved or engaged in the research, such as participants, research brokers, other scholars, CBOs/NGOs, funders and persons reading the publications. In this chapter, I want to plead for more transparency at all stages of the research process; openness about data collection, methods, analysis and interpretation to enable the persons involved in the research and various audiences to ”scrutinize your work and the evidence used to support your findings and conclusions” (Yin 2011, 19). Such open reflection can also support future researchers in anticipating similar ethical and methodological challenges (Clark-Kazak 2021). To illustrate the value of transparency, I shall be exploring some “ethically important moments and themes”, which constitute the “difficult, often subtle, and usually unpredictable situations that arise in the practice of doing research” (Guillemin and Gillam 2004, 262), including several opportunities, challenges, choices and decisions resulting out of a relational and reflexive ethical stance in setting up, implementing and phasing out a research project with mothers and fathers who became parents in forced captivity.

**Research and positionality**

Over twenty armed groups have tried to gain power since Yoweri K. Museveni’s army overthrew the Ugandan government in 1986 (Dolan and Hovil 2006). The armed conflict between the Ugandan government, led by President Museveni, and the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), led by Joseph Kony, has received great attention (Branch 2011; Dolan 2011). The LRA who organized major massacres, killing and maiming many, also abducted thousands of children and youth to serve as child soldiers. In this context of forced abduction, the LRA set up a highly organized and controlled system of forced marriages and parenthood (Atim, Mazurana, and Marshak 2018; Carlson and Maruzana 2008; Watye Ki Gen and CAP International 2013).The Ugandan government also forced approximately 1.8 million people, who accounted for about 90% of the Northern Ugandan population, into internally displaced people’s camps in which they experienced lack of adequate security and protection, food, water, sanitation, livelihood, educational opportunities and medical care, and overcrowding (Finnström 2008; Harlachter et al. 2006). Many people still experience the economic, physical, psychological and social consequences of this collective violence (Amanela et al. 2020; Mazurana, Marshak, and Atim 2019).

This chapter builds upon a previous eight-month stay in Northern Uganda, doing an internship and collecting data for a Master’s dissertation in the Lira and Gulu Districts in 2012 and 2013 while living in Uganda (mainly Kampala and Lira) from 2016 to 2021. I came to this context as an ‘outsider’; a white middle-class European female doctoral student funded by a European university. From the outset of the research project, I was involved as a researcher in the interuniversity research unit, the Centre for Children in Vulnerable Situations (CCVS). In 2015 I became increasingly involved in one of its practice centres, CCVS-Uganda, an international NGO providing mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) services for war-affected individuals, families and communities in Lango and the Acholi Sub-Region (Lira District, Oyam District and Alebtong District and, by the time I left the organisation at the beginning of 2021, Kitgum District), first as a representative of the board (2015-2017) and later on as the executive director (2018-2021). My positionality, both openly and unknowingly, influenced and shaped the methodological and ethical decisions that were made throughout the research (Bodineau & Lipandasi, this volume; Quirck, Bunting and Kiconco, this volume; Schulz, this volume), including processes of ‘getting in’, collaboration with research brokers, the autonomy, agency and vulnerability of the participants, narration, power and privilege, and completing the fieldwork.

I draw upon doctoral research focusing on the long-term effects of collective violence resulting from the armed conflict between the LRA and the Ugandan government, and specifically focuses on the upbringing of children in the Kitgum District in Northern Uganda. The study aims to yield a better understanding of the dynamics of change and transformation in physical and social settings, and the practices and beliefs about the upbringing of children in a context of (past) prolonged collective violence among specific target groups (see below). Furthermore, to the project explores sources of formal and informal support for caregivers in the upbringing of children before, during and after the conflict.

To explore the main research question, focus group interviews were conducted with various target groups living in the sub-counties of Mucwini, Lagoro and Omiya Anyima in Kitgum District.[[1]](#endnote-2) These included eleven persons who became parents while in forced captivity under the LRA. Specifically, seven mothers and four fathers aged between 26 and 38 years old were interviewed first. These participants were abducted when they were between 11 and 16 years old, and spent between 5 and 12 years in forced captivity. They became first-time parents when they were between 15 to 20 years old, with the majority having had two children while in captivity. Also included were five persons who were already parents living in internally displaced people’s camps in Northern Uganda and had lived there for at least three years, 43 persons above the age of fifty (‘elders’) who became parents before, during and after the armed conflict (using both focus groups and follow-up interviews), and eight social workers who had at least three years’ work experience in the development/humanitarian field. In addition to these recorded interviews and focus groups, I had numerous informal conversations with government leaders, community leaders, youth, social workers, fellow researchers, and parents of children/youth who were forcibly abducted and never returned home.

The research team included myself, the principal investigator, two white European female supervisors who are professors at universities in Belgium, and five Ugandan research assistants. The supervisors were not part of the data collecting team in the field but provided input to the data analysis, processing and interpretation. The research assistants, two females and three males, were fluent in the local language and provided simultaneous translation during all the interviews and focus group discussions. One of the assistants was recruited because of the support he provided in another doctoral research project in the same location, while the others were selected because they had expertise as counsellors in providing psychosocial support to the participants. Three were employed by a non-governmental organization providing mental health and psychosocial support services at the time of data collection. All of the members of the research team shaped the research process, as shall be illustrated in this chapter.

Four periods of fieldwork were undertaken to collect all the research data, between 2014 and 2016, totalling eight months. During my first fieldwork study in 2014, we explored the themes which relate to my research question and piloted an interview guide which included questions about the participants’ own upbringing, their experiences as caregivers before, during and after the forced abduction, and how they perceived upbringing in the future. In my second fieldwork study in 2015, we conducted focus group interviews with the different target groups described above. The last two periods of fieldwork in 2016 involved follow-up interviews and sharing all the personal collected accounts (member checks) with the forcibly abducted mothers and fathers only. Given the often complex and rich interviews conducted during the first two fieldwork periods, we decided to extend the contacts with this target group and to follow up with two forcibly abducted mothers during a period of about two years (July 2014 to July 2016) and the other mothers and fathers for one year (March 2015 to July 2016). Overall, we conducted at least four ‘official’ (recorded) interviews with each of the mothers and fathers.

**Working with Research Brokers and ‘Getting In’**

Gaining access to communities, individuals and organizations is a basic requirement of fieldwork (Schiltz and Büscher 2018); it is crucial in identifying participants as well as implementing and validating recommendations (Ogora 2013). Although getting introduced to the field through an established organization can prove helpful in certain research projects (see for example Schulz, this volume), I deliberately chose not to be affiliated with any organization because part of my research interrogated the support sources available to caregivers. Having participants who are mobilized by an organization could shape this information; participants could be hesitant to openly discuss the support they are receiving. It could also create the expectation of receiving additional support or feeling compelled to take part in the research (Quirck, Bunting, and Kiconco, this volume; Schiltz and Büscher 2018; Schulz, this volume). Given my position as an outsider, I had to work with different research brokers in the field who connected me to (potential) participants, including gatekeepers, research assistants and participant mobilizers.

After receiving clearance from the Ethical Committee of Ghent University, I passed through several government offices in Uganda which have gatekeepers positioned at different levels; the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST)[[2]](#endnote-3) on national level, the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) and the Resident District Commissioner (RDC) on district level[[3]](#endnote-4), the Local Council (LC) III and the Sub-County Chief on Sub-County level[[4]](#endnote-5), and the Local Council (LC) I at village level[[5]](#endnote-6). Following Otim (this volume), we noticed that “to get through, you have to make sure your letters are in order, visit the right people, and make the right calls. Courtesy calls are a must”. Aside from these actors, there are many other players in the field, often with their own agendas and interests (Schiltz and Büscher 2018), such as persons who want to be part of the research project to gain experience as research assistants or to secure financial gains. Although opportunities, restrictions and risks are connected to using a formal political system, we noticed that it gave our research more credibility among local leaders and participants. After obtaining consent from the government offices on different levels, contact was sought with different categories of participants in various ways.

In collaboration with the research assistants and the Kitgum NGO Forum, I mapped out the organizations in Kitgum District that were providing or used to provide services to people experiencing challenges and difficulties because of the armed conflict. The social workers included in this research were mainly contacted from their workplaces. After duly informing them about all aspects of the study, they were asked to participate in a recorded one-on-one interview in English.

To establish contact with all of the other participants, we organized a general informative meeting in every sub-county to which officials, representatives, potential participants and anyone interested to learn more about the research were invited. These meetings occurred at the start of the first two fieldwork periods, and were designed to simultaneously inform a broader audience about the research and to alert potential participants who were able to attend as part of a larger group of people, as opposed to singling them out (Kohrt, Rai, and Maharjan 2015; World Health Organization 2007). This approach was necessary to avoid initiating or aggravating stigmatization of specific target groups by exposing their histories to their wider communities. The participants who were forcibly recruited wanted to shield their engagement with the LRA from their families to avoid compromising their marriages and/or protect the children born to them in captivity. As our research shows, this was especially a concern for the mothers who participated in the research, since their experiences of being forcibly married and giving birth to children in captivity often complicated their post-conflict marital relationships (Apio 2016; Atim, Mazurana, and Marshak 2018; Kiconco 2015). Furthermore, participants’ choices to (at least partly) disclose or silence the context in which their children were born was framed within and repeatedly negotiated around various factors. These included the age of the child (an informal assessment of the child’s level of being ‘knowledgeable’/’clever’), the emotional impact of disclosure, the perceived stigmatization of the child leading to either wanting to frame the child’s experiences (e.g., by explaining to the child why s/he was being stigmatized) or shielding the child from potential future stigmatization (e.g., by concealing or denying the context in which the child was born), the need for belonging and knowing one’s identity, and the lack of resources and support in the upbringing of children (e.g., land, school fees, caregivers).

During the informative meetings at the sub-counties, a participant mobilizer who brokered the first contact between myself, my research assistants and potential participants living in the respective sub-counties, was appointed. Two of these mobilizers were parish chiefs and one represented local council (LC) I. In addition, because experiences of being forcibly recruited are highly sensitive, to the point where some people had not disclosed their full histories to their families and communities, snowball sampling was used to contact most of the mothers and fathers who became parents in captivity. Five of these participants ( two men and one woman) were referred by our mobilizers.

In a few instances it was also necessary to gain access at the family level. For example, after reaching the home of one of the fathers who was forcibly recruited and initiating a follow-up interview, he received a call from his brother who queried who we were and what we were doing at his home. We also had to engage with the family members (a mother and two husbands) of some of our participants, mostly the mothers, to explain why they were taking part in the interviews. In all of these instances, the research project was framed within the general research question without going into detail regarding the specific target group the participant in question fitted within, to minimize potential unwelcome social scrutiny (see supra).

Although working with research brokers can increase the validity and reliability of research data, many scholars emphasize the ethical and methodological caveats (Gorin et al. 2008; Jacobson and Landau 2003). These may include hampered mutual understanding between researchers, brokers and participants; a particular framing of participants’ accounts by brokers; power differences between researchers and brokers; a complication of the voluntariness of consent as participants might feel obliged to take part in the research; and the influence of brokers’ own expectations and interests on the research process (Clark-Kazak 2021; MacKenzie, McDowell, and Pittaway 2007; Schiltz and Büscher 2018). Indeed, brokers are active agents in the construction of relationship and information sharing between researchers and participants. Consequently, it is key that their role in the process is clearly described and reflected upon (Bunting and Quirck 2020; Schiltz and Büscher 2018).

Although it was necessary to work with research brokers to gain access to the research context, specifically to establish contact with participants living in the communities (i.e. persons who became parents in forced captivity, parents who raised children in the internally displaced people’s camps, and elders), it was not possible to fully control which persons were and which were not approached to take part in the research and what information was or was not passed on to potential participants (Ansoms 2013; MacKenzie, McDowell, and Pittaway 2007). Consequentially, some potential participants who were referred by the participant mobilizers did not fit the research selection criteria. Others had incorrect impressions about the nature of the research, which raised their expectations of receiving some kind of compensation or support. To address this concern, we met with most of our participants before the interview. In this meeting, as well as before the start and at the end of each interview, particular attention was paid to (re-)informing the participants about the goals, benefits and potential harms of their participation in the research. Informed consent was gained in a careful and continuous process—and had to be repeated—in each contact with the participants (MacKenzie, McDowell and Pittaway 2007; Vervliet et al. 2015). In three instances informal discussions were held with persons who did not fit the research criteria in order to minimise potential disappointment for people who had dedicated time to talk to us. Afterwards, particular attention was paid to re-inform the referring participant or mobilizer about the research aims.

The interviews conducted in the communities were audio-taped and later transcribed verbatim in English by an independent transcriber fluent in both Luo and English. This process revealed several occasions where one of my research assistants had added information that the participant had not given. Subsequent conversations with the research assistant did not yield any definitive explanations for these unprompted additions. They may have been motivated by a desire to make the participants’ accounts more comprehensive to an outsider, or perhaps as a way to incorporate their own personal experiences, since the research assistants also lived through the collective violence themselves. Since the interviews with the social workers were done in English, I transcribed these interviews myself.

In keeping with larger trends, the engagement of various research brokers was crucial to facilitate contact with participants in the communities, being able to have a conversation with them, maintaining contact with them throughout the research process, and being able to disseminate the research findings (see below). If England (1994, 84) states that fieldwork can be perceived as a “dialogical process in which the research situation is structured by both the researcher and the person being researched”, the influence and often active involvement of the wider context in this process, including research brokers, family and community members, cannot be underestimated and needs to be taken into account. In this research project, gaining access through both formal and informal channels was necessary to create an interactive environment in which participants and their wider context could be informed and provide input and feedback to the set-up and process of the project.

**Building the Research Relationship**

Throughout my fieldwork, I invested a lot of time and energy in building relationships with my participants. This was partly because it was important to have regular contacts to clarify questions and expectations surrounding the project. Equally important was a concern with the often extractive character of research in the Global South (Bunting and Quirck 2020; Clark-Kazak 2021; Quirck, Bunting, and Kiconco, this volume) and, in this case, Northern Uganda. By taking time to regularly meet with and listen to participants, I was able to better contextualize their stories and demonstrate respect for the time and energy they put into the research. Although I duly considered the participants’ questions for support and these were acted upon in certain instances, I felt that this respect and time was frequently the only thing that I could give in return (Wood 2006). Although elaborating a research relationship with the participants did not go as smoothly because of language barriers, high expectations and power differences, I felt that participants started to feel more comfortable during the follow-up visits.

Meetings with the participants would generally take place where they felt most comfortable and at times that were most convenient to them. All six focus group discussions and 25 interviews took place at sub-county offices, which were often regarded as a kind of neutral zone. In addition 28 interviews were done at participants’ homes, five were conducted at their work places, four at the home of a family member and eight at other locations (e.g., the home of another participant, a participant mobiliser, a hotel or a shop). Participants who had to move from their homes to the location of the interview received modest compensation to cover their transport costs.

In most of the interviews, we matched the gender of the research assistants and participants because we wanted to be sensitive to the information that could (potentially) be shared, such as experiences of gender-based violence and forced marriages. However, we could not keep up this practice in the final round of interviews in 2016 as one of the male research assistants decided not to participate in the research after his second day. This was cause by his frustration because two of the participants did not show up for the planned interviews.

Several considerations informed the recurrent meetings. On the one hand, it was necessary to thoroughly explain the research and build trust to enable participation. On the other hand, it was essential to protect the identities, stories and privacy of the participants. The latter proved to be challenging since we were only able to contact two of our participants living in the communities directly. All the other participants were mobilized through other research brokers (participant mobilizers or other participants). Some gave telephone numbers that were disconnected. Others relocated to another area. When we could not get in touch with participants we tried to (re)establish contact through family or community members, or visited them at their (new) homes. However, visiting participants at their homes involved running the risk of making them feel obligated to participate in a process which they were potentially not comfortable with, either practically or emotionally. It also put their privacy at risk. We mitigated this risk by keeping the explanation of our research very broad, that is, referring to the general research project (i.e. upbringing during and after the collective violence in Northern Uganda) in which various target groups were included instead of singling out the participants as persons who experienced forced abduction, marriage and parenthood. When following up with our participants, we did not receive any information indicating that sensitive information about their histories had been disclosed to the broader public.

To summarize, several challenges and opportunities resulted from the choice to have regular contact and recurrent interviews with our participants to develop a research relationship; we had enough opportunities to clear up any questions and expectations surrounding the project and to get a better understanding of the participants’ narratives.

**Power and Privilege**

The power hierarchy between researcher and participants will always be ethically fraught (Lahman et al. 2011; Stewart, this volume). Coming in as a white European doctoral researcher meant I had a privileged position, which invariably creates power imbalances between the researcher, research brokers, participants and the wider community. Since I needed to acknowledge that my research relationships would inherently be hierarchical (England 1994; Schulz, this volume), some measures had to be taken to counterbalance this imbalance by ensuring that “participants are able to exercise some degree of control over the research process and the conditions of their involvement in it” (MacKenzie, McDowell, and Pittaway 2007, 310).

**Addressing the Extractive Nature of Research**

My research assistants, local leaders and several participants repeatedly referenced previous examples of researchers and organizations who had come in, collected data, and disappeared without properly informing participants about the objectives of the research, what data was collected, or what would happen with the information they had provided. In this regard, van den Berg (2020, 41) suggests that “authentic and committed partnerships with those who contribute to knowledge production on the ground is fundamental to dismantling the extractive character of research”. Reconsidering my engagement practice with the participants, research brokers and other stakeholders (government and community leaders, NGO workers, other academics from the Global North and Global South) both challenged the power imbalance of the potential extractive nature of the research and contributed to deepening the data by meeting the participants, participant mobilizers and officials multiple times over the course of two years of data collection for interviews and informal conversations, while also providing some basic support to participants and making sure that information emerging from the data collection was played back at various levels. This also opened up avenues for providing input and feedback to the set-up and process. In addition, my engagement with CCVS and CCVS-Uganda also enabled me to direct my research to be more practice- and policy-oriented.

However, notwithstanding these considerations, it is important to highlight two shortcomings to making the research more collaborative. First, the research was framed in a doctoral study funded by a European university, which meant the research set-up had to be elaborated and approved by ethical committees in Belgium and Uganda before entering the field, and specific kinds of dissemination channels such as peer-reviewed journals and scientific conferences are more valued (Bunting and Quirck 2020; Schulz, this volume; Quirck, Bunting, and Kiconco, this volume). Second, my increasing involvement in the daily operations of CCVS-Uganda made me unable to pay sufficient attention to my doctoral studies. In an attempt to limit my extensive working hours, which were affecting my physical and mental health, combined with an urge to make a more meaningful impact in the lives of people, I decided to fully engage in the work of CCVS-Uganda and interrupt my doctoral trajectory from 2017 to 2021. On the one hand, this meant I was not able to keep in touch with the participants and research assistants as much as I would have wanted to after the last data collection period in 2016, however, on the other hand I was able to influence (to a certain level) the extension of CCVS-Uganda’s services to some of the communities in which we collected the research data.

**Engaging with Participants’ Questions for Support**

Throughout the research process it was necessary to simultaneously consider the participants’ trauma and vulnerability as well as their strengths, resilience and agency (De Haene, Grietens, and Verschueren 2010; MacKenzie, McDowell, and Pittaway 2007). Given that we asked participants to recount potentially traumatic experiences, we wanted to make sure that we were able to provide the necessary emotional support during and after the interviews and in between fieldwork periods (Amanela et al. 2020; Balami and Umar, this volume; Schulz, this volume). Crucially, four of my research assistants had a background in providing psychosocial services, which were offered to all of the participants. It was clarified to the participants that making use of psychosocial services did not in any way influence their participation in the research project and that everything that was said during the sessions would be treated with confidentiality. During the course of the data collection, psychosocial services were offered to six participants, of which four were formerly abducted mothers, one a father, and one was a parent who raised children in the internally displaced people’s camps. The sessions varied in length and included the participant’s spouse and/or other family members in three instances.

Although the provision of basic counselling and follow-up was necessary given the nature of our participants’ experiences and the lack of MHPSS services in the area, my research assistant’s double role as translator and counsellor also shaped the course of the interviews. For example, during transcription it became apparent that she put emphasis on the presumed healing effects of narration in working through traumatic experiences (De Haene et al. 2012). This can be framed within the idea that recounting traumatic experiences is perceived to be a central mechanism of recovery for trauma survivors and that silencing the experiences is seen as less adaptive for the individual and the broader context (Ibid). In some instances, when participants chose not to expand on certain interview questions, the research assistant encouraged disclosure by telling them, ‘it would be good for you to talk about this’ and ‘it will make you feel better’. This could have potentially put pressure on the participants to speak despite their wishes to remain silent to protect themselves and others around them.

Similarly in providing care to our participants, my research assistants and I made sure to have regular debriefings as not to become overwhelmed by the information that was shared during the data collection and engagement with participants in the counselling sessions. This was particularly important given that some of the research assistants lived through similar experiences and hearing certain stories might also have caused them distress.

Notwithstanding the provision of emotional support, our participants living in the communities regularly raised questions about financial and material support (school fees, hospital bills, call credit) throughout the various contacts. I was often perceived as ‘the one knowing it all’ and having access to money, connections and opportunities. During and after the collective violence, many (international) organizations and institutions came in to provide various kinds of relief. The precarious environment of the internally displaced people’s camps had given rise to a dependence on external donors (Harlachter et al. 2006; Wieling et al. 2015). However, from 2013-2014 onward, when this research project was initiated, many scaled or closed down their operations (Büscher, Komujuni, and Ashaba 2018). People’s expectations of financial or material support after participating in research activities or organized meetings nevertheless continued (Ogora 2013). In post-conflict Northern Uganda, this dynamic is often fuelled by research fatigue (Atim, this volume).

In an attempt to counter these perceptions, my positionality as a (doctoral) student was explained by one of the research assistants; one of wanting to learn and not having access to many resources. However, my simultaneous positionality as a white European still gave rise to expectations. During the debriefing session in the final interviews with mothers and fathers who were forcibly abducted, five participants indeed confessed that their decisions to participate in the interviews was (partly) based on the expectation of support and, for some, the expectation was still very much present until the last contact. This raises questions about whether research in low-resource settings in a context where both formal and informal support structures are insufficient, can ever be truly voluntary (Atim, this volume; Balami and Umar, this volume; Schiltz and Büscher 2018). How easy is it for participants who are struggling to get by to refuse to take part in a project if they perceive the project to have the potential to generate financial/material benefits?

On the other hand, the wish to participate in the research can also be seen as an expression of the participants’ agency; of –wanting to have their voices heard or to gain something from the research in order to change their situations (Vervliet et al. 2015). Interestingly, one participant claimed he had never been married and did not become a father while engaged with the LRA. At the time, we had already met him twice ,and he had narrated experiences of being married and becoming a father in forced captivity. When we tried to explore the reason why he changed his story, he kept on insisting that he never engaged in any marital relationship while in captivity. Did something happen that made him reluctant to share his story? Was he hoping for some kind of compensation or support after the interviews that he did not receive from the interview team?

Although “engaging in a context in which local communities face extreme needs and precariousness, the question of how to deal as a researcher with expectations in terms of immediate change is central” (Schiltz and Büscher 2018, 9). Supporting research participants remains a grey zone in research ethics, and various practices are apparent in the field (Atim, this volume; Bodineau and Lipandasi, this volume; Kiconco, 2015; Ogora 2013; Otim, this volume; van den Berg 2020). Notwithstanding the problematization that my privileged position brought about, I also acted from this position as it enabled me access to leaders and organizations which could potentially provide various kinds of support (Ogora 2013). Apart from ensuring an option for emotional support, I tried to build some kind of referral network for my participants, given that I chose to come in as an independent researcher. To this effect, I had meetings with several organizations and government leaders. At the outset of my third fieldwork, a district government leader informed me about a programme that was being initiated to provide livelihood training to child mothers. After sharing this information with my female participants, some of them agreed for their names to be shared with the office of this government leader. Unfortunately, after following up, I discovered that the programme fell through. Other connections that I tried to facilitate also did not yield much as the organisations in question only focused on specific target areas or categories of beneficiaries. Consequently, the participants did not secure the benefits they were looking for through this research project.

In specific situations, my research assistants and I tried to provide some basic support ourselves. For example, one of our participants disclosed that her ‘husband’ from captivity contacted her to find out about their daughter. He expressed interest in taking care of her, however, no further contact was established afterwards. The participant made a request for call credit as she did not want to disclose this contact to her current (post-conflict) husband or other family members. She was planning to return to live with her ‘husband’ from captivity, since her current husband was not taking care of her and her daughter. On another occasion, we visited one of our participants at home only to learn that she had moved back to her parental home some months before without notifying her husband. He could not give us any information on how she was doing, which caused us concern about her wellbeing. We tried to locate her for a follow-up visit, but failed to do so. My research assistant finally succeeded in making contact. The participant put forward the need for a reconciliation meeting between the two families to clear up the issues between herself and her husband, for which we provided transport and which resulted in her moving back to her husband’s home.

**Member Checking**

Another strategy to potentially address power imbalances between the researcher and participants was to explore member checking. Member checking is a “process in which collected data is ‘played back’ to the informant to check for perceived accuracy and reactions” (Cho and Trent 2006, 322), and has been established as a reflexive process for all parties involved in the research (Ibid). Member checking has a two-fold objective (Goldblatt, Karnieli-Miller, and Neumann, 2011). First, from a methodological standpoint, it serves to minimize misinterpretations of the narratives shared by the participants. Second, from an ethical viewpoint, it can be a way to increase active respondent participation by giving them more control over how their accounts are represented (Fernandez, Kodish, and Weijer 2003; Koelsch 2013). In addition, it also served as a valuable opportunity to ‘wrap up’ the various interviews and to thank our participants for journeying with us. The member checks were carefully prepared to include broad themes touched upon by each mother and father who became a parent during forced captivity, giving them the opportunity to make additions, deletions or adjustments to the information they shared in previous interviews. The reactions to the member checking varied. Some participants perceived it as a chance to clarify and add to their stories. Others did not want to engage with the information that they shared earlier on as it was too sensitive, or they interpreted the member check as a fault-finding mission. In the latter case, it seemed that the potential benefit of performing member checks as a means to increase the control of the mothers and fathers on how their accounts are represented had the exact opposite result, as it was seen as a way to rectify ‘errors’ in the stories that were shared.

To summarize, my positionality and privileged position as a white foreign researcher inevitably led to power imbalances between myself, the research assistants, our participants and people in the broader research context. Several choices and decisions were made to counterbalance this by addressing the extractive nature of research, considering and engaging with participants’ questions for support, trying to build a referral network, providing emotional support, and member checking.

**Phasing Out**

We cannot rush out of research relationships because breaking boundaries of trust may be harmful to participants (Vervliet et al. 2015). In an attempt to counter-balance the often extractive nature of research (see supra), we provided enough time for debriefing in the final stage of the fieldwork. To ‘give back’ to the community at large, formal and informal feedback sessions were organized featuring participants, social workers, government officials and representatives. These sessions took place at the end of the data collection. We also held meetings at the end of every period of fieldwork which were similar to the meetings held at the beginning of the project, but with the important addition of presenting preliminary research results. The simultaneous process of data collection, dissemination and consultation provided opportunities for collaboration as various stakeholders (participants, research brokers, government and community leaders) were able to openly share their views on the research plans and outcomes, creating a broader support base for the data collected and deeper engagement between all the parties involved.

Some scholars even suggest that “where this is feasible, ongoing contact after the research, including opportunities for debriefing and the consideration of issues that might arise and remain after the research is concluded” (MacKenzie, McDowell, and Pittaway 2007, 306). Taking into account the sensitive nature of the research, one of the research assistants made three follow-up visits to check in on our participants. While this step was well intentioned, it ultimately complicated the phasing out of the research, since the participants kept on requesting additional support (Stewart, this volume). Overall, throughout the research project, up until the very end, managing participants’ expectations remained difficult, despite recurrent information about the risks and benefits of the research, and the attempts to provide some basic support ourselves. Notwithstanding mitigation through various choices and decisions made throughout the research project, it thus appeared that the participants experienced extractive research in this setting as we were not able to provide an answer to the varied needs they were experiencing (Atim, this volume).

Ethical and methodological considerations also do not cease to exist when the fieldwork is completed (Ansoms 2013). Phasing out the data collection brings us to the question of how the collected data should be analyzed and reported on. Who should analyze the data? Who will author the publications? Which format shall be used to publish the research results? Research publications often require specific representations of collected data, which does not always provide the space for in-depth discussions of the ethical and methodological choices that were made, or to properly contextualize the research in time and space. As this research project is still ongoing, notably the data analysis and interpretation, choices still need to be made in this regard.

**Concluding Remarks**

The choices and decisions that a researcher makes in trying to perform methodologically and ethically sound research are bound by the project’s objectives, the positionality of the researcher, the relationships and interactions with research brokers and participants, and opportunities and challenges that are situated in the broader research context. Through elaborating on several major methodological and ethical issues and ‘ethically important moments’ that I came across while undertaking my fieldwork, I identified opportunities, challenges, choices and decisions. These resulted from a relational and reflexive ethical stance in setting up, executing and phasing out my research project with mothers and fathers who became parents in forced captivity. I reflected on collaborations with research brokers, the influence of the broader context of participants, including family and community, having regular contacts with the participants, considering questions for support, and power and privilege. However, the choices and decisions that were made should be contextualized within the particular research setting and might not even be considered useful, ethical or responsive in other contexts. For example, in some research projects it might be more appropriate to gain access to participants through informal channels or have the data collected by an insider (see for example Atim, this volume). Nevertheless, these considerations may provide useful to researchers as starting points for reflection when entering and working in complex research settings (Clark-Kazak 2021).

Procedural ethics, such as those espoused by most ethical review boards, can only partially cover the methodological and ethical questions encountered in research with participants who experienced traumatic events as a result of collective violence (Clark-Kazak 2021; Vervliet et al. 2015). As such, “it has been argued [that] research ethics should move beyond these codes … to the in-depth, long-term relationships that may develop between participants and researchers” (Lahman et al. 2011, 1399), into which “good ethical practice is rooted” (Thomson 2013, 148). The research relationships we built with our participants can be perceived as complex, intersubjective and ever-changing spaces that influence and are influenced by the context in which they evolve (De Haene, Grietens, and Verschueren 2010; England 1994; Stewart, this volume).

In summary, over a period of one to two years, we journeyed together with mothers and fathers who became parents while in forced captivity, “holding harm” (De Haene, Grietens, and Verschueren 2010) as we tried to increase the benefits and limit the risks of their participation in our research project by continuously re-informing them about the research processes, having recurrent meetings and discussions, respecting their potential wishes to keep their personal histories concealed from their families and communities, providing some basic support and trying to increase their control in the representation of their accounts. While we implemented specific actions to make our research more collaborative, the set-up of the project along the rules and expected outputs of a doctoral study, along with the many questions and expectations for support from our participants that we often could not provide a desirable answer to, could have created the perception and experience that the research was more extractive than it intended to be.

Even when we try to be as reflexive as possible, we shall never truly be prepared for the numerous ethical and methodological challenges that are part and parcel of doing research, especially in (post-)conflict settings. Taking difficult decisions, feeling uncomfortable and disappointed, often being unable to provide a satisfactory answer to participants’ expectations and trying to mitigate power differences are an inherent part of the research process and it is not possible to lift the continuous tensions that we encounter, as researchers. England (1994, 81) points out:

[T]the openness and culturally constructed nature of the social world, peppered with contradictions and complexities, needs to be embraced not dismissed. This means that ‘the field’ is constantly changing and that researchers may find that they have to manoeuvre around unexpected circumstances. The result is research where the only inevitability seems to be unreliability and unpredictability.

It is important for researchers to be open about the choices, decisions, achievements and failures encountered in fieldwork and how they came about, as illustrated in this chapter. Not being transparent about choices and decisions potentially limits the scrutiny and evaluation of research projects by all parties who are included or engaged with the research. Although the ultimate obligation for implementing methodologically and ethically sound research lies with the researcher, there is a need for institutions, such as ethical review boards and committees, to stimulate and open up opportunities to safely reflect on and discuss these issues to prepare researchers to enter the field beyond considerations of procedural ethics. This can be done through in-depth and interactive reflections with ethical review boards/committees and peer groups, or engaging in equitable connections between stakeholders from the Global North and Global South; in other words involving local partners from the start, implementing participatory research methods, and doing practice-oriented research.

**This list does not comply with the Chicago Manual of Style guidelines.**

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1. During the research project two of our participants moved to another location within Kitgum District. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. If a new research project is initiated within Uganda, one has to file a request to the UNCST which serves as an ethical commission. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. The Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) and the Resident District Commissioner (RDC) are, respectively, the head of the political system and the central contact person for security issues on District level. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. The LC III and the Sub-County Chief are, respectively, the head of the political system and the head of the community system on Sub-County level. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. The LC I is the mayor of a certain village. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)