

The Refugee Hosts project has demonstrated the important roles that writing and stories play in people's responses to, and understanding of displacement.ⁱ Past stories of both hosting, and of being hosted, are important devices that people draw on and share as they navigate contemporary displacement today. Through critical writing workshops with members of displacement-affected communities in Lebanon and Jordan, the Refugee Hosts project has adopted methodologies which focus on writing, listening and sharing. These methodologies are of value to researchers and practitioners, providing a means of encountering the experiences of people who have been affected by, and are responding to, displacement, and of maintaining space for shared dialogue about different needs, memories, and hopes.

Recommendations

Engaging with members of local communities, whether as research interlocutors or as 'beneficiaries' of policies and programmes, must prioritise **an ethical approach that respects and maintains space for people to articulate their own ideas, knowledge and needs on their own terms**. This must be a **slow and care-full process, built around trust**.

Attempts to 'empower' or 'give voice' to those affected by displacement must be avoided. These aims often imply that people are 'voiceless' or 'powerless' prior to an external intervention, whether one run by researchers and practitioners. Instead, **a critical approach to 'voice' focuses on identifying and overcoming the structural barriers that exist in contexts of protracted and overlapping displacement, and which prevent certain people from being heard and listened to**.

People are always and already analysing, making sense of and variously responding to their own situations and those of other people, including friends, neighbours and strangers. It is vital that such forms of knowledge and response are acknowledged and supported, rather than either undermined or instrumentalised. **Identifying which barriers prevent people from finding and enacting their own responses and articulating their own needs and rights, is essential alongside recognising the agency of people who have been displaced**.

Knowledge belongs to the individuals and communities which are affected by and are responding to displacement. This includes knowledge that is shared and created during different encounters, including in research. When translating such knowledge – whether through linguistic translation, or as a process of translating this knowledge to reach academic or policy audiences – this must be recognised as a process which is fragmentary, partial and incomplete in nature.

Critical reflections on 'voice'

"To embroider the voice with its own needle: an act proposed to problematise the notion of the voice; something that cannot be given (to anyone) since it must firmly belong to everyone from the beginning."
([Qasmiyeh 2019](#))ⁱⁱ

Refugee Hosts has adopted a critical approach to voice that goes against mainstream tropes within humanitarian research and practice that seek to 'empower' or 'give a voice' to those affected by

displacement. Such mainstream tropes re-produce existing power hierarchies that frame certain groups of people as 'voiceless' and as needing the intervention of largely Northern-based researchers and practitioners.ⁱⁱⁱ

Instead, a critical approach to voice requires us to think care-fully about how knowledge is produced, for example, about refugee needs, local community dynamics, religion, and hospitality. External actors can often assume that they 'know' what refugees need, in turn leading to the imposition of particular 'solutions' and an inability to hear or listen to different perspectives

or priorities. Because of this, it is important to recognise that different voices are already there, and it is vital to maintain space that ensures that these people can be heard on the terms of those who are themselves speaking.

This challenges us to think differently about the process of research, resisting long-standing extractive models: “After spending hours with us, in the same room, she left with a jar of homemade pickles and three full cassettes with our voices.”^{iv} Whilst the logistics of research often result in extractive relationships between the researcher and the participant (the former often leaves ‘the field’, taking voices and knowledge with them which, it is asserted, they will then use to fill gaps and develop abstract concepts), more equitable forms of knowledge co-creation and sharing are possible.^v

This must involve acknowledging research interlocutors as people who conceptualise and respond to their own lives in multiple ways, including as analysts of their own situations and that of others; through collecting and sharing resources; by contributing to solidarity networks and processes of mutual aid; writing poetry; and reciting stories with family and friends.

‘Writing Without a Helping Hand’

“... to see the voice within its owner, as a given and not to be given, through tracing the thread as it touches the needle eye to go through it and in so doing ushering in the embroidering that will come. Indeed, embroidering the voice is writing the intimate, the lived, and the leftovers in life into newer times as imagined by the writer herself; it is writing without a helping hand from anyone but rather through continuously returning to the embroidered (and what is being embroidered) and its tools, notwithstanding how incomplete and fragmentary they are.”

(Qasmiyeh, 2020)¹

Writing and knowledge: During critical writing workshops in Lebanon and Jordan, Syrian, Palestinian, Jordanian, Iraqi and Lebanese participants *hosted* members of the Refugee Hosts team, including the Refugee Hosts writer-in-residence, who was himself born and raised in Baddawi refugee camp (Lebanon). By disrupting diverse power dynamics, the workshops took place in such a way that everyone shared in the research process, simultaneously documenting, tracing and resisting experiences of and responses to displacement.



Participants writing during a Refugee Hosts workshop in Jarash, Jordan (c) E. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh

Inviting people to write can be a deeply personal and intimate act. The Refugee Hosts workshops were broadly envisaged as spaces where the residents of a specific neighbourhood, town or camp – ‘refugees’, ‘hosts’, and ‘refugee-hosts’ alike – reflected individually and collectively on what it means to live together. Many participants brought items that were significant to them, including poems they had written (and at times published) before the workshop and which they wanted to share with the other participants; others brought objects such as photographs, jewellery and gifts they had received from loved ones, to prompt conversation, debate and subsequent writing. By producing their own texts – as well as sharing existing texts -, participants created stories, narratives, and knowledge which they shared with one another in the workshop and responded to in different ways.

Diverse objects, like stories, connect people with a past, present, and precarious future. Whilst there is often a tendency to view the voice in research contexts as something to be listened to, including in interviews, it is also important to recognise that material items, including texts, are integral to understanding how people express themselves and respond to their own situations and the situations of others.

Resisting Barriers, and Expectations

When facilitating writing workshops, the potential barriers that people face must be acknowledged, including diverse levels of literacy. Adopting a fluid notion of ‘writing’ as including diverse forms of recounting and sharing – including through recitation and story-telling – is one way of maximising inclusivity and ensuring that different people’s perspectives are heard. In turn, where silences emerge, these should be respected, giving people space to think and write, or, indeed, to decide not to write.

Indeed, ‘creative approaches’ must themselves be viewed critically, recognising that such approaches and methods can at times reproduce, rather than disrupt, power inequalities:

“Creative methods may enable diverse forms of ‘self-exploration’ and ‘self-expression’, but they can (and perhaps should) also simultaneously provide a space for participants to transcend and resist different forms of externally imposed expectations... This can include providing a space to resist the expectations inherent within the [dominant] scripts ... – of the vulnerable/ violent/ bogus/ grateful refugee -, but also the very expectation that participants will (or should) be performing in an ‘authentic’ way and ‘revealing’ their ‘true self’ during workshops.”^{vi}

Acknowledging people with displacement backgrounds as producers of knowledge entails acknowledging people as having the right to engage with one another on their own terms, rather than through pre-determined scripts and thematics.



*A participant shares her child's medals and awards during a workshop in Zarqaa, Jordan
(c) E. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh*

In one workshop in Jordan, a Syrian man from the city of Daraa brought his wife’s ring, which he gently held in his hands while he spoke. Displaced and separated from his family by the conflict in Syria, he recounted that he had been informed by phone that his wife had died in childbirth. He was unable to bury his wife and continued to be unable to safely return to Syria to meet his child.

“This ring is a part of me. I wear it so that she continues to be with me.” In this poignant moment, participants comforted the man, and reassured him that he is not alone in Jordan, coming together to try to help him manage this enormous loss, a loss of the past – his wife, his marriage – and of the present and future – his separation from a child he may never meet. Participants determined that the ‘workshop’ was – and should be – a space and time for collective support and action.

While humanitarian policy and practice, and at times research, proposes that external actors ‘know’ what refugees need and can provide this to ‘them’ (as a ‘gift’), the persistence of structural barriers means that refugees remain unheard, and their responses continue to be not only unsustainable, but often undermined and destabilised by external actors. Writing is one way that people use to process and share their thoughts and priorities over time, communicating what is needed (and desired), and articulating what solutions might be most appropriate to meet their needs and rights. Recognising refugees’ voices, and writing, as forms of knowledge in their own right and on their own terms, is essential to ensure that these rights are upheld now and in the future.



*A Syrian man gently holds his recently deceased wife's ring:
“The ring is a part of me.” © E. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh*



A participant writing during a Refugee Hosts workshop in Zarqaa, Jordan (c) E. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh

Central to the Refugee Hosts project has been the work of our Writer in Residence, Yousif M. Qasmiyeh, a poet and scholar born and raised in Baddawi refugee camp. His poetic work has been integral to our analysis, informing our understanding of encounters in contexts of displacement and hosting, and of the urgency of rejecting the notion of 'giving voice'.^{vii}

The importance of this work to the project is explored in more detail in Research Brief #2: [Engaging with Histories and Narratives of Displacement](#)

Background

This Research Brief is based on the AHRC-ESRC funded Refugee Hosts project, which investigated local community responses to and experiences of displacement from Syria in Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey. Visit www.refugeehosts.org

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Refugee Hosts Recommendations for Research and Practice Series

- #1: [Understanding Local Responses to Displacement](#)
- #2: [Engaging with Histories and Narratives of Displacement](#)
- #3: [Refugee-Host Relationality](#)
- #4: [Local Faith Community Responses to Displacement](#)
- #5: [Critical Approaches to Voice and Writing in Displacement](#)

References

- ⁱ Qasmiyeh, Y. M. (2019) "[To embroider the voice with its own needle](#)" *Berghahn Blog*; Qasmiyeh, Y. M. (2020) "[Introduction: Engendering Plural Tales](#)" *Migration and Society* 3(1): 254-255; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. (2019) "Disaster studies at 40: looking forward" *Disasters*, 43 (S1): S36-60; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. (2020) "Recentering the South in Studies of Migration" *Migration and Society* 3(1): 1-18.
- ⁱⁱ Qasmiyeh, Y. M. (2019) "[To embroider the voice with its own needle](#)" *Berghahn Blog*.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Qasmiyeh, Y. M. (2019) "[To embroider the voice with its own needle](#)" *Berghahn Blog*; Qasmiyeh, Y. M. (2020) "[Introduction: Engendering Plural Tales](#)" *Migration and Society* 3(1): 254-255; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. (2019) "Disaster studies at 40: looking forward" *Disasters*, 43 (S1): S36-60; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. (2020) "Recentering the South in Studies of Migration" *Migration and Society* 3(1): 1-18.
- ^{iv} Qasmiyeh, Y. M. (2021) 'Anthropologists' in *Writing the Camp* (Broken Sleep Books) p. 17.
- ^v "Recentering the South in Studies of Migration" *Migration and Society* 3(1): 1-18.
- ^{vi} Greatrick, A. and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. (2017) "[The roles of performance and creative writing workshops in refugee-related research](#)" *Refugee Hosts*.
- ^{vii} See Qasmiyeh, Y. M. (2021) *Writing the Camp*. Wales: Broken Sleep Books.