


Documenting Syrian Refugee Children's Memories: Methodological Insights and Further Questions

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Abstract

Several scholars advocate for children's experiences to be articulated by children themselves, and some have offered strategies on how to facilitate this. Yet there are hardly any studies that record children's memories while they are children and offer methodological guidance on how to do so. None that we know of have recorded the unique memories of Syrian refugee children, possibly because of ethical, relational, and practical challenges of working with children considered especially vulnerable due to their age, ethnicity, and experiences as refugees. This article offers an account of how we engaged 13 Syrian refugee children (5–13 years old) in creating their autobiographies—based on memories of their lives in Syria, a transit country, and Canada—which they presented to other children in the study, in the presence of their parents, a school principal, and the researchers. In this article, we identify insights we gained by addressing issues raised by our Research Ethics Board; negotiating our roles and relationships with the children, their parents, and each other; and collecting data from the children in multiple forms. We also raise many questions, which we hope will engage other researchers in developing our collective expertise for recording understudied children's memories.

Keywords

narrative research, ethical inquiry, methods in qualitative inquiry, narrative inquiry, phenomenology

Introduction

Canada welcomed about 44,580 refugees from Syria between November 2015 and June 2019 (Statistics Canada, 2019). Upon arrival, nearly half of the refugees were children below the age of 15 years (Ramos & Unger, 2017). This means that a significant number of refugee children from Syria now live in this country.

The federal department of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, Canada, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Council funded 27 studies in the summer of 2016 to examine the settlement of Syrian refugees. However, we could not find any published work from Canada representing Syrian refugee children's voices. Perhaps such studies were not even proposed. This points to what Perry-Hazan (2016) calls "adultism." Adultism assumes that children's experiences and perspectives are the same as those of adults, or that adults can fully represent children and speak on their behalf, or that children's views on their own lives are not worthy of study.

Several scholars (Albanese, 2009; Clark, 2017; Crivello et al., 2009; Murray, 2019) agree that children are quite capable of understanding and expressing their experiences. Research on

children's memories has been done primarily in the context of forensic assessment of abuse or witness testimony of crime (Aldridge & Wood, 1998; Ghetti & Lee, 2011; Holliday & Marche, 2012; Lamb et al., 2011; Nelson & Fivush, 2004). Some scholars working in this field point out that accurate and detailed memories of children are rare until they are about 9–10 years of age and that implanted false memories are relatively common (Howe, 2013). Children's memories depend on the development of metacognitive skills (Ghetti & Angelini, 2008); they are bound to temporal, social, emotional, and cognitive contexts in which they were formed; and their expression is constrained by children's communicative skills, gender and culture, conceptual understanding, and interpretation of the contexts in which they are being recalled (Nelson & Fivush, 2004). Hence, eliciting and understanding children's

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autobiographical memories is a complex process, especially when researchers are unfamiliar with their language, culture, and lived experiences.

The following is an account of our effort to have some Syrian refugee children record their memories in autobiographies and have research conversations about them. We first outline the research process, then discuss what we did and why, what we learned, and what further questions we have regarding ethics, roles and relationships, and multimodal forms of data collection.

The Research Process

The primary purpose of this study was to record the memories of a small number of Syrian refugee children for them and their families. The secondary purpose was to lift their voices into the public sphere so we can find out what the children remember, and what conditions contributed to those memories. As educators of children, and of those who work with children, we believe children with unique experiences are uniquely positioned to articulate them. These children had escaped from the war in Syria, lived as refugees in a transition country, and moved to Canada in the last 2–3 years. We asked them to chronologically organize their autobiographies, representing their experiences in the three places.

We thought our team was well positioned to undertake this work. One of us, the principal investigator (PI), is a professor who teaches research and conducts research on immigrant children, youth, and families. The other two—who worked as research assistants (RAs)—speak Arabic, have worked with Syrian refugee children in Greece, have master's degrees in early childhood studies, and have taken two graduate-level research methods courses, one called *Research with Children*. The lead RA (a trained and experienced teacher and coauthor of this article) had the primary responsibility for data collection, while the second RA was mainly responsible for video-recording her interactions with the children.

Following approval by our university's Research Ethics Board (REB), we began participant recruitment by contacting a Syrian family known to the PI. Using the "snowball method" (Noy, 2008), we recruited five families, whose children we planned to work with. Given the limitations of time and money, we planned to include 12 children between the ages of 5–12 years in our project. We thought this was the youngest age-group we could engage in creating autobiographies. We later added a child who was just over 12 years old, as his siblings were participating in the project, and he was keen to be included. An honorarium of CAD\$100 was offered to the parents for each child's participation.

The RAs first visited each family's home to introduce themselves and the project, obtain written consent from a parent and verbal assent from each child in the parent's presence, and set up appointments for subsequent sessions. They arranged to meet each child for three individual sessions—spread over 2–4 weeks—for about 35–55 min each and then hold a group session where all children would "show and tell" from their

autobiographies. The children's interactions with the RA in the individual sessions and with each other in the final session were all video-recorded. Parents and children were offered the option of showing the child's image in extracts used for research dissemination, blurring their face, or not showing them at all.

In the first individual session, the lead RA focused on building rapport with the focal children and further explaining what they were being asked to do. She explained what an autobiography was in words such as "a story of your life." She also showed them examples of children's books, pointing out that they usually have pictures and text. She emphasized that they could draw and/or write whatever they wanted to. The RA then brainstormed ideas for autobiographies by asking questions such as "What do you remember about your life in Syria?" or "What do you want to put in your book about Lebanon/Jordan?" She wrote down these ideas and used them as prompts, if needed, in the following sessions. The length and focus of each session varied, depending on each child's understanding, interest, comfort level, and experience of witnessing a sibling's participation.

In the next two sessions, the children created their autobiographies by drawing and writing or dictating their memories of Syria, the transition country, and earlier days in Canada. They were offered pencils and pens, crayons, markers, erasers, glue sticks (in case they wanted to stick photographs or cut-outs), blank or lined paper, and papers with the upper section blank and the lower lined, which many of them selected. As the children worked on their autobiographies, the RA asked them question such as "What have you drawn here?" and "What would you like to say/write about this?" encouraging them to add details to their work, in drawing, writing, or in conversation. Sometimes she facilitated the children's recall by referring to the list created in the first session and asked questions such as "When you first spoke about Syria, you mentioned you lived in a big house. Can you tell me a little more about your house? What did it look like?"

Some children wrote captions or short paragraphs themselves, sometimes asking the RA for spellings or English translation of an Arabic word. Others dictated what they wanted to say for the RA to write. Toward the end of the third session, the children reviewed and edited (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004) their work if they wanted to. Some children also saw this as an opportunity to practice for the show-and-tell and asked who they would be presenting to, who would see their book, and where it would end up. The RA reminded them that they would present their work to other Syrian refugee children and some of their parents, the researchers, and perhaps someone from the school where the group session would be located. She also reminded them that they would keep the original, but the researchers would have copies of their book.

Our initial plan was to have the final session in two age groups, but the children preferred to be grouped by gender. Their preference reflected social norms in Arab societies, where most social gatherings are gender-segregated. Children in most Arab countries go to separate girls' and boys' schools,

and where this is not possible their seating arrangement is gender-segregated (Megahed & Lack, 2011). Their grouping by gender seemed to reduce the dominance of male voices and appeared to make the girls confident in reading out their autobiographies. Most of the parents as well as the principal of the school were present at this event. As the children took turns to show and read from their work, the RA invited comments and questions from other children in the audience.

In the following sections, we review our negotiations with our university's REB, our roles and relationships, and the data collection processes, some of which the RA had reflected on in written notes. As researchers, we believe in reflexivity in and on our practice (Day, 2012; Schön, 2017), but we also realize that we remain unaware of some issues and are obliged to ignore others in order to get on with the work.

“Vulnerable” Groups and the REB

Researchers based in Canadian universities and colleges are required to follow the federal Tri-Council Policy Statement on ethical conduct in research involving humans. Institutional REBs ensure compliance to the policy by faculty, staff, and students (except in cases where the REB delegates its authority to an instructor, usually in an undergraduate class, for assignments involving some interactions with human respondents). Critics of the policy and its implementation claim that it shows insufficient appreciation of the qualitative approach, and some REBs let their mandate “creep” or “drift,” making it unnecessarily difficult for qualitative researchers to practice their craft (Tilley, 2016).

In this qualitative study, our challenges were compounded by choosing to work with participants who had multiple “vulnerabilities” because of their age, ethnicity, and refugee status (Clark-Kazak, 2017). After submitting a very detailed application form, we were further questioned by our REB about the risk of triggering the children's potentially traumatic memories, collecting data in their homes, ensuring the children's and their families' privacy, and offering monetary compensation to the families.

In our 13-page response, we first acknowledged that we may indeed trigger traumatic memories of the children (Tilley, 2016). We then pointed to the high level of agreement among scholars that the risk of silencing children is even greater (Albanese, 2009; Christensen & James, 2008; Douglas, 2010). We said we would try to minimize the potential distress by drawing upon our professional and cultural knowledge and skills; continually check during data collection if the children wanted to talk about a topic or to change it or to stop entirely; and by asking the nearby parent/s to comfort the child, if needed. We did not offer referrals to a third party, as is often suggested by REBs. This was because (a) it is very difficult to find appropriately trained, certified, and affordable Arabic speaking counselors in our city and (b) by the time the service can be procured, the affected children are very likely to have recovered from distress caused by our questions.

Collecting data in participants' homes seemed to be a red flag for our REB, signaling coerced participation and lack of privacy for the research participants (Barnikis, 2015; Bushin, 2007) and greater vulnerability of researchers, especially if they are students. We persuaded our REB that conducting interviews with children in their homes is quite appropriate because a familiar environment and the presence of parents and siblings put the children at ease (Barker & Weller, 2003; Bushin, 2007; Gibson, 2012) and that any other location would be more cumbersome for the participants and their families. Given that the Syrian families most likely had more than one child, we thought it would be difficult for parents to entertain their non-participating children, or leave them in the care of strangers, or attend to housework in any other setting. To ensure the security of the RAs, we would always have them work as a pair. Because both the RA were women, we would also require the mother in each family to be at home during data collection (also see next section). We suggested that the parents were likely to be hyperprotective of their children because of prior experiences, and the transparency of our interactions with their children—which the parent/s could watch if they wanted to—would enhance the parents' trust in the researchers.

The REB also raised questions about the privacy of data, given that parents and siblings could watch a child interacting with the RA; children would share their autobiographies with other children; interactions with the RA other children would be video-recorded, and clips would be shown in settings where they may be recognized. We responded that the transparency of our interactions with the children was of greater concern than privacy. We explained that refugees from Syria, who often have large families (see Statistics Canada, 2019) and relatively low incomes, are not very likely to expect privacy in their daily lives. Furthermore, the notion of privacy is subject to cultural interpretations (Wang et al., 2011) and situational contexts. In her response, the PI wrote:

Traditional forms of confidentiality ensure that other people will not know what a participant has disclosed in response to the researcher. This is neither desirable nor possible in this study. For example, the children will be asked to show their peers what they have drawn or written in their autobiographies. We think the potential pedagogical, emotional and social benefits to children of doing so outweigh the confidentiality imperative. The children will be given back their original work, which they may choose to also share with family and friends. For them, this work may be something to be proud of, rather than something that needs to be hidden from others.

During our visits, we learned that some Syrian families had told each other about their participation in the project despite our explicit request not to do so. Some children even asked the RAs directly if their friends were included in the project. Parents and siblings initially watched and listened to the interactions between a child and the RA during the individual sessions but soon drifted away as they engaged in household tasks or their own play. In a few instances, children from the neighborhood

walked in and also witnessed the data collection for a few minutes before wandering away.

As noted above, our consent and assent forms offered various options regarding use of children's images in extracts used for research dissemination. Some parents asked about the RAs' professional affiliation, the purpose of the study, and the audiences to whom their children's video-recordings may be shown before selecting their response. The children asked if their videos would turn them into celebrities. The RAs' responses reassured the parents but disappointed the children. However, all of them selected the first option, which was to fully show the children in video extracts used for research dissemination.

The offer of monetary incentives for research participation was another red flag for our REB. We were questioned about our plan to offer CAD\$100 per child to the parents, given that the parents were likely to be in a "precarious financial situation." In response, the PI wrote:

Syrian refugee families may need the money I can offer but do not directly benefit from the study. They will give me their trust, time, and attention, and the children will give me records of their memories. I believe those are worth much more than CAD\$100 per child but I cannot offer more as I am bound by my research funds and REB norms. Some Syrian families may let me collect data from their children without any "incentive" at all, simply because they would see me as a person with higher socioeconomic status and therefore greater power; or, because my RAs and I will pay some attention to them and their children in a place where they do not have many friends or extended family members. However, I believe extracting data from them on that basis would be an unethical use of my position.

We were also asked why the money would be offered to the parents rather than to the children and why we would seek the parents' consent before each child's assent in their presence. It seemed the REB was concerned that parents would coerce their children to participate in the project because of the incentive offered. We responded that handling this sum of money by a parent (usually the father) was in keeping with norms followed by Syrian refugee families. We further explained:

The alternative to the procedure we have selected would be to hide the matter of the honorarium from the children, and to seek their consent in the absence of their parents. Both would be unethical for the following reasons: a) children have the right to full disclosure regarding the terms of their participation in a research project; b) children will be deprived of parental guidance while making a decision they most likely have never made before; c) parents will be denied the opportunity to help their children make a decision which may benefit his/her family. The objections laid out here seem to arise from a) a neoliberal perspective where individual decision-making is prized above all else, even if that is of a child below the age of 12; and b) a colonial perspective that Syrian refugee parents are insensitive to their child's wishes, or will value CAD\$100 more than their child's wishes, and will coerce him/her to participate in the project. Parents everywhere make all kinds of decisions on behalf of and / or in consultation with their children.

In this case, it will be in consultation with their children. Children take cues from their parents, whether it is to climb a tree, cross the road, or to talk to a researcher. We firmly believe that both parents and children should jointly make this decision and that it is not the researcher's role to act as the guardian of the child's "free" will.

The above explanations seemed to satisfy the REB because shortly after our response we received the approval to go ahead with data collection. In the process, we learned that it is helpful to acknowledge the potential for the distress caused by our work and to suggest realistic options for limiting and addressing it. It is also useful to demonstrate sensitivity to contextual factors and consideration of alternatives. Interactions with the Syrian families later confirmed that privacy was indeed not a high priority for them. Rather the transparency of our work seemed to put both the children and their parents at ease. We figured that the REB's insistence on privacy as a default position needs to be questioned as it can signal the premise that researchers can find out what children do not tell their parents (Barnikis, 2015; Bushin, 2007; Harcourt & Sargeant, 2012). This position can raise suspicion even in cases where it is not warranted. Instead, as researchers, we must assess what level of privacy is needed in our data collection and what can be negotiated in each situation, following Ebrahim's notion of "situated ethics" (2010).

Offering money in exchange for data is also a controversial practice (Fargas-Malet et al., 2010) and can signal exploitation. However, we need to acknowledge that researchers are the primary beneficiary of research studies. We want to believe that future changes in policy and practice may ultimately benefit other groups like our research participants in the long term, but research usually has a cumulative effect. There is little evidence to support such claims for individual studies. The provision of a monetary incentive seems to be a more tangible and fairer exchange. However, we do not know what a fair amount is, from whose perspective, and how this should be assessed.

To conduct our study we followed our REB's guidelines. It has historically deemed children, the elderly, women, prisoners, those with mental health issues, and those with diminished capacity for self-determination as "vulnerable." We do not yet know if the children and their parents' unfamiliarity with a research culture, loneliness arising from being newcomers, and insecure socioeconomic position made them additionally vulnerable. Did we take advantage of this vulnerability? We still struggle with the competing imperatives of children's rights to privacy with parents' rights to transparency regarding their children's interactions with researchers (Graham et al., 2016). The ethical dilemmas of working with children clearly continue beyond the procurement of REB approval.

Roles and Relationships

Data collection for this project required many roles and relationships to be negotiated (Collins & Cooper, 2014; Ezzy, 2010; McDermid et al., 2014) between the Syrian parents, their

children, the RAs, and the PI. While work with children typically requires negotiation with multiple gatekeepers, the fact that their parents only spoke Arabic and data collection took place in their homes, further complicated the issues.

The recruitment of Syrian parents was fairly easy. Several factors combined to facilitate this process. To begin with, the parents had received information about the project from a compatriot who had agreed to participate in it. Second, the initial phone contact with the RA who greeted them in Arabic invoked their interest. Third, the RA's explanation that she was a student-researcher at a local university put them at ease. Both the RAs were Arabic speaking women, which provided further assurance to the families when they arrived at their homes. Based on Arabic tradition the families plied them with food and drink, which the RA's graciously accepted, as not doing so would be considered offensive. Also, based on Arabic tradition the RAs addressed the older women as "aunties." They wanted the latter's goodwill for the project but also wanted to show them culturally appropriate respect and friendliness. However, the RAs asked the children to use their first names, following norms they had learned at their university. In her reflective note, the lead RA wrote:

I was fearful that if the children heard me calling their mothers 'auntie' and make some sort of relation to myself as their relative, then they would feel obligated to take part in the study, or treat me in a way that they may have felt they needed to.

However, as the lead RA began her work with the children it became evident that they thought of her as a teacher. The tasks in which she engaged them were strongly associated with elementary school activities (Hill, 2006; Kellett & Ding, 2004). They spoke to her primarily in English, although they also asked her to supply English translations of words they only knew in Arabic (see below for further details). They told her about their days and upcoming events such as Halloween. Children interact with their teachers in primary schools in very similar ways. The RA had already disclosed to the children and to their parents that she had worked as a teacher, most likely to gain their trust. Seele (2012) points out researchers and participants co-construct such roles and in this case both seemed comfortable in its familiarity.

Individual sessions with children were held in the living rooms of the family's home. Parents and siblings were asked to remain relatively quiet and not to interrupt but could stay and watch if they wanted to. In most cases, they observed the interactions between the focal child and the RA for a few minutes and then wandered off. Nearby siblings doodling or having snacks, seemed to put the focal child further at ease. In a few instances, however, a parent prompted a child to tell the RA about something the parent considered significant in the child's life, or to correct the sequence or details of events narrated by the child. In response, the RA gently reminded the parent that she was interested in whatever the child remembered, regardless of its accuracy or significance.

As noted earlier, the lead RA was responsible for interacting with the children and the second RA was responsible for video-recording these interactions. Nonetheless, as both were speakers of Arabic—albeit slightly different dialects—and had similar experiences and educational backgrounds, they often jointly reviewed each session afterward. The lead RA found it helpful to receive feedback and suggestions from a colleague and former classmate, who had witnessed her work with the children and families. On a few occasions, the second RA also put questions directly to the children. The lead RA found they were sometimes helpful but sometimes not, depending on whether they helped to probe what a child was trying to say or shifted their attention to a different matter.

The study was conceptualized and designed by the PI who did not speak Arabic and had very limited knowledge of Arabic culture. She was also the RAs' instructor in a research methods course they had taken. Given this background, she briefed the RAs but asked them to take the lead in the field. She expected that conversations between the children, their parents, and the RAs would take place in Arabic (Lu & Gatua, 2014; Squires, 2009; Temple & Young, 2004) a language she did not understand. She believed she may be perceived as a cultural outsider and a figure of authority, which may intimidate her former students as well as the Syrian families (Lincoln, 2009).

Fieldwork in qualitative studies is an uncertain and complex task even for experienced researchers. The PI's distance from this work reduced her control of the process and added to the RAs' uncertainties. For example, early in the project, the lead RA reported that some children were happy to chat with her about their lives in Syria and Jordan but were not really interested in producing "a book" themselves. It took a discussion with the PI for her to further understand the significance of the autobiography as a design element. On another occasion, the PI was surprised to learn that the RA's interactions with the children were mostly in English. Upon questioning, the RA told her that the children, encouraged by some of their parents, wanted to communicate with her in English rather than Arabic so she went along with their choice. In her reflective notes, the RA wrote:

This was extremely shocking to me as I thought they would prefer to speak in Arabic. However, perhaps since their parents spoke minimal English, it was a way for them to have a conversation more private and separate from their parents, I thought. Interestingly, some parents preferred their children to speak in the alternate language as they saw it as an opportunity for them to improve their English. On the other hand, some parents wanted their children to speak in Arabic so that they could understand what they were saying. It also seemed as a way for children to honour their heritage and origin. Some children spoke Arabic and most spoke English with me. However, there were some that would alternate between English and Arabic, especially when there was a word they could not translate to English.

The PI firmly believed that communication in a common first language is fuller and more nuanced than in a newly acquired

second language. However, given the RA's stronger grasp of the situational context, she did not insist that the RA should only use Arabic with the children.

In negotiating our multiple and complex roles and relationships, we were reminded that a common language and culture greatly facilitates the recruitment of and engagement with research participants and their gatekeepers. However, this can also heighten the risk of using one's ethnicity for exploitative purposes and conflicts between culturally versus professionally appropriate conduct. Should cultural norms trump professional norms in such situations? We also learned that new roles and relationships are framed through the lens of already known ones. The children thought of the RA as a teacher, a role they were familiar with. The parents treated her as a highly educated person, a teacher, and also a compatriot visiting their home (Fargas-Malet et al., 2010). However, teachers are also figures of authority and can exercise power over children and families (Seele, 2012). How did this perception affect her relationship with both and shape what the children expressed or censored? We realized the significance of the RAs' cultural and professional knowledge, and relationships built in the field, for productively engaging the children. But did this perception, combined with the assigned task of creating "a book" silence some of the children, and incline others toward performing as a "good" student (see also next section)? We also continue to wonder if the PI's "fly on the wall" (Hanington & Martin, 2019) presence in the field would have enabled her to offer better informed and more timely advice to the RAs. And yet, this may have felt like surveillance to the RAs, inserting a cultural outsider in the families' homes and restraining the communication between the RAs and the children.

Data Collection Tools and Processes

Researchers who work with children advocate for multimodal forms of communication (Clark, 2004; Crivello et al., 2009). Some scholars (Christensen & James, 2008; Plowman & Stevenson, 2012) suggest that use of visual materials supplemented by conversations/interviews in research with children is justified by its participatory and practical nature. Such methods are likely to be especially useful in working with children whose expressive language and/or writing skills may not be highly developed due to age, lack of/or interruption in their schooling, trauma, or neglect.

We asked the children in our project to create their autobiographies for a few related reasons. First, we thought that the children would benefit from articulating their experiences in the presence of sensitive, supportive, and respectful listeners. We are not therapists and did not plan to offer therapy. However, as teachers and researchers, we knew that drawing (Ugurlu et al., 2016), writing, and attentive listening (Ventres, 2016) can be emotionally helpful. Our second purpose was to archive the children's memories for them and their families. Although autobiography as a research tool is used by many researchers, almost all childhood

memories are recorded in adulthood (Douglas, 2010) and are therefore also subject to loss and filtering by authors and editors. We thought our team was well suited for this work and if we did not record the children's memories at this time no one else would. Third, we believed our analysis of the children's memories may offer them some useful insights to teachers, social workers and settlement workers, as well as a broader academic community. Our final reason was to facilitate communication (Fargas-Malet et al., 2010) between the children and the RA by asking the children to draw, write, and talk about their memories. All the children seemed to clearly understand the assigned task to which three individual sessions each were devoted.

The final group session was designed primarily for its pedagogical value. We thought the children would find it reassuring to hear stories similar to their own, and practice their presentation skills, both of which may boost their self-confidence. We also offered the families some treats during this session to reciprocate their hospitality and to mark the end of the project.

As Douglas (2010) has noted in the case of adults' recall of their childhoods, children's drawings represented nostalgic or traumatic memories. However, unlike adults, the children—especially the younger ones—did not necessarily show thematic or narrative coherence in their work. They used stick figures and a few written words or sentences to "hook" their verbal communication. For example, 10-year-old Murad sketched an airplane and a house in Syria, and a broken line connecting the two. He explained that the plane was shooting a missile at the house and talked at length—with highly animated voice and gestures—about a family, and the young girl who was visiting them, who died in the strike.

Some of the older children wrote full paragraphs on some pages and simply an unlabeled drawing on another. Younger children mostly dictated what they wanted to say, which could be a single word, phrase, sentence, or a full paragraph. Some children said they did not know how to draw objects such as an airplane. A few discarded their initial drawings because they were not "good." One possible reason for this may be that the children had little experience of expressing themselves through drawing. Another may be fear of their being judged by "the teacher," or the anticipated audience, or of falling short in comparison to books they had been exposed to.

On some occasions, the children's spoken words also did not convey their meanings. In her notes the RA wrote:

Sometimes, when the researcher was not sure what the child meant and when what the child was saying did not become clearer through asking more questions, we would sometimes decide to move on . . . when children grew mindful of the fact that we did not know what they meant, they looked a little uneasy, became fidgety and frustrated to get their point across Sometimes transitioning to Arabic would clear this obstacle, since it was solely related to lack of communication. However, when Arabic did not resolve the confusion, changing the topic sometimes worked out best—or coming back to the topic at a later time.

We video-recorded the children's interactions with the RA because we also wanted to capture their facial expressions and physical movements (Due et al., 2014). We weighed the risk of a potentially intrusive recording device against the opportunity to record the children's physically manifested expressions, and chose the latter. The children were familiar with video-recording on smartphones and after the first few minutes seemed oblivious of the recorder. For us, the visual data were invaluable because the children's expressions and gestures greatly enhanced what they told us through words and drawings. This was especially important because they were using newly learned ways of expressing themselves.

As noted above, we expected interactions with both the children and their parents to occur in Arabic. The RAs were selected for their fluency in Arabic and demonstrated this during their initial visits. However, they also offered the children a choice of using English or Arabic as many of them were becoming bilingual, and they as well as their parents seemed proud of their facility in English. To our surprise, all the children—some encouraged by their parents—chose English for creating their autobiographies and their conversations with the researcher. We did not ask the children reasons for this choice and retrospectively think we should have. The children freely asked the lead RA to give them English translation of some Arabic words, which shows they had not forgotten her familiarity with Arabic. We respected their decision but wonder if we should have offered a choice in the first place. The children probably interpreted the task of drawing and writing as school-like work, and their product as a "book," both of which were strongly associated with English. They may have wanted to demonstrate their facility in English, which was widely regarded as the "superior" language among Syrian refugee families (Ali, 2019) or to practice their skills in English (as encouraged by some parents); or in consideration of their "audience" to which the RA had alerted them while seeking their assent.

In retrospect, we think that the open-ended invitation to the children to document what they remembered yielded a wide variety of memories, including happy ones such as seaside picnics with extended families but also sad ones such as the discovery of a dead bird. This helped us appreciate their multi-dimensional lives. Probes used by the RA opened up more windows into their thinking. We learned that multiple forms of data yielded multiple layers of meanings, which we could not have accessed in a single form because every representation is limited. Yet, despite several options, we sometimes failed to facilitate children's communication, as noted above by the RA. Did the children not tell her what they wanted to say because they could not find any words to express themselves? Or because they did not think they could use Arabic for a school-like task, working with a teacher-like interlocuter? Or having frequently experienced nonunderstanding in Canada they gave up too readily? We do not know the answers to these questions but are now much more attuned to these possibilities.

Sometimes we found little coherence within and among the written and spoken words and the drawings. For example, a

child drew a dead bird and a row of colorful flowers, and pasted a red heart in the same picture and dictated, "I play with my sisters and the bird died. We took the grapes from the tree and ate it later." We were aware of the fragmented nature of children's memories (Ghetti & Lee, 2011; Holliday & Marche, 2012) and did not expect fully coherent narratives, especially from younger children. Nevertheless, in data such as the above, we could not even figure out the contextual information that "bound" together the items in their memories (Ghetti & Lee, 2011, p. 366) and were unable to use them for analysis.

Some of the children discarded work they thought was not good enough or took a lot of time to decorate the pages in their books. We wondered if the expectation of an audience, and the normative model of "a book" shifted their attention to making their work look "pretty" at the cost of providing coherent narrative details. We continue to speculate whether our teacher identities, manifested in tasks we selected, presented ourselves, and interacted with the children, compromised the richness of our data.

Conclusion

Research with children calls for a deeper examination of ethics than research with adults. In response to our REB's questions we had to demonstrate our understanding of the children, the parents, and their sociocultural contexts; of the alternatives, we had considered and the rationales for our decisions. We learned that our interests as researchers, those of the children, of their parents, and of the REB were not always aligned. We had to make difficult choices and learned to live with the ethical discomfiture that remains.

Studies that involve children from a minority ethnic and linguistic group require researchers to work as a team, which is both more rewarding and more challenging. Balancing the cultural norms of ethnic minorities and the "professional" norms we acquire in Western universities is another challenge. Children and parents new to the culture of research understandably cast researchers in more familiar roles, such as teachers and guests, which also complicates the negotiation of roles and relationships. In addition, our own prior roles and relationships continue to influence how we interact with others during fieldwork, and we need to systematically and continually reflect on how they shape our work (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004).

Generating multiple forms of data enhances their volume and quality. A sketchy drawing can trigger a rich conversation with a child, and a video-recording can capture confusion or other emotions which neither of the other two can. However, younger children, in particular, represent their memories in fragments which do not easily yield coherent meanings. As qualitative researchers, we mostly rely on words used by those with whom we share a language, which makes us confident about drawing meanings from them. But we need to be ultra-cautious in our attribution of meanings to children's drawings, words, and physical expressions, especially when they do not show a clearly discernable pattern.

While we gained some useful insights we are also left with many questions about ethical issues, roles and relationships, and forms of data. We expect to encounter even more questions as we analyze our data. We hope other scholars will address these questions and more because we need to see and hear children better, especially those we know very little about.

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