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Reflecting on Race, Gender and Age in Humanitarian-Led Research: Going Beyond Institutional to Individual Positionality

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Abstract: Feminist research involves critical analysis of power, including positionality—the multiple identities and power hierarchies surrounding researchers. While analysis of positionalities (referred to as "reflexivity") is relatively common in certain sectors, in the humanitarian sector, it is almost non-existent. Humanitarian-led research is often assumed to be objective. Despite momentum around decolonising and localising humanitarian aid, which has brought analysis of power sharply into focus, analysis done by humanitarian organisations has largely focused on power hierarchies at the institutional level, rather than how the individual positionalities of researchers might affect research led by humanitarian actors. In this article, I reflect on experiences as a minority-ethnicity researcher conducting anthropological fieldwork among Syrian refugees in Jordan. My experiences highlight how the intersections between race, gender and age profoundly shape research, challenging assumptions of "objective" humanitarian research. I echo calls for intentionally engaging with power hierarchies underlying humanitarian aid, urging humanitarian actors to analyse individual researcher positionalities.

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1. Introduction

In my research, I used feminist, anthropological approaches to explore humanitarian gender narratives on (im)mobility, family relationships and resistance. I completed fieldwork from September 2016 to May 2017, with Syrian refugees aged between 18-60, living in Zarqa, Irbid, Jerash and Amman. My research methods included participatory photography, focus group discussions, semi-structured interviews, life story interviews and participant observation. I also conducted semi-structured interviews with local and international humanitarian workers. Two research assistants provided translation support during the fieldwork. During the course of my research and as part of reflecting back on the process (NJERI, 2021), alongside my previous experiences working in international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in humanitarian settings, I have recognised the importance of reflecting on positionality. In this article, I

reflect on my personal experiences as a Sri Lankan, Australian-educated researcher doing fieldwork in Jordan to illustrate the need for humanitarian actors to engage in reflexivity within humanitarian-led research. [1]

Feminist researchers have long advocated for critical analysis of the positionality of researchers, as part of the feminist concern with power hierarchies (ABU-LUGHOD, 1993). "Positionality" is defined by SEHGAL (2009) as "a researcher's location within existing hierarchies of power and the ways in which the researcher's identity and affiliations are positioned among and by others" (p.331). Positionality thus relates to the identities of the researcher, which "multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions" (HALL, 1996, p.4). Positionality is not neutral but may be "a proxy for relations of power" (SIRNATE, 2014, p.399). FRANKS (2002, p.43) has suggested that positionality encompasses three static "ethnographic positionalities" which are ascribed (given), selective (chosen and worked out) and enforced. This emphasises that "identity is not simply imposed. It is also chosen and actively used" (PETTMAN, 1991, p.191). At times these choices may be strategic, enabling even minority-ethnicity researchers to move "between marginality and privilege" (MAYORGA-GALLO & HORDGE-FREEMAN, 2017, p.378). Within research processes, these multiple identities affect how researchers interact with participants, what they disclose/hide and how data is analysed (ABU-LUGHOD, 1993; BERGER, 2015; EDWARDS & RIBBENS, 1998). These identities, often inscribed in the human body, carry meaning and can be "read" in certain ways by research participants. For example, skin colour, as an indicator of race, may be linked to assumptions about social and economic status (HENRY, 2003). The extent to which similar identities can enable greater connection with research participants is not straightforward. Even where the race of the researcher and research participants is similar, other intersections complicate whether a researcher is viewed as an insider or outsider (GALAM, 2015; HURD & McINTYRE, 1996; JOHNSON-BAILEY, 1999). Other scholars have suggested that rigid lines between "insider" and "outsider" status are unhelpful, particularly when studying migration (NOWICKA & RYAN, 2015; RYAN, 2015). [2]

Awareness of positionality is what feminists refer to as "reflexivity", the "active acknowledgement by the researcher that her/his own actions and decisions will inevitably impact upon the meaning and context of the experience under investigation" (HORSBURGH, 2003, p.309). WICKRAMASINGHE (2010) has described the practice of reflexivity as "an overarching action of consciousness that straddles the entire research process" (p.56). BERGER (2015) suggested reflexivity means "turning of the researcher lens back onto oneself" (p.220), while PILLOW (2003) introduced the notion of "uncomfortable reflexivity" which captures the messy disruptions resulting from reflexivity (pp.192-193). Within feminist literature on positionality, scholars have observed the focus on the experiences of white researchers who do fieldwork among minority-ethnicity (non-white) communities (BRITTON, 2019; HOONG SIN, 2007; OSANAMI TÖRNGREN & NGEH, 2017). In contrast, there is little analysis of the experiences of minority-ethnicity researchers (including those from the diaspora)

who conduct research whether within their own communities, within majority-white contexts, or among other minorities (EGHAREVBA, 2001; FISHER, 2015; HOON, 2006; HOONG SIN, 2007). Race and ethnicity are frequently analysed with a "white gaze" (HOONG SIN, 2007, p.490), often without acknowledgement of how being white offers privileges to white researchers (BRITTON, 2019). This does not mean minority-ethnicity researchers do not experience privilege; VILLENAS (1996) complicated the insider-outsider status of minority-ethnicity researchers by observing that such researchers may occupy positions of both the colonised and the coloniser. [3]

As noted by SCHULZ (2020), reflecting on researcher positionality is not solely a feminist concern but has become important within other disciplines and sectors. In academia, there is increasing recognition of the academic institution as a site of gendered, racial and colonial power hierarchies, which has implications for who is granted power and who is not (WEBSTER & CARETTA, 2019). Being reflexive may be a means of demonstrating research legitimacy and validity (PILLOW, 2003). However, within humanitarian settings, there is limited engagement on researcher positionality (SCHULZ, 2020). This is despite the fact that humanitarian actors, including international NGOs, United Nations agencies and local NGOs regularly conduct research among forcibly displaced populations. While some research is led by "locals", research is also led by expatriate staff and consultants, many of whom spend much of their careers moving from country to country. Yet, there is little consideration in humanitarian-led research on how these varied identities and life experiences shape researcher perspectives. Within humanitarian research, the personal becomes buried in favour of being "neutral"—itself an important principle within humanitarian work. Reflecting a personal perspective is viewed negatively, rather the individual is subsumed into the institution, which negates the fact that individuals have their own perspectives, biases, motivations and interests. It also assumes a uniform neutrality across staff who come from different ethnic backgrounds, without leaving room for how the perspectives of a minority-ethnicity researcher differs from the typical starting point of the "white gaze". While there is growing recognition of the need to tackle racism in the humanitarian sector, this remains a sensitive and fraught topic. Anti-racism is often linked to decolonisation, which focuses on challenging and dismantling colonial legacies (KOTHARI, 2006) and localisation, which seeks to shift power, funding and structures from "international" to "local" actors (PINCOCK, BETTS & EASTON-CALABRIA, 2020, p.721, see also ROEPSTORFF, 2020). In a recent survey of 286 humanitarian aid workers, half experienced racism at work in the past year, while 14% witnessed racism towards communities and/or staff who are black, indigenous or other people of colour (ALI, 2021). The humanitarian sector has been criticised for racialised representations of communities, including assumptions about vulnerability and need, as well as representations of communities as backward and needing modernisation (BENTON, 2016; DOGRA, 2011; FASSIN, 2012 [2010]; MULLINGS, WERNER & PEAKE, 2010; PAILEY, 2020; SPIVAK, 1994). Salary structures and assumptions about capacity have also been identified as influencing racialised structures in the humanitarian sector (ALI, 2021; CREWE & FERNANDO, 2006; EADE, 2007; KOTHARI, 2005). [4]

The way research is conducted in humanitarian settings represents an opportunity to challenge assumptions about the objectivity of research. Scholars have asserted that being a neutral researcher is a myth (MALEJACQ & MUKHOPADHYAY, 2016), and that the personal may deepen the quality of research, enabling analysis of the complex meaning underlying findings (BERGER, 2015). HENRY (2003) suggested that analysing how we present ourselves as researchers can help us analyse how we construct our research participants, particularly the "conditional, contingent and shifting" (p.240) positions we (and they) hold. Analysis of positionality and critical reflection on power can become an important part of the method itself, as auto-ethnography (PRATT, 1999). This goes beyond just analysing the interactions with the refugees; reflexivity may enable deeper consideration of the power hierarchies humanitarian staff and agencies themselves are implicated in. This includes the pressure to generate funding, which affects which issues are researched and how data are presented—an issue not unique to humanitarian actors, but also something very relevant to neoliberal academia where there is pressure on early career researchers to obtain funds and publish their work. [5]

The notion that research is objective is unravelled within processes of reflexivity (BERGER, 2015). Yet, research led by humanitarian actors is often informed by positivist approaches, which have been criticised for being less conducive to analysis of positionality (SCHULZ, 2020). Positivist framings of research often position the researcher as a neutral actor who presents objective truths (HARAWAY, 1988; HARDING, 1991). In humanitarian settings, the risk is that assumptions about what is typical drives research instead of being informed by issues facing affected communities (COMES, 2016; MAUTHNER & DOUCET, 1998). For example, analysis of power that is conducted within humanitarian research tends to fixate on stereotypical and paternalistic positionings of communities as "victims in waiting" (CONNOR, COPLAND & OWEN, 2018, p.400), resulting in uninterrogated claims about the power of researchers over their participants (MALEJACQ & MUKHOPADHYAY, 2016). This is a critique which scholars have voiced about fieldwork in other settings as well (THAPAR-BJÖRKERT & HENRY, 2004). For example, within academia, the assumption tends to be that white researchers embark on research in foreign settings, leading to disproportionate focus on the power differential between researchers and participants (MIRAFTAB, 2004). Rather than seeing power as static, literature on positionality has challenged this narrative to focus on the power of both the researched and the researchers as fluid and intersectional rather than immovable (BASHIR, 2019; GANGA & SCOTT, 2006; HAMILTON, 2019; HENRY, 2003; THAPAR-BJÖRKERT & HENRY, 2004). While rhetoric about taking an "intersectional" approach to research is growing among humanitarian actors, such analysis tends to solely be framed in terms of the culture and power hierarchies of conflict-affected communities, rather than institutions or individual researchers who seek to understand these communities. ABU-LUGHOD (2002) argued that trying to understand culture is seen as more important than understanding structural forces; this perspective can extend to humanitarian actors' positioning of communities as "other" (SPIVAK, 1994; THAPAR-BJÖRKERT & HENRY, 2004) while neglecting their own culture and positions. [6]

MALKKI's (1996) in her seminal work on "dehistoricization" provided a framework to understand how historical and social contexts might be ignored by humanitarian actors in favour of analysing the "here and now". In her research, she focused on the idea that there is little analysis of the socio-cultural norms of refugees before displacement. She suggested that the questions humanitarian actors ask and the issues they choose to focus on in conducting research with refugees, result in history being "leached out of the figure of the refugee" (p.385). Others echoed this critique, discussing how experiences of displaced populations are "reduce[d] ... to a site stripped bare" (FLURI, 2012, p.31). In this article, I extend MALKKI's argument to suggest that lack of attention to the historical and social context surrounding refugees extends to how humanitarian agencies also fail to recognise how the histories and identities of their staff influences research being undertaken. Researchers are presumed to be neutral observers, capturing "facts" from refugees. [7]

I propose that humanitarian actors must prioritise analysis of positionality within research, alongside ongoing efforts to decolonise and localise humanitarian aid. The text that follows is divided into four sections. Firstly, I outline my positionality within the identity politics of Jordan, exploring how my positionalities were role- and context-dependent (Section 2). Secondly, I explore how positionality may be read and assessed by others, which confers differing levels of acceptance during research (Section 3). Thirdly, I discuss how being a minority-ethnicity researcher might create more opportunities for discussions about race with participants (Section 4). Finally, I explore how being viewed as non-threatening has particular implications for interactions with men (Section 5). I argue that the multiple, intersecting identities of researchers make a difference for the content and process of research itself. Using the concepts of "dehistoricisation", "approachability" and "credibility", I suggest that humanitarian actors must go further than merely considering institutional positionality during research, to analyse individual positionality. [8]

2. "Where Are You From?": Situating Multiple Positionalities Within the Context of Jordan

> "Taxi Driver: Are you from Pakistan?
> Me: No, Australia
> Taxi Driver: Muchos gracias
> Me: (silence)
> So, here you are,
> too foreign for home
> too foreign for here.
> Never enough for both" (UMEBINYUO, 2016, p.175)
>
> Anyone: Where are you from?[1]
> Me: Australia.
> Anyone: No, no, *bil asel* [originally]!
> Me: Well, Sri Lanka but ...
> Anyone: Ah! Sri Lanka. Good.

As an Australian citizen with ethnic origins in Sri Lanka—and therefore brown skin—I have often been aware of my "outsider" status in many settings and observed how others find my intersecting identities surprising. On more than one occasion, in the course of my work for international NGOs or as a consultant, upon arriving in a country to support research or run a workshop, I have encountered comments similar to HENDERSON's (2009) experience: "We thought you would be white". Being mistaken for an Indian has also been relatively common in my travels, resulting in people calling out "Namaste" and bowing, or shouting "Indian, Indian!" as I walked past. While volunteering in Aceh after the Indian Ocean tsunami, I was once crossing a busy road with a friend when two young men called out to us. They began dancing in a Bollywood style in the street while we watched in confusion. During the course of my life, as a result of these kinds of encounters, I have chosen which aspects of my identities to emphasise and not emphasise, depending on the setting. For example, while working for international NGOs I have often felt uncomfortable with my in-between status as someone who has lived in settings that were colonised and who now works in an industry that is often shaped by colonial ideologies (VILLENAS, 1996). My work has often involved promoting "modern" ideas about gender equality, that by implication contained value judgements about certain populations. The fact that I was now part of this "elite" because of my education and background complicated my work. However, I often distanced myself from this level of reflection. In international NGOs, my education came to the foreground, and race was less emphasised. Although I did face the "where are you from?" question in the course of working in different countries, to some degree I shelved my racial difference and chose to emphasise my educational background. However, in Jordan, my race became more central. [9]

1 This question was asked by too many people to count, so this conversation could be with anyone.

The question "where are you from?" in the vignette above is one I've encountered throughout my life, but which was asked more than ever before during my time in Jordan, over the course of living and working there with my husband for 2.5 years. This question, suggested OSANAMI TÖRNGREN and NGEH (2017), positions the asker as an insider and the person being asked as a racial and ethnic outsider. Even asking the question invokes particular power dynamics, immediately classifying the ask-er as powerful and in their right place, and the asked are out-of-place. During my time in Jordan, I was often asked about where I was from. People would be visibly surprised when I said "Australia". More than once, I was asked: "Are Australians black?" Sometimes, I went further to explain that my parents are from Sri Lanka, since they looked so obviously disappointed to have guessed incorrectly. As time passed, I became frustrated by the incredulous responses to my "Australia" answer, so I would immediately say I was from Sri Lanka, knowing that this likely meant they assumed I was a domestic worker, due to the presence of South Asian domestic workers in Jordan. This is similar to HOON's (2006) experiences trying to explain to research participants where he was from, resulting in multiple answers to the question that reflected his "fragmented self" (p.92). This answer largely stopped the conversations; people were satisfied that I fulfilled their expectations. The "Australian" part of my identity was tucked away, while my racial identity became the main way I was categorised. [10]

My multiple identities became most visible to me during my PhD fieldwork in Jordan. The decision to study the experiences of Syrian refugees stemmed from my experience working in development and humanitarian NGOs (including on refugee programs), my personal values, my concerns regarding the treatment of refugees in Australia, as well as my family background. My parents and their relatives on both sides of the family left Sri Lanka during the civil war before I was born, due to their Tamil ethnicity. This shaped my worldview and politics, as well as my career choice. Having lived in multiple places during my childhood (Brunei, New Zealand and Australia), I have always been interested in issues related to migration, which led to volunteer work with refugees and migrants. Prior to my PhD, I worked in international NGOs, in roles involving program management, provision of technical advice on gender equality and monitoring, evaluation and research for over eight years, including field postings in Jordan, Burundi and Nigeria. My experiences working in Jordan made me particularly aware of the experiences of Syrian refugees in Jordan and the need to improve humanitarian practice. [11]

The context in Jordan further complicated my multiple positionalities. Reflecting now, the history of Jordan and the questions of identity Jordan has historically grappled with, might have contributed to what I perceived as this seeming preoccupation with identifying my origins. Certainly, while living in Australia I was an "outsider" in terms of race, however, my experiences living in a multicultural city (Melbourne) somewhat desensitised me from recognising my racial outsider status in Jordan, especially how race, gender and socio-economic status intersected to cause me to be "read" in very particular ways in Jordan. Jordan is a country of 6 million people, consisting of 2 million Palestinians, 668,000

registered Syrian refugees[2] and around 600,000 unregistered Syrian refugees (CARRION, 2015). Jordan also hosts close to 500,000 Iraqis, as well as refugees from Somalia, Sudan, Yemen, and some 20,000 domestic workers from the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Indonesia. Jordan thus represents a diverse and multi-ethnic context for the study of forced migration. Scholars have drawn attention to racialised hierarchies of aid in Jordan that may result in certain groups being "invisible" to the government and humanitarian actors (MURPHY, TODMAN, TAYLOR & DAVIS, 2016, p.6). Within literature on the many populations living in Jordan, the politics of hosting refugees, who are often referred to as "guests" also emerges as important in thinking about race. The attitude of the Jordanian Government toward refugees and other "guests" is shaped by Jordan grappling with its own identity, especially as distinct from Palestinian identity. The Jordanian government's inclusion and exclusion of populations has varied and includes visa restrictions on certain groups (CHATTY & MANSOUR, 2011), border closures and rapidly-changing limitations on employment and access to services. The process of Jordan establishing its identity has occurred through creating camps to contain various populations, as well as in how nationality laws are narrowly framed (ALMALA, 2014). [12]

The way South Asians are positioned within such a context is important to consider. In Lebanon, a similar context, the status and treatment of migrant domestic workers highlights how race, gender and economic status intersect (ABU-HABIB, 1998). In Jordan, migrant domestic workers experience racism and harassment (TAMKEEN, 2015) including being assumed to be sex workers (CAILLOL, 2018). "Whiteness" as a concept has been analysed by scholars who focus on the extent to which whiteness is normalised (KOBAYASHI & PEAKE, 2000) and how judgements may be made based on someone's whiteness (FARIA & MOLLETT, 2014; FISHER, 2015). Whiteness as a system which societies are preconditioned to value, is often perceived as conveying a "structural advantage" (FARIA & MOLLETT, 2014, p.10). Researchers have highlighted that in Jordan, darker skin colour may result in discrimination and prejudice, and is associated with lower economic status (CURTIS, 2011), which represents the ongoing legacy of colonialism and its entanglement with whiteness. Race, gender and age thus intersect in particular ways to position South Asians in particular in lower status professions, with some negative associations regarding sex work. [13]

My fieldwork encounters illustrate the implications of these intersecting identities in Jordan. While working for an international NGO in Jordan, I once caught a taxi in Amman after work, carrying my laptop bag and handbag. The taxi driver asked me the regular "where are you from?" question, then when my response of "Australian" resulted in his disbelief, I finally said I was from Sri Lanka. I thought this would end the conversation (as it does normally), however, after a brief pause, the taxi driver said, "Sri Lankans don't have laptops", indicating the laptop bag I was carrying. Here, the assumption was that all Sri Lankans were domestic workers and domestic workers didn't own laptops—evidence of the intersections between gender, race and class. I also observed differences in how I was treated

2 Syria Regional Refugee Response Inter-Agency Information Sharing Portal, UNCR, http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=107 [Accessed: August 1, 2021].

that varied depending on whether my (white) husband was with me or not. Despite the fact that our reason for being in Jordan was my work, and later my research, the onus was on me to explain my outsider status (MIRZA, 2017), while my husband's presence required no explanation. I felt uncomfortable having to rely on his "credit" as a white person, to gain status even in our local neighbourhood in Amman, a multi-cultural city filled with humanitarian workers from across the globe. At one point, much to his discomfort, I forced my husband to come to our small local supermarket with me, to make our relationship clear to the supermarket staff and ensure they would treat me better in his absence. This was after a Jordanian lady was served before me (on instructions from the supermarket manager to the cashier), despite me waiting in the queue long before she arrived. I noticed that my Uber passenger rating was consistently low, despite me speaking better Arabic than my husband and always knowing where I was going; his ratings were always higher to the extent that I stopped using my account. Alongside these events, I came across an article in the *Washington Post* about how Jordan was the least racially-tolerant country based on the World Values Survey data (FISHER, 2013). It made me question the interactions I'd had even with local humanitarian agencies in the start-up phase of my research. Were they secretly wondering why this brown person was in their building, and negotiating for access to refugees? What did they really think of me? These reflections were also confronting in the context of my husband's very different experiences of life in Jordan, causing us both to think about how power and privilege are granted to certain bodies over others. I felt compelled to prove that I belonged by invoking my husband's perceived power, which caused discomfort for both of us because it meant reinforcing colonial narratives about whiteness being superior. [14]

The contrast in my racialised experiences in Jordan while working for an international NGO compared to while doing my PhD are important for the argument in this article about the need for humanitarian actors to consider individual positionality of their researchers. While working for an international NGO, my interactions with Jordanians and Syrians occurred strictly within the confines of my work as a manager of a humanitarian programme focused on Syrian refugees. This affiliation somewhat shielded me from realising that my race mattered to people, because my institutional affiliation granted me a certain educational and economic status. However, these realisations came some time after my work experiences. I remained blissfully ignorant of how these intersecting identities would affect my work, even while conducting assessments in Jordan where I interviewed NGO practitioners and Syrian refugees. I did not intentionally reflect on my individual positionality during these research processes, but only reflected on the power dynamics of the NGO I represented. Importantly, I was also not *asked* to reflect on my individual positionality while conducting this research or indeed while leading a large team of Jordanian and Palestinian staff. Despite working in a colonial, essentially white institution, the implication was that my identities did not matter, but only the institution's positionality warranted analysis. [15]

During my doctoral research, I found myself in a situation where I was not tied to the status of the international NGO like I had been in the past. I travelled across Jordan using taxis, instead of driving myself in the NGO's vehicle. I spent more time outside rather than sitting in an office: standing on streets waiting to meet people, sitting in cafes for interviews, waiting for taxis or buses on busy roads. Although being different to a white expatriate enabled me to blend in, it also placed a higher onus on me to explain my background. I deliberately tried to historicise myself by revealing more of my personal background with research participants, but it was more the conversations with other Jordanians: taxi-drivers, supermarket workers and random strangers, that most challenged me. I found myself having to explain my background more than when the institution I was affiliated with automatically provided me with a certain status. During my fieldwork, I came to recognise the weight of the "where are you from?" question. [16]

My fieldwork experiences highlight that status and identity may be inscribed (as well as taken away) by others. On one occasion, I was reminded that I am uncomfortably "other" despite my "outsider-within" status within academia (MIRZA, 2017, p.42). Strangely, this occurred in a setting where I felt more comfortable and aware of my identity as a Western-educated doctoral researcher: at a research centre in Amman where I came to hear a lecture. I arrived a few minutes late, and wandered around the foyer, trying to find the room where the lecture was being held. A woman with skin colour similar to mine was sitting on a sofa in the lobby, and seeing my confusion, pointed me towards a room in the corner of the foyer. I walked that way, expecting to find the lecture hall, and instead found myself in the kitchen, where a few people with skin colour similar to mine were preparing food. Surprised, I walked out. Seeing me leave, the woman shouted, "Kitchen, kitchen!" and pointed me again towards the kitchen. Realising she thought I was a domestic worker, I felt quite embarrassed and said quietly, "I'm here for the lecture". She looked surprised, displaying what PUWAR (2001) described as disorientation when certain bodies appear out of place, and pointed me in the opposite direction. This was a quite startling encounter, because I wasn't in the mindset to be aware of my race, like I would be when walking on the street or catching a taxi. In effect, I had put on my "academic hat" in this setting and shifted my racial identity to the background. However, in this encounter, race, gender and class intersected, destabilising the perception that I was an academic insider. This experience was a reminder that we carry the meaning represented by our bodies everywhere we go: it is inescapable. [17]

3. Navigating the Tests of Credibility and Approachability

The way our bodies are read by others may, however, bring benefits, even for minority-ethnicity researchers. Aside from blending in more easily, what emerged in my fieldwork experiences was that being read as a certain race also conferred a lower social status on me. While this at times caused discomfort, it sometimes felt like this was a positive in my interaction with research participants: being underestimated or not seen as threatening was an advantage in negotiating access and building relationships with Syrian women and men. MAYORGA-GALLO and HORDGE-FREEMAN (2017) have suggested that the concepts of "credibility" and "approachability" (p.380) can be useful in analysing fieldwork experiences. They emphasised that credibility, which is related to trustworthiness and whether the researcher is worth spending time on, is about self-presentation as well as perceptions of others. Approachability relates to being viewed as non-threatening. Their conceptualisation of the key question: "why and how did people talk to me?" (p.391) helps to outline my own experiences of how my race, gender and age intersected to shape my fieldwork experiences. [18]

Being a woman from South Asia already helped to make me more approachable to my research participants. However, age (or perceptions of age) were also important. I was often perceived as younger than I actually am. On multiple occasions, Syrian women assumed I was younger than them, only to find I was five or sometimes ten years older. One of my research participants was a woman in her 60s. From the beginning of my interactions with her, which occurred over several months, she assumed a kind of motherly care over me. This included being concerned about my lack of children and urging me on multiple occasions to visit a doctor. On one occasion when I visited her in her home, we decided to make *kuba*—a popular Syrian dish. When we visited the supermarket to buy ingredients, she scolded me for not covering my head and made comments about my trousers, which I had previously thought were quite conservative. This opportunity to teach me how to cook her favourite food was not only about sharing Syrian culture, but also as a means of educating me. On another occasion, after a chance comment from my research assistant about my lack of sufficient pyjamas, she took it upon herself to take me shopping for lingerie, which she referred to as "fire pyjamas". Much to my dismay, I was dragged to al-Shaddeh Street, in Zarqa, known for its shopping. It was cold and rainy. She walked rapidly through the streets and mostly ignored shop staff. We struggled to keep up with her. She was on a mission to shop for "pyjamas" for me, despite my protestations. I found her giggling cheekily at one point, when she pointed to a mannequin in the street which featured bright red skimpy underwear. At one store, the two of them found the pyjama/lingerie section and dragged me to that part of the store. The research participant picked up various lingerie packets, while we were watched by a burly man who stood about one metre away. She chose bright yellow lingerie, saying, "[y]our husband will follow you if you wear this one", while I smiled nervously and steered them back to the winter jumpers. They urged me to try things on, but I refused. It was surprising to see very public displays of underwear and lingerie in the market in Zarqa, all in shops staffed entirely by men. I had seen this in Amman previously and assumed this was

because Amman was less conservative, however, I found it uncomfortable to see semi-naked mannequins in provocative poses on the street. Neither my research participant nor my research assistant seemed to find this unusual, but I felt very awkward. No one purchased any lingerie, thankfully. Later, I wondered, would this encounter have occurred if I was white, or older, or unaccompanied? Certainly, gender granted me "insider" status (EGHAREVBA, 2001), but it was also the intersection with other identities that made this experience possible. Would I have had this access to an entirely different shopping experience if I was not dark-skinned and young and therefore viewed as non-threatening, able to observe and directly engage in this slightly artificial shopping experience of being surrounded by women and watched by male shop-owners? I had never seen a white woman shopping in this street, where it would be much harder to blend in, but it was easier for me. [19]

At various points I felt more accepted, though not quite an insider, through the kind and welcoming comments I received from Syrians. One older woman, in the middle of an interview, smiled warmly at me and said: "If you weren't married, I would take you to my son to be my daughter-in-law". There were also times where I felt the acceptance of Syrians was more "in spite of" my outsider status. At the end of one interview, a woman said to my research assistant: "[F]rom the first sight we know if a person is good and kind-hearted or ... Michelle is a foreigner even though we still know that she is *tayybeh*, you know, good heart". Once, my family history—a sign of credibility—was also mentioned by a research participant. She introduced me by saying, "[h]er parents left Sri Lanka because of the war. She is like us". During another interview, the mother of the interviewee said about me, "[s]he's sweet, this girl"—descriptors which seemed to indicate that she also assumed I was young. Her daughter added about her mother, "[s]he doesn't like all foreigners", inscribing an extra level of acceptance upon me. Underneath this acceptance, however, there was a thread of separation. This was also evident during a visit to a family, when they brought out a delicious breakfast for us to share. The sister of my research participant turned and asked my research assistant: "Does she need a fork?" in a sarcastic tone. Towards the end of this visit, this sister said, "I like her" in reference to me, and told my research assistant she can immediately see the goodness of a person when she first meets them, which I found a bit confronting. I felt this outsider status in a different way towards the end of my fieldwork when I visited a women's Quranic centre for a crafts fair. I had been invited by one of the research participants who proudly took me around the room, introducing me to her friends. Her introductions went something like this: "She is from Australia. She is Christian. She is interested in the centre". [20]

The feeling of being assessed was a constant feature of the fieldwork period. Research participants seemed to be constantly weighing me up; what I wore and what I ate, and my actions and words were constantly on display. For example, my Arabic skills received considerable critique, particularly from men. Although there was some recognition that I had at least attempted to learn the language, I was often critiqued by male strangers and once by a male research participant. On one occasion, while in a taxi on the way to an interview, I took a phone call in

Arabic. When the call ended, the taxi-driver issued the grim pronouncement: "You need to practice more". Language skills were part of demonstrating credibility in Jordan, both during my time working in an international NGO as well as conducting PhD research. Jordanian colleagues and taxi-drivers would often comment about how many humanitarian workers did not bother to learn Arabic. Despite my sub-standard attempts at speaking Arabic, being able to converse did help to bridge barriers with research participants. [21]

Aside from language skills, credibility was assessed in other ways. Some participants were aware of the academic institution where I was conducting my PhD: the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). SOAS is particularly well-known for its scholarship and promotion of Palestinian rights, therefore being associated with SOAS also granted credibility. One of my first interviews with an older male life story research participant took place in the presence of his family. While we ate lunch together in their home, he asked me: "Do you know about Sykes-Picot [the treaty that enabled British control of Palestine]?" I was taken aback slightly, as it seemed I was being tested. Thankfully, my affirmative response meant that I passed this assessment in a context where one's position on Palestine is important. My status as a minority-ethnicity researcher positioned me as an outsider to the Palestinian struggle, and I needed to prove myself to this older man who had encountered these politics for most of his life. This encounter emphasised to me that history matters. In this setting, how you are positioned on issues like Palestine or Assad, makes a difference to how people interact with you and whether you are deemed credible. However, thinking about politics and history in this way contrasts with messaging within humanitarian agencies, who urge staff never to share views on politics or religion as part of the humanitarian commitment to neutrality. My academic association with SOAS challenged my position as a "neutral" humanitarian. [22]

4. Unexpected Conversations About Race

At times during my fieldwork, issues of race became more visible. One young woman, during a home visit, introduced her sister by saying to me, "she likes Bollywood movies". Thinking I was Indian, she felt her sister's movie preferences would connect us. I observed that when participants showed me photos of their children or family members, they would often comment on skin colour, being proud of a relative who had fair skin, or reference the combination of a child having fair skin and blue eyes. A few times, I was asked to show a photo of my husband, which resulted in very positive reactions because they liked my husband's skin colour, describing him as "beautiful". The idea that having lighter skin was undoubtedly positive was reaffirmed outside of the interview context as well. When I visited the supermarket, I was surprised by the array of beauty products used for skin-lightening. I had not seen these in the UK or Australia and was struck by the value attached to having light skin within this context: whiteness was not only the baseline but aspirational (FARIA & MOLLETT, 2014; KOBAYASHI & PEAKE, 2000). [23]

Issues related to race also became more visible because of my racial identity, which, combined with my other identities, made me more credible and approachable to research participants who had experienced racism themselves. During fieldwork, I found myself the confidant of two Syrian women who had darker skin. They met during the photography workshops and became friends, asking to be interviewed together as well as separately. One of them spoke frankly about the racial discrimination she experienced as a child at school, including experiences of bullying. Her stories of racism at school due to her darker skin resonated with me: "I suffered a lot from discrimination, this discrimination. And it follows me each place I go to". My research did not focus on race and I did not ask questions around this at all; however, particularly during the life story interview with this participant, she began sharing these experiences, perhaps feeling I would be a sympathetic listener. These disclosures emphasise the importance of both the credibility component (being trustworthy and being assumed to understand particular issues because of my race) as well as approachability (being non-threatening and a "safe" avenue to disclose issues to) (MAYORGA-GALLO & HORDGE-FREEMAN, 2017; SHINOZAKI, 2012). Skin colour acted as a "marker of shared social disadvantage" (HILL, LEE & JENNAWAY, 2010, p.329). [24]

For the other young woman, the questions were more about marriage prospects. She was curious about my marriage, wanting to know if my husband's family accepted me "despite" my skin colour. Both women were pleased to learn that the city where I lived was multicultural and they joked about finding Australian husbands for themselves. These women used humour to discuss their skin colour, saying things like, "[m]y mum forgot me in the oven for too long". However, jokes were sometimes delivered from others to these women in ways that were less amusing. Towards the end of an interview with one of them, where other family members were also present, her sister reacted to a jibe by calling her an Indian driver, which was an insult indicating her skin was darker than her sister's. When my research assistant explained this comment, I immediately felt uncomfortable and like I wanted to leave, despite the fact that we had shared a lovely meal together. The insult to her sister felt like an insult towards me as well, capturing the associations between race and class, while confusingly positioning me as similar to my research participant (PILLOW, 2003). This experience illustrates that as well as these two participants perhaps identifying with me because of our intersecting identities, I also identified with them and felt drawn to their struggles. [25]

Apart from these two women, most Syrians did not reference my race. This was perhaps because I spent some time explaining my background in Arabic at the beginning of each photography workshop, so that the Syrians attending knew a bit about me. In many cases however, this was not enough, and I faced quite personal questions from the women in particular, who wanted to know about my husband and whether I had children. Many women expressed concern that I had been married for several years and did not yet have children, with a few offering advice (including herbal concoctions). Despite knowing my age by that point of

the research, they felt their "married with children" status warranted the authority to advise me, although I was older. [26]

5. Interactions With Men: From Disclosure to Harassment

While I had anticipated challenges in finding Syrian men who would agree to being interviewed, to my surprise men were willing and even enthusiastic about participating in both life story interviews and semi-structured interviews. This aligns with the experiences of other female researchers in Jordan, which they link to their status as "Western" as well as access to the private sphere granted due to being female (SCHWEDLER, 2006). I had anticipated men would find it difficult to be interviewed by a woman; however, it seemed that my status as non-threatening may also have helped. While some interviews with men took place in their homes in the presence of their wives, others occurred in the NGO spaces where the photography workshops were held and in coffee shops. For the three men who participated in life story interviews, this involved multiple sessions held over a few months; however, the men seemed happy with this level of time commitment. For example, at the end of his first interview, a young male life story interview participant exclaimed, "I still haven't told you a quarter of my story!" He gave long accounts of his activities supporting the rebels in Syria, perhaps influenced by his perception that myself and my research assistant would be impressed by his bravery. Interestingly, he spoke of older women in his family in glowing terms, describing their bravery in Syria and his relationship with them in positive terms, which may also have been because we were women. He may have wanted to represent himself as progressive in his views on women. Other male research participants also spoke at length about their lives before leaving Syria and after arriving in Jordan. A few even became emotional, crying during interviews, which I found surprising because of my own assumptions that Middle Eastern men would be unemotional. Unlike other researchers who faced challenges and at times inappropriate behaviour from male participants (ARENDELL, 1997), my experiences were quite the opposite. I also had the sense that men were somehow excluded from opportunities to discuss their experiences, perhaps because of the humanitarian aid focus on the vulnerability of Syrian women and girls (TURNER, 2016). [27]

However, my experiences with men who were not part of my research illustrate how gender, race and age collided in a more uncomfortable ways outside of the direct research context. These uncomfortable moments occurred most with taxi-drivers, though I also experienced staring and catcalling on the street. Once, I was in a taxi on the way home from interviews, when the taxi driver struck up a conversation with me. He had lived in Saudi Arabia before and had recently returned to Jordan and was sharing his views about Jordan. It seemed I didn't need to participate in the conversation beyond saying the occasional "really?" or "interesting" while he spoke. His one-sided conversation then shifted. He said that some men in Jordan have two wives and this is because men are "crazy for sex". He joked about how a woman is not able to meet this need for sex, so a man takes another wife. At the time, I changed the topic rather quickly, feeling uncomfortable at this discussion of sex. Later, and during discussions with my

PhD supervisor, I realised this was more than a taxi-driver just being provocative but was harassment, linked to my identities as a young woman travelling alone who was from a particular racial identity that is sometimes linked with sex work in the Middle East. Another time, also in a taxi, the driver was a younger man who was very confident and keen to talk. I had answered the "where are you from?" question by saying I was Australian, which prompted him to raise the issue of the legalisation of marijuana in Australia. His subsequent jokes and invitations to party led to me asking to be dropped off earlier than planned, as I didn't want him to know exactly where I lived. Being viewed as non-threatening had consequences. [28]

On both these occasions, at the time I failed to acknowledge that the jokes and provocative comments amounted to harassment, instead displaying a stoic resolve that this was part of the fieldwork experience and might be part of culture —a common assumption (KLOß, 2017). HANSON and RICHARDS (2017) observed how ethnographic researchers simply reflected on feeling "uncomfortable" when faced with sexualised behaviour (p.592). They argued that being ambivalent about these experiences or being reluctant to classify them as harassment might be part of norms within academia that cause female researchers to fear being viewed as emotional or unprofessional, as well as norms valorising danger and involvement in humanitarian aid (HANSON & RICHARDS, 2017; KLOß, 2017; MALKKI, 2015, SCHNEIDER, LORD & WILCZAK, 2021). The need to appear professional in the course of humanitarian work and academic research resonates with sexualised encounters during my experiences. These include being propositioned for marriage, being sent flirtatious text messages late at night from members of the data collection team who were staying in the same accommodation, and being placed in unsafe and risky security situations by male decision-makers. These encounters demonstrate how gendered positionality in particular has implications not just during longer-term fieldwork but also shorter-term research work commissioned by humanitarian actors. Like NJERI (2021), my reflections on these experiences have often been retrospective, involving a change in perspective over time. [29]

6. Conclusion

In this article, I have explored how the intersecting identities of a researcher can impact the research process. Through accounts that reflect on power hierarchies within academia as well as humanitarian institutions, I have contributed an analysis of positionality from the perspective of a minority-ethnicity researcher conducting research in a forced migration context. These accounts complicate my status as a Sri Lankan, Australian-educated researcher with a background working in often colonial humanitarian organisations and conducting fieldwork in Jordan while affiliated with a university in the United Kingdom. I have demonstrated how different identities may shift from the foreground to the background depending on setting and institutional affiliations, requiring researchers to reflect on how they manage multiple identities (CREAN, 2018). My experiences explore the disjunctures and contradictions associated with navigating multiple identities, including how at times I benefited from emphasising

or de-emphasising particular identities. I have argued that positionality matters during the research process, because history matters (MALKKI, 1996). I have suggested that reflexivity must shift from being only needed in certain disciplines, but should be embedded into humanitarian-led research as part of the method itself. Drawing on my experiences, particularly as a researcher in neoliberal academia, I have reflected on the complications of navigating the blurred categories of "insider" and "outsider" during fieldwork, pointing to the relevance of this kind of reflexivity for researchers working in humanitarian institutions. While discussions about decolonising and localising aid have resulted in greater analysis of the positionality of humanitarian institutions, analysis of the positionality of individuals *within* humanitarian institutions remains almost non-existent. This gap in individual reflexivity has serious implications for research conducted by humanitarian actors, perpetuating assumptions about the apparent objectivity of humanitarian-led research. Reliance on the notion of researcher objectivity can limit the extent to which humanitarian researchers consider the gendered, racial and colonial power hierarchies they occupy—which are structured by broader power hierarchies surrounding and perpetuated by the humanitarian sector itself. [30]

Through reflexive analysis, I demonstrate how the hierarchies of power linked to academia and the humanitarian sector, as well as within the setting of Jordan, lead to particular narratives of inclusion and exclusion within research. During fieldwork, the "where are you from?" question illustrates such power hierarchies. This question represents more than mere curiosity, but an attempt to historicise researchers, with particular implications for minority-ethnicity researchers who face greater onus to explain their presence and background (MIRZA, 2017). Following arguments made by THAPAR-BJÖRKERT and HENRY (2004), my fieldwork experiences reinforce how intersecting identities can shift power dynamics. In my research, the weight attached to being "Western"-educated was lessened somewhat by my presentation as brown, female and young. My experiences during fieldwork serve as an important reminder that the meaning ascribed to bodies can disrupt "elite" status or the illusion of institutional affiliations. Brown skin is "read" by others in particular ways and shaped by gendered, racial and colonial power hierarchies. Minority-ethnicity researchers may thus shift between enjoying the privileges associated with education, and experiencing "marginality" (MAYORGA-GALLO & HORDGE-FREEMAN, 2017, p.378). In my research, at times this marginality caused me to be perceived as both approachable and credible, though this involved various tests by research participants as well as others within the Jordanian context such as taxi-drivers. [31]

My experiences suggest that skin colour may be a means of bridging barriers between researchers and research participants, reinforcing the idea that power relations are fluid and challenging paternalistic descriptions of large power differentials always being experienced by research participants (MALEJACQ & MUKHOPADHYAY, 2016; MIRAFTAB, 2004). Shared skin colour may be a unifying aspect for researchers and research participants, creating common ground through shared experiences of discrimination, and permitting disclosures and unique access to people's lives (HILL et al., 2010). Refugee accounts of

racism, access to certain activities and even interactions with male participants may not have been possible without my specific intersecting identities, suggesting that "the ontological distinction between research and researched is no longer intact" (HOON, 2006, p.85). Reflexivity may also have other consequences, including "uncomfortable" moments (PILLOW, 2003, pp.192). During my research, this discomfort included feeling the need to self-describe differently to avoid the scrutiny of others, or unconsciously reinforcing a colonial narrative about whiteness being superior by relying on a spouse's whiteness to gain acceptance. Being viewed as non-threatening at times had negative consequences, including harassment. Sexual harassment and other forms of violence are a challenging reality for many female researchers, which problematically is often ignored in academia. Norms about the need for professionalism (HANSON & RICHARDS, 2017) alongside pressures to produce research and generate funding may prevent female researchers—especially early career researchers—from acknowledging violence that occurs during the research process. [32]

The reflections in this article reinforce that reflexivity within research represents more than merely "navel-gazing" (MINH-HA, 1989, p.28) but may become part of the research method—as auto-ethnography that challenges power hierarchies including the role of gender, neoliberalism and colonialism in shaping the research enterprise (BUTZ & BESIO, 2004; ELLIS, ADAMS & BOCHNER, 2011; PRATT, 1999). MAUTHNER and DOUCET (1998) observed that "in analysing data we are confronted with ourselves, and with our own central role in shaping the outcome" (p.122). The fact that multiple, intersecting identities may produce both deeper interactions as well as uncomfortable disruptions during the research process has clear implications for humanitarian institutions whose staff hail from varied backgrounds. From the selection of the research subject matter to the interactions with research participants and the way data are presented, research is powerfully shaped by the intersecting identities of researchers as well as the motivations and interests of the institutions they represent. The power held by minority-ethnicity researchers to invoke different identities at different moments is also not neutral, but represents both privilege and marginality (MAYORGA-GALLO & HORDGE-FREEMAN, 2017). Reflecting on positionalities recognises this complexity and offers humanitarian actors the opportunity of producing more grounded, reflexive research. [33]

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