



## Ethical Considerations for Humanizing Refugee Research Trajectories

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### ABSTRACT

This paper argues that ethical responsibilities in refugee studies have focused on fieldwork, yet ethics ought to be applied to the research problematic—the aims, questions, and concepts—as potentially implicated in the production of harm. Using an example from Tanzania, I argue that policy has largely shaped the language, categories investigated, and interpretive frames of refugee research, and this article advocates greater attention to historical and contemporary racialization processes underpinning humanitarian principles and practices, and how they might contribute to exclusion and ontological anxieties among refugees in the Global South. By expanding our conceptualization of ethical responsibilities, researchers can better explore the suitability, and the implications for the refugee communities, of the approach that they have adopted and whether they contribute or challenge the racialization and dehumanization of people seeking refuge.

### KEYWORDS

refugee; forced migration; ethics; field work; Tanzania

### RÉSUMÉ

Cet article soutient que les responsabilités éthiques dans les études sur les réfugiés se sont concentrées sur le terrain de recherche alors que l'éthique devrait également s'appliquer à la problématique de recherche - les objectifs, les questions et les concepts pouvant potentiellement causer préjudice. À partir d'un exemple issu de la Tanzanie, cet article soutient que les politiques publiques ont largement façonné le langage, les catégories étudiées ainsi que les cadres interprétatifs de la recherche sur les réfugiés, et préconise de porter une plus grande attention aux processus de racialisation historiques et contemporains qui sous-tendent les principes et pratiques humanitaires, ainsi qu'à la manière dont ils peuvent contribuer à l'exclusion et aux anxiétés ontologiques chez les réfugiés du Sud global. En élargissant la conceptualisation des responsabilités éthiques, les chercheurs sont mieux à même d'explorer la pertinence et les implications de l'approche qu'ils ont adoptée pour les communautés de réfugiés, et dans quelle mesure ils contribuent à la racialisation et la déshumanisation des personnes cherchant refuge ou la remettent en cause.

### KEYWORDS

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## INTRODUCTION

Emmanuel is 35 years old<sup>1</sup>. He gained Tanzanian citizenship in 2009 when approximately 162,000 Burundian refugees were allowed to apply for Tanzanian nationality. He was born in a Tanzanian refugee settlement to parents who fled the 1972 genocide in Burundi. He is considered one of the leaders of the Burundi community in Dar es Salaam. Unlike other former Burundian refugees who are actively hiding their identity (Daley et al., 2018), Emmanuel and his friends are seeking to reimagine a new one that emphasizes their experiences in Tanzania and draws from aspects of Burundian culture that are considered positive. He comments, "Why should we abandon our food and language, and our approach to gender relations which is much more progressive than Tanzanians. ... Tanzania has so many ethnic identities, we could rename our ethnic group 'Higwe'"—a Kirundi term meaning "lucky people." He believes ethnic reclassification will address the stigma and discrimination they face as "refugees," Hutus, and Burundians, which constitute problematic categories of being in Tanzania. A frequent complaint from these former refugees is that Tanzanians fear them (Daley et al., 2018). This echoes research by Run (2012, p. 384) and others of media representation of refugees in Australia, where they are "portrayed as personifying the violence that ousted them from home and bestowed them by the label" of **refugees** (p. 384). In reality, as Run (2012, p. 386) contends, "from the time of fleeing home well through most of their life experiences, [refugees] consistently feel threatened"—a condition that produces,

following Anthony Giddens (1991, p. 36–37), "existential anxiety" or "cognitive and emotional disorientations," thus preventing the attainment of "ontological security"—because their biographical histories fail to provide certainties and a sense of belonging (Daley et al., 2018).

Many former Burundian refugees, residing within and outside of the settlements, expressed the same sentiments, and there is historical evidence of refugees in North America and Europe, for example, Jewish refugees from Central Europe to the United States, changing names and abandoning their culture for a variety of reasons, including to avoid stigma and gain employment (Maass, 1958; Moriel, 2005). In post-colonial Tanzania, from the 1960s to the 1980s, supporting refugees was believed to be a moral and political responsibility of states and host societies (Chaulia, 2003). Based on research conducted in the mid-1980s, Liisa Malkki (1995) argues that refugees in encampments hung onto the refugee label to differentiate themselves from Tanzanians, while refugees settled in townships pursued strategies of assimilation. A study by the Centre for Forced Migration (CFM) et al. (2008, p. 16) notes that four decades later, "refugees were frustrated with the [refugee] label" and that it "[left] them feeling marginalised and excluded from mainstream Tanzanian society and create[d] a real challenge" for initiatives aimed at integrating those who chose to remain in Tanzania. The study also found that former refugees were still confronted with fear and loathing, that those, such as Emmanuel, who once held the label were seeking new ways of identification to facilitate integration into

<sup>1</sup>The name Emmanuel is a pseudonym. The qualitative data used in this paper was obtained in 2016–2017 for a research project entitled *Becoming Tanzanian: Former Burundi Refugees and the Forging of Citizenship in Tanzania*, which was funded by the University of Oxford. Ethics clearance was obtained from Oxford University's ethics committee. In Tanzania, the research was supported by Dr. Ng'wanza Kamata and Leiyo Singo of the University of Dar es Salaam. Some of this research was previously published in Daley et al. (2018). The first part of this article draws and expands on insights first discussed there.

the political community of Tanzania and to regain their everyday humanity.

This state of affairs can be attributed to the anti-immigration and anti-refugee discourse produced by some Tanzanian politicians (see, e.g., [Siyame, 2017](#)). However, research pursued by academics and other institutions such as think tanks also ought to come under scrutiny. Commonly, the discourse of non-academic protagonists tends to be interrogated as to whether it inspires incitement to hatred and violence or othering, but that of the academic receives less attention. [Crawley and Skleparis \(2018\)](#) alert us to the problematic relationship between policy and academic research in the context of Europe. They comment:

Taking the dominant categories as the basis of our analytical approach can limit our understanding of migration and make us potentially complicit in a political process which has, over recent years, stigmatised, vilified and undermined the rights of refugees and migrants.

*p.50*

[Bakewell \(2008, p. 433\)](#), noting the limitations of policy categories in migration research, similarly argues that they tend to “obscure and render invisible some population groups, causal relationships, and questions that are methodologically difficult to capture.” Using the example of the intersection of policy and academic research in Tanzania, my contention builds on and goes beyond these authors’ conclusions by suggesting that researchers’ uncritical use of these policy categories can be implicated in the production of harm.

Ethical responsibility in forced migration research, though advanced significantly over the past two decades ([Clark-Kazak, 2017](#); [Jacobsen & Landau, 2003](#); [Krause, 2017](#)), nevertheless has tended to focus on fieldwork practices: anonymity, informed consent, security, and appropriate methodolo-

gies, all aimed at doing no harm ([Muller-Funk, 2021](#); [Espinoza, 2020](#)). Yet, such scrutiny often does not apply to the research problematic—the theories, aims, questions, and terminologies—as potentially implicated in the production of harm. [Krause \(2017, p. 19\)](#) alerts researchers to the danger of “reproducing victimising notions of refugees and therewith contributing to concepts of vulnerabilities which the international refugee regime uses.” Since their arrival in 1972, Burundian refugees in Tanzania have been an example of a group subjected to a plethora of academic and policy-based research ([Lemarchand, 1996](#); [Malkki, 1995](#); [Sommers, 2001](#)).

Such research uncritically deploys concepts that have utility globally, often without understanding how they might resonate locally. [Malkki’s \(1995\)](#) study of the 1972 Burundian refugees in Tanzania led to some insightful theoretical observations on the antagonistic relationship between refugee identity and the nation-state and the discursive construction of the refugee as “a special kind of person” (p. 9), “a victim” (p. 12); yet, as noted in [Daley et al. \(2018\)](#), [Malkki \(1995\)](#) also depicted the Hutu, who were victims of genocide, as possessing an atavistic form of ethnic hatred of the Tutsi perpetrators. She claims that camp refugees promoted a unified Hutu identity that drew on a “mythico-history” based on experiences of social injustices and violence against the group (1995, p. 55). It is not clear whether her findings were disproportionately influenced by the Hutu political elites in the Mishamo camp. However, and inadvertently, [Malkki’s \(1995\)](#) representations of Hutus (“trapped within ‘... bloodstained categories’ and ‘categorical hatred’” [1995, p. 297]) may have influenced policy-makers and their academic consultants. This perception of violent Hutus

was reinforced by the 1994 Rwandan genocide where the Hutus were the perpetrators (Turner, 2010), which Malkki (1995) discusses in her concluding chapter.

Research that addresses the persistence of ethnic hatred in a national context, such as Tanzania, where ethnicity as a factor in the post-colonial state had been downplayed in order to promote national unity (Campbell, 1999), can sow seeds of suspicion and end up germinating hostility. This becomes even more potent in a context where the economic and political anxieties of the neoliberal era have emphasized axes of difference that can be utilized for elite mobilization. Therefore, by retelling the narratives of violence, work such as Malkki's (1995), for example, may have inadvertently helped to legitimate Tanzanian suspicions about refugees of Hutu ethnicity, with government officials expressing distrust of the refugees' motives and desires (Daley et al., 2018). As one local academic policy adviser, who was exhibiting a degree of hostility towards the new citizens, stated when we interviewed her: "They [Burundian refugees] are not really interested in staying. Did Malkki not say they want to return and overthrow the Burundi government?" (Daley et al., 2018, p. 28). While this represents a simplistic interpretation of Malkki's more nuanced analysis, her retelling of the violent narratives prevalent among 1980s' Hutus in camps may have informed the negative perception of all Hutus in and out of camps transmitted to second- and third-generation refugees, and contributed to how some Tanzanian scholars and bureaucrats approach the integration and the realization of the sense of belonging that the new citizens seek (CFM, 2008). This is important in that a context where colonial assumptions about identity as unchanging persist. In mitigation, second- and third-generation Hutus outside

of the refugee settlements, cognizant of the perception that they embody violent histories, continue to devise ways of "passing" by hiding their individual biographies or trying to officially change the name of their ethnic group (Daley et al., 2018).

## ACADEMIC RESPONSIBILITY

When I first started doing research on refugees in the 1980s, refugee research was largely focused on advocacy directed at improving the situation of refugees—how to ensure that people escaping persecution and violence could find safety and sanctuary away from home, and how to resolve the conflicts that led to flight. Since then, and as the academic discipline of refugee studies has grown, mainstream research has provided routes to career opportunities, whether in the university and international humanitarian organizations, and/or as lucrative consultants, and conforms increasingly to policy imperatives aimed at control and exclusion with dehumanizing consequences. To the extent now that the most vulnerable people on the planet are en route to being treated as a pool of labour by international capital, academics style them as "entrepreneurs" or as captive labour to be appropriated in similar ways as in Global North corrective facilities (Heilbrunn & Iannone, 2020).

Ethical responsibilities necessitate an investigation of the ways in which the language academics use, the labels and categories they investigate, and the assumptions they draw have contributed to the continued externalization of people fleeing violence as a category outside of common referents (Malkki, 1995) and the production of a discourse that sanctions objectification and potential exploitation. In seeking to influence policy-makers, scholars tend to replicate the policy language in their interpre-

tive frames: **durable solutions, repatriation, integration, assimilation, self-reliance, and internally displaced peoples** have become normative concepts for obscuring the structural factors behind flight and individualizing the ontological anxieties of asylum and refugee trajectories. Ethical humanizing research requires new definitional terminologies and frames of analysis.

Labelling, naming, and categorizing things and people have been central to colonial acquisition, demonstration, and maintenance of power. Colonial narratives of innate racial or tribal characteristics continue to inform popular assumptions about group behaviour, even in post-colonial Tanzania, where ethnic differences are rarely articulated (Daley et al., 2018). **Refugee**, as a bureaucratic category as defined in the 1951 Refugee Convention, was another external label imported in the late 1950s to fit the nation-state concept being adopted by emerging post-colonial states and marking the distinction between insiders (citizens) and outsiders (refugees/immigrants) (Rosenthal, 2015). Malkki (1995) argues that in the Tanzanian camp, refugee identity was embraced by the refugees to distinguish themselves from citizens, almost as an act of defiance. But as Rosenthal (2015) has shown, the label also enabled the post-colonial Tanzania state to consolidate its territorial identity and the humanitarian regime to differentiate aid beneficiaries from the local population. As he further argues, the term refugee was, over time, used more widely across Tanzania and became associated with threats—security (implying innate propensity for violence) and demographic (outnumbering citizens in the sparsely populated areas in which they were settled).

Roger Zetter (1991) questions the functions of the bureaucratic label of the refugee.

He sees labelling as “more than a taxonomic problem because, far from clarifying an identity, the label conveys, instead, an extremely complex set of values, and judgments which are more than just definitional” (p. 40). Zetter revisited the issue of labelling in 2007 and argued that it was driven by the Global North and by different interests, particularly states opposed to migrants and refugees. Crawley & Skleparis (2018) discuss the persistent use of these northern-derived categories that have meanings that vary over time and are linked to distinct policy measures promoted to and within southern states, which, increasingly, are rebounded back to the North and are received and interpreted differently by host communities and states.

In response to Doreen Massey’s (2004, p. 6) call for geographies of responsibility, I agree with her that “identities are forged in and through relations (which include non-relations, absences and hiatuses)” that are interconnected in multiple ways across space and place. In the context of refugee studies, the identities of the asylum seeker, refugee, migrant, and ethnic group are treated as foundational identities, even though they are fluid. Through an active process of labelling, these identities are defined and fixed during border crossings and in spaces of encampment to regulate and control bodies considered to be outside their “natural” and national geographies (Malkki, 1992). Policy-makers and researchers appear incognizant of how such labels manifest, travel, and are understood at different spatial scales, outside legal and policy frameworks. Following on from Massey, bodies carry meanings into place. Bodies subjected to humanitarian care carry distinct identities and produce an embodied sense of place that affects how they negotiate their sense of belonging.

## RACE: THE MISSING CATEGORY IN REFUGEE RESEARCH

In my decades of researching and observing refugee situations, I have been puzzled by the lack of attention to the interconnections of refugeeness and racialization, especially when refugees are predominantly non-white people in and/or of the Global South. It is impossible to miss the racialized hierarchies in humanitarian work, in peace missions—in whose lives have the right to be protected and the right to abandonment, who is or is not allowed on the last flight out at times of life-threatening emergencies, and who is inside and outside the bunker (Duffield, 2012). Why, then, have race and racialization as analytical categories taken so long to be addressed by academic researchers, and why are they still largely ignored by policy-makers and humanitarian practitioners?

The decolonizing movement emanating from the Global South has demonstrated the continued coloniality of existence and poses epistemic questions about how being and belonging are understood in a world shaped by European colonialism and its legacies (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). The labels of **refugee** and **migrant** and the space/ places associated with these labels and their relationship to international humanitarian, national, and local actors reproduce racialized hierarchies that affect how refugees are treated and how such identities are experienced in interactions and negotiations with local people (Daley et al., 2018; Fassin, 2010). As Mayblin (2017, p. 11) argues, this can be traced back to the “role slavery [and its abolition] played in influencing early conceptions of humanity and differential rights” in the West. In Tanzania, such hierarchies are a consequence of colonial categorizations of ethnic groups and of the citizen/refugee differentiation that has accompanied the nation-

state project.

Scholars attempting to conceptualize the precarity of refugee life, especially in camps, have drawn on Giorgio Agamben's (1998) notion of “bare life” or Michel Foucault's (1976) “biopolitics” without centring race or other aspects of bodily differences. This is not surprising because critical race theorists have pointed out the lack of a race analysis in both Agamben's and Foucault's theorizations (Weheliye, 2014). Foucault's omissions of discussion of colonialism are argued to put race beyond the boundaries of Europe. Race and ethnicity are treated in Western thought as if they operate in non-Western spaces, beyond the space occupied by white people.

The institutionalization of race with colonialism and the association of whiteness with “civilization,” greater access to resources, and elevated levels of humanity, including traits such as empathy and morality, reinforce the differential treatment of people racialized as white and “others.” With humanitarianism, the white saviour becomes the custodian of Black life, irrespective of whether the vulnerability of such life originated in policies emanating from the Global North or arose from continued coloniality. The humanitarian refugee body is racialized in that it exists only in oppressive relationships. In the same way that Frantz Fanon (1967, p. 83) contends that the “black man has no ontological existence in the eyes of the white man,” I contend here that liberal humanitarianism divides humanity into “civilized” humans and lesser humans, who can be subjected to conditions deemed unacceptable for the so-called civilized, and that such thinking has been absorbed even by sections of Global South societies.

Drawing from Fanon (1967), I argue that in Western conceptualization, refugees,

when placed under liberal humanitarian subjection, have had, in the same way as Fanon's Black man, their frames of reference wiped out (their customs and sources to which they were based, in which they could place themselves). Therefore, the body of the refugee is not dissimilar to that of Fanon's Black body, "surrounded by an atmosphere of uncertainty" (1967, p. 83). This recognition of the constitutive role of power was necessary in the context of colonialism, as for many, the removal of agency from the colonized was one of the worst outcomes of colonialism (Noxolo et al., 2012; Osei-Nyame, 2009).

In refugee studies, the dehumanizing treatment and deaths of people from the Global South trying to seek asylum in Global North countries that have championed universal human rights has forced the emergence of a racial analysis in academic scholarship. De Genova (2018, p. 1766), for example, argues that the migrant crisis in Europe is a racial crisis evidenced in the "brute racial fact of [the] deadly European border regime," which promotes a pure white Europe vulnerable to the pollution of the non-white other. Kyriakides et al. (2019, p. 5) view race "as part of an embedded structure of oppression in which the racialized refugee regime is generated and reproduced." In Africa, race thinking in the treatment of refugees by humanitarian actors adds to the legacy of the racialized and ethnicized colonial categorization of humanity. Colonial identity politics and its legacies remain significant in affecting outcomes for African refugees (Brankamp & Daley, 2020). Therefore, the effects of the categorization of humans cannot be confined to the past, nor to specific geographical spaces, and demand a relational understanding.

Centring racialization as an analytical tool in refugee studies necessitates historical and

contemporary studies of how racialized others have been treated in the colonial context and in humanitarian law and practice. In such vein is Mayblin's (2017) study of the attitudes to the human rights of the colonized others in the era of colonization/decolonization and its historical connections to slavery and abolition. Similarly, Krause's (2021) timely research explores the development of the "Eurocentric" and "colonial-ignorant" 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention. Forced migrants elsewhere were not expected to fit into the Convention and were deliberately marginalized and othered.

Continuing to push the methodological approach of intersectionality as a frame of analysis might reveal further how the international legal concepts that are deployed as universal are differentially practised on bodies and experienced and read in diverse places (Taha, 2019). An intersectional approach will reveal that the legal categories of asylum seeker and refugee are just two of a range of overlapping modern legal identities people have adopted—the essentialization of which can result in dehumanizing policies and practices. Yacob-Haliso (2016), for example, demonstrates in her study of the application of the United Nations' "durable solution" to refugee women in Nigeria and Liberia that the universal liberal definition of **gender** that the international refugee regime utilizes is flawed in that it does not account for inequities and intersectional issues among refugee women and can entrench rather than address disadvantage.

Following decolonial scholars such as Rutabizwa (2021), I argue for scholarship that recognizes the existence of a more pluriversal humanitarianism that (a) historicizes and challenges the bureaucratic social categories deployed for migration governance and seeks ways of being beyond them; and (b) recognizes that human morality,

empathy, solidarity, and responsibility are not confined to people from one part of the globe but is shared by all humanity. This necessitates new methodologies that start with refugees as people rather than bureaucratic categories and can be supported by (c) archival work—revisiting, for example, the work of the Organization of African Unity (now African Union) liberation committee, its principled stance against oppressions, and humanitarian support for Africans fleeing apartheid regimes. Such research would involve excavating silenced histories of global solidarity among non-white peoples and, in the contemporary period, researching, mapping, and documenting everyday forms of conviviality and mutuality.

The everyday acts of solidarity that I have witnessed in refugee-hosting communities in Tanzania are often seen as transgressive by states and international agencies, as they challenge institutional and researchers' pre-occupations with antagonistic identities and consolidation of nation-states territoriality, and demonstrate that even in adverse conditions, people can coexist beyond, amid, and in spite of international interventions. While most of the literature focuses on an individualized conception of agency, there is greater need to attend to the interrelations, interconnections, and mutuality existing beyond the white and northern humanitarian gaze.

## CONCLUSION

The prevalence of dehumanizing policies and acts against refugees in the contemporary era requires a return to activist and ethical scholarship focusing on social justice that characterized the early years of refugee studies. To understand the experiences of hostility, rejection, and dejection faced by former refugees, such as those in Tanzania dis-

cussed here, we need to employ analytical tools that interpret these affective responses not as isolated new developments but as the manifestations and magnification of underlying resentments and dehumanizing practices in liberal humanitarianism encounters with racialized others. Such a step should not just be about incorporating race into our research but should advance an anti-racist agenda with counter-hegemonic critiques, new approaches, and new terminologies emphasizing alternative ways of belonging, a common humanity, and mutuality, and recognizing that how we do refugee research has enduring and sometimes unexpected negative impacts long after we have left the field.

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