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When Consent Is Not Free: Mediated Consent and Structural Positionality

Rıza Özgür Olmadığında: Dolaylı Rıza ve Yapısal Konumsallık

Abstract

Qualitative fieldwork with vulnerable populations generates a consent problem that institutional ethics frameworks cannot resolve. Structural power asymmetries may constrain a participant's freedom to decline regardless of procedural compliance. Drawing on ethics in practice, relational autonomy, and structural coercion, this article argues that structurally assigned positionality, determined by political and legal hierarchies rather than personal biography, can systematically hollow out the voluntariness of consent. This claim is substantiated through field research with Syrian refugees in Türkiye. In response, the article introduces mediated consent: a procedure in which a trusted community peer, holding no known authority over potential participants, conveys the consent request in the researcher's absence, making refusal a genuinely viable option. Despite limitations regarding intermediary selection and sampling transparency, the study contributes a reflexively documented, field-derived procedure to an area where diagnosis has long outpaced remedy and argues for a post-research imperative of transparent ethical accountability.

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Öz

Kırılgan popülasyonlarla yürütülen nitel saha çalışmaları, kurumsal etik prosedürlerinin çözümsüz kaldığı bir rıza sorunu ortaya çıkarabilmektedir. Asimetrik güç ilişkileri, prosedürel adımların uygulanmasına rağmen katılımcıların reddetme özgürlüğünü kısıtlayabilir. Uygulamadaki etik, ilişkisel özerklik ve yapısal zorlama kavramlarından yararlanan bu makale, siyasi ve hukuki hiyerarşiler tarafından belirlenen güç ilişkilerinin rızanın gönüllülük esasının altını sistematik bir biçimde boşaltabileceğini savunmaktadır. Bu iddia, Türkiye'deki Suriyeli mültecilerle gerçekleştirilen saha araştırmasıyla temellendirilmektedir. Makale, bu meseleye çözüm olarak dolaylı rıza yöntemini öne sürmektedir. Olası katılımcılar üzerinde bilinen bir yetkisi/otoritesi bulunmayan ve topluluk içinden güvenilir bir akranın, araştırmacının yokluğunda rıza talebini iletmesi bu prosedür, reddetmeyi sahiden uygulanabilir bir seçenek haline getirmektedir. Aracı seçimi ve örneklem şeffaflığına ilişkin sınırlılıklarına rağmen bu çalışma; sorunların tespitin çözüm önerilerine kıyasla çok daha ileri olduğu bir alana, refleksif olarak belgelenmiş ve saha deneyiminden türetilmiş bir prosedürle katkıda bulunmakta ve araştırma sonrası şeffaf bir etik hesap verebilirlik zorunluluğunu savunmaktadır.

Keywords

Reflexivity, Positionality, Vulnerable populations, Research ethics, Informed consent

Anahtar Kelimeler

Refleksivite, Konumsallık, Kırılgan popülasyonlar, Araştırma etiği, Bilgilendirilmiş rıza

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Introduction

In recent years, research ethics and transparency have increasingly gained prominence within methodological debates. Fieldwork constitutes one of the most sensitive domains in this regard, particularly when investigations are conducted with or among vulnerable populations. Although institutional frameworks now systematically require prior ethical approval from institutional review boards before entering the field, a growing body of scholarship demonstrates that these procedural measures face limitations in actual practice (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004: 263; Taquette and Borges da Matta Souza, 2022: 2). Institutional review boards typically rely on rigid and bureaucratic requirements that are not always equipped to anticipate the fluid, unpredictable ethical moments arising during face-to-face encounters in complex social settings (Townsend et al., 2010: 616). Consequently, procedural compliance cannot guarantee the substantive protection of participants or fully address the power asymmetries inherent in the research encounter (Shaw et al., 2020: 279). These limitations are particularly consequential in qualitative field research, where the relational nature of data collection places researchers and participants in direct and often unequal human encounters.

Within the broader spectrum of qualitative field research, the qualitative interview serves as a foundational method for identifying causal mechanisms and generating rich primary data (Mosley, 2013: 5). Rather than engaging with the entire breadth of qualitative methodology, this article narrows its scope to interviewing within the context of vulnerable and displaced populations (Wood, 2006: 373). In these delicate settings, the interview cannot be treated as a mere neutral procedure for information extraction. It operates as an interactive and relational encounter where meaning is actively co-constructed between the researcher and the participant (Fujii, 2018: 2; Yow, 2005: 8). Because standard institutional frameworks offer limited guidance for the volatile realities of these encounters, researchers must employ rigorous reflexivity to examine how their own background conditions the inquiry (Knapik, 2006: 78). This reflexive practice shifts the analytical focus toward positionality, a broad and contested field of debate in contemporary methodology (Solie, 2024: 511; Tuzi, 2024: 705). Instead of addressing positionality in its traditional biographical sense, this study narrows its focus to structural positionality. This dimension examines how macro-level institutional and political hierarchies automatically assign dominant roles to researchers regardless of their personal conduct or intentions (Haraway, 1988: 587). Ultimately, the study traces how this structural positionality directly impacts the dynamics of voluntary consent, as deep political asymmetries can silently compel participation and compromise the relational autonomy of vulnerable individuals in the field (Davidson et al., 2024: 275; Mackenzie et al., 2007: 301). Therefore, this study addresses a central research question: *how can informed consent be made genuinely voluntary when the researcher's structurally assigned positionality constrains a participant's practical freedom to decline?*

This central question is illuminated through the practical experiences and methodological insights gained during qualitative fieldwork involving forty-one interviews conducted with Syrian refugees across Istanbul and Gaziantep in 2019. This study took place at a time when anti-Syrian sentiment in Türkiye had reached a pronounced intensity, creating a highly fraught sociopolitical atmosphere that significantly exacerbated the situational vulnerability of the displaced population. During the initial stages of direct recruitment, the researcher developed a distinct impression that several potential participants were hesitant to take part but did not feel entirely free to decline. This observation did not rest on explicit verbal refusals, since the individuals formally stated their assent, but emerged instead from the subtle meta-data of the encounter, such as hesitant tones, guarded gestures, and facial expressions (Mosley, 2013: 7; Fujii, 2018: 23). This field intuition indicated that the participants, residing under a conditional temporary protection status, perceived a direct research request from a host country citizen as an obligation difficult to refuse, a dynamic rooted in what the literature identifies as social debt and structural coercion (Fisher, 2013: 360; Masterson and Mourad, 2019: 24). Understood through the lens of relational autonomy, individual willingness to participate is not a static cognitive capacity but a socially embedded competence that is systematically undermined by such stark macro-level power asymmetries (Mackenzie et al., 2007: 309). Recognising that direct consent requests under these highly unequal conditions could not guarantee a genuinely unconstrained choice, the researcher determined that a different approach to recruitment and consent was required.

To restore the practical availability of refusal, this article introduces a procedural modification conceptualised as mediated consent. This mechanism operates by routing the initial research invitation through a trusted local peer who shares the social identity of the refugee community. By design, the researcher remains physically absent during this initial contact, thereby removing the intimidating presence of host country authority. This separation allows potential participants to evaluate the request in a safe space and exercise a real choice to decline. Equally important, the procedure is designed so that a potential participant's refusal cannot be traced back to the researcher, ensuring that the social cost attached to declining is removed alongside the physical presence that produced it. While this approach builds an ethical buffer, it simultaneously introduces specific methodological challenges, such as the risk of sample bias, the risk of peer gatekeeping, and the possibility of secondary social pressure within refugee networks. This study approached these limitations not as obstacles to be mechanically eliminated, but as inherent features of the field that required continuous reflexive negotiation. Rather than relying on a single gatekeeper, the recruitment process was diversified across multiple independent peer networks to minimise selection bias. Furthermore, the intermediaries relied upon were same-community peers who held no formal position in relation to the study and, so far as the researcher could establish, no authority over those they approached. By embracing these reflexive adjustments, the study demonstrates that mediated consent offers

a feasible pathway for navigating the limitations of standard institutional ethics frameworks. Rather than proposing this as a definitive or exhaustive solution, this work offers a practical framework to reconcile field ethics with the relational demands of autonomy in precarious research environments. The article proceeds as follows: it first establishes the theoretical foundations of mediated consent, then analyses the practical challenges encountered in the field, and concludes with a discussion of the implications for ethical standards in field research with vulnerable populations.

Conceptual Framework

Qualitative field research generates knowledge that other methods cannot easily produce. Where surveys map the distribution of attitudes and quantitative designs trace relationships among variables, qualitative inquiry attends to meaning, process, and context, examining how people interpret the events they live through (Gallagher, 2013: 181-182). Within this domain the qualitative interview has become one of the most widely applied tools of field research, particularly in settings of conflict, displacement, and political violence, where conventional data sources are absent, partisan, or unreliable (Wood, 2006: 373). Its epistemological value lies in its relational character: the interview is best understood not as a neutral procedure for extracting information but as a social encounter in which knowledge is co-constructed, with the participant engaging responsively in the making of meaning (Fujii, 2018: 2; Knapik, 2006: 78-79), which allows the researcher to see from the inside, through the interpretive lens participants themselves provide (Fujii, 2018: 9, 92). These same strengths carry the method into ethically demanding terrain, since its interpretive depth is obtained through a direct human relationship, and in conflict and displacement research that relationship is most often formed with participants who occupy precarious social, legal, or economic positions.

These strengths make qualitative interviewing ethically demanding, though not in a single way. Interviewing elites, officials, or experts carries its own demands around attribution and access, and there the balance of power may run toward the participant. The ethical questions this article addresses belong to a different and recurrent configuration, the one in which participants occupy precarious positions, and the concept that conditions it most directly is vulnerability. A widely used definition treats vulnerable populations as categories of people presumed more likely than others to be misled, mistreated, or taken advantage of as research participants, and therefore as warranting protections beyond those owed to all participants (Shaw et al., 2020: 280); refugees are routinely placed in this category, alongside children and prisoners, on the grounds that exposure to trauma, displacement, and economic precarity heightens their susceptibility to harm (Solie, 2024: 516). This group-based understanding has been criticised on grounds that matter for the argument here. Treating vulnerability as an inherent property of a population implies that every member shares a fixed susceptibility, which

forecloses examination of what actually renders particular individuals vulnerable and under what conditions (Minatti and Gass-Quintero, 2026: 626), and labelling a whole population as uniformly vulnerable casts its members as passive recipients of harm, denying their agency and inviting unwarranted paternalism (Solie, 2024: 516; Mackenzie et al., 2013: 6). The more precise account that has emerged distinguishes the inherent vulnerability common to all persons from situational vulnerability, which is context-specific and caused or exacerbated by the social, political, and economic circumstances in which individuals are placed (Mackenzie et al., 2013: 7), and which emerges through social interaction along structures of power, class, and status (Shaw et al., 2020: 280; Ramírez Rodríguez and Minatti, 2026: 606). Vulnerability so understood is relational and situational, not a stable attribute a participant carries unchanged into every interaction but a condition produced, in varying intensity, by the configuration in which the encounter takes place. This carries a direct methodological consequence: if vulnerability is constituted in the encounter rather than fixed in the participant, the conduct of the researcher within that encounter is itself an ethical variable rather than a neutral background (Shaw et al., 2020: 279-281). Because most inquiry is initiated by the researcher rather than the community, control already rests on the researcher's side of the relationship, and the interview format accentuates this asymmetry by granting the researcher authority over which questions are asked and how (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004: 271; Solie, 2024: 516-517). A method that depends on a relationship with susceptible participants therefore cannot be practised responsibly without a disciplined account of the person conducting it, and that account is the work of reflexivity.

Reflexivity is the self-reflective stance through which a researcher gains awareness of how their personal framework tacitly conditions the research process (Mortari, 2015: 2). In its established methodological sense it is the continuous monitoring of how the researcher's own characteristics, beliefs, and experiences shape data collection, analysis, and the conclusions drawn (Berger, 2015: 219-220), and in a more explicitly political formulation it is reflection on self, process, and representation that examines the power relations running through the research and the researcher's accountability in collecting and interpreting data (Sultana, 2007: 375). So understood, reflexivity is not only a mechanism of quality control but an ethical practice: to be reflexive is to place oneself and one's practices under scrutiny and to acknowledge the ethical dilemmas that run through the research process, which makes it the first ethical imperative of fieldwork rather than a supplement to it (Mortari, 2015: 2). Reflexivity, however, is a broad demand, and a single article cannot address every dimension of the self that bears on inquiry. The discussion therefore narrows to the dimension most consequential for the ethics of fieldwork with vulnerable participants, namely the researcher's position in relation to those participants. That dimension, positionality, is the subject of the next section, and it is through positionality that the argument will reach its ethical destination, the voluntariness of consent.

Positionality

Among the dimensions of the self that reflexivity calls into scrutiny, position is the one that most directly governs the research encounter. Positionality can be defined as the practice of identifying and negotiating the positions a researcher holds in relation to a project and its participants, positions that are multiple and changeable rather than fixed (Noh, 2019: 4). These positions are best understood as a configuration of social locations, including class, citizenship, race, and gender, each conditioning how the researcher sees and is seen (Jacobson and Mustafa, 2019: 2). Its significance for interviewing follows from the relational nature of the method: the researcher's social position conditions the researcher-participant relationship and what participants are willing to disclose (Berger, 2015: 221). This means that two researchers working from an identical design with the same participants may generate different data, because who conducts the interview is part of what it produces (Mosley, 2013: 12-13). This is not a flaw to be corrected but a condition of inquiry, since all knowledge is produced from a particular and embodied location rather than from a detached vantage point that sees everything from nowhere (Haraway, 1988: 581, 583). Positionality, on this understanding, is constitutive of the interview rather than external to it; the field does not exist independently of the researcher's construction of it (Tuzi, 2024: 705).

The literature has long organised these effects through the distinction between insider and outsider positions, the insider sharing identity or experience in ways that ease access and disclosure, the outsider bringing a distance that sharpens perception but risks conceptual blind spots (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009: 57-59). Neither position is straightforwardly advantageous, since insider proximity invites the assumption of similarity while outsider distance can limit depth (Ntanyoma, 2021: 3; Noh, 2019: 6), and the binary itself directs attention to the visiting researcher while leaving local participants and associates comparatively unexamined (Mwambari, 2019: 2). For these reasons the literature has moved away from treating the categories as discrete, recognising that most researchers occupy a space between, in which insider and outsider characteristics are simultaneously present (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009: 60), described by some as the position of the in-between (Noh, 2019: 7) and refined by others into a transitional position held by the researcher who moves between the two over the course of a study (Berger, 2015: 222-229). Position is moreover not determined by the researcher alone but co-constructed, assigned and reassigned through interaction as participants perceive and categorise the researcher in their own terms (Ntanyoma, 2021: 4; Tuzi, 2024: 705), which is why the recent literature treats positionality as contextual and flexible rather than fixed (Okçuoğlu, 2025: 2; Moralli, 2024: 753).

Whatever its framing, this body of work examines positionality primarily for what it does to the knowledge the interview produces, that is, for its effect on access, rapport, and data quality (Berger, 2015: 227-229; Jacobson and Mustafa, 2019: 2). The strategies it proposes in response, reflexive logs, peer consultation, and repeated review of analysed material, are

correspondingly oriented toward protecting data quality against the effects of position. The dimension it characterises is, moreover, biographical, accumulated through the researcher's own life and career. There is a further dimension this framing does not capture. A researcher's position may be determined not by individual biography but by the political and legal structure within which the research takes place. Even a researcher who shares nationality, ethnicity, and gender with participants is placed in a relation of hierarchy by class and educational privilege, and the deference this produces is structural and socially assigned rather than personal (Sultana, 2007: 378). This mechanism appears in its sharpest form where ethnic and political polarisation, not the researcher's self-presentation, determines how the researcher is positioned and what risks the encounter carries (Ntanyoma, 2021: 1; Brand, 2014: 10). When a researcher belongs to a national or ethnic group standing in a relationship of legal and social hierarchy over the group being studied, that researcher occupies a dominant position regardless of personal background, intention, or conduct. This is a structurally assigned position: not chosen, not accumulated through experience, and not fully available to renegotiation through reflexive practice, because it is imposed by conditions external to the encounter and prior to it. Prominent scholarship recognises that institutional ethics frameworks cannot by themselves ensure good practice once such hierarchies are in play (Sultana, 2007: 382), yet the literature has been more successful in diagnosing this problem than in generating concrete procedural responses to it. Tracing that diagnosis to its implications for the ethics of consent, and proposing one such response, is the task to which the discussion now turns.

Ethics, Positionality, and the Voluntariness of Consent

If a researcher's position can be structurally assigned, and if that position is not fully answerable to reflexive practice, then positionality ceases to be only a question of data quality and becomes a question of research ethics. The most widely used framework for thinking about this distinction separates procedural ethics from ethics in practice. Procedural ethics refers to the formal process of obtaining approval from an institutional review board before research begins. Ethics in practice refers to the everyday, situational, and unanticipated issues that arise once the researcher is actually in the field (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004: 263-264). The central claim of this framework is that the first cannot deliver the second: institutional clearance certifies compliance with a protocol, but it cannot anticipate what happens in the actual conduct of research (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004: 269; Taquette and Borges da Matta Souza, 2022: 11). What clearance cannot anticipate is captured by the concept of the ethically important moment, a point in the encounter where the approach taken carries real ethical consequences even where the researcher faces no formal dilemma (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004: 265). Such moments are not isolated events but can arise at any stage, from the conception of a project through to the dissemination of its findings (Müller-Funk, 2021: 2311).

Ethics, on this view, cannot be discharged as institutional paperwork; it must be negotiated and renegotiated in the field, since the power relations running through fieldwork are not registered by the forms institutional frameworks rely on (Sultana, 2007: 379, 382). The response the literature converges on is reflexivity recast as an ethical practice, supported by self-awareness and a continuous ethical mindfulness exercised throughout the research relationship (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004: 276-277; Townsend et al., 2010: 626). Ethical conduct therefore depends on the situated judgment of the researcher and on procedures fitted to the conditions of the specific field, calibrated to its constraints while the duty to protect participants remains paramount (Arjona et al., 2018: 17). The formal apparatus of consent can become an instrument of distortion, since where the relationship is unequal the request can corner a participant rather than free them (Franklin et al., 2012: 1734).

Informed consent is the procedural heart of research ethics, and its moral force rests on a single condition, that participation is voluntary. Voluntariness presupposes autonomy, the capacity to make a self-governed decision free of controlling interference (Townsend et al., 2010: 620-621). Genuine consent therefore requires more than a completed form; it demands an ethical sensibility that treats participants as ends rather than means (Fujii, 2018: 6). The difficulty is that a participant may agree while wishing to decline, and a researcher unfamiliar with local conditions may not register that the assent was not free (Fujii, 2018: 23). The mechanism that produces this unfree assent is power asymmetry. The relationship within which consent is sought is rarely one between equals, and the social distance between researcher and participant, marked by differences of education, economic standing, and institutional authority, surfaces precisely at the consent stage (Hofman, 2004: 652). The standard model locates coercion narrowly, within the encounter and in the form of overt pressure, treating the broader conditions of a participant's life as ethically external to it (Fisher, 2013: 357-358). This is the assumption the concept of structural coercion corrects: it names the way the broader social, economic, and political context can compel a person toward participation independently of anything the researcher does or intends (Fisher, 2013: 360). Where such conditions hold, the standard model presupposes a voluntariness it cannot secure, and the power disparity between researcher and participant calls into question the very fiction of informed consent (Cronin-Furman and Lake, 2018: 607, 609). The failure is not a matter of participants misunderstanding the form but of the conditions under which it is signed, since a participant positioned below a more powerful interlocutor may agree out of a sense of duty or obligation, complying because refusal feels foreclosed rather than because participation is wanted (Cronin-Furman and Lake, 2018: 610).

The forced migration literature has documented this directly. Refugees approached by researchers may agree to almost any request in the hope of assistance, a pattern termed the desperation effect, which locates the problem in the structural relationship rather than in the participant (Hugman et al., 2011: 1278; Clark-Kazak, 2021: 129; Masterson and Mourad, 2019:

24). The claim is not that refugees lack the capacity to make free decisions; it is that the social, legal, and political context of their presence makes the exercise of that capacity practically constrained, so that the obstacle is contextual rather than cognitive (Hugman et al., 2011: 1278; Mackenzie et al., 2007: 302-303). This is why a relational rather than individualised account of vulnerability is required. The vulnerability at issue is at once situational, caused by the social and political position of those concerned, and dispositional, a standing susceptibility carried into the encounter because the structural conditions precede it; the consent encounter does not create that susceptibility but activates a condition already in place (Mackenzie et al., 2013: 7-8; Shaw et al., 2020: 280). The concept that holds these observations together is relational autonomy. Autonomy is not a fixed endowment of the isolated individual but a socially constituted capacity, acquired and exercised within relationships and structures of power, and for that reason it can be enabled or eroded by the social conditions in which a person is placed (Mackenzie et al., 2013: 16-17; Moralli, 2024: 763). If autonomy is conditioned by structure, abstaining from overt pressure is not sufficient to discharge an ethical obligation. The researcher carries both a negative duty not to exploit a participant's constrained autonomy and a positive duty to design the encounter so that genuine refusal remains a practical option (Hugman et al., 2011: 1280-1281; Mackenzie et al., 2007: 309-310). A participant who agrees because the structural conditions of their presence make refusal practically costly has not exercised autonomy in any sense the consent model can certify: the agreement is formally valid and substantively constrained at once, and it is this gap that a relational account of autonomy makes visible and an individualised account conceals (Cronin-Furman and Lake, 2018: 609-610; Fisher, 2013: 360).

Two consequences follow. The consent problem cannot be resolved at the procedural stage, since it is produced by structural conditions that institutional review cannot see. Consent has to be understood as an ongoing and renegotiated relationship rather than a single authorising act (Hugman et al., 2011: 1280-1281; Mackenzie et al., 2007: 306-308). This inadequacy is documented at the level of the guidelines themselves: a systematic review of fourteen national and international frameworks found that almost none offer substantive procedural guidance for refugee research and that they define vulnerability largely in terms of diminished cognitive capacity, missing its structural and relational dimensions (Davidson et al., 2024: 277-278; Clark-Kazak, 2021: 132). Nor does the obligation end at clearance. Refugee research carries a dual imperative, owing both methodological rigour and a genuine accountability to the people it studies (Jacobsen and Landau, 2003: 185). Ethical practice is therefore better understood as an iterative process that incorporates what fieldwork teaches rather than a clearance secured once at the outset (Kostovicova and Knott, 2022: 68). The diagnosis developed across this literature is, by now, well established. That structural power asymmetry can hollow out the voluntariness of consent, that procedural clearance cannot reach the conditions under which agreement is given, and that a researcher's position shapes whether a participant

feels free to decline are recognised claims. The problem is well detected; what remains open is the response. Remedies cannot be specified once and for all, because each field generates its own structural configuration and its own ethical dilemmas, which general frameworks can orient but cannot fully anticipate. Addressing the voluntariness of consent therefore depends on reflected, documented accounts of how the problem was met in particular settings, and it is to that body of applied reflection that this article seeks to contribute. It asks, in procedural terms, how informed consent can be made genuinely voluntary when the researcher's structurally assigned positionality constrains a participant's freedom to decline. The article approaches this question by reflecting on the researcher's own field research with Syrian refugees in Türkiye and on the consent procedure developed during that research.

Structurally Assigned Positionality in the Field: Research with Syrian Refugees in Türkiye

In 2019 the researcher carried out field research with Syrian refugees in Türkiye, conducting qualitative interviews on ethnic identity and the Syrian civil war. The study was designed to examine ethnic identification under conditions of conflict rather than to examine consent, and the account given here is a reflection developed afterwards on a difficulty the original design had not been built to address. The research comprised interviews with forty-one participants across twenty-four separate settings in Istanbul and Gaziantep, recruited through snowball sampling from four initial contacts and conducted in Turkish, with the person who had made the introduction translating where this was necessary. Interviews took place in homes, workplaces, and occasionally cafés, some with a single participant and others with two or three present at once. The two sites were reached through those initial contacts rather than selected to satisfy a comparative design. The timing was likewise not selected with the present consent question in mind, but coincided with a period of particularly intense public debate over the presence of Syrians in the country, a context in which the pressures examined below were especially salient. Recruitment ended when responses began to repeat rather than at a predetermined number. The claim is accordingly not one of representativeness across Syrian refugees in Türkiye, but of analytical relevance to comparable structural relations between citizen researchers and participants whose legal presence is conditional.

All participants were men, since the gendered norms of the community placed interviews between a male researcher and Sunni Syrian women outside what was culturally appropriate, a constraint that is itself an instance of positionality in the conventional, biographical sense. They ranged in age from twenty-two to sixty-one and spanned a wide social range, from a former rebel commander to fighters, merchants, labourers, students, teachers, university lecturers, and school principals, and included both supporters and opponents of the uprising, in several cases within a single family. In the conventional terms set out earlier, the researcher

occupied a mixed position, an outsider by nationality and legal status and a partial insider through a shared religious culture that allowed the interpretation of Qur'anic and other religious references participants drew on, which might have been less accessible to a researcher unfamiliar with that cultural repertoire.

That biographical account, however, does not capture the condition that mattered most for the ethics of the encounter. The researcher was a citizen of the host state, while the participants were refugees living under temporary protection, their legal residence, their access to work, and their security all conditioned by the policies of the government of the state of which the researcher was a citizen. This is a structurally assigned position in the sense developed earlier: a relationship of legal and political hierarchy, conferred by the political order rather than by the researcher's biography or conduct, and not dissolved by reflexive awareness. That positionality can be imposed by the political environment rather than chosen has been shown in conflict research, most directly in the account of a researcher whose ethnic membership, in a polarised setting, structurally assigned him a position that placed his own fieldwork at risk (Ntanyoma, 2021: 1, 4). The configuration in the present case runs in the opposite direction. There the structural assignment subordinated the researcher; here it subordinates the participants, and the consequence is borne not by the researcher's safety but by the participants' freedom to refuse. That hierarchy was not total, nor did it run in the same direction on every dimension. On the substance of the interviews, participants held knowledge the researcher did not: an experiential and context-specific understanding of displacement and war, and in this respect the encounter contained an epistemic asymmetry running toward the participant of the kind noted earlier in relation to expert interviewing. Yet informational advantage within the interview does not alter the legal and political conditions of one's presence in the host country, and it is those conditions, rather than the distribution of knowledge, that matter for whether a research request can be freely declined. Nor was that structure static background. The fieldwork coincided with a period of intensifying public hostility toward Syrians in Türkiye, a sustained debate across traditional and social media questioning whether refugees were a burden on the country. The relationship between citizen and refugee was therefore not an abstract legal fact sitting quietly in the background of the interview; it was a condition the participants were in all likelihood conscious of, reminded of in everyday life, and sensitive to at the moment a Turkish researcher approached them with a request. The participants were, moreover, vulnerable in the situational sense established earlier. As refugees under temporary protection they held a legal status that was conditional and revocable, and many had survived war, displacement, and loss, and faced economic precarity in the host country. Their vulnerability was not a fixed attribute of the category "refugee" but a condition produced by this particular configuration of legal, economic, and political circumstances, and it was this already precarious standing that the consent encounter then entered. The ethics protocol was careful by the standards of the field. The researcher introduced himself, presented his student identi-

fication card, and explained the study; participants' real names were not recorded; interviews were documented in notes rather than audio-recorded, and identifying background detail was deliberately left unwritten; each participant was told he could stop at any point and was given contact details for later withdrawal. These measures address the recognised components of research ethics, anonymity, transparency, the right to withdraw, the avoidance of harm. What they do not address, and what the protocol assumed rather than secured, is the voluntariness of the initial agreement.

That assumption did not always hold. In the first attempts to arrange interviews, the researcher had the impression that some of those approached were reluctant to take part but did not feel able to decline. The impression rested not on what participants stated, since what they stated was assent, but on the meta-data of the encounter, the tone, the hesitation, the gestures and facial expressions that accompany speech and can carry as much as the words themselves, the contextual register the qualitative interview makes available to an attentive interviewer (Fujii, 2018: 2, 7). In several cases a participant would agree while the manner of the agreement suggested a reluctance the words did not express, the situation the relational account of interviewing anticipates, in which a participant assents while wishing to decline (Fujii, 2018: 23). A plausible reason can be offered, as interpretation rather than measured finding. Several participants appeared to regard a request from a Turkish citizen as one they were not fully free to refuse, given the protection afforded them in the host country, a perceived obligation that may be termed social debt and that the burden discourse of 2019 kept continually present. What constrained their agreement was not pressure from the researcher, who pressed no one and offered the standard assurances, but the broader political and economic context of their presence, which is what the concept of structural coercion captures (Fisher, 2013: 360), and the pattern is recognisable as the desperation effect documented in refugee research, which locates the difficulty in the participants' situation rather than in any deficiency of their judgement (Hugman et al., 2011: 1278). This is why the participants' situation has to be read through a relational rather than an individualised account of autonomy. On an individualised account each participant's agreement would count as valid, since each was informed, competent, and free of overt coercion. On the relational account it does not, because autonomy is exercised within social and political structures that can enable or constrain it, and a refugee who agrees because the structure of his situation makes refusal feel impractical has not exercised the autonomy that consent is meant to protect (Mackenzie et al., 2013: 16-17). The agreement obtained in these early encounters was, in this precise sense, formally valid and substantively unfree at the same time.

A Procedural Response: Mediated Consent

The difficulty described above was recognised in the field, and the response to it was developed there rather than designed in advance. After the first attempts at direct recruitment, the rese-

archer concluded that a consent request issued by a Turkish citizen to a Syrian refugee could not, under the structural conditions described, reliably produce a free answer, and that the procedure therefore had to be changed. The response was to route the consent request through an intermediary. It is set out here not as a general protocol but as one documented procedure, developed in one setting, offered for the reflection of researchers who encounter comparable conditions. What was done in the field was less articulated than the account that follows. The researcher stopped putting the request directly and asked the intermediaries to put it instead, and the three conditions set out below are a reconstruction, arrived at afterwards, of what that change involved and of the features on which its ethical rationale depended. The intermediaries were not recruited for the purpose. They were the same individuals who, through snowball sampling, had connected the researcher to potential participants in the first place, and there were several of them, reached through different channels. What changed was the function assigned to that existing role. Rather than introducing the researcher and leaving consent to be settled face to face, the intermediary now carried the consent request itself, and did so under three conditions that together define the procedure. The first condition is the physical absence of the researcher at the moment consent is sought. Interviews with this population take place in the participant's own domain, a home, a shop, a workplace, and in the cultural setting of the fieldwork a guest who has arrived must be received. A potential participant who sees the researcher waiting at the door cannot easily decline, because refusal has already been foreclosed by the obligations of hospitality before the question of consent is reached. For refusal to remain possible, the researcher must not be present, not in the room and not visibly nearby, when the request is made. The intermediary approaches the potential participant alone.

The second condition concerns what the potential participant understands about the request. It is not enough that the intermediary asks on the researcher's behalf; the request must not be experienced as one that traces back to the researcher and whose refusal the researcher will receive. If the participant knows that a refusal will reach the Turkish researcher, then declining still means disappointing him, and the social cost that made direct refusal difficult is simply transferred intact to the mediated request. The intermediary conveys the invitation as their own, without signalling that the researcher is aware the question is being put at that moment. What is withheld here is narrow and specific. It is not the existence of the study, the identity of the researcher, the purpose of the interview, or any risk of participation, all of which are conveyed fully and form the basis of any consent later given. What is withheld is only the social traceability of a refusal, so that a participant who does not wish to take part can decline without that refusal becoming a refusal delivered to the host-country researcher. The distinction matters for how the procedure should be judged. Everything a participant needs in order to decide, the existence of the study, the identity of the person conducting it, what participation involves, and any risks or burdens it may entail, is conveyed in full, and what is withheld does not bear on any of these matters. What is removed is a fact about the social

consequences of one answer rather than the other, and it is removed in the direction of making refusal easier rather than participation more likely.

The third condition is that the intermediary stands in a relation of rough equality with the potential participant. If the intermediary held seniority, authority, or some other advantage, the procedure would not remove the coercive pressure on consent but merely relocate it, and the participant would feel unable to refuse the intermediary as he had felt unable to refuse the researcher. The intermediary must therefore be a social peer of those approached, so that a refusal carries no relational cost in that direction either. This condition is the most demanding of the three, since equality between two people is a matter of judgement rather than something that can be verified, and the researcher's reliance on it is examined among the limitations below. These three conditions address the consent problem at the point the framework identified as decisive, the point before agreement forms. They do not alter the structural hierarchy between citizen and refugee, which no interview procedure can do, and they do not pretend to. What they alter is the practical availability of refusal. By removing the researcher from the encounter, by detaching a refusal from the researcher, and by ensuring the intermediary exerts no countervailing pressure, the procedure restores to the potential participant a real option of declining. In the terms of the framework, it works on the conditions of voluntariness rather than on the form of consent. It does not produce autonomy where structures constrain it, but it removes one specific structural obstacle, the foreclosure of refusal, so that the agreement of those who do take part has a stronger claim to being genuinely their own. After the change, some of the invitations conveyed by the intermediaries were declined. Neither the number of invitations nor the number of refusals was recorded, since the study was not designed to evaluate a consent procedure and no such count was kept. That gap is also connected to the logic of the procedure rather than being only an omission in its documentation: refusal was deliberately made socially untraceable to the researcher, and individual refusals were therefore not documented as identifiable events. The observation is reported as what it is, a recollection from the field consistent with refusal having become a practically available option, and not as a measure of how frequently the procedure produced that outcome.

The procedure carries limitations its design attempted to address but cannot fully resolve. The first concerns the intermediary. An intermediary who holds social seniority, authority, or some form of influence over potential participants does not remove the coercive pressure on consent but displaces it, and the voluntariness problem the procedure was designed to solve simply reappears in a different relationship (Mackenzie et al., 2013: 16-17; Øye et al., 2016: 459). The intermediaries relied upon in this study were same-community peers of those approached, held no formal position, and, to the researcher's knowledge, possessed no unofficial authority over them. They were not gatekeepers in the institutional sense, and they had no organisational stake in securing a positive response. The difficulty is that equality between two people is a matter of judgement rather than something the researcher can certify from the outside, and the possibility that an intermediary's social standing or personal relationship with

a potential participant introduced a pressure the researcher did not perceive cannot be excluded. The second limitation concerns the sample. When consent is mediated, the researcher cannot fully see who was approached and who declined, so the intermediary's own choices and relationships shape the pool of participants in ways that remain partially invisible. The concentration is greater than that description suggests, since the same individuals who conveyed the consent request had also opened access to the community in the first place and, where a participant's Turkish was limited, translated the interview itself, so that recruitment, consent mediation, and, in some cases, linguistic mediation all ran through the same set of relationships. This is a real methodological cost, but in conflict and displacement research some degree of sampling constraint is rarely avoidable: with millions of internal and external refugees dispersed across informal and precarious settings, a representative sample is in most cases an unrealisable standard (Jacobsen and Landau, 2003: 185). The procedure accepts a constraint on sampling transparency in exchange for a stronger claim to genuine consent, on the grounds that the ethical obligation to participants takes precedence over sampling optimisation. The third limitation follows from scope. The procedure does not claim to be a universal solution, but in settings where a researcher's structurally assigned positionality forecloses genuine refusal, mediated consent of this kind offers one documented way of restoring it. The fourth is a matter of transparency. By naming these limitations openly, the article enacts the reflexive ethical practice it calls for rather than presenting a cleaned-up account, and that self-critical accounting is itself part of what mediated consent, properly understood, requires.

Conclusion

Qualitative fieldwork generates knowledge that other methods cannot produce, but it does so through a direct human relationship that carries material and ethical consequences for both parties. The researcher enters the field with institutional standing, professional incentives, and the protection of a home institution. The participant, particularly in conflict and displacement research, frequently occupies a precarious legal, economic, and social position that the research encounter does not alter. This asymmetry is not incidental to the research process but structural, and it is precisely this structural dimension that conventional ethical frameworks tend to leave unaddressed. If the researcher fails to exercise rigorous ethical oversight, the research process risks exacerbating the existing vulnerabilities of those it seeks to study. Navigating this ethical landscape requires more than a commitment to the "*do no harm*" principle, it demands an active and reflexive engagement with the structural power dynamics that define the researcher-participant relationship.

At the heart of this article lies the challenge of ensuring genuinely voluntary consent within settings where structural asymmetries, such as those between a citizen researcher and refugee participants, systemically constrain a participant's ability to decline. As demonstrated through the researcher's field research with Syrian refugees in Türkiye, conventional ethical

protocols are often insufficient to address the subtle structural pressures that can lead participants to assent out of a perceived sense of obligation rather than free will. To address this, the study has proposed mediated consent as a procedural intervention designed to detach the consent request from the researcher's physical presence and social authority. By ensuring that the choice to participate remains a socially and practically viable option, this approach moves beyond the formalistic requirements of institutional review boards by reorienting the informed consent process toward a relational autonomy that prioritises the agency and well-being of the participant.

It is important to acknowledge that mediated consent does not offer a universal solution. As noted earlier, this procedure entails methodological trade-offs regarding the selection of intermediaries and the limits of sampling transparency in precarious settings. Despite these limitations, this approach represents a reflexive response to a critical ethical problem by offering a practical strategy where conventional protocols are insufficient. While this procedure may be adapted to various research settings, it should not be treated as a comprehensive resolution to all ethical tensions arising in the consent process. Although this article does not intend to launch an exhaustive critique of institutional frameworks, it remains evident that while institutional review processes provide a foundational requirement, they are rarely sufficient on their own. Institutional clearance will likely continue to face inherent limitations because fieldwork is not a linear process that concludes upon approval but an iterative encounter with an inherent potential to generate new ethical dilemmas. Therefore, beyond the formal necessity of obtaining pre-research approval, this article argues that researchers working with vulnerable populations must embrace a post-research imperative: a transparent and reflexive commitment to documenting positionality and ethical navigation as a standard practice of accountability, extending from fieldwork through to the dissemination of findings.

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