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**A Critical Evaluation of Peer Research
Methodology from the Perspectives of Refugee
and Migrant Women Peer Researchers**

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Abstract

Peer research is a participatory methodology where people with lived experience of a topic under study are involved in conducting research. Despite its growing popularity and many purported benefits among academics, peer research is not commonly used with refugee and migrant communities and peer researchers' own perspectives about the value of the methodology remain under-researched. Therefore, this dissertation seeks to explore how peer research methodology is a valuable and meaningful practice from the perspectives of refugee and migrant women peer researchers. Using one peer research project in Glasgow as a case study, it draws upon interviews with five peer researchers and two other professionals. Overall, the study shows how peer research was valued for producing tangible benefits specifically for communities of refugee and migrant women. Peer research was seen to facilitate meaningful research practice through its utilising of 'insider' researchers, who were uniquely positioned to create trusting spaces for refugee and migrant women to participate in research. Furthermore, peer research was strongly valued by peer researchers as an opportunity to gain deeper knowledge about their community, which ultimately helped to strengthen support networks for refugee and migrant women beyond the research process. Lastly, peer researchers valued the methodology for recognising the agency and power of refugee and migrant women, which allowed them ownership and greater self-representation in academic practice.

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1 Introduction

Throughout the course of my Masters programme I became increasingly aware of the purported benefits of participatory and community-based research practices and was keen to further explore their potential value in research with refugee and migrant communities¹. I was therefore excited to be employed as an intern on a project using peer research methodology with communities of refugee and migrant women in Glasgow. Coming from an academic perspective, I went into the project with a strong sense that peer research was an ethical and valuable methodology. However, I began to question how this process was experienced by the peer researchers themselves. Were the purported benefits of the practice really felt, and more importantly valued by the peer researchers? And what impact did peer research have for them and their communities going forward? I therefore decided to undertake my dissertation based on this project to explore peer researchers' own experiences and perspectives of the methodology.

Academic researchers are increasingly recognising the problematic nature of conventional social research approaches which risk being extractive and hierarchical, where research is done 'on' participants for academic gain (Kindon, Pain and Kesby, 2007a; Clark *et al.*, 2021). This is particularly prevalent for research within the field of migration studies, where traditionally research has tended to be undertaken on displaced and often marginalised communities by Western researchers and produced

¹ Throughout this dissertation, 'refugee' is used inclusively to refer to those seeking refuge in the UK, including asylum-seekers and those who have been granted formal refugee status. The term 'migrant' is used to also include people with different migration statuses, but in the context of this research, generally refers to non-European, racialised migrants who face higher levels of precarity and discrimination in the UK.

little tangible benefit for participants (Clark-Kazak, 2022; Van Liempt and Bilger, 2009a) Consequently, in an effort to undertake research in more meaningful and ethical ways, there is a growing turn towards participatory research methodologies, which commit to doing research ‘with and for’ the individuals under study by actively involving them in the research process (Clark *et al.*, 2021; Clark-Kazak, 2022; Yang and Dibb, 2020; Kindon, Pain and Kesby, 2007a).

This study will focus specifically on peer research as one participatory methodology, which Yang and Dibb define as when ‘people with lived experience of the issues being studied take part in directing and conducting the research’ (2020, p.4). Peer researchers are typically identified as belonging to the community under study, and act as co-researchers at some or all stages of the research process under the guidance of a professional academic researcher. With a particular emphasis on lived experience as making people ‘experts’ in their own lives, peer research aims to centre the voices and knowledge of those who have been more traditionally excluded from academic research practice, and like other participatory methodologies, is often considered particularly appropriate for use with marginalised groups (Harding, Whitfield and Stillwell, 2010; Lushey and Munro, 2015; Yang and Dibb, 2020; Roche, Guta and Flicker, 2010). Moreover, it seeks to reduce power hierarchies in research relationships by including people in decision-making and recognising them as capable agents in the research process (Lushey and Munro, 2015; Roche, Guta and Flicker, 2010). Consequently, advocates for peer research claim that the methodology is not only a way to undertake ethical research with marginalised groups ‘properly’ (Harding, Whitfield and Stillwell, 2010, p. 326), but that it creates richer data and has the potential to empower participants and promote positive change within their communities beyond the

research process (Yang and Dibb, 2020; Lushey and Munro, 2015; Roche, Guta and Flicker, 2010).

With a general push towards democratic practices, peer research is becoming increasingly popular not only in social science research but also in governmental and organisational service provision, evaluation and policy development, where people with lived experience are framed as respected stakeholders in decision-making processes (Edwards and Alexander, 2011; Hodge, 2005). However, there is little critical discussion or evaluation of peer research methodology, and there is a relatively small amount of literature that attempts to understand the experiences and perspectives of the peer researchers themselves (Beresford, 2002; Guta, Flicker and Roche, 2013; Goodson and Phillimore, 2012; Thomas-Hughes, 2018, p. 5; Kothari, 2001). Moreover, peer research is still not commonly utilised with refugee and migrant communities in the UK (Yang and Dibb, 2020), and there is a particular need for greater scholarly insight into the perspectives of peer researchers of refugee and migrant background to understand its value with this demographic. While the benefits of peer research are often inherently assumed and generalised by academics who advocate for the methodology, it is important that the practice goes beyond being tokenistic and ‘wanting to appear to do the right thing’, but that its impact and value for those involved are demonstrable (Harding, Whitfield and Stillwell, 2010, pp. 327–328). In light of this, this dissertation seeks to critically evaluate peer research as a methodology specifically with communities of refugee and migrant women to gain a more nuanced understanding of whether, and how, it may be considered an effective and meaningful methodology to utilise with this demographic.

The research question that this study seeks to address is: *In what ways is peer research a valuable and meaningful practice for refugee and migrant women peer researchers?* This question will be addressed in two ways. Firstly, in the context of research practices with migrant populations, this study aims to understand whether and how peer researchers perceive peer research to be an effective and valuable methodology to meaningfully engage refugee and migrant women in research. Secondly, the dissertation aims to reveal what value the peer researchers perceive peer research to hold for them and their communities more widely and beyond the research process.

This dissertation is structured into five chapters, the first being this introduction. Chapter 2 is a literature review which provides an overview of the literature on peer research methodology both generally and within migrant communities, and critically discusses the related conceptual and theoretical concerns. Chapter 3 outlines the research framework and methodological approach that I took for this study, taking reflexivity and ethical considerations into account. Chapter 4 presents and analyses the main findings from this study in relation to the research aim, drawing upon the literature and key concepts discussed in chapter 2. Finally, chapter 5 provides a concluding summary of the research and its key findings, before outlining the significance of these findings and recommendations for future research.

2 Literature Review

Though peer research continues to be increasingly recognised and utilised by researchers in a range of fields, there is a surprisingly small amount of scholarly literature that critically evaluates it as a methodological approach, and even less with migrant populations or from peer researcher perspectives. This dissertation aims to contribute to this gap with its focus on exploring how peer research methodology is perceived as a valuable and meaningful practice by female peer researchers of refugee and migrant background. The first two sections of this literature review draw on wider discussions of peer research and participatory methodologies in both scholarly and grey literature. They outline how the key concepts of knowledge and power are considered within peer research, which largely underpins the purported value of the methodology. The third section of the literature review discusses more general methodological considerations in research with refugee and other migrant populations, before the fourth section focuses more specifically on applications of peer research with migrant communities and how the concepts of knowledge, power and positionality apply in relation to producing valuable practice within this context.

2.1 An alternative approach to knowledge production

Peer research methodology engages with the long-standing academic debate around knowledge production and what types of knowledge are deemed legitimate in social science research. Many have challenged traditional positivist approaches, which assume that valid knowledge resides in academia and institutions, and that there is one objective reality to be known and measured by professional researchers (Kindon, Pain and Kesby, 2007b, p. 9). In line with qualitative and feminist research traditions, participatory research is instead underpinned by the belief that there are multiple

realities and valid forms of knowledge (Kindon, Pain and Kesby, 2007b; Yang and Dibb, 2020; Hesse-Biber, 2017; Hawkesworth, 2012). Moreover, participatory methodologies such as peer research question what knowledge counts as legitimate and who is allowed to produce it, rejecting conventional notions that academic research is the only valid way of knowing (Lenette, 2022; Yang and Dibb, 2020). Feminist and decolonial scholars in particular have argued that what is presented as 'neutral' and legitimate knowledge, and informs much academic practice, is in fact largely produced by middle-class, white, Western men, and that other types of knowledge, for example that of black women and other systematically marginalised groups, have been routinely delegitimised as knowledge and excluded from scholarship and academic research (Liamputtong, 2020; Yang and Dibb, 2020; Hill Collins, 2000; Mayblin and Turner, 2021). Peer research is partly considered a meaningful approach because it aims to recognise and foreground this subjugated knowledge, by placing value on subjectivity and respecting 'ordinary' people with lived experience as legitimate knowledge holders who are essential to the process of knowledge production (Lenette, 2022; Pain, Kindon and Kesby, 2007; Lushey and Munro, 2015).

Yet, it is important to note that peer research does not disregard academic knowledge in favour of lived experience. Rather, participatory approaches equally value the multiplicity of knowledge that academic researchers and participants bring to the research process and place emphasis on co-production for creating a unique, collaborative form of knowledge (Lenette, 2022; Lushey and Munro, 2015; Pain, Kindon and Kesby, 2007; Liamputtong, 2020; Banks *et al.*, 2014). In the small amount of literature that includes peer researchers' own perspectives, the majority do recognise that they hold unique, situated knowledge which enhances the academic research

process (Dowling, 2016; Guta, Flicker and Roche, 2013; Burns and Schubotz, 2009; Elliott, Watson and Harries, 2002). Their insight and understanding of the topic under study is viewed as key to the knowledge-production process, and combining this with academic knowledge is considered to produce 'better' data, that is more rich, nuanced and relevant to the concerns of the community being studied (Yang and Dibb, 2020; Harding, Whitfield and Stillwell, 2010; Lushey and Munro, 2015). Knowledge is therefore an essential concept underpinning the alleged value of peer research methodology, which aims to not only legitimise multiple ways of knowing but also to produce a new form of knowledge to conventional practices.

However, demonstrating the value of peer research also requires greater exploration into the application and impact of the knowledge that it produces (Goodson and Phillimore, 2012; Yang and Dibb, 2020, p. 13). Participatory methodologies importantly prioritise the research process itself as a site of learning, with an emphasis on the knowledge gained throughout the process (Banks *et al.*, 2014; Kindon, Pain and Kesby, 2007b). Peer researchers are reported to not only gain practical skills in this process, but also a greater insight into their communities and the issues they face (Dowling, 2016; Burns and Schubotz, 2009). With a growing agenda for social science research to produce impact and 'relevance', peer research and community-based participatory approaches are often deemed valuable not only because they involve multiple perspectives but because they develop this kind of knowledge which is seen to enable change within communities (Boyd, 2020; Kindon, Pain and Kesby, 2007a; Vaughn *et al.*, 2017; Yang and Dibb, 2020; Hodge, 2005). Yet, most peer research literature tends to make the claim for community change somewhat anecdotally, and academics fail to show what practical application or tangible benefit the process has for the communities

involved beyond the research output. By providing more nuanced insight into peer researchers' own perspectives, this dissertation aims to develop scholarly insight into how the knowledge produced by peer research may be meaningfully applied beyond the research process, and therefore what impact and value the methodology may have at a community level.

2.2 Power and empowerment in the research process

Many of the questions around which types of knowledge are valued in research fundamentally relate to the hierarchies of power that are inherent in research practices (Edwards and Alexander, 2011). Feminists and others have increasingly problematised conventional research practices as perpetuating unequal power relations, where professional researchers control the process and undertake research 'on' participants as passive subjects (Kendon, Pain and Kesby, 2007a; Harding, Whitfield and Stillwell, 2010; Vaughn *et al.*, 2017). Not only does this extractive model have little benefit for research participants, it also perpetuates the systemic oppression of marginalised groups by reinforcing their lack of power in relation to 'knowing' academic researchers (Hesse-Biber, 2017). Peer research fundamentally challenges this approach by seeking to share power in the research process, in order to deconstruct hierarchical relationships and involve people in research in a democratic way (Harding, Whitfield and Stillwell, 2010; Lushey and Munro, 2015; Goodson and Phillimore, 2012). Moreover, peer research is often deemed appropriate with vulnerable and marginalised groups in order to recognise them as capable, active agents in the research process, and is commonly claimed to 'give them a voice' in academia where they may otherwise be unheard (Lushey and Munro, 2015, p. 522; Yang and Dibb, 2020; Goodson and Phillimore, 2012).

With this redistribution of power, peer research is further claimed by some academics to be empowering for participants. However, the meaning of empowerment is rarely defined in literature, though it tends to be associated by academics with this mitigation of power imbalances in the research process, claims of ‘giving people a voice’ and building participant confidence (Yang and Dibb, 2020; Lushey and Munro, 2015; Burns and Schubotz, 2009; Vaughn *et al.*, 2017). Empowerment as a research agenda has also been problematised as in fact reinforcing power hierarchies, because it inherently assumes that participants need empowering and that this is something that should be provided by an academic researcher (Gatenby and Humphries, 2000; Mohan, 2001; Kothari, 2001; Thambinathan and Kinsella, 2021; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Qasmiyeh and Greatrick, 2021). Peer researchers’ own voices about what constitutes empowerment and if this is something they gain through the research process are significantly lacking from this debate. Advocates for peer research view the redistribution of power and its potential for empowerment as key strengths of the methodology, which facilitate a more ethical and meaningful way to conduct research (Harding, Whitfield and Stillwell, 2010; Guta, Flicker and Roche, 2013; Yang and Dibb, 2020). However, what is crucially missing from the literature to validate these claims are the perspectives of peer researchers themselves, a gap that this dissertation aims to address.

Many heavily criticise the assumption that participatory methodologies create equal power relations, instead arguing that all research involves power imbalances, and a failure to acknowledge this in peer research risks reproducing the inequalities that it often seeks to address (Kesby, Kindon and Pain, 2007; Edwards and Alexander, 2011; Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Atfield *et al.*, 2012). Especially when used with groups deemed vulnerable and marginalised, there are likely to be inherent differences in

status that mark professional researchers as having more power and greater ability to set and control research agendas (Lushey and Munro, 2015; Banks *et al.*, 2014). In addition, understandings of 'participation' in research are largely dependent on how much control professional researchers are willing to give peer researchers (Donà, 2007; Yang and Dibb, 2020). Even with the best intention to share power equally with peer researchers, academic researchers may inadvertently reproduce power hierarchies or impose research requirements on participants at various stages of a project (Lykes and Hershberg, 2012; Cooke and Kothari, 2001). Debates around the concept of power are therefore central to understanding the value of peer research methodology, with its potential to both reduce and reinforce power hierarchies in practice needing further investigation.

Furthermore, power is often construed as a fixed commodity in peer research that professional researchers possess and can hand over to participants in order to empower them (Edwards and Alexander, 2011, p. 272; Cooke and Kothari, 2001). However, this rather simplistic approach fails to explore the nuances and instability of power, which is better understood from a post-structuralist perspective: not as a static possession that is handed over once or equalised, but as an effect which constantly shifts and circulates among all individuals throughout the research process (Donà, 2007; Kesby, Kindon and Pain, 2007; Edwards and Alexander, 2011). Peer researchers may therefore exercise and undergo power, but this is temporal and may not translate into all areas of the research process or indeed into other areas of their lives (Donà, 2007; Kesby, Kindon and Pain, 2007). This dissertation aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of how the unstable and shifting nature of power within peer research

methodology may simultaneously produce or inhibit meaningful research experiences for peer researchers.

2.3 Methodological considerations with migrant populations

This study focuses specifically on the application of peer research methodology with migrant populations. Much literature discusses specific methodological and ethical considerations for conducting research with this demographic, which highlight the need to move away from conventional research practices. As a result of restrictive immigration policies, many refugees and other migrants face particular conditions which heighten their risk of exploitation and their perceived 'vulnerability' in the research process, such as social isolation, being economically disadvantaged, experiencing ill mental health, and being in dependent relationships with the state and other institutions (Van Liempt and Bilger, 2012; Hynes, 2003; Pittaway, Bartolomei and Hugman, 2010; Thambinathan and Kinsella, 2021; Dudhia, 2020). In addition, researchers often face practical challenges in the field such as language barriers, certain migrant populations being considered 'hard-to-reach', and high levels of mistrust from migrant participants towards 'outsiders' and institutions (Van Liempt and Bilger, 2009b; Hynes, 2003; Oda *et al.*, 2022). Cultivating trust is an integral consideration in research with refugee and migrant populations, who may be reluctant or fearful to participate in research as they not only foster mistrust towards others as a survival strategy, but are also often subject to mistrust and disbelief themselves (Hynes, 2003, 2017; Van Liempt and Bilger, 2012; Dudhia, 2020). Moreover, many refugee and migrant populations may be weary of participating in research that fails to produce results that improve their own lives or communities (Van Liempt and Bilger, 2009b; Pincock and Bakunzi, 2021). Failing to properly address these considerations, much

conventional research has been problematised as extractive or having little benefit for migrant communities, partly because research in migration studies is often undertaken by Western researchers lacking direct experience of migration themselves (Marlowe *et al.*, 2015; Clark-Kazak, 2022). There are, therefore, increasing calls for research to be done ‘with and for’ migrant populations and a move towards participatory methodologies (Hynes, 2003; Pittaway, Bartolomei and Hugman, 2010; Clark-Kazak, 2022). Yet migrants’ own perspectives on whether this produces more ethical and meaningful research practices remain sparse in the literature.

It is also important to note the complexity that gender adds to research with migrant populations, which often goes unacknowledged in the literature. While both men and women in refugee communities may face the issues outlined above, women are doubly marginalised by their refugee status and their gender, which often heightens social isolation, mistrust, fear, lack of confidence, and practical difficulty participating in research (Goodkind and Deacon, 2004; Hynes, 2017; Dudhia, 2020). Refugee and migrant women face gender-specific issues which require more careful consideration in relation to what constitutes appropriate and meaningful research practice for them (Dudhia, 2020; Goodkind and Deacon, 2004). Though gender-specific, often participatory, research is increasingly being undertaken with refugee women to address this (Vacchelli, 2018; Dudhia, 2020; Dantas and Gower, 2021), their own views on these approaches are rarely explored, and peer research has not been evaluated as a methodology with this demographic. Despite strongly aligning with feminist principles, peer research literature tends to somewhat assume a gender-neutrality and there is a surprising lack of recent peer research studies in the UK with women as the main demographic (Maguire, 1987; Gatenby and Humphries, 2000; Yang and Dibb, 2020).

This dissertation seeks to help fill these gaps by exploring how peer research may pose a valuable solution to producing meaningful research practices specifically with refugee and migrant women and from their own perspectives.

2.4 Peer research with migrant communities

The following sections will discuss the literature on peer research methodology where it has, somewhat limitedly, been used with refugee and other migrant populations. They will outline the key discussions in peer research within this context by drawing upon and extending the concepts considered earlier in the chapter.

2.4.1 Incorporating migrant knowledge

Questions around types of knowledge and their validity are especially pertinent in migration research, which has been criticised for an overzealous desire for policy relevance that reproduces state logics and continues to silence the knowledge of migrant populations (Mayblin and Turner, 2021; Bakewell, 2008). However, decolonising approaches are also becoming increasingly popular in this field, which recognise how colonialism and its ongoing legacies have legitimised Western, Eurocentric forms of knowledge while indigenous and other forms of knowledge, including that of many migrant communities, have been excluded from mainstream knowledge production (Hearn *et al.*, 2022; Mayblin and Turner, 2021; Tuhiwai Smith, 2021; Mohan, 2001; Thambinathan and Kinsella, 2021). Decolonial scholars call for an unlearning of the ways that we construct and value knowledge in traditional research, and peer research has been seen as a valuable and practical way to implement this in some migration research to legitimise and re-centre the knowledge of those who have been oppressed, 'othered' and traditionally treated as research objects (Mayblin, Wake and Kazemi, 2019; Thambinathan and Kinsella, 2021; Hearn *et al.*, 2022). Decolonial

scholars have used peer research to foreground the skills and experiential knowledge of refugee and other marginalised migrant populations and highlighted how this enhances the research process (Mayblin, Wake and Kazemi, 2019; Hearn *et al.*, 2022). This epistemological approach also recognises migrants' knowledge as essential for any work that aims to inform migration policy and discourse, where their experiential knowledge is all too often excluded (Vacchelli, 2018).

In the small amount of literature that does examine migrant peer researcher perspectives, many equally recognise the value that their lived experience and community knowledge bring to the research process, particularly in ensuring culturally appropriate interview questions, facilitating more comfortable interviews in a variety of languages and providing richer insight into data with more meaningful application (Mayblin, Wake and Kazemi, 2019; Hearn *et al.*, 2022; Atfield *et al.*, 2012; Marlowe *et al.*, 2015). In addition, some peer researchers note that their experiential and contextual knowledge allows them to uncover or understand information that may remain hidden to those outside of migrant communities (Marlowe *et al.*, 2015; Ghorashi, 2008). In Hearn *et al.*'s recent and noteworthy study of migrant peer researcher experiences, peer researchers stress the invaluable role of their knowledge in all areas of the research process and that this facilitates meaningful, culturally appropriate and safe research practices for refugee and other migrant communities, as well as strengthening the integrity and relevance of the results (2022). Much of these important findings focus on how migrant peer researchers' knowledge adds value to the academic research process, which is becoming a reasonably established premise within the literature on peer research. This dissertation hopes to build on these findings by providing further insight into how peer research may contribute to meaningful research practices specifically for

female refugee and migrant communities, but also to investigate how the process of knowledge production may hold value for peer researchers outside of enhancing the research process.

2.4.2 Power and agency

Many note the stark power imbalance between researchers and refugee populations in migration research, and that even when refugee participants become peer researchers their marginalised social locations and often reduced access to resources ultimately leave them as holding less power than professional researchers (Temple and Moran, 2006; Van Liempt and Bilger, 2009b; Atfield *et al.*, 2012; Thambinathan and Kinsella, 2021). Temple and Moran argue that one area where it is particularly difficult for academic researchers to reduce power hierarchies with migrant participants is language (2006). For peer researchers from any demographic, academic language and systems may present barriers and reinforce power hierarchies (Banks *et al.*, 2014), yet this is heightened for migrant participants for whom English is not their first language. Though peer researchers often use multiple languages in interviews to facilitate better access and communication with participants, the working language of peer research projects in the UK is most commonly English. Working within academic English language standards as well as producing work in that language can be difficult for migrant peer researchers, and yet beyond practical considerations, language is rarely discussed as an issue of power and accessibility in this context (Piacentini, Mirza and Gilmour, 2022). Not only may language serve to reinstate the authoritative position of the professional researcher (Temple and Moran, 2006), it may reduce the accessibility of peer research and therefore continue to marginalise and silence certain populations from research practice (Piacentini, Mirza and Gilmour, 2022). If peer research is to be a

meaningful practice that values marginalised voices and redistributes power with migrant populations, greater attention is required to the role that language plays in this process.

Peer research and other participatory methodologies are often used as a way to recognise the agency of migrant participants and enable their self-representation in research, which is important when dominant discourses frame refugee women in particular as victimised, vulnerable and lacking agency and voice (Pittaway, Bartolomei and Hugman, 2010; Johnson, 2011; Vacchelli, 2018; Dantas and Gower, 2021; Oda *et al.*, 2022). Peer researchers themselves often value participating at all stages of the research process, with equitable team relations and shared decision-making highly important to meaningful and 'successful' research (Atfield *et al.*, 2012; Vaughn, Jacquez and Zhen-Duan, 2018; Hearn *et al.*, 2022). Yet in practice, academic researchers share power with peer researchers to varying degrees, with many projects only employing migrant peer researchers for recruitment and data collection in order to access participants and overcome language barriers (Temple and Moran, 2006; Yang and Dibb, 2020; Pincock and Bakunzi, 2021). Used in this way, academics tend to reinforce their own power over participants, and peer research risks being exploitative and further marginalising of migrant communities (Elliott, Watson and Harries, 2002; Guta, Flicker and Roche, 2013). With different approaches to peer research generating varying levels of success in relation to power sharing, this dissertation hopes to provide greater insight into the conditions that enable or inhibit peer researchers of refugee and migrant background to exercise their agency.

2.4.3 Positionality

Though present in all peer research, questions around positionality and insider-outsider status are particularly prevalent in the literature that exists about peer research with migrant communities and the way it relates to producing meaningful research practices. In contrast to more conventional research approaches which value researcher objectivity, peer research importantly utilises ‘insider’ researchers. In migration studies, peer researchers typically have lived experience of migration and may also share the same ethnic, cultural, religious or linguistic background as participants (Carling, Erdal and Ezzati, 2014; Ryan, Kofman and Aaron, 2011). Migrant peer researchers themselves note that understanding a community and having a shared cultural identity are essential for forming reciprocal relationships of trust and integrity which enable participants to share their stories within a ‘safe space’ (Hearn *et al.*, 2022, p. 7; Marlowe *et al.*, 2015). Peer researchers often view their ‘insider’ role as invaluable for overcoming the pertinent issue of trust with refugee and migrant populations, and as creating more ethical, meaningful and sensitive research encounters as well as enhancing the quality of the data (Hearn *et al.*, 2022; Marlowe *et al.*, 2015; Bakunzi, 2018).

However, echoing many feminist researchers who problematise basing ‘insider’ status on one characteristic alone (Riessman, 1987; Beoku-Betts, 1994; Phoenix, 1994; Edwards, 1990), some studies show that ‘matching’ migrant peer researchers to participants based on migration status or ethnicity fails to meet the assumptions of the ‘insider’ position (Mestheneos, 2006; Edwards and Alexander, 2011). Instead, peer researchers were met with mistrust and suspicion by those who were assumed to be part of their community, which caused difficulty accessing participants as well as

building rapport (Mestheneos, 2006; Edwards and Alexander, 2011). This importantly draws into question what exactly constitutes an ‘insider’ in migrant communities in order to truly facilitate trust, which is based on more than shared nationality, ethnicity or experience (Oda *et al.*, 2022, p. 31). Migrant communities are often categorised as a homogenous group, or with Western, all-encompassing ‘labels’ and yet inevitably tend to be hugely diverse and differentiated (Vaughn *et al.*, 2017; Donà, 2007; Crawley and Skleparis, 2018). Simply ‘matching’ peer researchers to participants by race, ethnicity or migration status assumes a monocultural experience, an essentialising practice which has been criticised as racist and colonial (Gunaratnam, 2003; Donà, 2007; Phoenix, 1994). Instead, more attention needs to be paid to the concept of intersectionality, which recognises the ways that various aspects of a peer researcher’s identity such as class, age and gender shape their positionality in relation to others in the research process and can facilitate or hinder the building of trust (Gunaratnam, 2003; Atfield *et al.*, 2012). A peer researcher’s ‘insider’ status then is not considered to be inherent or fixed, rather they may move along an insider-outsider spectrum and this affects how successfully they are able to produce valuable and meaningful research encounters (Marlowe *et al.*, 2015; Oda *et al.*, 2022; Atfield *et al.*, 2012). This dissertation seeks to contribute to this literature by specifically exploring how peer researchers may produce trusting and meaningful research encounters in communities of refugee and migrant women.

2.5 Concluding remarks

This literature review has provided an overview of the principles of peer research methodology, which challenge more conventional approaches to knowledge, power and positionality in research and underpin its purported value in much of the literature. It

has also demonstrated that this may make peer research a particularly valuable approach for research with refugee and migrant populations, and yet that the methodology comes with challenges in practice that require further exploration if it is to avoid reproducing extractive or damaging research practice. What this chapter importantly highlighted is that peer researchers' own perspectives remain rare, and yet their views and experiences are necessary to properly evaluate the methodology and understand if and how it may be valuable for them beyond academic claims. With gendered approaches to peer research with migrant populations or otherwise also completely lacking, this dissertation aims to contribute to filling these gaps by exploring how peer research is perceived as a valuable and meaningful practice specifically by female peer researchers of refugee and migrant background. It seeks to understand if and how peer researchers view the methodology as an appropriate and valuable way for research to be undertaken with their communities. Moreover, with little literature that focuses on the wider impact and value of peer research beyond how it enhances research data, this dissertation further aims to reveal what value peer research is seen to hold for the peer researchers and their communities beyond the research process. In the next chapter I will outline the methodological approach I took to address these research aims.

3 Methodology

The last chapter outlined my review of the literature and identified a lack of nuanced discussion on the value of peer research methodology from migrant peer researchers' own perspectives. This dissertation aims to address this gap by investigating how peer research methodology is valuable and meaningful from female migrant peer researchers' perspectives. This chapter sets out to describe my approach to this research and justify the decisions made at each stage of the study. Ethical considerations arose throughout the project and are included within the different sections in the chapter where relevant. My own proximity to the participants was also an important factor in this study, and issues around my positionality are again included in various sections as well as being further discussed in section 3.7, 'insider-outsider positionality'.

3.1 *Philosophical framework*

My philosophical approach to this research largely aligns with that of peer research methodology, which reflects much of my own values. I believe in valuing lived experience as essential knowledge in research and that research practices with refugee and migrant populations should aim to re-centre their subjugated knowledge and reduce power hierarchies to produce meaningful outcomes. A constructivist ontological approach therefore underpins this research, which recognises that multiple, subjective realities exist in the social world, which are shaped by each individual's intersectional identities (Clark *et al.*, 2021). Epistemologically, this aligns with my feminist-oriented approach to the study to acknowledge that there are multiple ways of knowing which are contingent on social location and emphasises the subjectivity of knowledge (Brisolara and Seigart, 2012; Hesse-Biber, 2012). Moreover, this research takes

influence from both black feminist and decolonial approaches in recognising that refugee and migrant women hold specific and valuable knowledge which has traditionally been excluded from academic research in favour of androcentric, Western ways of knowing (Hill Collins, 2000; Tuhiwai Smith, 2021). This knowledge is essential if we are to properly evaluate peer research methodology as an approach with female migrant communities, and yet the majority of existing studies about peer research methodology are from Western academic perspectives. With these approaches, this study aims to centre the perspectives and lived experience of refugee and migrant women.

In addition, a feminist methodological approach importantly recognises that research cannot be value-free and acknowledges the active role of the researcher throughout the research process (Clark *et al.*, 2021; Stanley and Wise, 1983). Moreover, it seeks to minimise the power imbalance that exists between researcher and researched in favour of non-hierarchical research relationships (Van Liempt and Bilger, 2012; Liamputtong, 2020). While I will address my positionality in more detail later in the chapter, it must be acknowledged that I am a white, Western researcher without lived experience of forced migration attempting to represent the experiences of refugee and migrant women. Therefore, despite my prioritising of participant perspectives, my own subjectivity inevitably shapes meaning-making so that my research is an interpretation of the participants' experiences (Hesse-Biber, 2017; Stanley and Wise, 1983). Furthermore, I have sought to pay attention to the inexorable power imbalance that my position produced in ways that will be outlined throughout this chapter, and practiced reflexivity in order to be aware of how my position has shaped the research process (Hesse-Biber, 2012).

3.2 Research strategy and design

In keeping with the philosophical framework and the aims of the research, I deemed a qualitative research approach the most appropriate for this study. With the general aim to study subjective lived experience and how individuals understand the social world, a qualitative approach was the most suitable way for me to explore peer research methodology as understood from my participants' own perspectives (Liamputtong, 2020). Moreover, a qualitative approach is well-suited to the fact that this study is exploratory and focuses on an area that is reasonably under-researched (Hesse-Biber, 2017). With very little existing on migrant women undertaking peer research, I deemed primary data collection necessary to be able to address the research aim. In keeping with this, I took more of an inductive approach to this study so that my data would be key in guiding the main themes, though this inevitably also included some deduction and iterative working between data and existing theory (Clark *et al.*, 2021).

I employed a case study research design for this dissertation, which focuses on a single peer research project in Glasgow as the unit of analysis, as described in more detail in the following section. As seen in the literature review, peer research methodology is used in a variety of ways and one project may differ greatly from another, therefore evaluating one study accounts for its specific context and approach. Moreover, a peer research project undertaken solely with migrant women is still fairly unique. I therefore decided a case study design was valuable to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of those participating within this one project (Clark *et al.*, 2021). I also used the case study design because of my proximity and access to the project, where my existing relationships with participants made it the most ethical and appropriate situation in which I could undertake primary data collection with peer researchers.

3.3 *The case under study*

The project that this dissertation focuses on is a partnership between three Glasgow-based community organisations, two of which specifically provide support to refugee and migrant women. The overall project aims to develop and deliver a model of community-based advocacy, and in doing so to also build the capacity, knowledge and skills of the organisations. Everyone involved in and working on the project identifies as a woman. Peer research is being used to undertake the monitoring and evaluation of the project. Six women of refugee and migrant background, who are participating in the project and work or volunteer within the organisations, are working as peer researchers alongside an academic researcher. Using a qualitative approach, the peer researchers work on all stages of the research process: design, development, data collection, analysis and report writing. Since March 2022 I have been an intern on the project, working directly with the research team to provide support as they carry out the research.

3.4 *Sampling and recruitment*

I used purposive sampling for this study to select participants specifically because they had characteristics relating to the research aim, which determined my choice of the case and then my participants within it (Clark *et al.*, 2021). My key focus was the perspectives of the peer researchers themselves, though I was also interested to gain greater contextual insight into why and how peer research methodology had been utilised in the project under study from professional perspectives. I recruited five of the six peer researchers as participants, with the sixth being unavailable at the time of data collection. The peer researchers are all female migrants with different backgrounds and migration statuses, though the majority have refugee status in the UK. Further to this, I

recruited two other participants who have significant professional roles within the project but do not have refugee background: the academic researcher working in the peer research team, and the overall project coordinator. Both are also women. My final sample size was seven, which though reasonably small was limited by the size of the project under study.

My role as an intern on the project raised some ethical considerations at the sampling and recruitment stage. As outlined in the literature review, refugee and other migrant women are often deemed vulnerable in research and considered to be at higher risk of exploitation to Western researchers (Hynes, 2003; Pittaway, Bartolomei and Hugman, 2010). For this reason and at the risk of being extractive, I would not have felt it appropriate to approach potential participants that I did not already know. However, I would argue that my ongoing relationships with the women made it more ethical for them to be involved in the study. My regular time spent working with them gave me multiple opportunities to discuss the research study, answer questions and to ensure that my approach was suitable for them as individuals. I also aimed for my research to involve some level of reciprocity, by being useful not only for my own study but also to provide the participants and their organisations additional insight as they develop their uses of peer research methodology (DeVault and Gross, 2012). However, I was aware that my existing relationships with participants may have made them feel obliged to take part. To address this, I was clear to delineate this research from the work of the project and emphasise that participation was voluntary. I emailed each participant with the plain language statement detailing what the study would entail before I began data collection. Subsequently at the beginning of each interview I re-provided the plain language statement and obtained a signed consent form. For the peer researcher

participants, their work experience had given them familiarity with research practices, and I felt made them well-placed to make independent and informed decisions about their participation.

3.5 *Semi-structured interviews*

In keeping with the philosophical approach to this study, I chose qualitative interviews to give precedence to participants' lived experience and as a particularly appropriate method for accessing the perspectives and knowledge of both women and marginalised populations (Liamputtong, 2020; Hesse-Biber, 2017; Doucet and Mauthner, 2008). I used semi-structured interviews because of their flexibility and use of open-ended questions to encourage rich responses, but to also allow participants to share as much or as little as they feel comfortable (Clark *et al.*, 2021). Moreover, with this format I was able to guide discussion while also giving participants greater freedom to direct the conversation and allow for unexpected topics to arise (Liamputtong, 2020; Hesse-Biber, 2017). Doing so creates a two-way interaction which provides participants with greater agency and visibility in the process of knowledge production, and I therefore felt this was an effective method to somewhat reduce the inherent power hierarchy in my relationship with participants (Doucet and Mauthner, 2008; Brinkmann, 2020). Interviews were also the most appropriate method given the context of my project: the peer researchers had used interviews themselves and therefore had some familiarity with this method, and a less structured approach was most suitable given that I already knew the participants.

Six out of the seven interviews were conducted face-to-face in locations which were chosen by participants and were convenient and familiar to them. This took account of participants' time constraints and level of comfort as well as reducing researcher

control a little in the process (Liamputtong, 2020). Similarly, one interview was undertaken as an online video call at the preference of the participant. I designed a reasonably broad interview guide which allowed participants to speak about their experiences at various stages of the peer research project as well as some more general reflections on research. I did not ask all questions in my guide nor in the same order in each interview, instead I was directed by participant responses. The interviews lasted between thirty minutes and two hours, which was more variation than I initially planned but was a result of prioritising flexibility, giving due agency to participants to share what they wanted and working within their time constraints.

From an ethical point of view, I decided to focus my interview questions largely on the peer research project, which was the context within which I already knew my participants. For the peer researchers, asking them to divulge personal and potentially sensitive information about their migration experiences not only felt intrusive and inappropriate but may have caused emotional distress (Lee and Renzetti, 1990; Liamputtong, 2020). While their identities as migrants provided much of the context for the research, my interview approach allowed them to speak about this as much or as little as they wished without direct questioning. Moreover, being able to speak to the women primarily as fellow researchers placed us on a more equal footing in terms of power. As an additional ethical consideration, I anonymised participant interviews and have not named the project under study or any of the organisations involved to reduce the risk of identification. Though the ethical assumption of anonymisation in research is a debated issue which can in fact reinforce power hierarchies and silence participant voices (Moore, 2012; Godfrey-Faussett, 2022), I did so because some participants

expressly requested that they not be named. To provide some level of agency within anonymisation, I gave all participants the opportunity to choose their own pseudonym.

I undertook all interviews in English because it is the working language of the project under study and that which I already communicated with the participants in. All participants are competent in English though for the majority it is their second language, which can present complexity as well as further power imbalances in interviewing (Temple and Moran, 2006; Liamputtong, 2020). My existing relationships with participants were invaluable in knowing how to approach each individual interview with consideration to language, and where required in some cases I repeated, reworded or wrote questions down. All of the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed to capture participants' words as accurately as possible. I sent each participant a copy of their interview transcript to give them an opportunity to check if I had misrepresented any of their words and to amend, add or redact any information they chose. The majority of participants did send me comments, and some sent amendments to their transcripts, which were largely corrections to spoken English and additional details for some responses. I did this with all participants with the aim to share some control in the research process and to ensure that they felt comfortable with how they had been represented in the data, which felt particularly important to do for those with English as a second language (DeVault and Gross, 2012).

3.6 Data analysis

I used an inductive-oriented approach to answer my research question, which though informed by initial reading, relied on my data and analysis to form the final ideas and concepts for the study in conversation with the literature. In line with this I used a grounded theory coding method for analysing my interview transcripts, which begins

by giving all data equal importance and requires close reading without the application of preconceived categories (Charmaz, 2014). As an inductive method it emphasises constant interaction with data and allows for new or implicit meanings to be identified (Charmaz, 2014, p. 114). In my initial coding I applied codes to each individual line or small segment of the data. I largely coded data as actions, which helps to focus on what is happening in the data instead of applying categories or concepts too early (Charmaz, 2014). This method allowed me to remain close to my interview transcripts with the aim to begin analysis from the perspective of the participants (Charmaz, 2014).

My initial coding produced a large number of codes, but by comparing transcripts and the codes in each I was able to begin synthesising the data to produce more focused codes (Charmaz, 2014; Bryant, 2020). In the process of moving between my data and emerging ideas, I identified categories and then more overarching themes in the data. Some of these early categories aligned with common ideas that I had already identified in the literature around positionality, power and knowledge, for example 'insider-outsider role' and 'voices being heard'. Yet, it was interesting to find other important categories in the data such as 'strengthening support networks' and 'women as a safe space' that went beyond ideas in the literature. From this stage of analysis, I returned to the literature and worked between the two to refine the key themes and concepts for the study.

Like feminist research, the constructivist grounded theory method importantly acknowledges the researcher's active role in the interpretation of data and therefore that themes do not simply 'emerge' from data but are created by the researcher (Charmaz, 2014; Bryant, 2020; Mauthner and Doucet, 2003). This approach emphasises the need for researcher reflexivity, and during analysis I aimed to note how my own

position and knowledge shaped my interpretation of the data (Mauthner and Doucet, 2003; Charmaz, 2014). I was inevitably influenced by the literature I had already read about peer research methodology, but I also noted that my being a Masters student at a British university gave me particular understandings of what peer research and academic research more generally 'should' be, which likely shaped the way I both asked interview questions and interpreted my participants' responses. Moreover, I already knew my participants and it was important, though challenging, to note at the analysis stage how this shaped my interpretations of the data, for example in wanting to represent participants positively or using my knowledge of the wider context to inform my analysis (Mauthner and Doucet, 2003).

3.7 Insider-outsider positionality

A feminist methodology advocates for researcher reflexivity, which recognises and integrates personal experience into the whole research process (Stanley and Wise, 1983; Liamputtong, 2020). Having already noted some of the ways that my position influenced the research process, it is also important to address my positionality as both an insider and an outsider in relation to this research project. I could be considered an 'insider' because I work for the project, therefore I knew participants in a professional capacity and had an active role in much of the work they were undertaking. Like all my participants I am also a woman, which for the project under study and for early feminist researchers presupposes a level of shared understanding (Oakley, 1981; Finch, 1984). These factors facilitated access to my participants, stronger rapport and trust, and a greater understanding of the topic (Merriam *et al.*, 2001; Berger, 2015). This was helpful in interviews where I could speak comfortably and knowledgably about specific aspects of my participants' work, though I did question whether my role on the project

meant that some participants may not have felt comfortable to share more negative opinions with me.

On the other hand, I was aware that the participants' professional roles on the project were just one part of their identities and that in many other respects I was an 'outsider' to them. While this was prevalent with the peer researchers, with whom I did not share migrant or refugee background, I was also younger than all my participants and at times felt that this affected their perception of me. As many feminists have since argued, basing 'insider' status on being a woman or just one aspect of identity is problematic and does not automatically constitute easy rapport or understanding (Riessman, 1987; Edwards, 1990; Beoku-Betts, 1994; Phoenix, 1994). In interviews I felt I particularly shifted to 'outsider' status when the peer researchers spoke about their communities and the problems faced by refugee women. This had the benefits of gaining fuller explanations and shifting power to them as the authoritative voices (Ryan, Kofman and Aaron, 2011; Merriam *et al.*, 2001; Berger, 2015). However, it highlighted that some aspects of their experience would always be 'invisible' to me, and in some respects reinforced the problematic nature of a white, Western woman aiming to represent the experiences of migrant women (Hesse-Biber and Piatelli, 2012; Hesse-Biber, 2017; Clark-Kazak, 2022). This serves to highlight the inevitably fluid and multifaceted nature of the researcher and their insider-outsider position (Folkes, 2022) and the potential benefits and drawbacks it brought to my own research.

3.8 Limitations

The main limitations of this study are the small sample size and the very specific nature of the project. These limit the transferability of the findings to other contexts; the research does not produce outcomes that are generalisable to other peer research

projects or migrant communities (Clark *et al.*, 2021). Moreover, the participants are all part of the same project and organisations, which is likely to have influenced their views and values and produced some bias in the sample. These are typical limitations of the qualitative case study, yet it is important to note that the intention of this research design is to undertake a detailed analysis of the chosen case and to expand theoretical ideas, not for findings to be generalisable to larger populations (Clark *et al.*, 2021, p. 61; Yin, 2009). In addition, as noted in the literature review, generalisation across migrant populations is not particularly desirable and risks assuming homogenous experiences within inherently diverse populations (Gunaratnam, 2003; Temple and Moran, 2006; Donà, 2007).

Another limitation of this study is that the project was still ongoing while I undertook my data collection. Though it may have been preferable to interview the participants at the end of the peer research process, this was not possible within the practical requirements of this dissertation. At the time of data collection, peer researchers had completed one round of interviews and data analysis, prepared a second round of interview questions and begun writing a report. While this might not have allowed participants to speak about the whole process of peer research or the final output, it did mean that they were still immersed in the process and provided potentially 'fresher' reflections on their experiences.

This chapter has outlined the methodological approach I took to explore the value of peer research methodology from the perspective of migrant women peer researchers and justified my decisions for doing so. Having used a feminist framework, I have sought to give close attention to my own position within the research process at each stage with the aim to strengthen the integrity and rigour of my study (Hesse-Biber and

Piatelli, 2012; Berger, 2015). In the next chapter I will discuss the key findings that came out of my research data.

4 Findings and Discussion

This chapter will discuss the findings from the data produced in the interviews for this study. It aims to address how peer research methodology is perceived as a valuable and meaningful practice for refugee and migrant women undertaking peer research, both within and beyond the research process, and places emphasis on the perspectives of the peer researchers themselves. It is organised under three sections of 'creating trusted spaces', 'gaining deeper knowledge' and 'recognising power', which were prevalent categories in the data and relate back to the concepts of knowledge, power and positionality as identified in the literature. This chapter aims to both draw and expand upon existing discussions in order to give a more nuanced understanding of the value of peer research methodology.

The peer researchers in this study belong to one of two community organisations, which are both specifically for refugee and migrant women. Though 'community' is a complex and somewhat debated term, especially in peer research studies (Edwards and Alexander, 2011; Yang and Dibb, 2020; Thomas-Hughes, 2018), in this dissertation the women's 'communities' refer to these groups within which they self-identify and undertook their research. The women within these groups differ in nationality, age, class, religion and ethnicity, but the two uniting aspects of their identities are their gender and their refugee or migrant status. All of the peer researchers work or volunteer for their community organisation to support women of refugee and migrant background, and undertaking research was often seen as an extension of this existing work.

4.1 Creating trusted spaces

All participants viewed the peer researchers as ‘insiders’ and placed great value on this position as allowing them to overcome trust issues and create a sense of ease with participants in the research process, particularly in interviews (Marlowe *et al.*, 2015; Oda *et al.*, 2022).

‘Because they trust us, they trust me a lot, they was able to express easily. Because they trust me, they know me, and they express themselves.’ – Magy

‘When you make the interview, and the person is your friend, [...] she opens their heart and tells you their concerns. And if you don't have any relationship with the person, this person is going to build a wall between her and you.’ – Lilluka

The peer researchers placed emphasis on their participants being able to open up and fully ‘express themselves’ in interviews, which partly held value because it allowed them to access fuller, honest responses to enrich their research data (Dowling, 2016). Yet, it was also clearly important for the peer researchers more generally to create a space where their participants felt comfortable and safe to share without judgement, which they viewed ‘outsider’ researchers as unable to do. The peer researchers’ own views support previous literature to emphasise that fear and lack of trust towards outsiders are common issues among refugee and migrant women, which create barriers to their research participation (Goodkind and Deacon, 2004; Hynes, 2017). Yet, by utilising their ‘insider’ status and knowledge of their communities, peer research was seen as a valuable way to overcome these issues. Corresponding to other studies, the peer researchers saw themselves as uniquely placed to create a trusting research environment, which allowed for sensitive and meaningful research to be undertaken

with their communities (Ryan, Kofman and Aaron, 2011; Marlowe *et al.*, 2015; Hearn *et al.*, 2022; Oda *et al.*, 2022).

Though lived experience of migration was an important factor in the women's community identities, their 'insider' status was more nuanced than this. Interestingly in this dissertation's findings, trust was largely predicated on having strong, pre-existing relationships with participants. While other studies found that simply 'matching' migrant peer researchers to participants based on lived experience or certain characteristics produced mixed results in facilitating trust, (Mestheneos, 2006; Edwards and Alexander, 2011; Atfield *et al.*, 2012; Marlowe *et al.*, 2015), the effect of peer researchers having existing relationships with participants is largely unexplored in the literature. This dissertation's findings suggest that being interviewed by someone they already know is important for creating the conditions in which refugee and migrant women can overcome mistrust and meaningfully participate in research. Furthermore, in contrast with other studies that argue for the transient and fluid nature of peer researchers' insider-outsider status (Marlowe *et al.*, 2015; Oda *et al.*, 2022; Atfield *et al.*, 2012), and unlike my own researcher experience, pre-existing relationships were perceived as giving the peer researchers relatively static and unproblematic 'insider' status with all participants that prevailed over differences such as nationality, age or religion.

Among peer researchers, another fundamental aspect of being able to create trusting and meaningful research encounters with participants was gender. Chantal saw being a woman as giving her a shared understanding with other women, which enabled her to build rapport with her participants and create meaningful research encounters:

'It's the same language, you know, men language is completely different from women language. So when a woman tell you something, you will get what they mean.' – Chantal

With gender being a strong element of how most peer researchers constructed their identity, it was often seen as key to their 'insider' status and as the basis for easy and empathetic relationships in line with more traditional feminist thinking (Oakley, 1981; Finch, 1984). Moreover, this may be heightened for refugee and migrant populations where cultural and religious gender roles are seen to play an important role in the social organisation of communities, and are important factors in determining 'insider' status and appropriate researcher-participant relationships (Kusow, 2003; Goodkind and Deacon, 2004). The peer researchers noted that within their communities, many women felt scared or uncomfortable around men:

'Maybe they're feeling the hurt from the men, actually, they don't trust them, they aren't comfortable in front of them. Some women are very shy in front of the men.'
– Zahra

Refugee women are commonly victims of gender-based violence and may feel unsafe and distrustful around men as a result (Dudhia, 2020). Speaking to a male peer researcher even with refugee or migrant background may be inappropriate, difficult or a complete deterrent to participation for many women. Yet, fully gendered approaches to peer research are completely lacking in the literature, including with refugee and migrant populations. This dissertation's findings draw attention to the importance of gender as an ethical and practical consideration in making peer research accessible and meaningful specifically for refugee and migrant women. As discussed earlier in this dissertation, there are debates around the extent to which female gender identity is

enough to establish trust and ‘insider’ status in research encounters (Oakley, 1981; Finch, 1984; Riessman, 1987; Edwards, 1990), and simple ‘matching’ of researchers to participants based on one characteristic has been criticised (Phoenix, 1994; Gunaratnam, 2003; Oda *et al.*, 2022). Yet, for the women in this dissertation, the intersection of gender with their migration status made womanhood essential for producing the conditions for meaningful research practice within their communities.

The trusting environment that the peer researchers were uniquely able to create for interviews not only benefitted the research process, but importantly held value for the women’s communities beyond data collection (Hearn *et al.*, 2022). The individual interviews could be seen to provide an opportunity for ‘trusted spaces for disclosure’ that refugee women often need and lack (Hynes, 2017, p. 234), and as Hearn *et al.* found, are valuable for both researchers and participants to gain greater awareness of community issues and for participants to feel that they are heard and supported by their peers (2022, p. 7). For participants in this dissertation, the notion that peer research may support women’s voices to be heard was key to the value of the methodology.

‘[Women] have knowledge, they have a lot of ideas, but sometimes they’ve destroyed everything within them, because they think, “what is the point to put my idea there if no one is listening to it?” So we assure them, this is what we are doing, this peer research is to make sure the voices of women are heard’ – Chantal

In line with feminist and decolonising arguments, Chantal pointed to the fact that refugee and migrant women’s knowledge tends to be structurally excluded and not listened to (Thambinathan and Kinsella, 2021; Tuhiwai Smith, 2021; Hearn *et al.*, 2022; Hill Collins, 2000). While advocates for peer research see the methodology as valuable

for 'giving a voice' to marginalised participants (Lushey and Munro, 2015; Yang and Dibb, 2020), Chantal's quote crucially highlights that the women already *have* a voice, but 'no one is listening to it'. This corresponds with those who criticise the agenda to 'give voice' through research because it reinforces mainstream and colonial discourses of refugees and migrants as voiceless, powerless and in need of Western intervention (Johnson, 2011; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Qasmiyeh and Greatrick, 2021; Thambinathan and Kinsella, 2021). Instead, it is essential to hold spaces where these voices are acknowledged and listened to (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Qasmiyeh and Greatrick, 2021). With the peer research process creating these physical, trusting spaces for women to express themselves openly, it helps women to have their voices heard and valued within their communities. In addition, it creates opportunity for refugee and migrant women to co-produce academic research outputs based on these voices and potentially influence policy and practice. Though not wholly unproblematic, peer research recognises and somewhat 'legitimises' their knowledge and voices within this academic sphere from which they are often excluded. From the peer researchers' perspectives then, this process was valuable for providing a new platform and opportunity to amplify theirs and their participants' voices and to be heard on a structural level.

4.2 Gaining deeper knowledge

All participants spoke about and highly valued peer research as a learning process. Similar to findings in other peer research studies (Burns and Schubotz, 2009; Dowling, 2016; Thomas-Hughes, 2018; Harding, Whitfield and Stillwell, 2010), some peer researchers did tell me that this process had personal benefits in terms of building confidence and gaining new skills, for example, 'I feel I'm more confident now' (Zahra) and 'my writing English has improved' (Magy). However, all peer researchers placed

much less emphasis on these personal benefits and largely told me how they valued the research process for discovering new and deeper insight about the women in their communities. In particular, undertaking interviews and analysing data provided them with a greater understanding of the women.

'Now I see that I know them when they speak, when they express, now I know.

Before I didn't, I was thinking I know them but I didn't.' – Magy

'I can understand more now. Not just about understanding the system, but I can understand people better than before, you know, I can read their body language' –

Sarah

Both Sarah and Magy felt that undertaking peer research heightened their ability to understand people. They both importantly spoke about understanding body language and expression, part of the 'untold' in research encounters, which Ghorashi argues is a significant element of refugee women's identities that is not always visible through speech (2008). With their 'insider' status, migrant peer researchers are often seen as already being able to access this more 'hidden' level of knowledge that may be invisible to an 'outsider' (Marlowe *et al.*, 2015). Yet this dissertation's findings suggest a more reciprocal relationship, where the peer research process itself provided a valuable opportunity for the women to become more astute and access more nuanced understandings of refugee and migrant women's identities that went beyond their existing knowledge as 'insiders'.

In much of the literature, the deeper insight that peer research provides is valued because it is considered to produce richer and more 'authentic' data, more closely representing the experiences of the community under study (Harding, Whitfield and Stillwell, 2010; Lushey and Munro, 2015; Yang and Dibb, 2020). Though no one 'truth' is

deemed knowable, peer researchers' ability to overcome trust issues and utilise experiential knowledge is often seen to produce data that is somewhat closer to 'true' representations of migrant experience (Kothari, 2001; Marlowe, 2009). In this dissertation, peer researchers did appreciate their ability to access this level of somewhat 'hidden' understanding about participants, but the value of this was spoken about less in terms of research data and more about how gaining this new depth of knowledge helped them going forward:

'I'm knowing their problem deeper, I can direct them to the right place. Where they can get information, and where they can get help. I can know this is this problem, they need this, this one needs this' – Magy

Peer researchers valued the deeper, more personal insight into their participants because it was directly applicable to their work in the community, and therefore had the tangible benefit of making them better equipped to provide bespoke support to women. Peer research was valued as producing new knowledge not primarily for academic gain but as something that strengthened their communities, which was heightened by employing peer researchers who were already embedded within these communities (Vaughn *et al.*, 2017; Thomas-Hughes, 2018). While other studies more anecdotally note that peer researchers gain greater insight into their communities (Burns and Schubotz, 2009; Thomas-Hughes, 2018), this dissertation demonstrates how this knowledge was practically useful for peer researchers to make it a valuable practice beyond data collection. With social isolation and difficulty establishing support networks identified as common problems for refugees in the UK (Dudhia, 2020; Al-Om, 2021), here peer research is valuable because it enables the women to ultimately build stronger support networks for refugee and migrant women (Vaughn *et al.*, 2017).

However, some peer researchers did note that gaining this deeper insight came with emotional challenges:

'It's uncomfortable because I also suffer a lot with this bad situation. So the person share with you though, it's the most challenging for me because when she share about the bad part of her life, it's very difficult to handle it' – Zahra

As other studies have found, the emotional impact of interviews is often heightened for peer researchers in comparison to 'outsider' interviewers because of their lived experience of the topic under study (Mestheneos, 2006; Atfield *et al.*, 2012; Vaughn, Jacquez and Zhen-Duan, 2018; Oda *et al.*, 2022). The risk of 'compassion fatigue' is especially high for migrant peer researchers who may be reminded of their own difficult migration experiences and feel a strong desire to help participants who are likely to need support (Oda *et al.*, 2022, p. 44). In this respect, a valuable aspect of peer research also came with the risk of being somewhat harmful for peer researchers. As highlighted by other studies, clearer attention needs to be given to supporting peer researchers with the emotional impact of research if it is to be a meaningful and valuable practice for them (Atfield *et al.*, 2012; Oda *et al.*, 2022).

The dissertation findings also showed that the peer researchers valued the research process for being collaborative, which helped them to gain this deeper knowledge.

'I have maybe from my experience, I have some knowledge, you know, because I was an asylum seeker, and now I am a refugee, so I have some experience about this system [...] So I think everyone has differences, you know, that's why when we are working together we can share everyone's experience and ideas.' – Sarah

'It is interesting for me to see how people view things in a different way. Because the way I see things is not the way my mentor sees things' – Chantal

As seen in other peer research studies with migrant communities, Sarah acknowledged that she held specific knowledge from her lived experience of the asylum system and that this added value to the research process (Mayblin, Wake and Kazemi, 2019; Hearn *et al.*, 2022; Al-Om, 2021; Abdulkadir *et al.*, 2016). However, both Sarah and Chantal suggested that there are different ways of knowing to their own, and valued working within a team that brought these together to enhance the research process and produce new, deeper knowledge about their community (Pain, Kindon and Kesby, 2007; Brisolaro and Seigart, 2012; Abdulkadir *et al.*, 2016). Furthermore, with all knowledge being partial (Maynard and Purvis, 1994), lived experience was not valorised as a 'superior' type of knowledge over another, which may fail to recognise that learning more academic, Western ways of knowing can also be desirable and practically beneficial for marginalised community groups (Banks *et al.*, 2014). For participants in this study, peer research was also an effective methodology to 'straddle these two modes' (Daisy). It utilised the experiential knowledge of the peer researchers, but with a practical need to gain funds and recognition in Western society, it also partly equipped them and their organisations to navigate the system that they must work within. With its focus on collaboration and valuing different types of knowledge, peer research provided a new and valuable approach for the women in this dissertation to gain deeper knowledge which strengthened and built the capacity of their organisations.

4.3 Recognising power

The project under study in this dissertation took a community-based approach, which prioritised being driven by the needs of the community organisations and placed strong

emphasis on power sharing throughout the whole research process (Goodson and Phillimore, 2012; Vaughn, Jacquez and Zhen-Duan, 2018; Boyd, 2020).

'It's not about what I want, or what I feel or what my organisation feels, it's about what their organisation needs, what they feel is appropriate for their reality' – Daisy (project coordinator)

'[Researchers] want to have control over everything, you know, we want to control the outputs, we want to control the timeline, and we want to control what is asked and how, you want to control absolutely everything. And in peer research, that is not possible. If you are doing a peer research project, where you're controlling all of those things, you're not doing peer research' – Emma (academic researcher)

Emma conveyed the difficulty for many academic researchers to relinquish control and foster collaboration at all stages of research, which has been recognised as a challenge in other peer research studies with migrant communities and can lead to exploitative practice (Temple and Moran, 2006; Pincock and Bakunzi, 2021; Elliott, Watson and Harries, 2002). In contrast, the fact that those overseeing the project in this dissertation prioritised community needs, collaboration and power sharing was essential to its 'success' in producing a meaningful and valuable experience for the peer researchers (Beresford, 2002; Goodson and Phillimore, 2012; Vaughn *et al.*, 2017).

Demonstrating this, all peer researchers described having an equal say in the team, which was highly valued along with working on all stages of the research (Vaughn, Jacquez and Zhen-Duan, 2018). However, power sharing was still not a wholly unchallenging process, with power shifting at various stages instead of being equalised or simply 'handed over' by a researcher (Donà, 2007; Edwards and Alexander, 2011). One area that this was particularly interesting was language. Although English was

collectively chosen as the working language as a practical necessity, every peer researcher told me that language was a challenge for them in some way. Zahra spoke about how the official name for the research work, 'monitoring and evaluation', initially created a barrier for women in her community and deterred some people from becoming peer researchers:

'Make a small, a simple name. You understand? People are thinking, oh my God, I don't think so. I can't do this, what does this mean? You know, this evaluation, monitoring.' – Zahra

This demonstrates how working within academic English language standards may fortify power hierarchies between researchers and participants and serve to reinforce feelings of powerlessness and low self-confidence for participants in the face of institutions (Temple and Moran, 2006; Banks *et al.*, 2014). Moreover, the choice of language reduced the accessibility of the peer research project here, which inadvertently excluded some of the voices it aimed to amplify (Piacentini, Mirza and Gilmour, 2022). In this way, even with a strong agenda of power sharing, peer research methodology failed to produce a meaningful research practice for some refugee and migrant women and instead somewhat reproduced their marginalisation from academic practice (Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Kesby, Kindon and Pain, 2007; Edwards and Alexander, 2011).

The peer researchers also noted that working in English was often difficult when interacting with participants:

'One of the things that for me was so difficult in the interviews was of course the language. Because for most of them English is, it isn't their first language, like me' – Lilluka

However, despite their seemingly having less power in this area, the peer researchers all spoke with confidence and authority about the ways that they individually navigated language barriers. Peer researchers chose to use a variety of approaches to suit individual participants, including undertaking interviews in other languages and translating, which Magy noted: 'it's easier, and I understand very clearly, everything I can put it into English easy'. The peer researchers were not inherently powerless in all areas of using English language as some studies tend to suggest, nor did they express difficulty with undertaking translation themselves (Temple and Moran, 2006; Hearn *et al.*, 2022). Instead, being able to exercise autonomy and control in this area based on their existing community knowledge shifted power to them and made for meaningful practice. Yet, examining the small moments where power shifts throughout the peer research process shows that it is not straightforwardly valuable or successful in its agenda of power sharing, rather peer research can equally enable and constrain the power of refugee and migrant women and therefore affect its potential to be a meaningful and beneficial practice.

In addition, peer research methodology was valued by participants as an approach which recognised the agency of refugee and migrant women. Both Emma, the academic researcher, and Chantal, a peer researcher, challenged the notion of vulnerability and the way that more conventional research practices continue to marginalise refugee and migrant women.

'If somebody's vulnerable, what that actually means is that they're vulnerable to you, as a researcher coming in and telling them what to do and what they should need to know and all these kinds of things. You know, one way that you can help

“vulnerable people” is that you can hand over a load of power so that they cease to be vulnerable in this one context’ – Emma

‘When it is an outsider doing research, most of the time, they assume, oh the women are sad, oh the women need this. It's not. Every women doesn't want to be given some stuff. They want to do themselves, they want to shine. But when other people see them, says “oh poor women, we can give them food, we can give them a fortune”. So, but them they want, “I can do something, I can show that this is my work”, instead of being someone's work’ – Chantal

Emma problematised the notion of vulnerability in research, a label that academic researchers may use to reify their own power, which serves to perpetuate participants' marginalised status and prohibit them from fully contributing to research practices (Kramer-Roy, 2015). Such an approach fails to acknowledge that vulnerability is not inherent but an effect of structural exclusion (Luna, 2009), and that researchers can somewhat mitigate this by emphasising the agency and power that their participants have in the research process. In addition, Chantal challenged the way that refugee and migrant women are often victimised and deemed vulnerable by 'outsider' academics, who make assumptions about what they need (Dantas and Gower, 2021; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Qasmiyeh and Greatrick, 2021). She acknowledged the women's own agency and desire to produce work themselves, instead of participating in extractive research practices which simply continue to silence their voices and turn them into 'being someone's work' (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Qasmiyeh and Greatrick, 2021). For participants in this dissertation study, peer research was crucially valued as an alternative methodology to conventional research practices, because it challenges the perception that refugee and migrant women are vulnerable by recognising their agency and skills.

This allowed them to take ownership of the research process as well as building capacity for them to undertake research independently and represent their own voices (Boyd, 2020).

As outlined in the literature review, peer research is often purported by academics to be empowering for participants, and yet empowerment is rarely defined or spoken about from a peer researcher perspective. Interested to explore this further, in my interviews I asked each participant what empowerment meant to them. Emma, the academic researcher, spoke about empowerment in terms of 'handing over the majority of power'. As in other studies, Emma described power more as a fixed possession that she holds as a researcher and can hand to participants within the research process (Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Edwards and Alexander, 2011). In contrast, the peer researchers all described empowerment in different ways, which included: 'when you know yourself' (Lilluka); 'when I help someone, and then I can see by myself how their life changed' (Sarah); 'to show [women] that they are equal with men' (Magy). For many, empowerment was also about being with others and feeling supported: 'we have fun together sometimes, we laugh together, cry together' (Zahra). Within all these definitions, it was clear that empowerment was something that peer researchers already fostered and gained within their communities and was achieved on an everyday level. Moreover, empowerment was connected to finding confidence, strong social networks and a sense of belonging, all things that the UK's immigration system is seen to destabilise for many refugees and migrants (Dudhia, 2020; Al-Om, 2021). Though there were elements of these things in the women's experiences of undertaking peer research, none explicitly spoke about it as empowering. Empowerment for peer researchers was therefore more connected to overcoming the everyday effects of the immigration system and not necessarily something that they wanted or needed to

receive from academics within a research practice (Gatenby and Humphries, 2000; Vacchelli, 2018; Thambinathan and Kinsella, 2021). By interrogating the perceived meaning of empowerment, this dissertation's findings dispute the problematic claim made by other peer research literature that the methodology empowers participants (Burns and Schubotz, 2009; Lushey and Munro, 2015; Yang and Dibb, 2020). Instead, peer research methodology here can perhaps be better understood as enabling. Though the research process has not provided them with a power that they could not achieve alone, it has somewhat helped to make their existing power evident and given them new opportunities to exercise it (Vacchelli, 2018; Thambinathan and Kinsella, 2021). In doing so, the peer research process has been valuable for enabling women to strengthen their communities and further foster empowerment within these.

4.4 Summary

This chapter has aimed to show the various ways in which peer research is deemed a valuable and meaningful practice for refugee and migrant women from their own perspectives. By utilising 'insider' status, peer research was considered to create trusting spaces for meaningful and accessible research encounters with this demographic. Yet unlike other peer research studies, this dissertation has revealed that pre-existing relationships and gender are perceived to be essential elements of the 'insider' position. This chapter has outlined the ways that peer research is considered valuable specifically for refugee and migrant women, by creating the conditions for them to meaningfully participate in research and have their voices heard, for peer researchers to gain deeper knowledge which strengthens their communities, and for providing opportunity for migrant women to exercise their agency and self-represent in the academic sphere. This chapter has also highlighted that these benefits do not come

without challenges and noted areas where the methodology may be less valuable for the peer researchers. Furthermore, the findings have challenged some of the more simplistic academic assumptions of the value of peer research methodology such as 'giving people a voice' and empowering participants, as well as drawing attention to the significance of gender in research with refugee and migrant populations, which has so far been overlooked in peer research literature. Though specific to my participants and the nature of the project in this study, the findings suggest some approaches to peer research which give it potential to hold similar value for other refugee and migrant communities.

5 Conclusion

5.1 Overview and summary

This dissertation aimed to explore in what ways peer research methodology was perceived as a valuable and meaningful practice from the perspectives of refugee and migrant women peer researchers. To address this aim I undertook seven interviews with five peer researchers and two other professionals working within the same peer research project, where participants were asked to reflect on their experiences of the peer research process. From the data produced, I was able to investigate whether and how the peer researchers viewed this process as beneficial and some of the conditions that made it so. In doing so, this dissertation has sought to reveal how peer research was perceived to be a valuable way to undertake meaningful research with communities of refugee and migrant women, and what wider value the methodology was considered to hold for peer researchers beyond the research process.

Firstly, this dissertation found that peer researchers perceived peer research methodology to produce meaningful and accessible research practice for the refugee and migrant women in their communities. Utilising their 'insider' status was crucial to creating trusting and open research encounters for women to be heard and overcame some of the common methodological and ethical issues in research with this demographic, which made peer research a valuable alternative to conventional research practices with 'outsiders' (Ryan, Kofman and Aaron, 2011; Marlowe *et al.*, 2015; Hearn *et al.*, 2022; Oda *et al.*, 2022). Yet, this dissertation importantly found that pre-existing relationships and gender were essential to creating these conditions for meaningful research practice with refugee and migrant women, and require greater consideration in peer research studies than previous literature has shown. Secondly, peer research

was strongly valued by peer researchers as an opportunity to gain and develop knowledge about their community, which was enhanced by the methodology's emphasis on bringing together multiple perspectives to co-produce knowledge. Though beneficial for the research output, this deeper insight was largely valued for its use beyond the research process because it directly enhanced the peer researchers' work and therefore helped to strengthen support for refugee and migrant women. Thirdly, peer research was perceived as a valuable methodology for recognising the agency and skills of refugee and migrant women. Though not without some challenges, peer research was valued for involving refugee and migrant women in research practices in a meaningful way. It allowed them to exercise power and have ownership of research processes in a way that challenged their perceived vulnerability and allowed for greater self-representation at a structural level.

These findings demonstrate that in many ways, what makes a research practice 'valuable' and 'meaningful' was similar for peer researchers as it is for academics in much of the literature. For example, with its emphasis on lived experience and power sharing, both value peer research's ability to facilitate trusting research relationships that make for more open, comfortable and accessible research encounters; produce richer and deeper knowledge of a community under study, and actively involve refugee and migrant women in the research process. Yet, this dissertation has also challenged some of the purported 'value' that academics give to peer research to show that peer researchers do not need to be given a voice or be empowered by the research process, and instead provided alternative ways to understand these seeming values of the methodology which avoid further marginalising refugee and migrant communities. Furthermore, while much academic literature focuses on the value of peer research

methodology for enhancing academic research processes and outputs, what was most strikingly of value and meaning about peer research to the peer researchers was how it helped them to further serve their communities (Liuta, n.d.). Many of the elements of peer research that were considered valuable and meaningful in this dissertation related back to somewhat addressing problems faced by refugee and migrant women, for example in building trusting environments to speak, strengthening support networks, and providing opportunities to be included and heard at a structural level, which show how peer research was specifically considered a valuable approach with this demographic. In this way, what largely held value and meaning for the peer researchers was a practice with tangible benefits that enabled them to further strengthen and build the capacity of their communities to ultimately improve the situations of refugee and migrant women.

5.2 Significance of the research and recommendations

While academic researchers, particularly in migration research, are often seeking approaches that move away from extractive practices and produce meaningful outcomes, few methodologies are evaluated from participant perspectives to truly understand what their potential value is. It is hoped that this research provides necessary insight into refugee and migrant women peer researchers' own perspectives to understand how this may be a valuable and meaningful methodology to use with this demographic, as well as where it may present challenges. Ultimately, this study does support peer research as a valuable methodology for refugee and migrant women peer researchers, but has aimed to caution against simplistic assumptions and make evident areas that researchers must give greater consideration to. Moreover, it has hoped to provide some useful indication of the approaches and conditions required by academic

researchers and organisations to give peer research the potential to be a valuable and meaningful practice for peer researchers and avoid being tokenistic or exploitative. More broadly this dissertation hopes to invoke greater academic questioning into migrant participants' own views of participatory research methodologies, to avoid assumptive practices and enhance the potential value and impact of academic research for communities in this field.

This study is based on one small peer research project with refugee and migrant women and its findings cannot, of course, be generalised to other peer researchers or projects. With the nature of peer research and its potential value being very project-specific, further research is required into female migrant peer researcher perspectives to provide greater insight into how the methodology may constitute a valuable and meaningful practice for different communities. It would further be useful to compare perspectives of migrant peer researchers from multiple projects to understand commonalities and differences across peer researcher experiences and the extent to which project conditions do affect its value. In addition, even more greatly lacking in the literature are the perspectives of those who are peer researchers' participants, whose views are also necessary to fully understand whether and how peer research is deemed a valuable and meaningful practice for refugee and migrant communities.

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