

Africa: Moving the Boundaries

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Reflections on methodology for a qualitative cross-cultural study of human rights

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Abstract

The aim of my doctoral research is to build a picture of how African families from refugee backgrounds understand and construct human rights, and to explore how this data might inform cross-cultural social work practice. To achieve this goal a qualitative study with a critical constructionist orientation was undertaken. In-depth semi-structured interviews were utilised to create opportunities for co-construction of meaning about human rights through the examination of participants' lived experience. A number of fundamental components in the research contributed to its complexity, including vulnerability, culture, language and ontology. Drawing upon the literature, several methodological components were put in place to address these complexities and to support the strength, efficacy and validity of the study. Firstly, a small group of African-born informants who comprise a research reference group were invited to contribute ethical, conceptual and practical insights at key points in the study. Secondly, concepts of liberation through dialogue that were embedded in the study shaped the semi-structured interview guide, cycles of participant recruitment and data checking processes. Thirdly, the application of interpretive phenomenological analysis sensitised me to both the meaning of participant experience of human rights, and the way experience was conveyed in the research. Applying and then reflecting upon these aspects of the research project has led to new understandings of good practice in qualitative research with a critical orientation. In this paper, I present the methodological challenges and learnings that have emerged throughout the study.

Introduction

During the 10 years from 1997 until 2007, armed conflict significantly undermined peace, stability and security in many African countries, causing large numbers of people to flee, and prompting the Australian Government to prioritise resettlement of African refugees above other groups from 2004-2007 (UNHCR 2009). Subsequent studies of their wellbeing in the diaspora have highlighted the multiple, complex and intersecting impacts of pre- and post-migration trauma in this population and documented both challenges and opportunities in resettlement (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury 2007; Dhanji 2010; Hebbani, Obijiofor & Bristed *et al* 2010; Hugman, Pittaway, & Bartolomei 2011; Lejukole 2008; McArthur, Thompson, Winkworth, & Butler 2010; Westoby and Ingamells, 2010). The evidence base amply demonstrates that African families' experiences of war and trauma, flight, transition and resettlement significantly impact on family composition and structure in the diaspora. It also shows that African family values, norms and power dynamics differ from Australian norms and values in important ways, African families report not feeling understood or respected by service providers in relation to family matters (AHRC, 2010; Milos, 2011; Wille, 2011).

Social workers and other professionals endeavour to respond to the particular needs of

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such families. Yet they operate in contexts where legislation, policy frameworks and organisational imperatives may not fully support practice quality, exacerbating tensions inherent in supporting, protecting and advocating for these vulnerable communities (Bates, Baird, Johnson, Lee, Luster & Rehagan, 2005; Bromfield & Holzer, 2008; Bromfield, Lamont, Parker, & Horsfall, 2010; Pine & Drachman, 2005; Sawrikar, 2009). Many studies document the failure of mainstream services to comprehensively address the needs of African families from refugee backgrounds in Australia (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2007; Hugman, 2010; Lewig, Arney, Salveron and Barredo, 2010; McArthur et al., 2010; RCOA, 2010).

Human rights legislation and frameworks are thought to strengthen social work interventions by focusing on unique stories about, and approaches to, wellbeing, adjustment, development and inclusion, and promoting respectful, hopeful, resilience-building cross-cultural encounters (Bricker-Jenkins, Barbera and Young, 2009; Cemlyn & Briskman, 2003; Flynn, 2005; Ife, 2008; Nipperess & Briskman, 2009). However, African perspectives on human rights vary considerably from those promulgated in the West (Addo, 2010; An-Na'im, 1992; Flynn, 2005; George, 2008; Legesse, 1980; Merry, 2005; Nasu & Saul, 2011; Outhred, 2010; Zou & Zwart, 2011). Moreover the capacity to influence human rights in a way that shapes public policy and formal discourse is often concentrated in the hands of the powerful (De Feyter, 2011; Outhred, 2010). Some argue that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Conventions and Protocols (1959, 1967) arose out of a limited cultural frame of reference achieved by compromises and assumptions that effectively reinforce hegemonic tendencies and have done little to prevent serious contraventions of human rights by governments, corporations and individuals, or bring such perpetrators to justice (Donnelly, 2003; Nasu & Saul, 2011; Wronka, 1992). The ideal of the social construction of rights (An-Na'im, 1992; Zou & Zwart, 2011), or of human rights from below (Ife, 2008), contrasts starkly with positivistic notions of rights, natural law and natural justice concepts (O'Manique, 1992). It is for these reasons that dialogue and grassroots engagement with human rights is necessary (Gomez Isa, 2011; Ife, 2006; Nasu & Saul, 2011; Outhred, 2010).

Providing an opportunity for African families from refugee backgrounds to share their perspectives on human rights is important as a means of overcoming hegemony in relation to human rights (De Feyter, 2011; Outhred, 2010), facilitating Afrocentric processes of meaning-making (Asante, 1983; Schreiber, 2000), celebrating the worldviews of African families from refugee backgrounds and bringing new understandings about their perspectives on the wellbeing of their families and communities. Therefore, my doctoral study asks, *how are human rights constructed and understood by African families from refugee backgrounds, and how might this contribute to social work practice?* The ontology of the study was social constructionism paired with hermeneutic phenomenology. Social constructionism is underpinned by critical theory which engages with power imbalances and oppression and has a transformational agenda whereby dialogue and critical self-awareness are the pre-eminent tools for achieving social change (Crotty, 1998; Dryzek, 1995; McLaren, 1997). Hermeneutic phenomenology is based on Heidegger's process and framing of the exploration of the meaning of concepts or experiences located within, as opposed to abstracted from, context (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007).

A thoughtful approach to cultural difference between my participants and myself was

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supported by my knowledge of cultural theories. Biculturalism was useful as it emphasises the conscious and deliberate process where ‘individuals learn to function in two distinct social cultural environments’ and ‘mediate between the dominant discourse and the realities that they must face as members of subordinate cultures’ (Darder 1991, p. 84). The ‘third space’ was also a source of fascination and resonance, referring to a metaphysical space that offers unique possibilities to those in between or critiquing cultural practices (Bhabha 1994). Berry’s (2001) acculturation framework focused me on the two central issues which require mutual negotiation by migrants to a new culture and the members of the receiving community, namely engagement with difference and the retention of cultural attributes within the broader society. Conscious of the impact of cultural difference and the potential for ideas to get lost in translation during the research, and wary of inadvertently re-traumatizing or imposing an understanding of human rights on my participants, I implemented safeguards in the research design which will be discussed in the next section. With these in place, I utilised semi-structured interviews to focus on participant experiences, ideas about human rights and meaning making in the resettlement context.

Research Design

My research methodology facilitated the exploration of culturally located and diverse participant views of human rights and responsibilities. I undertook a qualitative study with a critical orientation that involved individual, couple and kinship interviews lasting for about 1 – 1 ½ hours. Participant stories and experiences offered meaningful insights about the practice of human rights that potentially broaden and deepen our application of human rights in the helping professions. Data collection centered on metropolitan Sydney and occurred in two distinct phases: October 2013 to March 2014, and September 2015 to August 2016. The study sample was 15 participants in total, 7 males and 8 females from countries of origin including: Liberia, Kenya, South Sudan, Sierra Leone, Rwanda and the Ivory Coast. Ages ranged from 25-64 years of age and length of time in Australia ranged between 3 to 14 years. About 13 people from the cohort had professional or semi-professional roles and responsibilities in the community, including: counselling, community work, religious ministry, cultural liaison, nursing and childcare. Two participants were unemployed. 10 participants had a Bachelor’s Degree, 3 of whom also had a Master’s Degree, and 3 had a TAFE Certificate or Diploma, 1 was completing his HSC and 1 did not disclose their educational level. All participants spoke multiple languages including: English (all participants), Krio (4), Swahili (3), Arabic (3), French (3), Kreyol (1), Dinka (1), Kinyarwanda (1), Luo (1), Kono (1), Mende (1).

Cyclic reflection upon methodological matters facilitated the building of knowledge about good practice in research design. This article focuses on my discoveries about the importance and function of my research reference group, the efficacy of my semi-structured interview guide and my selection of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis as the means of data analysis. Regarding the research reference group, six community leaders, workers and contacts from African families from refugee backgrounds were invited to participate, utilizing links with agencies such as: The Asylum Seekers Centre, the Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors, Trans-cultural Mental Health Centre, Settlement Services International and the African Studies Association of Australia and the Pacific. Face-to-face meetings, phone calls and emails were used flexibly for the convenience of each member. Individual meetings promoted a

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diversity of roles, contributions and insights in the research and avoided groupthink. Contact with reference group members adhered to the confidentiality and boundary requirements of the Australian Catholic University Human Research Ethics Committee and the Australian Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics. I involved the Research Reference Group in as many aspects of the research design as possible. The results section of this article presents data on the contributions of the reference group to the research, followed by discussion and analysis.

I developed the semi-structured interview guide specifically for this project, informed by Ife's (2010) human rights community consultation framework and Holstein and Gubrium's (2003) chapter on race, subjectivity and the interview process, but also informed by a phenomenological concern with understanding the lived experience of participants. Its design was iterative in keeping with the conceptual framework of critical constructionism. Following introductions, discussion of the research purpose, obtaining consent and permission to record the interview, participants were invited in Part 1 of the interview to introduce themselves and their cultural background. Part 2 comprised an invitation to talk about human rights in their own words, and discuss the meaning of human rights to their family and community. Participants were asked to share stories, songs, poems, pictures and experiences that might illustrate their views. The value of this knowledge for social workers and the context and meaning of help seeking and importance of trust building was explored in Part 3 of the interview.

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was utilised for data analysis as it resonated with the consultative and dialogical approach taken in the study and provided tools for attending closely to participant attempts to make sense of their experience (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). This method of analysis facilitated the interrogation of my own reading of and understanding of the data in iterative and inductive cycles of analysis in the tradition of Heidegger's hermeneutic circle of understanding (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). IPA involves five cycles of analysis, three within a single transcript and the final two working across transcripts to identify and organize subordinate and superordinate themes (Smith et. al., 2009). Each transcript followed the same pattern of immersion in the data, followed by initial note making about experience and finally a deeper reading of the transcript to explore participant explanations about their experiences. My analysis of each transcript in this way yielded a new data set that required summary and facilitated comparison and contrasting with other transcripts to identify commonalities and differences between descriptions and facilitate theory-building. In this way data analysis was informed by the notion of the "thick description" (Geertz 2002; Ryle 1968, para 9). Data and a discussion of how the particular methodological aspects outlined above contributed to the strength of the research is presented below.

Research Results: "Good Words Pull Cola Nar Mot"

The phrase in Krio "Good words pull cola nar mot" was provided by Participant 10, and highlights how a researcher's respectful approach or "good words" will elicit useful responses

...Because people like to chew cola nut. So when you go there, you see he or she chewing his cola nut. He talking to you, he no listen to you because he chew,

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chew, chew. But when you bring peaceful approach with respect, [he] stop chewing – here - let me put my cola nut here, see...They will listen to you. But if you come with, no this is it! You should do this, you should do this, you should do that; you're supposed to be doing this, this, this, this, they will continue, continue to chew!

This phrase was Participant 10's contribution to a discussion about practice quality. It points to his skills and views about capturing a client's attention to support change and growth and resonates with my findings on best practice in research design for cross-cultural phenomenological studies where priority must be given to eliciting participant expertise, creating a safe interview space, and enhancing participant power. In sharing various concerns with my supervisors and the research reference group and applying their recommendations iteratively to the semi-structured interview guide, I moved closer to the maxim above. The following example demonstrates this process. Participant 2 and 5's responses below were elicited by my question, "I am interested in how your families and communities understand human rights":

We say that we don't know human right. Because imagine something that you were grown in and you come to a different culture, now you always feel...cover up, stay with that fear in you... That's what I say I don't know human rights. (mmm?) I really don't know. I must admit that fact. (Participant 2)

Thank you for your contribution and your willingness to know something about what is called human rights. I myself I can (cough) I can say I don't know anything about this, ah I just heard about what is called human right ah about how human right works ah and yes, I know – I, yes , I don't know ah any definition about it ah but this I think when same when something talk about it, something like about human right there's look like, I think – I myself I get ah I get it, just feel my, when you have the words for human right or the right of humanity it's look like ah when you see the light somewhere there. (Participant 5)

These statements about understandings of rights contain hesitation, uncertainty and conceptual distancing. There is awkwardness and minimising of wisdom. The idea of "not knowing" becomes the overpowering force in the conversation. The line of questioning seems to have prevented participants from tapping into their stories and forms of knowledge. In contrast, the following participant responses were elicited by the revised question: "Do you have a word or words in your language for human rights?"

Yes. Very hard for you to understand although if you would be able to write it. We say uburenganzira bwa muntu. Muntu is human. Uburenganzira is rights, then uburenganzira bwa muntu is like to -[Interviewer: Rights to the human?] Yes, that's it. [Interviewer: Do you want to write it down for me?] Yeah, of course, yes...Sometimes some people use it in French but, droit de l'homme, but we use uburenganzira bwa muntu..... What it means to me is actually broad as well. But I think it means a lot. It means that people need to have the same rights, need to be equal, need to be um not selected from one culture, from one religion, from the colour of the person...(Participant 12)

This statement about rights is affirmative, certain and immediate. There is nuance, exploration, explanation and the sharing of wisdom. There is a sense of ownership over, and pride in, the knowledge being shared. The phrase

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Participant 12 provides directly translates from Kinyarwanda into English as ‘rights of everybody’. She says ‘[it will] be very hard for you to understand’, showing awareness and empathy towards me because I am unfamiliar with her language. She writes the words for me to reflect upon later. Importantly for my research, when Participant 12 tells me these words in her mother-tongue, it opens the conversation and she begins to list a range of experiences that imbue meaning into the words, focusing mainly on the need for people to have equality without discrimination.

This second quote is also delivered with confidence. This man explains that there is not a word that directly translates from Dholuo into English and that the words that are closest actually mean something quite different.

The words for human rights in my language doesn’t exist. But having said that, the educated class and some of us say the words such as twero. Twero means responsibility. And that word, twero padano mean the responsibility of people. It is not a right word to me, because it would translate as responsibility for human beings. This word does not make a better translation for human rights, because it would mean human responsibility. (Participant 13)

In sharing this wisdom, Participant 13 highlights the importance of personal responsibility as opposed to individual entitlements. This conversation about the difference between the Western individualistic paradigm and that of the Acholi people is important. The question “centres” his language and hence perspectives. It assumes that there are concepts close to human rights in participant languages, rather than testing how much they understand about an external concept. The conversation becomes critically reflective and dialogical and enhances the ability of the participant to tap into his stories and forms of knowledge, and by extension, enhances the quality of the data collected and the eventual findings. By engaging in this way, I was allowing for decolonisation of the concept.

Another potential example of decolonisation in the research is presented below. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis sensitised me to nuances occurring in these research conversations and facilitated deeper reflection upon content as well as process. I will show with a brief excerpt how it was a form of data analysis particularly well suited to this study.

Suitability of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis for this study

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis guides the researcher to successive levels of analysis from general notes, to a focus on specific messages and how these messages are conveyed, before making links to theory. In the excerpt below, my initial notes on emerging themes highlighted the protective role and resistance of Participant 2’s father to the cultural norms of the time as a way of “doing” human rights. However, looking at the way the story unfolds highlights potential interference in the narrative.

Researcher: So, then what are your thoughts on [FGM], presumably that, you’ve experienced that as a child?

Participant 2: It’s not, it’s not good

Participant 4: Is it true that you went through that when you were a child?

Participant 2: No I didn’t go through that because my Dad never wanted his, his girls to do it so he never did it to any of his girls, no, yeah, but I have friends

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I have heard since, who all did it yeah. In my village, they are still doing it.

Participant 4: Oh, do you do the circumcision for girls?

Participant 2: Mmm

Participant 3: Mmm they used to do it in Liberia

Participant 2: They do it in Liberia, not used to

Participant 3: Like you know in Sierra Leone (yeah) the same, the same way but there's – have they put laws into place now to stop it?

Participant 4: In Kenya, there's cultures that do that like the Masai's but our role stops it.

Participant 3: But our law prohibits it. It's very big on that.

Participant 2: Eh I'm not, they have not had any law about it.

Participant 4: You mean it's an acceptable thing?

The other female participants were highly engaged in the discussion and it is a high-energy situation with swift comparisons of laws and norms of different countries occurring. Some of the participants question the legality of the practice in parts of Africa and in effect interrogate Participant 2. This raises the possibility that it might have become difficult for Participant 2 to tell her story. This reading of the data stimulated further research and reflection on my part. I applied circumspection to the example, no longer quite as certain that it was a story of resistance to oppression. In this case IPA facilitated a closer reading of the text and the identification of contextual aspects that may have influenced Participant 2's narrative. It helped me to identify and deconstruct my assumptions about what was being said. In this way, the processes of IPA sensitised me to cultural nuances and supported decolonisation in the research.

So far, I have discussed two elements of my research design that contributed to the strength of the research. A third aspect was the involvement of my research reference group. This is discussed below.

The value of a research reference group for an outsider researcher

To highlight the value of the research reference group for me as an outsider researcher I conducted a review of the multiple contributions made by members of the research reference group throughout my research to date. These contributions included vouching for me to the ethics committee; providing a letter promising to support participants in case of emergency; review of the research flier, consent form and interview guide; advice about enabling participation; raising awareness about the research and vouching for me with participants; reviewing and advising me on my data summaries; consulting with elders and/or communities about the data summaries; involvement in theoretical and conceptual discussions throughout the research including matters of trust, reliability and reciprocity; advising on cultural safety, engagement of interpreters, skills to promote dialogue and risks to research participants; and affirming the value of the research.

This list highlights the involvement of members of the research reference group in many aspects of the study. They gave generously of their time in reviewing documents, recommending that a small gift be provided for all research participants, advertising the research, linking me with participants, guiding me on the meaning of data, helping to interrogate and address assumptions and blockages in the research process and supporting theory building objectives. Indeed, the collation of this data highlights that the research reference group have been pivotal to the research. They enabled data

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collection, supported cultural safety and strengthened the findings through their involvement in data analysis.

Another aspect that is important to highlight in terms of the value of the research reference group for me as an outsider researcher is the learning about reciprocity, which they facilitated. I conducted a review of the reciprocal acts that occurred and have documented them in Table 1 below.

Reciprocal Acts	Reference Group Member/s	Researcher
Vouching	Connecting me with potential participants	Connecting a group member with an academic colleague who shares his professional and research concerns about recovery in mental health
Self-disclosure	Sharing own wisdom and expertise to deepen the research	Sharing my own family and community experiences of rights especially in relation to generational responses to grief and loss
Information giving	Sharing knowledge to enhance cultural safety in the research	Sharing professional knowledge about university courses, eligibility, costs and application processes
Affirmation	Reviewing and affirming the research findings	Encouraging members and their families in their study and career aspirations - sending them information about interesting career openings and showing belief in their aspirations

Table 1: Reciprocal acts between research reference group members and the researcher in the study Human Rights as Constructed and Understood by African Families from Refugee Backgrounds

Table 1 highlights specific acts of reciprocity that occurred within my relationship with research reference group members such as vouching for one another, responding to requests for information, engaging in self-disclosure and mutual affirmation that sensitized me to the more embedded but vitally important possibilities for reciprocity between my study participants and me. These included being interested and supportive in relation to shifting political and economic realities in their countries of origin, affirming their knowledge and sharing my own in meaningful ways, and attending functions and events when invited. It can be seen from Tables 1 and 2 that the more recurrent nature of interactions with the research reference group members increased the potential for reciprocal acts to occur. Members of the research reference group functioned as “cultural liaison” (Halcon, et al., 2004; Lim, 2009, p. 1030; Williams, 2008) by linking me with participants, engaging with me in critical reflection about the data and research design and informing me about cultural issues throughout the research process. The research study was publicised by discussing with service providers more generally and seeking permission to display a flier in their organizations. However, the research reference group was more instrumental in recruitment, linking me with 75% of participants and vouching for me with community elders.

Discussion

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Concerns about outsider researcher positioning, especially with participants from a refugee background, highlight potential power differentials, multilayered cultural, ethnic and gender identities, experiences of misunderstanding, the need for cultural empathy and skills for effective engagement (Gair 2011; Pernice 1994; Ryan, Kofman, & Aaron, 2011). Further, it is argued that special care is required through the research process to ensure transparency, accountability and depth in data analysis and conversely avoid superficial or unsupported accounts of the lived experience of participants (Fox, 1989, p.18; McNess et.al., 2013). These aspects support culturally sensitive research but do not necessarily amount to a culturally safe and decolonizing research approach.

Careful reflection upon language and power differentials (Ruzzene 1998), approaches to relationship building, reasoning and philosophy across cultures and contexts were implemented reflexively as part of the research design. The reference group established early in the process assisted me to be as reflective and critical as possible about culture and othering tendencies. The notion of critical friend (Foulger, 2009) framed this role, and members of the group were encouraged to challenge my assumptions and interpretations, share their knowledge and expertise and contribute to a deeper understanding of all aspects of the research process. Experts in the field such as Hugman *et al* (2011) hold reciprocity to be part of the ethic of care and responsibility in research with individuals and communities from traumatized backgrounds. In my study reciprocity came to life in the interactions with the research reference group members. My ongoing relationship with research reference group members confirms the importance and potential of prolonged engagement with those involved in the research.

Documenting and demonstrating reflection upon the insights arrived at, the background to those insights and the degree to which value judgements are informed in the process of research are both fundamental to rigour in qualitative research (Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Johnson & Waterfield, 2004) and the application of decolonising methodologies (Smith 2012). As human behaviour is symbolic Geertz suggests we must ask rather than assume what is being said through particular choices of action and behaviour. If we do not seek the required background information our interpretations will produce “systematic misunderstandings” (Geertz 2002, p. 66). Employing Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith *et al*, 2009) in this research facilitated my interrogation of the data in iterative and inductive cycles of analysis in the tradition of Heidegger’s hermeneutic circle of understanding (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). IPA facilitates a high level of attentiveness to the data and the context in which the data is located. This aided my recognition of patterns of speaking across the interview and ways of telling the story, and sensitized me to what might lie behind the story in terms of the research relationship, power, choice and approaches to expertise, as has been found with other studies with refugee populations (see for example Rosbrook & Schweitzer, 2010; Schweitzer, Greenslade & Kagee 2007; Shakespeare-Finch & Wickham, 2010).

Finally, my increasing confidence to employ reciprocal self-disclosure elicited experiences and responsibilities in the lives of African families from refugee backgrounds which complicated their participation in the research study. When I shared something of my own self and challenges that I was facing, participants reciprocated with brief stories about their own lives and the events that made it difficult to set a date for our research interview. They told of the birth of children and grandchildren, travel as representatives of their communities, family or community deaths in the weeks before

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our interview, and changing jobs and workplaces. My sharing of my own life circumstances, which were in essence very similar, elicited these stories. This helped contextualize the interview and supported me to manage my research agenda respectfully.

Conclusion

The goal of this research project was to highlight unique understandings of and priorities about human rights to inform and influence cross-cultural practice. Immersion in the stories, experiences and perspectives of African families from refugee backgrounds gathered via dialogue within semi-structured interviews and systematic, rigorous analysis of the data collected has confirmed the value and timeliness of cross-cultural, rights-focused dialogue with African families from refugee backgrounds settled in Australia. This article has focused on key methodological elements that impact engagement, cultural safety and power in research and demonstrated ways of supporting iterative co-construction of meaning in the research space.

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