

Methodological Reflections on the Displacement Narratives from the Polish- Ukrainian Border

Anastasiia Mykolenko

Anastasiia Mykolenko is a PhD student in the Anthropology department at the Université de Montréal. She also holds a Master's degree in European Law from the College of Europe (Bruges). Her current research examines the humanitarian infrastructure on the Polish-Ukrainian border and the life trajectories of displaced Ukrainians.

I. INTRODUCTION

How do people navigate the overarching uncertainty of war and forced displacement? This question underpins my PhD thesis on the life trajectories of displaced Ukrainians. My fieldwork began during a period when the Polish-Ukrainian border was experiencing the largest refugee crisis in Europe since World War II. With over 50,000 Ukrainians arriving daily in Przemyśl, a Polish town located 10 km from the border, critical questions arise: How and where do they go after arriving? What and who facilitates their decisions? How do they obtain information? Why do some choose to stay in Poland while others move on to Germany, France, or even Canada?

To investigate these questions as part of my PhD project, I conducted over 100 semi-structured interviews with displaced Ukrainians, as well as volunteers and humanitarian workers, who were passing through the Polish-Ukrainian border from Summer 2022 to Autumn 2023. While interviewing volunteers and humanitarian workers was quite straightforward methodologically, talking to displaced Ukrainians presented several challenges.

II. METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

Firstly, it is important to note that the Polish-Ukrainian border and nearby Polish towns served as transit zones for most arriving Ukrainians. Although several shelters were available in Przemyśl and its vicinity, they functioned as temporary resting places, where the fast decision had to be made. Upon arrival at these shelters, people were required to indicate their next destination or be prepared to decide within a few days. Under such pressure, how could my potential respondents share their experiences of forced displacement? Where would be an appropriate place for me to interview them?

From the beginning, I decided against interviewing people at obvious points of passage—the border itself, bus, and train stations. I assumed that shelters would be suitable places for people to feel more comfortable sharing their stories, as they were usually bored while waiting for transport to their next destination. Sometimes, the shelters at the border were the first places where Ukrainians could relax, breathe, and sleep normally without the constant threat of air raid sirens. For many, it was the first opportunity to process their situation, to contemplate and reflect on their journey, and often, on the loss of their homes. During these few days, they were surrounded by others in the same situation, as well as by the volunteers, humanitarian workers, psychologists, and me. And it is difficult to define who I was for them.

On one hand, I did everything I could to help those I met as a self-proclaimed volunteer. By

gathering bits of available information and piecing it together, I was able to explain how to get to various countries and what awaited them there. Given that I was also collecting data for my dissertation, I became one of the most knowledgeable persons around, as I was constantly moving between the three parts of this humanitarian infrastructure—the border, the train station, and the shelter.

On the other hand, I was there to collect my data. Consequently, I often viewed humanitarian and volunteer interactions as opportunities to invite individuals for interviews. Was this entirely ethical? Not really. To mitigate this, I mostly invited for interviews those who had already connected with another volunteer. Although this increased my reliance on my newly formed network of colleagues, it helped me avoid potential conflicts of interest and situations where I might hold a position of power.

One factor that helped me connect and establish trust with my informants was my own Ukrainian background, which allowed me to empathize and share in their feelings of grief and loss. However, this shared identity sometimes prevented me from maintaining the necessary distance to capture subtle nuances that might otherwise be overlooked.

This is why while the insider position offers certain advantages, such as the opportunity of building the stronger rapport with the participants,¹ facilitates richer data collection and a deeper understanding of cultural meanings,² it also necessitates the ongoing critical reflexivity³ on one's positionality. In my research I occupy rather a "third space" or a hybrid position⁴ that allows to enrich the data collection process – my insider position (shared cultural and social background) might enhance trust, while my status of a researcher and a volunteer from Canada allowed me to establish a critical distance to ensure reflexivity.

A significant methodological challenge was the interview process itself. People fleeing war and displacement have often endured traumatic experiences that are difficult to revisit and discuss. This worried me, as I lacked professional psychological training and was unsure how to pose questions without risking retraumatization. Initially, I collaborated with a field psychologist to identify individuals who seemed emotionally ready to be interviewed. While using translators or community-based organizations for participant recruitment and screening is common in qualitative research, the involvement of psychologists is not a standard practice. To my knowledge, this is the first time a psychologist help was engaged during fieldwork. However, in this specific context—the emergency situation in the transit zone—it was crucial to be highly sensitive to the mental state of potential participants to prevent any conscious or unconscious harm. In particular, pre-screening allowed me to avoid potential conflictual situations, and make sure that the participants were ready to be interviewed despite already being in the stressful environment. Overall, my field experience suggests that such pre-screening practice could successfully facilitate the data collection, and therefore, might be recommended as a potentially beneficial tool for the further research.

Given that my research was conducted within an active humanitarian infrastructure, social workers and psychologists were readily available to assist with data collection. During the initial months of my fieldwork, when I lacked a clear understanding of the situation, psychologists played a vital role in screening research participants. They suggested interviewing individuals they had previously contacted and assessed as mentally prepared to discuss potentially traumatic experiences.

As my research progressed and my understanding of the field deepened, along with the relative stabilization of the border situation,

psychologists' assistance was required less frequently and was only used when a participant explicitly requested it.

It is noteworthy that, in both cases (with the psychologists' assistance and without it), respondents often burst into tears when asked how they identified themselves—whether as refugees, temporarily displaced persons, tourists, or else. This question forced them to confront their new reality and reflect on it, often for the first time. As a researcher, witnessing this distress made me feel helpless, leading me to consider abandoning the question or even the research entirely. I questioned whether the potential benefits of the research justified the pain it caused my informants. However, after discussions with my research supervisor, I realized that while tears are a clear sign of distress, they also offer a release and an opportunity for the informants to recognize and process their pain. Not once did a respondent agree to stop the interview when I suggested it upon seeing their distress.

It became evident that my respondents needed to talk, and my research provided a medium through which their emotions could be expressed and understood. Sometimes, respondents would become agitated or angry during interviews. Initially, I thought my questions were poorly worded or too triggering. However, as I refined my questions and the situation persisted, I recognized it as "interlocutory slippage." As Sean Akerman explains in his book *"Words and Wounds"*,⁵ this phenomenon occurs when respondents imagine they are speaking to someone other than the researcher. During these moments, I was seen as a "proxy,"⁶ with their stories directed at either the supposed culprit or an authority figure who could provide justice. Although I was neither, I used 'active' or 'engaged listening'⁷ to recognize non-verbal cues, allowing me to know when to pause, ask neutral questions, or respond to certain emotions.

This engagement allowed me to create a safe space for respondents to securely reflect on their experiences. Some even mentioned that the interview helped them piece together their experiences into a coherent narrative, which aided in managing their painful emotions. Therefore, while interviews conducted in transit zones might be emotionally challenging for both respondents and researchers, they also have a therapeutic effect. As Matos, Indart, et al.⁸ note, the benefits of participating in a study often outweigh the distress of revisiting traumatic memories, providing participants with empowerment, a sense of control amid uncertainty, and potentially the beginning of healing.

In the early stages of my fieldwork, I aimed to approach the interview process cautiously and to identify the particular techniques to mitigate any potential retraumatization of my respondents. At the outset of each interview, participants provided oral consent to take part in the research. They were informed about the confidentiality of the study and their right to withdraw consent at any time, with the assurance that all data would then be deleted. This provision was exercised once by a respondent concerned for their family's safety due to possible disclosure.

None of the participants expected monetary compensation for their involvement, as they recognized the value in sharing, reflecting upon, and organizing their experiences. Frequently, we would map out the respondents' journeys, marking each transitional stop with distinctive colours or symbols. The ultimate destination frequently remained uncertain, often indicated by a question mark.

Many of my interviews were not individual conversations; families and small groups of friends traveling together often expressed a desire to be interviewed collectively. Although not structured as focus group sessions, these groups typically consisted of no more than three members, with some intermittently absent during parts of the

interview. They recounted shared experiences, recalled specific details together, and offered mutual support during narration. Certain details were easier for one person to articulate than another, fostering a supportive environment where respondents could connect not only with their memories but also with each other.

III. CONCLUSION

To sum up, methodologically, I faced several challenges, including navigating my dual roles as a volunteer and researcher, the potential for retraumatization of respondents, and the unique context of transit where some individuals did not feel secure enough to openly share their experiences, especially when trauma was recent. Despite these challenges, I discovered that the interview process itself had therapeutic benefits. Many respondents found it empowering to narrate their journeys, gaining a sense of control over their lives and recognizing their own resilience. For some, it offered a chance to process emotions without the formality of psychological counselling. Therefore, while the risks of conducting research with traumatized individuals in transit and displacement settings are significant and should not be overlooked, the interview method can also yield unanticipated healing benefits for participants.

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