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# From Babel to Bridge: The Challenges of Research Co-Production in Multilingual Spaces

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## Abstract

This article discusses emerging findings from a large-scale study undertaken in 12 diverse areas of England focused on reducing health inequalities for refugees, asylum seekers, and migrant populations. Working with multilingual populations has posed both ethical and practical considerations throughout the design and implementation of this co-produced participatory research project. Despite our deep-rooted commitment to working collaboratively with communities of interest and a large team of multilingual academic and community partners who have co-designed the study, the linguistic complexities of operationalising planned activities have highlighted multiple obstacles. We argue that multilingual research presents significant challenges to researchers and has the potential to jeopardise commitments to inclusivity and co-production, even for those teams well-versed in working with refugee and migrant groups. Practical considerations around recruitment in diverse languages, appropriate translations of project documentation, and timely booking of sufficient interpreters repeatedly emerged as challenges, as has gaining informed consent, particularly where literacy and understanding of concepts of research are new to participants. The methodological difficulties involved in achieving linguistic inclusivity are outlined, together with the complexities of interpreting and translating set within a context of negotiating different power relationships between institutions, academic researchers, collaborative partners, community co-researchers, and participants. Whilst community co-researchers and organisations create a vital bridge to enable all participants to communicate effectively within an ethical and collaborative space, we interrogate the challenges inherent in such empirical research and propose methodological practices to address these concerns.

## Keywords

asylum seekers; co-production; inclusivity; migrants; multilingual; power dynamics; refugees

## 1. Introduction

Socially engaged, qualitative research rightly seeks to empower and champion participants' concerns and foreground their lived experience to both ensure validity of findings and as a matter of social justice (Smith & Wool, 2025). The ethos of participation and co-production requires considerable attention to ensure nuanced and meaningful inclusion, particularly when working with diverse, multilingual groups of refugees and migrants who may be perceived as experiencing heightened risk and complex vulnerabilities (Davidson et al., 2024). These essential considerations of ethical research practice entwine with the complex funding and policy landscape in the UK and internationally. This can lead to significant and extensive complexities in project governance and throughout the research process, from planning to operationalisation of activities, and beyond. This article will discuss the challenges of delivering a large-scale research project with participants who speak multiple languages while seeking to ensure inclusivity of experience is both a key objective and guiding principle. Studies in the linguistic fields have begun to grapple with questions of how to engage with speakers of second or multiple languages (Saaida, 2023), yet the migration studies arena is yet to develop a similar attention to its practice, despite the proliferation of multilingual research.

Inclusivity is a guiding objective of this study to enable the active participation of the multicultural and multilingual participants within the research cohort. The research aligns with the UK Government guidance on social research practice (Government Social Research Profession, 2022), which emphasises the need to meaningfully understand the populations participating in the research, ensuring that participants feel welcomed and supported to engage in an equal manner, whilst acknowledging the barriers and enablers to their inclusion. With refugee and migrant inclusion conceptualised as relating to wellbeing and belonging (Dobson et al., 2021), in multilingual research settings this translates to the need to ensure that all participants have the opportunity within that space to be listened to, heard, and understood. The aim of linguistic inclusivity is thus bias-free communication, that attempts to be equally inclusive of people of all ethnicities, gender identities, sexual orientations, religious affiliations, abilities, and ages, by communicating in a non-hierarchical way that makes no presumptions about the receiver of such communication (British Association for Applied Linguistics, n.d.). However, such complexity may make it difficult to give voice to all participants, especially those who are most marginalised, for example those who rely on others to interpret for them, or who experience multiple communication barriers such as sensory impairment, necessitating interventions and filtering of information. Accordingly, such elements speak to the consideration of linguistic power dynamics within the research, explored further below (Zhao et al., 2024).

The project's understanding of culture is informed by the idea of the complex whole formed by shared patterns and behaviours that distinguish members of a group from another (Avruch, 1998; Spencer-Oatey, 2008). Multiculturalism captures the overall notion that individuals have the right to have their differences respected (Locke & Bailey, 2013) and that the values of all cultures are valid (Nieto, 1992). Cultural skills deployed by the research team therefore require aptitude and sensitivity to acknowledge and navigate these concepts in practice appropriately. Thus, this article draws upon insights from the fields of participatory research to inform current debates within migration studies about multilingual migrant and refugee inclusivity within research. In bringing these together in conversation, this article aims to reflect upon the challenges for interdisciplinary teams working in these areas and argues for the need to embed long timeframes and better resourcing within research design and funding structures to enable these issues to be sufficiently addressed. This article takes an inclusive framework focusing on aiming to ensure that our

approach to ethical research is guided both by cultural sensitivity and adherence to the principles of meaningful participation (Ullah, 2024). Inclusivity in this multilingual and multicultural research context refers to the commitment that research should be shaped by people of diverse backgrounds from different communities and that different speakers remain equal during the research process at all stages. It therefore reflects a systematic and planned approach to encourage representation of members with different characteristics from our participant communities.

## 2. Research Methodology

The project at the heart of this discussion is a three-year UK-based UKRI-funded initiative to explore the use of community assets to tackle health inequalities for refugees, asylum seekers, and migrant communities. It focuses on three regions, East of England, North London, and South London, with 12 fieldsites that offer a comparative perspective in terms of urban, rural, accessibility, and population differences. These are Cambridge, Peterborough, Ipswich, Lowestoft, Great Yarmouth, Norwich, Colchester, Wethersfield, Barnet, Islington, Greenwich, and Lewisham. The project focuses on four core asylum-seeking and refugee populations—Afghans, Hong Kongers, Syrians, and Ukrainians—who have been given protection via well-established UK resettlement schemes across the sites, thus facilitating comparability throughout the study. This selection also helps to identify differences in experience dependent on route of entry, subsequent access to housing, designated support and other services, as well as the specific context of the fieldsite location and facilities available therein. Each fieldsite has, in discussion with community partners, and based on administrative data sets and information available, also selected one EU and one non-EU nationality group in addition to the four core groups as research participants. Wethersfield is treated differently as it provides asylum accommodation for single adult male asylum seekers and thus has a dynamically changing population. In total, there are a minimum of 28 nationalities and approximately 44 languages among the project participants.

The collaborative project team includes three universities and eight civil society/community partner organisations. The latter are either embedded within local communities in each fieldsite or work closely with other organisations that provide front-line services. Recruitment of two community co-researchers (CCRs) per fieldsite via community partners has been a key feature of the project structure. CCRs are remunerated on a fee basis for their time. They have had extensive three-day and ongoing training involving practice activities, role-playing, and learning about various research methodologies. CCRs have been recruited to mirror as many participant nationality groups as possible, although given the complexity of the sampling frame, CCRs do not represent each nationality for every fieldsite. Hence on occasion this has led to a "doubling-up" of fieldsite cover by speakers of particular languages as necessary, depending on the required languages for a specific activity. The presence of CCRs is vital to the research process, from recruitment of participants through to delivery of creative activities. Both CCRs, academics, and community partner staff involved in the research (who have excellent or mother-tongue levels of skills in certain languages) perform essential interpreting functions, for example conversations during activities and "consenting" of participants. CCRs were recruited explicitly based on their ability to speak one or more project languages, a competent level of English, aptitude and interest in performing project tasks, as well as meeting requirements for gender balance and a spread of age ranges. They are mentored throughout the project by the team for each fieldsite, which consists of an academic lead and community-based partners, providing a consistent point of contact and support.

Delivering this project across multiple fieldsites has been particularly challenging, requiring a commonality of approach whilst allowing for local variation according to population, area structure (service delivery models etc.), needs, and geography. Thus, for example, for the fieldsite teams working in the East of England, with a less developed public transport system in many cases, travel is far more time-consuming, complex, and likely to experience disruption than for those working in London. As a co-produced endeavour from the initial conception of the project, writing of the bid, and operationalisation of the entire process, fieldsite teams have autonomy to tailor activities as they wish, given their knowledge of the dynamics in each setting, as long as they align with the core pillars of the activity and the agreed timeline. Each fieldsite is tasked with delivering a series of 12 community forums (CFs) across a two-year period. These CFs are the setting where the project participants come together in mixed nationality and linguistic groups to engage in research activities including data collection, creative sessions, and exhibition planning. In some localities it has been identified that activities or forums require additional targeted engagement with "hard to reach" populations or to overcome complexities if specific dynamics pertain around gender, age, or relationships between diverse populations who share a common language. The forum settings have thus brought to light several key methodological challenges which this article will reflect on.

The project seeks to understand the strategies refugee, asylum seeking, and migrant populations employ in their use of community assets to tackle health inequalities, viewed through the three key prisms of housing and accommodation, food and nutrition, and broader services such as health, education, and legal advice; all of which underpin the wider social determinants of health (Marmot et al., 2020; Moustakas et al., 2024). Community assets are broadly defined and include services, activities, spaces, or people that are an integral part of community life. They can be formal or informal assets and include advice and information services, community hubs, community groups, religious organisations, open spaces, food banks, leisure centres, etc. Understanding barriers to access assets and whether these pertain to an individual's protected characteristics, socio-economic status, linguistic barriers, route of entry to the UK (and thus legally permitted usage of statutory or publicly delivered services), or personal migration trajectory, are all fundamental to the project aims.

In the sections below, the methodological challenges involved in achieving such inclusivity in this study are firstly outlined, given the diversity of participants, the co-existence of different languages, English language ability, education level, and length of time in the UK. The complexities of interpreting and translating within the project are subsequently explored before finally looking at the challenges in seeking to create inclusivity in a context of negotiating different power relationships which exist between institutions, academic researchers, collaborative partners, CCRs, and participants in the project.

## 3. Discussion

The central argument of this article is that the substantive difficulties that multilingual research poses compound the well-documented methodological and ethical complexities of community-based research (O'Sullivan et al., 2023; Salway et al., 2015), thereby problematising commitments to inclusivity and co-production. Despite having a multilingual project team who are well versed in working with refugee and migrant groups as academics, facilitators, practitioners, supporters, and advocates, many of whom have migration histories themselves, the complexities and tensions of working with such a wide range of linguistic differences are multiple and ever-changing. Scholars have recently begun to consider the importance of

researching multilingually in highlighting the critical need for conscious reflection on the process and effect of such approaches (King, 2023), yet these complexities are not commonly discussed or addressed in research training, ethics processes, or methodological literature (Holmes et al., 2013). However, multilingualism poses direct challenges to the participatory, co-production approaches common to research with refugee and migration populations, and indeed, researchers may overtly downplay the complexities in research with such populations (Holmes et al., 2015). Accordingly, we seek to explicate some of the intricacies of these methodological approaches, while acknowledging that they will be context and situationally dependent.

### *3.1. Unravelling Hierarchies of Language, Literacy, and Knowledge Within Research Settings*

The project team were committed to ensuring that low levels of English and education should not be a barrier to participation. To this end, to ensure representation from our target six participant groups in each fieldsite, partners and CCRs did not assess English ability when recruiting participants for the project. Thus, at each CF, approximately six to eight different languages would be spoken by participants. Teams were prepared for mixed levels of English capability at each fieldwork event, and interpreters were provided accordingly via CCRs and team members. Each CF was run in English with simultaneous translation taking place as needed. In practice, with some participants having moderate to good levels of English, translation was not required in every language. The fluid nature of the forums and different language requirements of each one meant that these events could be chaotic and noisy, impeding efforts to provide sufficient opportunity for clarity and understanding for each participant. At one CF in the East of England, seven different nationalities were represented. The challenges of sensitively managing such linguistic diversity were apparent throughout the initial consent process and into the research activities themselves. Dedicated time was built-in to ensure participants fully understood the activities and tasks, leading at times to frustration from those with more developed language or research comprehension skills who had understood and wanted to move on to next steps, in comparison with those still attempting to understand the explanation and task. However, it was notable that mutual support and cooperation developed over the course of the workshops, with participants typically aiding those with lower English proficiency. It was observed that this collaborative attitude was highly beneficial to the group of participants who appreciated the opportunity to mix and interact with other nationalities in a relaxed setting.

It was fundamental to the inclusive project ethos that researchers engaged participants equally regardless of different migration status, duration of residence in the UK, and English proficiency. English proficiency of participants before arrival in the UK varied greatly. Recent Afghan refugees, for example, include a wide variety of backgrounds, from military drivers with very little English or education, service personnel who had acted as interpreters so had excellent English proficiency albeit potentially low levels of education, to Afghan female judges with very high levels of education but often poorer English language skills. Generally, lower levels of English were associated with gender, with Afghan women (regardless of qualification level) particularly disadvantaged amongst those who had arrived as part of the Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy and the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme. These two programmes were run by the UK Home Office to resettle eligible Afghan nationals to the UK and have now been replaced by the Afghan Resettlement Programme. Afghans spoke Dari, Pashto, or Farsi (sometimes more than one), while Syrian participants all spoke Arabic. Hong Kongers spoke Cantonese, and Ukrainians all spoke Ukrainian and sometimes Russian also.

Long-standing shortfalls in ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) funding and dispersed provision mean that many refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants who arrive in the UK without a competent standard of English face great variability in access to such services. Extensive research and scholarship shows that English language acquisition is critical to adaptation and building a new life in the UK (Bell Foundation, 2024; Casey, 2016; Home Office, 2019). Indeed, the Bell Foundation (2024, p. 11) emphasised:

> The ability to communicate in the host country's national or official language [English] increases productivity in reducing the costs of communication with others, complement[s] other forms of human capital (e.g., networks, or skills), and can lead to wider integration outcomes (i.e., democratic participation, access to services, or education).

However, the ability of migrants to improve their English is hindered by the current provision of state-funded courses. Research indicates this is characterised by a highly fractured funding landscape (Bradstreet, Marren, et al., 2024; Casey, 2016) where "in general, funding is poorly related to need, with far too many students being offered courses as a result of funding considerations, rather than an assessment of their learning needs" (Lifelong Education Commission, 2022, p. 29). Additional obstacles to progress include a low number of tuition hours per week. A study noted that "while ESOL provision typically begins within the first month, it often falls short of the eight-hour mark, sometimes offering only 1–2 hours of informal ESOL," and "of the 118 people requiring ESOL, 30% are attending 8+ hours, and 70% are receiving less than 8 hours" (as cited in an East of England Local Government Association/Local Government East internal report from 2024, not publicly available). This low number of tuition hours results in very slow improvements in attainment equivalent to one grade per academic year rather than per term as is common in the private English as a Foreign Language (EFL) sector.

Given the impact of access to ESOL training on the populations in question, the research found immense variability in opportunities to develop English proficiency post-migration. The inability of learners to make progress towards improving their English proficiency is further compounded by significant funding cuts. Although no recent national figures are available to map the reduction in ESOL funding, cuts in provision correlate to falls in the overall Adult Skills Fund (which replaced the Adult Education Budget in 2024), and frequent policy change has compounded the situation (Isphording, 2015; Migrant English Support Hub, 2024). Inevitably, demand for ESOL classes has vastly increased over recent years, which with limited provider capacity leads to long waiting lists for extended periods (as cited in an East of England Local Government Association/Local Government East internal report from 2024, not publicly available). Bradstreet, Stevenson, and Woodhouse (2024, p. 5) reported that "lower-level ESOL courses tend to have the longest waiting lists," and it is the lower-level courses that have the highest demand. Access varies by status, with some learners, e.g., from Hong Kong, required to pay significant fees for ESOL classes, reducing their ability to participate. Payment for ESOL lessons is dependent on eligibility for funding from the Adult Skills Fund (available after three years plus of UK residence), and although Hong Kongers may be able to access ESOL through the HK Welcome Programme, few providers deliver this targeted service, perhaps through lack of awareness (Bradstreet, Stevenson, & Woodhouse, 2024). Despite plans dating back to 2016 to develop a funded English Language Strategy (see further HM Government, 2018), there is still no English Language Strategy in place for England despite stakeholder pressure.

The findings unsurprisingly noted that length of time in the UK generally correlated to higher levels of working English, although in many cases it is unclear how participants acquired their language skills, e.g., via government-funded language learning, informal learning with voluntary sector organisations, internet-based learning, or simply interactions in daily life. Age at arrival was a clear factor in language acquisition, with young adults, particularly those with some English mandatory schooling, having improved their skills rapidly by interpreting for older family or other community members. In contrast, mature adults (40+) frequently struggled with language learning. These findings correlate with wider ESOL-focused research (Bell Foundation, 2024; Casey, 2016). The children of older community members—whether born in the UK/second-generation migrants or first-generation migrants who came to the UK at a young age—are relied upon heavily by older generations to mitigate language challenges. Importantly for some communities, frustration with language learning challenges (structural and acquisition-based) has resulted in older generations simply failing to continue with language acquisition and accepting that they will never be able to operate in the UK in the same way as in their country of origin (Bell Foundation, 2024).

Whilst all languages were welcomed and included within the project, in practice English was the most commonly spoken language within the participant groups and research team and therefore persisted as the most frequently used. Juggling immense diversity in English proficiency and educational level within the heterogeneity of project participants has been an ongoing challenge, requiring constant reappraisal and readjustment throughout the two years of data collection activity. Fieldsite teams frequently reflected on this barrier to participant inclusivity, which they tackled within fortnightly discussion meetings to adjust the approach as required. One technique used to improve this was to divide participants into groups of broadly equal ability, when enough time could be built into the process to allow for this. Alternatively, the team would sometimes hold extra sessions in a single language where it was recognised that linguistic or cultural factors had potentially affected the detailed collection of participant experiences. However, given the shifting nature of CF composition every time with different participants attending, the fluctuating variables remained a constant unknown to navigate. Towards the mid-point of the project, it was recognised that it would be valuable to hold single-language focus groups to enable a deep dive into the distinctive experiences of the different nationality groups, whilst also accounting for differences in routes of entry within these. The opportunity to share experiences as a group in their native language, supported by interpreters, offered a complementary element to the CFs. Methodologically, supporting such variation was a significant and ongoing challenge for the fieldsite teams throughout the project.

### *3.2. Working With Community Researchers: The Dynamic Challenges of Multiple Roles*

CCRs were recruited from fieldsite areas on the basis that they were members of one of the migrant communities and had deep and well-established networks. Two CCRs were recruited per fieldsite (predominantly selected by language and seeking always to have both male and female researchers in each team); therefore, due to particular needs at certain fieldwork events, CCRs were sometimes asked to work in other fieldsite locations as a result of their gender, or ability to speak a particular dialect or language. For instance, it may be inappropriate for women of a particular community to speak with male CCRs, or if no female members of a fieldsite team have the required language. These elements impact not only meaningful co-production and inclusion at the overall project level but can also have implications for micro-level data-gathering. The CCR has not built the level of trust within the new fieldsite that they have with their usual one, which can impede the research process. At one such event, a male CCR who speaks Dari and

Pashto was asked to attend another fieldsite to translate for several Afghans who had registered to attend the forum. A group of Afghan men had carshared from their isolated rural location where they were housed in ex-military properties in order to attend. Others came separately from the two hotels housing asylum seekers in the area, and some from elsewhere in the town. The CCR spent considerable time assisting some participants to find the location of the event on the telephone, which meant he could not translate some of the proceedings for the newly arrived asylum seekers, one of whom spoke hardly any English. The men who had carshared arrived almost halfway through the allocated time for the event, meaning that the consent process had to be undertaken by team members without disrupting the flow of events for participants who had arrived on time. The team decided to create a separate table for the Afghan participants with a team member who speaks Pashto working with the CCR to carry out the data collection activities to ensure that they felt welcome and included. The team stayed much longer than planned to facilitate this, which the venue was able and willing to accommodate on this occasion. This type of responsivity is emblematic of the type of situations that occur at each CF. The forums require adaptability and flexibility and all team members to be willing to deviate from the planned approach to one that fits the circumstances of the situation, while simultaneously maintaining the needs and requirements of the project and centring the inclusion and dignity of participants.

Research with so-called "hard to reach" groups frequently relies on the active facilitation of participant recruitment by community partners, gatekeepers, or academics with links into the appropriate communities. In this project, where the diversity of types of migrants spans those with long-established lives in the UK (for instance elderly Italian people in Islington) to very recent arrivals housed in dispersal accommodation, there has been a key focus on recruiting a range of refugees and migrants who capture the spread of official schemes and unofficial routes into the UK. This recruitment stage is subject to the ability and opportunity of sharing materials in appropriate languages, in the right places, at the right time. Concerns over safety (for community organisations and potential participants) in the ever-increasing hostile climate since the riots of 2024 have also limited prospects for circulating recruitment materials more publicly on social media and the internet. The project has therefore relied on a variety of methods at the local level to recruit, including, to an extent, upon the abilities of CCRs to effectively communicate project details to potential participants through word of mouth and their own contacts. Project materials in the form of flyers translated into 25 languages are succinct and contain limited information. The effect of this is to limit the inclusivity of the pool of participants to some extent, potentially capturing only a particular subsection of the desired populations. Recruitment limitation occurred in varying forms despite the issuing of clear guidance as to participant inclusion and exclusion criteria.

CFs with up to 18 participants have had up to seven or eight languages spoken within these groups, and the logistical issues with providing interpreters for so many languages in a group discussion are significant. Due to the methods of recruitment, and despite advance registration (sometimes online and sometimes in person, depending on the fieldsite), it was difficult to ascertain levels of English capability in advance of the session, thereby making it problematic to have appropriate interpreters in the required languages. The mitigation for this situation was the use of CCRs to interpret as needed. In their capacity as members of certain population groups, CCRs also bridged the insider–outsider gap for some of our participants (Court & Abbas, 2013). However, the use of untrained interpreters brings in deeper questions around the accuracy of translation and the nuances of interpretation related to English competency. It also raises issues of the importance of subjectivity and social position on the dynamics within the setting and the research (MacKenzie, 2015), whether translation may

threaten the reliability of qualitative data (Court & Abbas, 2013; Holmes et al., 2013), if interpreters should be perceived as active participants in the study (Temple & Edwards, 2002), and whether their role should evolve from data collection to analysis (Tsai et al., 2004). Having different participants at different CFs meant that language and interpreter requirements changed every time. On some occasions, participants would speak the main language of a nationality group (e.g., Farsi), whereas at a subsequent session a minority language would be required to support participants (e.g., Dari). Therefore, the shifting nature of the participants' spoken languages meant that it was easy to be wrong-footed, notwithstanding preparations having been made to cater for the anticipated linguistic requirements.

CCRs were involved in translations of project documentation, including the participant information sheets and consent forms. They took an active role in supporting the consent process, particularly where literacy and understanding of concepts of research or activities were new to participants. The circular dance between research team, CCR in their role as intermediary/interpreter, and participant took time to coalesce meaningfully and ensure a substantive insight. Here again, the reliance on CCRs to effectively and accurately communicate the demands of the consent form required trust from the academics that CCRs understood what was being asked of the participants. The training programme placed significant emphasis on the rigour of ethics and the consent process, thereby giving some confidence in the CCRs' knowledge and understanding of the importance of this. However, as highlighted, researcher identity matters and affects the research (Lincoln et al., 2016; MacKenzie, 2015), and this applies particularly with regard to community researchers, where they are often acting as informal community liaison (Salway et al., 2015). The dynamics of interaction between CCRs and research participants in their own language is an area that the academic teams observe but are unable to participate in and understand. Therefore, the extent of the influence of the CCR on the participant, the research setting, as well as the interactions prior to—and during—the research process, remains opaque and difficult to untangle.

The length of the CFs was a practical concern that had related effects on interpreting. In seeking to make the forums as inclusive as possible, the times and venues were carefully selected with community partners to facilitate attendance for those with caring responsibilities or work commitments, providing a variety of times and dates where possible. Sessions always provided a meal in recognition of the fact that many of our population groups were confronting challenges around affordability and accessibility of nutritious and culturally appropriate food as well as time and opportunity to socialise. Therefore, the sessions were planned to incorporate sufficient time to accommodate the consent process, data collection activities, and a meal, resulting in events that usually span 2 to 3 hours. The team was already cognisant of the "uncomfortable realities of doing engaged qualitative research" in community settings (Pillow, 2003, p. 193), and the messiness that Pillow urges researchers to embrace is starkly evident in the reflexivities of discomfort that our research team encountered within these sessions. Pressures of time, attention, and commitments elsewhere for participants were all at play, while researchers attempted to balance the demands of attentiveness to research questions and data collection, and to create space for participants and their interpreters to carry out their linguistic interactions and be actively heard within the group.

### *3.3. Balancing Power Dynamics at Different Scales*

The rigours of providing informed consent and the resulting temporal impact on the entire CF illustrates the exercising of institutional power experienced by all, but most acutely by participants with limited English.

Providing explanations of academic concepts and processes in several languages to a range of participants with different backgrounds was particularly difficult and time-consuming, even for experienced researchers. It sometimes took as long as an hour to ensure that all participants had correctly completed the consent forms at community events. The participation information sheet and consent forms were longer than the team had originally planned in order to include all the information required by the approving ethics committee. Despite developing easy-read versions of consent forms in all languages, these still took considerable time to go through in different languages with participants. Having to work through these forms in up to seven or eight languages at each event took time and complicated the flow of the research activity, particularly when participants arrived late. Interpreters were frequently required to ensure that informed consent had been provided. Participants with moderate or above English proficiency would be ready to begin long before others. When the research got underway, the presence of up to 18 participants, two CCRs, sometimes an additional two or more interpreters, and the research team in one room created an environment that was frequently difficult, both literally and figuratively, for participants to be genuinely heard. Creating space for listening actively to different voices, whether interpreters or participants, was a constant challenge within the noisy settings of CFs. Adding to this was the presence of babies and small children accompanying their parents and the fact that activities were typically held in community spaces that were hosting multiple groups at a time.

#### 3.3.1. Power Within Multilingual Research Settings

The research study was designed and largely carried out in English, and the privileging of English as the common language between research team, CCR, and the majority of participants inevitably creates a power imbalance that disadvantages those with less proficiency. Where multilingual discussions occur and default to a lingua franca, it has been noted that conversations tend to be dominated by the individuals most familiar with the language (Nikulina et al., 2019), and thus single-language groupings may yield the richest data within a multi-language setting such as a CF, as long as there is consensus on terminology and concepts to enable comparability. However, conceptualisations and the articulation of processes, particularly if dissent exists, may also be viewed or presented variably in feed-back in multilingual discussion groups, depending on the language skills of the CCR, culture of the participants, and a perceived hierarchy of values or beliefs within the research space. Where multiple partners and CCRs are working in the same physical space to interpret terms and concepts to participants from different language groups simultaneously, there is often a negotiated process between the interpreters and other researchers in the room to reach a consensus and find a term to describe an activity or concept to those for whom they are interpreting. Dynamics of power can come into play here, and it is thus crucial that observation of dynamics and levels of engagement are identified and explored by the research team (including CCRs), to gain an understanding of both (a) the content of the session, discussions, and perceptions of how the session ran, and (b) whether the session was driven in a particular manner, depending on the "power" held by a person or particular groups at the table.

The sharing of a country of origin or cultural background with participants is but one element of the complexity of negotiating power dynamics within multilingual research. For example, a CCR may be perceived as holding a particularly influential position, through their employment with a well-known or trusted agency, their personal social status, their duration in the UK, or perhaps having a greater knowledge of English or both English and the shared first language. All of these elements may influence the data gathered, language used by participants, and the subtle interpretations of linguistic and physical cues, both positively and negatively, as indeed may

the setting of an activity, for example within a trusted community organisation's premises, rather than in a neutral setting or formal and potentially "alien" academic environment (Somerville, 2005).

The necessity of "sub-contracting" CCRs on occasion creates further potential power imbalances and hierarchies of (in/ex)clusion, e.g., depending on an individual's access to transport, caring responsibilities, or position in a household and social or domestic expectations which may impact their ability to participate in additional activities; whether they have the means (practical, temporal, and fiscal) to travel to locations some distance away from their home fieldsite location (particularly in rural or coastal regions); and the organisation of payment for their work by a collaborating project partner other than their main employing agency. More subtle issues, such as the age of an individual, their membership of a particular cultural group which may be "read" or "coded" by participants regardless of the CCR's language skills, or whether it is seen as culturally congruent for participants to discuss or engage in activities such as individual walking interviews with a person of a different gender, age, or even socio-economic or class background, have also required close attention when undertaking these multilingual research activities.

### 3.3.2. Institutional Power Within Research

The power wielded by the structural dimensions of institutions echoes within the very heart of the research space itself. The institutional requirements of both funding bodies and universities are necessary and essential to ethical and responsible research practice; however, the concepts of ethical approval and the types of methodologies operationalised in research are neither broadly understood nor familiar to many, even native speakers of English (Patten & Newhart, 2016). Given limited familiarity with research practice within some refugee, asylum seeker, and migrant populations, with often poorer English skills or limited formal education, the requirements on researchers to explain pertinent concepts and obtain informed consent are considerable. Despite best efforts to mitigate this within the project, the effect of such requirements has been to reinforce the imbalance of power between researcher and participant, and pose additional challenges to inclusivity.

It was essential to ensure thorough and appropriate communication of all processes. This, combined with the number of diverse language groups within sessions, made the consent process particularly difficult and time-consuming. Syrian participants, who had been in the UK for around five years or more, were resettled to the UK on the basis of a defined set of vulnerability characteristics which typically did not take prior educational level into account, meaning that for some, lower levels of education and resultant limited understanding of research acted as a barrier to comprehension. In contrast, participants from Hong Kong and Ukraine generally had higher education levels and greater English proficiency, which facilitated their understanding of research methods. The broad range of our asylum-seeking participants equated to considerable variation in pre-existing research understanding and English proficiency, creating complex challenges to engagement, e.g., in the time required to explain the study and obtain consents.

The team's reflections on this issue therefore aimed to create a space which acknowledged these particularities and provided both time and opportunity for discussion and clarification. The starting point for this mitigation was that data collection activities were carried out in spaces selected in collaboration with community partners across all our 12 fieldsites, to allow participants to feel at ease. Given that many participants have experienced (or are currently experiencing) precarious, overcrowded, and difficult housing situations, a sense of security

and familiarity was identified as being particularly important, e.g., in supportive community spaces. Detention centres have been well documented as complex sites and spaces that exercise control and carcerality with significant negative effects on mental health (Filges et al., 2024; Moran et al., 2016). In Wethersfield, where the quasi-detention of asylum seekers on a former Royal Air Force site has proved controversial, the vulnerability of the potential participants and their lack of trust initially required a different approach to the one used elsewhere. Researchers did not use the standardised ethics forms and participant information sheet, which required a signature. Instead, they opted for a verbal explanation and recorded and witnessed consent as part of an initial discussion aimed at building trust and assessing the willingness of the potential participant to build a relationship. This required a high level of cultural skills by the research team, but was instrumental in beginning the process of deeper engagement and trust-building with the participants. In several cases, participants were engaged successfully, went on to attend further workshops, and subsequently recruited other participants from the site.

A CCR or community organisation staff member might for example hold high-level academic qualifications, and have lived experience or prior employment as a researcher, but due to embedded power structures, the flow of finances from grant holders to agencies and the requirements imposed by academic institutions and funders, in addition to linguistic or cultural barriers and the geo-physical research setting, can act to disempower that individual or mask their expertise. Accordingly, unrecognised or merely unspoken community and project structures need to be explored in a safe way, led by CCRs (Vaughn et al., 2018) and often interrogated in granular detail if meaningful co-production and shared understanding is to occur at the deepest level. Thus, the realpolitik of research structures may risk the consolidation of power firmly in the hands of academic institutions or well-established and powerful agencies, reducing the potential to maximise inclusive research by limiting the role of community partners to that of mechanistic linguistic interpreters and cultural translators framed by narrow parameters rather than utilising the full breadth of their partnership status.

It is of paramount importance therefore to implement methodological practices that centre the needs and requirements of participants, CCRs, and community partners within such multilingual projects. To achieve this, it is essential to build in sufficient time and resources at the stage of developing the funding bid. Scholars have argued for the need for longer timeframes in participatory studies and stressed the importance of "slow science" (Schuurman et al., 2025, p. 86). Therefore, the provision of *more than adequate* time and *more than satisfactory* staff resourcing is critical to an authentically inclusive practice with reasonable funds to allow for the multiple requirements of translation and interpreting at formal and informal levels, and at different points within the study. Without this, both project and ethics are potentially compromised by the exigencies of time pressures in all phases. Genuine and equal inclusivity of multilingual participants is fundamental to ensuring a positive and productive research environment, thus building in such time and resourcing is critical. It is advisable for funding bodies and universities to be sympathetic and pragmatic regarding the complexities highlighted here and permit research teams to build in such mechanisms at funding stage that realistically account for these.

## 4. Conclusion

This article has argued that inclusivity as a guiding principle and ethos of community-based research faces significant complexities of resource and delivery in multilingual settings. Linguistic and cultural diversity is a fundamental challenge for migration studies precisely because it presents barriers to the very ability of

researchers to study these phenomena. Unpacking the power dynamics inherent in multilingual and co-produced research is fraught with difficulties and may not yield practical solutions or desired outcomes. Elements of trust and communication are central to understanding how power may be shared and dispersed, and it requires both adequate time and the ability to achieve consensus and co-design a way forward through a shared "language" of research. Even where mutual desire exists for inclusive and co-designed approaches to power sharing, operationalising such practice may not be possible in the light of externally imposed governance requirements which require specified outputs, rigid time-frames, stringent reporting requirements using technical and inaccessible language, limited flexibility over programme design and budget usage, and requirements to utilise expensive and complex legal and contractual arrangements or to demonstrate levels of fiscal accountability.

The article shows that consideration of these complex issues is essential for those engaging in multilingual research. Such projects may turn out to be more complex to deliver than initially anticipated during the planning stage. Community-centred, collaborative, and co-produced research is a key expectation of the current funding landscape (Campbell & Vanderhoven, 2016; Darby, 2017), yet adequate resourcing for such approaches remains a key issue in terms of implementation. This applies equally to projects at different scales and of different funded amounts. Stinting on necessary research time, support, and resourcing for both academics and community partners potentially devalues both the research approach and the quality of the research itself. Whilst these issues can apply to many forms of research, in multilingual settings they prove to be particularly acute.

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## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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