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ARTICLE (REFEREED)

'It's a Sensitive Topic for Me, But I Want to Tell You': Ethical and Trauma-Informed Issues of Conducting Interviews with Young Ukrainian Refugees

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Abstract

This study examines the ethical and methodological complexities of conducting qualitative research with forcibly displaced Ukrainian youth during an ongoing war. Through two waves of semi-structured interviews (2023–2024) with 20 young refugees in Germany and Australia, it draws on Park's integrated meaning-making model to explore how trauma, displacement, and disrupted meaning systems shape both participant experience and the research encounter. A qualitative-dominant mixed-methods design combined standardized trauma assessment with narrative interviews. Findings reveal meaning-making as a non-linear, cyclical process in which vulnerability and resilience coexist. Notably, many participants described the interview itself as an opportunity for cognitive integration and narrative reclamation. The study also reflects on the researcher's own experience as a Ukrainian academic, documenting secondary trauma, compassion fatigue, and the ethical tensions of insider positionality. It calls for relational, reflexive ethical frameworks that protect both participants and researchers in active conflict settings.

Keywords

Trauma-Informed Research; Ukrainian Refugees; Meaning-Making; Research Ethics; Forced Displacement

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Introduction

Since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, over 6.8 million people have fled the country, including 6.3 million across Europe, while an additional 3.6 million remain internally displaced ([UNHCR 2025](#)). The displaced youth often carry not only the burden of direct trauma – such as exposure to violence, loss of loved ones, and destruction of home – but also the prolonged stress of navigating displacement-related instability: uncertain legal status, language barriers, economic hardship, and cultural adaptation ([Chaaya et al. 2022](#); [Andrews et al. 2023](#)). Critically, many displaced individuals also carry the ongoing psychological burden of worrying about family and friends who remain in Ukraine, sometimes in occupied territories or conflict zones where communication is intermittent or impossible. This 'ambiguous absence' ([Boss 2007](#)) creates a distinct layer of distress, as refugees navigate their daily lives while mentally accompanying loved ones through imagined dangers.

In post-displacement settings, these challenges are compounded by insufficient trauma-informed support systems. Interviews with Ukrainian university students in Germany and Australia reveal that many face complex mental health stressors, bureaucratic barriers, and identity disorientation, but also show remarkable resilience and adaptive capacity through social networks and educational institutions ([Gorokhova et al. 2025](#)). For example, one participant in the current study described how joining a Ukrainian student association provided not only practical support but also '*a place where I didn't have to explain why I was sad*', illustrating how peer networks function as informal meaning-making spaces.

The psychological impact of forced migration on youth has been widely studied in relation to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression ([Betancourt et al. 2010](#); [Perreira et al. 2013](#)). However, recent research underscores the role of meaning-making as a central mechanism in recovery and identity reconstitution. Meaning-making, understood as a cognitive and emotional process of reinterpreting traumatic events within a coherent life narrative, can support psychological growth when individuals are able to align traumatic experiences with global beliefs and future goals ([Neimeyer 2016](#); [Park et al. 2013](#)).

Nonetheless, current meaning-making models often prioritize Western, individualistic perspectives and overlook collective, multigenerational, or culturally embedded forms of adaptation, common among refugee communities ([Pieloch et al. 2016](#)). Social trauma theory suggests that large-scale disruptions, such as war, generate not only individual psychological wounds but also collective cultural pain that reshapes group identity, memory, and social cohesion ([Alexander 2012](#); [Abrutyn 2023](#)). For Ukrainians, this collective dimension is particularly salient, as the war has fractured not only individual life trajectories but also national narratives of progress, European belonging, and intergenerational continuity. Many displaced young people find themselves grappling simultaneously with personal loss and the broader existential question of what it means to be Ukrainian in a world where their homeland is under attack. These models also tend to treat trauma as a discrete event rather than a protracted and ongoing disruption, a limitation well-documented in studies of war and collective violence ([Lerner 2022](#)). The Ukrainian case directly exemplifies this challenge. Displacement is not a completed event but an ongoing condition, shaped by daily news of attacks on home cities, uncertainty about the war's duration, and the impossibility of planning for return. Unlike post-conflict settings where reconstruction can begin, Ukrainian refugees inhabit what might be termed 'suspended displacement', a state where the future remains fundamentally unknowable.

Moreover, the inclusion of refugees in research presents both ethical risks and emancipatory potential. Refugees are often viewed through a lens of vulnerability, leading some ethics committees to impose rigid safeguards that may unintentionally reinforce disempowerment and silence ([Mackenzie et al. 2007](#)). Yet, research participation – particularly when using narrative or dialogical methods – can be experienced as validating and restorative, allowing participants to reclaim their agency and voice ([Dickson-Swift et al. 2008](#); [Puvimanasinghe et al. 2015](#)).

At the same time, trauma-informed research demands attention for the researchers' own well-being, especially when they are members of affected communities. Studies have shown that researchers working with survivors of violence and displacement may face vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue, and moral distress, particularly when institutional support is lacking ([Coles & Mudaly 2010](#); [Cohen et al. 2013](#)).

RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

This article draws on primary qualitative research conducted by the author across two phases: first, interviews with 10 Ukrainian students in Germany and Australia in 2023 (reported in [Gorokhova et al. 2025](#)); and second, interviews with an additional 10 young Ukrainian refugees in Germany in 2024. As lead researcher and interviewer in both phases, I critically examine the ethical tensions, emotional dimensions, and trauma-informed responsibilities that arose throughout the fieldwork process.

The aim is to offer empirically grounded, context-sensitive reflections on three interconnected dimensions:

1. How ethical principles, such as informed consent, autonomy, and do-no-harm, are operationalized under conditions of uncertainty and ongoing conflict;
2. How trauma manifests in researcher-participant interactions and shapes the dynamics of narrative disclosure;
3. How researchers themselves – particularly those from affected communities – navigate emotional exposure, vicarious trauma, and ethical ambiguity in times of war.

These questions are addressed in the three sections of the findings.

This article seeks to contribute to scholarship at the intersection of refugee studies, trauma research, and research ethics, while advocating for more reflexive and supportive academic environments for both participants and researchers engaged in work with forcibly displaced populations.

Materials and Methods

STUDY DESIGN

The study employed a cross-sectional, mixed-methods design combining standardized trauma assessment instruments with in-depth narrative interviews. The study was grounded in a trauma-informed research paradigm and drew conceptually from Park's integrated model of meaning-making ([Park 2010](#); [Park & George 2013](#)), which frames psychological adjustment after trauma as a function of disrupted global meaning – core beliefs about the world, self, and future, and the gradual reconstruction of life purpose through cognitive and emotional processing.

Park's model was selected over alternative frameworks for several reasons. Unlike purely clinical approaches such as Cognitive Processing Therapy, which focus on symptom reduction, Park's framework emphasizes the subjective experience of meaning disruption and reconstruction – making it well-suited to qualitative, narrative-based inquiry. Compared to [Neimeyer's \(2001\)](#) constructivist approach to grief and loss, Park's model offers a more structured operationalization of meaning violation that lends itself to mixed-methods research. Furthermore, while narrative therapy approaches ([White & Epsom 1990](#)) share an interest in story and identity, they are primarily therapeutic interventions rather than analytical frameworks for understanding trauma processing.

Park's model has been refined in subsequent work ([Park 2010](#); [Park et al. 2013](#); [Park et al. 2017](#)), particularly regarding the distinction between meaning-made (achieved resolution) and meaning-making

(ongoing process), a distinction highly relevant to populations experiencing unresolved, ongoing trauma. The model was applied in both phases of this research, including the earlier study ([Gorokhova et al. 2025](#)), providing conceptual continuity across the project.

The project employed a qualitative-dominant design to capture participants' lived experiences and subjective meaning systems before and after displacement. Semi-structured interviews were used to elicit detailed narratives of war exposure, psychological distress, adaptive strategies, and evolving identity perceptions. In parallel, two standardized self-report instruments were administered. The HTQ ([Mollica et al. 1992](#)), originally developed for Southeast Asian refugees, was adapted for use in this study. Given the absence of a formally validated Ukrainian-language version (see [Figueiredo et al. 2025](#)), the adaptation followed established cross-cultural guidelines ([Shoeb et al. 2007](#)): instruments were translated into Ukrainian using a forward-backward translation process, reviewed by two bilingual Ukrainian mental health practitioners with experience in trauma work, and pilot-tested with three Ukrainian refugees prior to full implementation. The Global Meaning Violation Scale (GMVS) ([Park et al. 2017](#)) underwent the same adaptation procedure. These instruments are described in detail in the section, Materials, below.

The research had three primary objectives, corresponding to the aims outlined in the introduction:

1. To examine how ethical principles – including informed consent, autonomy, and do-no-harm – were operationalized in the context of ongoing conflict and displacement;
2. To investigate how trauma manifested in researcher–participant interactions, including risks of re-traumatization and the dynamics of emotional disclosure;
3. To reflect on the researcher's own emotional exposure, vicarious trauma, and ethical navigation as a Ukrainian academic conducting research with fellow Ukrainians.

I hypothesized that different dimensions of traumatic experience – displacement, loss, and institutional distrust – would each contribute distinctly to disruptions in participants' meaning systems, while acknowledging that these dimensions frequently overlap and compound one another in practice. For instance, displacement often entails loss (of home, community, routine), and institutional distrust may intensify when bureaucratic systems fail to recognize or respond to that loss. Rather than treating these as discrete categories, the analysis attended to how they intersected within individual narratives.

PARTICIPANTS AND PHASES

Data were collected in two waves:

Phase 1 (August–September 2023): As lead researcher, I conducted in-depth interviews with 10 Ukrainian university students displaced to Germany (n=5) and Australia (n=5). This sample, which formed the basis for the earlier publication ([Gorokhova et al., 2025](#)), focused on participants enrolled in higher education programs navigating academic, social, and psychological adaptation.

Phase 2 (February–March 2024): Follow-up interviews with an additional 10 young Ukrainian refugees residing in Germany, including both students and those outside formal education. This second cohort broadened the scope to include participants with diverse legal statuses, backgrounds, and exposure to institutional and community support networks.

Purposive sampling was used in both phases, prioritizing participants aged 18–35 who had fled Ukraine since February 2022 and had lived in the host country for at least six months. Interviews were conducted in Ukrainian, Russian, or English, depending on the participants' preference.

Materials

The research protocol consisted of six core documents, all designed to ensure transparency, participant protection, and alignment with trauma-informed research practices:

1. Participant information sheet, presented in writing and reviewed orally prior to each interview, outlining the study objectives, roles of the research team, data use procedures, risks and benefits, participant rights, and measures for confidentiality and emotional safety.
2. Informed consent form, which participants signed and dated after receiving verbal clarification and having the opportunity to ask questions.
3. Socio-demographic questionnaire, developed by the author to collect background data, including gender, age, region of origin in Ukraine, current legal status, educational background, displacement trajectory, and access to psychosocial support – variables considered critical for understanding refugee adjustment and health outcomes.
4. Harvard Trauma Questionnaire (HTQ) ([Mollica et al. 1992](#)), adapted for Ukrainian-speaking populations. Given the absence of a formally validated Ukrainian version at the time of data collection ([Figueiredo et al. 2025](#)), the instrument was reviewed by two bilingual mental health practitioners with expertise in war-related trauma. Part 1 assessed exposure to war-related traumatic events; Part 4 assessed PTSD symptom severity. The HTQ has demonstrated strong cross-cultural validity across diverse refugee populations ([Shoeb et al. 2007](#); [Sigvardsson et al. 2016](#)).
5. Global Meaning Violation Scale (GMVS); ([Park et al. 2017](#)), adapted for the Ukrainian context and reviewed by bilingual trauma psychologists, consisting of 13 items which measure the extent to which core beliefs (e.g., trust in institutions, justice, safety) and life goals (e.g., education, family, autonomy) were perceived as disrupted by war-related events. Participants rated responses on a five-point Likert scale (1 = not at all violated; 5 = very much violated).
6. Semi-Structured Interview Guide, designed to explore participants' subjective experience of trauma, meaning-making, and adaptation. The opening narrative prompt ("Tell me about the events that led you to leave Ukraine") served as a grounding entry point into deeper discussions of disrupted meaning systems, evolving identities, and post-displacement goals.

All six protocol documents, including the participant information sheet, consent form, socio-demographic questionnaire, and semi-structured interview guide, were prepared in English and translated into Ukrainian and Russian using a forward-backward translation process, verified by trauma-informed practitioners.

Data Processing

To protect the participants' anonymity, each respondent was assigned a unique alphanumeric code, used consistently across transcripts, questionnaires, and data files. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and subsequently anonymized. Once transcriptions had been verified for accuracy, the original audio files were securely deleted.

Field notes captured immediate emotional reactions, pauses, tears, signs of distress, and post-interview feedback. These observational notes were stored in a separate secure document (the 'reflexive tracker') to preserve the emotional texture of each encounter, without contaminating the analytical process. The analytical database consisted of anonymized interview transcripts, questionnaire responses, and demographic data, organized by participant code. During the analysis, field notes could be cross-referenced with transcripts by using the participants' codes, allowing me to contextualize narrative content with observed affect, for example, noting where a participant's composed verbal account was accompanied by visible

distress. This separation ensured that initial interpretations remained grounded in the participants' own words, while emotional and contextual observations could inform later stages of thematic analysis.

Expected Outcomes

The study generated both quantitative and qualitative data, though the design was primarily qualitative. The standardized instruments (HTQ and GMVS) yielded numerical data on trauma exposure, PTSD symptom severity, and perceived meaning violation. However, these scores were used descriptively to characterize the sample and contextualize individual narratives rather than for inferential statistical analysis. For example, knowing that a participant scored high on meaning violation helped situate their narrative account of disrupted beliefs about safety and justice. In this sense, the quantitative data had a contextualizing rather than an evaluative function – providing a structured snapshot that enriched, rather than replaced, the qualitative exploration of lived experience.

Qualitative data were expected to illuminate participants' meaning-making narratives, including shifts in self-understanding and future orientation, experiences of empowerment or disempowerment during interviews, and perceptions of psychological adjustment. Additionally, the study sought to generate insights into trauma-informed research practices across three dimensions:

- First, participant reactions to trauma-focused interviewing. I documented how participants responded emotionally and cognitively to discussing painful experiences, including moments of distress, relief, resistance, and unexpected insight. For instance, several participants reported feeling anxious before the interview but described the actual experience as *'lighter than expected'*. One participant explained: *'I thought I would fall apart, but actually, saying it out loud made it smaller somehow'*. Such reactions were systematically recorded in field notes and analysed alongside narrative content.
- Second, the role of narrative methods in fostering agency and coherence. Drawing on [Park's \(2010\)](#) distinction between meaning-made and meaning-making, I attended to moments when participants appeared to be actively constructing, rather than simply reporting, their understanding of events. The semi-structured format allowed participants to control pacing, emphasis, and the boundaries of disclosure. Several participants noted that the interview helped them *'connect pieces'* that they had not previously linked. As one participant reflected: *'Nobody ever asked me these questions before. I didn't know I had answers until you asked.'* These moments suggested that the research encounter itself could function as a site of meaning-making.
- Third, the researcher's emotional labour and self-care. As a Ukrainian researcher interviewing fellow Ukrainians about war and displacement, I occupied a position of shared vulnerability. I documented my own emotional responses, including moments of identification, being overwhelmed, and protective distancing, in a separate reflexive journal. This allowed me to track patterns of compassion fatigue and to identify when I needed to slow the pace of data collection. These reflexive notes became data, informing the analysis of how insider positionality shapes trauma research (above in the section *Impact of Refugee Trauma Research on the Researcher*).

The study also aimed to contribute to the preliminary contextual validation of the GMVS in post-Soviet, war-affected youth populations – paving the way for its broader use in conflict-affected regions of Eastern Europe.

STUDY IMPLEMENTATION

Data collection was conducted in two sequential phases between August 2023 and March 2024, led by the researcher. Interviews were conducted in person or via secure video conferencing platforms, depending on participants' availability, location, and comfort levels.

Phase 1: University Students in Germany and Australia (2023)

The first phase focused on forcibly displaced Ukrainian students enrolled in higher education institutions in Germany and Australia. Ten participants (seven women and three men), aged between 19 and 32, were recruited through university mailing lists, diaspora networks, and refugee support centres. All had arrived in the host country after February 2022 and had been residing there for at least six months at the time of the interview.

Most participants were pursuing undergraduate or graduate degrees in fields such as business, engineering, social sciences, and medicine. Interviews were conducted in Ukrainian, Russian, or English based on the participants' preference and lasted between 60 and 100 minutes ($M = 82.5$). Interviews took place in quiet university offices, study centres, or via end-to-end encrypted Zoom sessions.

This cohort shared experiences of disrupted education, legal uncertainty, and trauma related to war, displacement, and identity erosion. Several participants reported initial mistrust or hesitancy about participating in the study but later described the interview as a space for personal reflection and emotional release.

Phase 2: Broader Refugee Youth in Germany (2024)

The second phase, conducted between February and March 2024, expanded the participant base to include ten additional young Ukrainian refugees (six women and four men) residing in various parts of Germany. Unlike the first cohort, these participants represented a more heterogeneous group in terms of education, legal status, and professional background. Ages ranged from 18 to 34. While some were enrolled in integration or vocational training programs, others were navigating unemployment or informal work.

Interviews took place in Berlin, Hamburg, Bochum, and Leipzig, either in collaboration with local NGOs or in participants' chosen community settings. Two interviews were conducted online due to participant mobility and schedule constraints. Language preferences were distributed among Ukrainian, Russian, and English.

This cohort brought diverse perspectives on post-displacement adaptation, with narratives reflecting themes of fractured futures, informal resilience strategies, care responsibilities, bureaucratic fatigue, and the search for belonging. Emotional intensity varied across interviews, with some participants requiring additional time, breaks, or post-interview follow-up.

Preliminary Results and Dissemination of Findings

Preliminary findings across both phases suggest that: (1) Young Ukrainian refugees, regardless of legal status or education level, are exposed to a mix of acute and chronic stressors that destabilize previously held beliefs about justice, identity, and safety; (2) Meaning-making is rarely linear; it often takes place in fragmented, recurring cycles across different stages of displacement and is closely intertwined with the participants' efforts to regain agency and purpose; (3) Psychological adjustment following trauma includes elements of both vulnerability and strength: refugees may simultaneously experience empowerment and despair, growth and grief.

These findings further challenge traditional notions of trauma recovery as a fixed or final state, pointing instead toward a processual, fluid model of adaptation. These themes are developed in the Results section.

The study's results have been disseminated through international academic conferences, journal submissions, and short-form summaries shared with participating organizations and community groups. Abstracts of the key findings were translated into Ukrainian to ensure accessibility for participants and the partner organisations involved in recruitment, including NGOs and Ukrainian student associations.

Results

STRATEGIES TO ADDRESS METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES

Protocol Adaptation

As outlined in the Study Design section above, Park's integrated meaning-making model ([Park 2010](#); [Park & George 2013](#)) posits that psychological distress following trauma arises from discrepancies between one's 'global meaning' – core beliefs about the world, self, and future – and the 'situational meaning' assigned to a specific event. When traumatic events violate fundamental assumptions (e.g., that the world is just, that effort leads to safety), individuals engage in meaning-making processes to reduce this discrepancy. The model distinguishes between 'meanings made' (achieved resolutions) and 'meaning-making' (ongoing processing), a distinction highly relevant to populations experiencing unresolved trauma.

Originally conceptualized within Western clinical settings, this model required significant contextual adaptation to be meaningfully applied to forcibly displaced Ukrainian youth. Prior to implementation, I consulted with Ukrainian psychologists, diaspora educators, and trauma-informed practitioners to assess whether core constructs resonated with participants' lived realities.

Although the conceptual foundations were broadly applicable, specific terms were flagged as problematic. For example, 'global meaning' was perceived as overly academic; Ukrainian equivalents risked sounding either philosophical ('світогляд' / 'worldview') or religious ('сєнс життє' / 'meaning of life'). 'Violation of core beliefs' carried connotations of moral transgression, potentially implying participants had done something wrong. 'Post-traumatic growth' risked pressuring participants to frame suffering as beneficial, inappropriate given the war's ongoing nature. 'Sense of purpose' sounded grandiose to younger participants focused on daily survival rather than existential direction.

Thus, two primary strategies were adopted to enhance accessibility and resonance: First, terminological adjustments were made based on pilot discussions. 'Global meaning' was reframed as 'how you see the world before and after the war'; 'sense of purpose' became 'what gave your life direction before the war – and what gives it direction now'. These adjustments preserved the conceptual architecture of Park's model while enhancing accessibility. The core theoretical relationships remained intact: the underlying constructs were translated into vernacular language, but their relational structure was maintained. This approach aligns with established cultural adaptation methodology, which distinguishes between surface-level modifications and deep-structure theoretical changes ([Bernal et al. 2009](#)).

Second, the semi-structured interview guide was refined to introduce abstract concepts through concrete, personally anchored experiences. Cued probes (e.g., 'Can you tell me about a moment when something important in your life changed?') avoided over-intellectualization and facilitated grounded reflection. These probes elicited narratives organized around recurring focal points: the moment of departure from Ukraine; news of loss or destruction; encounters with unexpected kindness or cruelty; and academic or professional milestones representing reclaimed agency.

Participants were given space at the end of the interviews to reflect on the process. Responses varied but revealed consistent themes. Some described the experience as emotionally demanding but valuable: *'These questions were hard. I cried. But it was good crying – like cleaning a wound'*. Others emphasized the novelty of being asked about meaning: *'Nobody asks these questions. People ask 'how are you?' but they don't really want to know. You asked, and you waited for the answer'*.

Several participants described the interview as helping them integrate fragmented experiences: *'My story was in pieces – the bombing, the train, Germany, university. You helped me see it's one story, not many broken ones'*. These responses suggest that the adapted protocol not only collected data but also, for some participants,

facilitated meaning-making in real time, consistent with literature on the therapeutic potential of narrative research ([Puvimanasinghe et al. 2015](#)).

Recruitment and Participation Dynamics

To uphold ethical responsibility and avoid over-researching already vulnerable individuals, recruitment was conducted through trusted intermediaries, including Ukrainian student associations, NGOs, and community leaders. Introductory sessions were held in informal settings (e.g., coffee gatherings, online discussion groups), where the lead researcher was introduced by familiar figures. These sessions emphasized voluntary participation, confidentiality, and emotional safety. The individual interview format was more acceptable, as it provided a greater sense of privacy, emotional safety, and control over disclosure.

Key challenges in recruitment included:

1. Research fatigue. Several potential participants had already taken part in interviews for NGOs, media, or academic studies and were hesitant to repeat painful narratives.
2. Confidentiality fears. Especially among participants with pending asylum cases, fears about misuse of personal information or misunderstanding of institutional affiliations were common.
3. Time and stability constraints. Many were navigating unstable housing, employment uncertainty, or caregiving responsibilities that limited availability.

Legal status was not used as an inclusion criterion, allowing for greater representativeness of the broader displaced Ukrainian population, including asylum seekers and temporary protection holders. Snowball sampling emerged as the most effective recruitment mechanism, as participants who found the experience validating frequently recommended others and even facilitated follow-up coordination. The combination of one-on-one interviews, cultural-linguistic matching, flexible scheduling, and transparent communication contributed to a high completion rate and a waitlist of interested individuals exceeding the initial recruitment target.

Language and Expression

Language emerged as both a logistical and epistemological challenge in the study. While participants were offered a choice of Ukrainian, Russian, or English, not all constructs, particularly those related to purpose, worldview, and psychological transformation, translated seamlessly across linguistic and cultural contexts. Several participants opted to speak in English, especially in academic settings, but occasionally struggled to access deeper emotional or existential content in a non-native language. I responded in several ways depending on the situation. When a participant visibly struggled to find words or appeared emotionally blocked, I gently offered the option to continue in Ukrainian or Russian: 'If it's easier, you can say this in Ukrainian'. Several participants took this option mid-sentence, switching languages to describe particularly painful memories before returning to English. Some participants moved fluidly between languages within a single response, using English for factual or analytical content and switching to Ukrainian for emotionally material. Rather than interrupting this flow, I followed their linguistic choices and reflected in whichever language they were using at the time. When participants used Ukrainian or Russian words that lacked direct English equivalents, such as 'безнадія' (hopelessness tinged with exhaustion), I asked them to explain what the word meant to them, treating these moments as opportunities for richer meaning-making rather than translation problems. In some cases, participants simply paused when words failed. I resisted the impulse to fill these silences, allowing space for participants to find their own way back into language, or to acknowledge that some experiences resisted verbal expression altogether.

The choice of language often reflected not only pragmatic considerations (e.g., level of fluency or study environment) but also emotional distancing; some participants deliberately used English to maintain a

degree of separation from painful memories. Others, however, preferred to speak in their native language precisely because it allowed for richer, more authentic storytelling. As one participant remarked, *'If I say it in Ukrainian, I feel it again. If I say it in English, I can analyse it'*.

Given the collective trauma and erosion of social cohesion experienced by many displaced Ukrainians, especially in the early months of the war, issues of trust, identity fragmentation, and narrative ownership were closely linked to language use. Several participants described being wary of sharing traumatic stories even with close friends or compatriots. One participant reflected: *'You know, I never talked about this before – not with anyone. Maybe I needed someone from outside'*.

These dynamics reinforced the necessity of creating a linguistically flexible and emotionally safe interview environment, where participants could shift between languages if needed and were encouraged to speak in the language they associated with emotional clarity. From an analytical perspective, I retained original Ukrainian and Russian terms in transcripts with translations in brackets, treating language choices as meaningful data rather than obstacles to overcome ([Temple & Young 2004](#)).

Depth and Quality of Narrative Data

Participants' ability and willingness to engage in reflective meaning-making varied across the two phases of the study. In Phase 1, the student-refugees, most of whom were enrolled in structured academic programs, appeared cognitively prepared to reflect on life disruption, loss, and adaptation in abstract and analytical terms. Despite ongoing stressors, they demonstrated a remarkable capacity to articulate shifts in identity, future orientation, and values.

In contrast, the broader refugee cohort interviewed in Phase 2 revealed a more heterogeneous range of responses. Some participants offered fragmented or circular narratives, especially when describing experiences of loss, war violence, or displacement from occupied territories. Such narrative disruption is well-documented in trauma literature: traumatic memories are often encoded differently from ordinary autobiographical memories, resulting in sensory fragments, temporal disorganization, and difficulty integrating experiences into coherent life stories ([Brewin 2011](#); [van der Kolk 2014](#)). For refugees experiencing ongoing displacement, narrative fragmentation may also reflect the impossibility of closure: the story cannot be 'finished' because the situation remains unresolved ([Eastmond 2007](#)).

In this study, fragmented narratives took several forms: participants would begin describing an event, then jump to a different time period; return repeatedly to the same moment without linear progression; or trail off mid-sentence when approaching particularly painful content. One participant from Mariupol, describing her family's evacuation, circled back three times to the image of her grandmother's hands: *'Her hands were shaking. I keep seeing her hands. We got on the bus and... her hands'*. Rather than treating such moments as failures of articulation, I understood them as meaningful data, evidence of how trauma disrupts the narrative coherence that meaning-making typically requires. These narratives, while less linear, were equally rich in emotional depth and pointed to cumulative, ongoing meaning-making rather than resolution or closure.

Importantly, the interview setting played a critical role in shaping narrative engagement. The individual format fostered a sense of confidentiality and narrative control that enabled participants to access sensitive material. In some cases, participants described the interview itself as a space for cognitive integration, a rare opportunity to pause, reflect, and organize fragmented memories.

Educational background influenced narrative complexity but not narrative depth. Participants with higher education were generally more comfortable with abstract constructs and psychological vocabulary, using terms like 'identity crisis' or 'cognitive dissonance' to describe their experiences. However, participants without academic training often conveyed equally profound insight through metaphor, anecdote, and embodied expression.

For example, one participant from Kherson described her sense of lost identity not through psychological language but through a striking image: *'I used to know exactly who I was. Now I look in the mirror and I see someone wearing my face'*. Another participant from Zaporizhzhia explained his difficulty planning through analogy: *'It's like trying to build a house when someone keeps moving the ground. You put down one brick and everything shifts'*.

These metaphors captured the phenomenology of meaning violation – the sense of groundlessness, the uncanny unfamiliarity of one's own life, with a precision that academic vocabulary might not achieve. Such moments reinforced the importance of attending to how participants expressed meaning, not only what they said.

STRATEGIES TO ADDRESS ETHICS- AND TRAUMA-INFORMED CHALLENGES

To mitigate the risk of psychological distress during the research encounter, the protocol incorporated multiple safeguards tailored to the individual needs of participants. These included: (1) pre-interview briefings about the emotional nature of trauma-related discussions; (2) normalization of emotional reactions; (3) a clear right to pause or withdraw at any point without explanation; and (4) referrals to psychosocial or student support services available in the host country.

During the interviews, participants were gently reminded that emotional responses were valid, and that difficult topics could be approached flexibly. Grounding strategies such as guided breathing, breaks, and gentle topic shifting were used when participants appeared overwhelmed. Several participants, particularly those who had fled recently occupied territories, reported difficulty articulating certain memories. In two cases, participants requested to write about specific traumatic events rather than describe them verbally. One young woman handed the researcher a folded page reading, *'I lost my mother during the first rocket strike. I haven't told anyone until now'*.

Some participants disclosed experiencing pre-interview anxiety, including disturbed sleep or fear of re-traumatisation. One student from Mariupol reported having panic symptoms the night before the interview, stating: *'I didn't know if I could go through it, but I also didn't want to keep everything inside'*. In such cases, interviews were shortened, and the focus shifted to affirming agency and emotional safety.

In one instance, a participant became dissociative while discussing a traumatic loss. The interview was promptly paused, and the researcher shifted to present-tense grounding cues (e.g., *'You are safe now. You're in Berlin. Let's take a breath together'*). No further probing was conducted, and the interview ended early, with a follow-up message offering optional counselling resources.

Several said they had *'never been asked these questions before'* and described the interview as a form of therapeutic release. One participant, after responding to the trauma symptom checklist, paused in tears and said: *'Now I understand. It's not because I'm weak or overreacting. It's because it's trauma'*.

Four participants spontaneously reached out post-interview to share how the experience helped them process suppressed thoughts or unspoken emotions. As one wrote: *'It was hard, but I felt lighter after saying it out loud for the first time'*. Another added: *'People usually want facts or documents. You wanted a story. That meant a lot'*.

Several participants offered to help recruit others or invited the researcher to their community centres, reflecting a sense of reciprocity and ownership over the knowledge being co-created.

IMPACT OF REFUGEE TRAUMA RESEARCH ON THE RESEARCHER

The Researcher as an Agent of Witnessing and Social Responsibility

While this project was designed to protect participants from harm, it also required the researcher to assume the ethically complex role of empathetic witness, facilitator, and sometimes moral responder. In interviewing

forcibly displaced Ukrainian youth, many of whom had endured bombing, occupation, or systemic dislocation, the researcher often navigated delicate balances: between scientific approach and emotional sensitivity, between neutrality and responsibility, and between listening and acting.

The protocol integrated trauma-informed, socially responsive strategies aligned with principles of research justice and participant dignity. These included empathetic validation of suffering and survival, acknowledgment of family and community resilience, holding silence when words failed, and small but human gestures of care, such as following up with participants, asking about their well-being post-interview, or connecting them to services (e.g., mental health providers, Ukrainian-speaking legal advisors, or student peer groups).

These moments, although outside traditional research roles, were ethically indispensable, particularly when working with a community whose sense of being heard had often been denied by institutions, governments, or even humanitarian actors.

Emotional Labour, Fatigue, and Trauma Exposure

As a Ukrainian scholar working with Ukrainian refugees, the emotional intensity of the fieldwork was compounded by personal identification with the community under study. While this insider position helped foster trust and openness, it also heightened the emotional costs of data collection.

Early interviews were deliberately spaced, no more than two or three per week, to allow for my own emotional processing and adequate reflection as the researcher. But sometimes there were two-three interviews per day. This increase in pace, coupled with the repetition of themes such as bombing, death of family members, or life under occupation, led to signs of secondary trauma and emotional numbing in me.

By the later stages of data collection, the researcher noted a diminished ability to respond empathically, shorter prompts, and missed follow-up questions. Feelings of guilt arose around the inability to hold space with the same attention and care for everyone. This echoed findings from previous literature, which describe empathic erosion and vicarious fatigue as common in repeated trauma exposure, particularly in qualitative research ([Dickson-Swift et al. 2008](#); [Coles & Mudaly 2010](#)).

While protective distancing is sometimes necessary for emotional survival ([Hubbard et al. 2001](#); [Rager 2005](#); [Woodby et al. 2011](#)), it also raised ethical questions: How does one maintain respect and attentiveness when the stories begin to echo one another? What does it mean to stop feeling?

Shared Vulnerability, Privilege, and Transformative Insight

Many interviews began with disclosures such as: *'I've never told anyone this before'*. Participants shared deeply personal, often harrowing experiences of fear, helplessness, and shame. Although the research design intentionally minimized probing for trauma details, favouring cognitive and meaning-focused discussion, participants often chose to narrate their most painful memories.

I relied on strategies such as focusing on narrative structure rather than emotional content, scheduling decompression periods, and seeking collegial debriefing. Yet, the emotional resonance of hearing the stories of one's own displacement was at times overwhelming.

Despite the fatigue, these moments also led to unexpected moments of clarity and reappraisal. The researcher frequently experienced a profound sense of humility and gratitude, not only for the trust placed in her by participants but also for the reminder of resilience amid horror, and the reminder of the role of science, not just in analysis, but also in holding space for the human story.

This reflexive stance, in itself, became part of the meaning-making process of this study. Rather than detaching, the researcher found renewed purpose in witnessing, documenting, and amplifying the voices of those who had lost so much – yet continued to strive, study, speak, and build.

Discussion

This study explored the ethical and trauma-informed challenges of implementing a qualitative research protocol with forcibly displaced Ukrainian youth in the aftermath of full-scale war. The combination of complex psychological constructs heightened emotional vulnerability, and cultural-linguistic nuances demanded flexible and ethically reflexive adaptations throughout both phases of the project. Central among these constructs was meaning-making – the process by which individuals attempt to reconcile traumatic experiences with their existing beliefs about the world, themselves, and their futures. Meaning-making was not merely a theoretical framework applied retrospectively; it was visible during interviews. Participants were actively constructing meaning as they spoke – revising interpretations, discovering connections, and sometimes arriving at new understandings mid-sentence.

For example, one participant from Kharkiv began by describing her displacement as *‘the worst thing that ever happened’*, but as she narrated her subsequent experiences – learning German, entering university, forming new friendships – she paused: *‘Wait. Maybe it’s not only the worst thing. Maybe it also gave me something I wouldn’t have found otherwise. I don’t know how to hold both of those’*. This moment captured what [Park \(2010\)](#) describes as the tension between assimilation (changing one’s interpretation of the event) and accommodation (changing one’s global beliefs), a tension that participants often inhabited without resolution.

Similarly, cognitive reappraisal emerged spontaneously in several interviews. A student who had initially described his inability to return as *‘a kind of exile’* later reframed it: *‘Or maybe it’s not exile. Maybe I’m not banned from home – I’m just not ready to go back. That’s different’*. Such moments demonstrated that the interview itself could function as a space for meaning-making, not simply a site for reporting already-formed meanings.

Rather than adhering to static ethical principles such as ‘do no harm’ or strict neutrality, the study prioritized a participant-centred, context-responsive approach, grounded in relational ethics. This included adjustments to recruitment procedures, terminology, and narrative pacing, as well as intentional strategies to create emotional safety and support participant agency. These adjustments, though demanding for the researcher, were essential for facilitating safe self-expression and meaningful data collection in a population navigating collective trauma and fractured life trajectories.

Importantly, the researcher’s insider positionality, a Ukrainian academic engaging with fellow Ukrainians, proved to be both an asset and a psychological risk. It fostered trust and mutual understanding, but also exposed the researcher to heightened emotional labour, ethical ambiguity, and secondary trauma. These dynamics point to the need for research protocols to embed not only participant safeguards, but also clearly articulated researcher protections, including opportunities for debriefing, supervision, and structured reflection. As the data collection intensified, signs of compassion fatigue emerged, leading to an ethical decision to close the fieldwork despite high interest from potential participants.

Findings from both cohorts suggest that, while distress was occasionally triggered during interviews, it was typically transient and proportional to the gravity of the topics discussed. Participant responses to the interview experience varied. Positive experiences predominated: approximately 16 out of 20 participants spontaneously described the interview as helpful, relieving, or clarifying – using language such as ‘lighter’, ‘clearer’, and ‘like unpacking a heavy bag’.

Neutral or ambivalent experiences were reported by three participants, who found the interview ‘interesting but tiring’ or ‘useful but hard’, without framing it as therapeutic.

One participant experienced significant distress, becoming dissociative while describing the loss of a family member during the siege of Mariupol. I immediately paused, used grounding techniques, and offered

to stop. After several minutes she chose to continue briefly before we ended early. I followed up the next day and provided information about Ukrainian-speaking counselling services.

Two other participants cried during interviews but explicitly distinguished this from harm: *'I'm crying, but it's not bad crying. It's the first time I've let myself feel this'*. These varied responses underscore the importance of preparation for the full spectrum of reactions, including protocols for managing acute distress.

For many participants, the interview functioned as a healing experience – a rare opportunity to speak freely, reconstruct disrupted narratives, and reaffirm direction. In several cases, participants expressed new understanding of their own suffering, contextualizing symptoms such as dissociation, fear, or identity disorientation within a trauma framework for the first time. These reflections support existing literature on the therapeutic potential of narrative methods ([Neimeyer 2016](#); [Puvimanasinghe et al. 2015](#)).

The co-production of meaning between interviewer and participant became a powerful tool, not only for academic insight but also for personal growth and re-evaluation. Reclaiming one's story was frequently described by participants as a small but vital act of resistance against the silencing effects of displacement, loss, and marginalisation. In this sense, the research encounter moved beyond information extraction toward a shared act of dignified witnessing.

Recruitment dynamics also provided important lessons. In contrast to traditional focus groups, which proved ill-suited to war-affected populations wary of public disclosure, the individual interview model facilitated greater emotional safety and narrative complexity.

From a methodological standpoint, the need for linguistic and cognitive flexibility was paramount. Sometimes English was chosen by students, others shifted between Ukrainian and Russian depending on emotional proximity to the subject matter. This highlighted the need to treat language not merely as a communication tool, but as an affective terrain – a space where trauma, distance, and intimacy are negotiated.

Finally, the study reaffirms growing calls among refugee scholars and trauma researchers to reimagine research ethics not as rigid frameworks, but as evolving, relational practices rooted in care, accountability, and responsiveness ([Mackenzie et al. 2007](#); [Dickson-Swift et al. 2009](#)). Research with war-affected communities must recognize not only participants' vulnerabilities but also their capacities, voices, and agency. At the same time, researchers – particularly those from the affected community – require institutional and emotional support to bear witness without burnout, and to translate pain into purposeful knowledge.

Conclusion

This study highlights the ethical and emotional complexities of conducting qualitative, trauma-informed research with forcibly displaced Ukrainian youth during an ongoing war. By drawing on two waves of narrative interviews with 20 participants, the project demonstrated that meaningful participation in research can offer participants not only a platform for expression but also a process of reflection, sense-making, and, at times, healing.

Three substantive findings emerged. First, young Ukrainian refugees experience meaning violation across multiple domains, beliefs about justice, safety, and identity, regardless of educational background or legal status. Second, meaning-making is rarely linear; participants described cyclical, fragmented processes of sense-making that ebbed and flowed with news from home, bureaucratic setbacks, and unexpected triggers. Third, vulnerability and strength coexist: participants simultaneously inhabited positions of trauma and resilience, grief and growth, often within the same narrative.

The adaptation of psychological constructs such as meaning-making to the context of Ukrainian displaced persons required significant linguistic, cognitive, and methodological adjustments. Yet these

adaptations did not weaken scientific rigour; rather, they underscored the importance of flexibility, cultural sensitivity, and ethical reflexivity in trauma research.

At the heart of this work lies a dual recognition: first, displaced individuals are not merely subjects of suffering, but active agents in re-narrating their disrupted lives; and second, researchers, particularly those from affected communities, also navigate layered emotional and ethical landscapes that require institutional support and compassionate practice.

Finally, this study underscores the importance of researcher self-care as an ethical imperative, not merely a personal preference. Institutions supporting trauma-focused research must develop frameworks that acknowledge researcher vulnerability, provide access to debriefing and supervision, and recognize that sustainable, ethical research requires attending to the well-being of those who bear witness alongside those who share their stories.

This study advocates for a more relational, justice-oriented model of research ethics, one that recognizes the research encounter as a site of potential vulnerability and empowerment for both participants and researchers. Safeguards must be multidirectional; they must protect participants from harm, but they must also acknowledge the emotional labour of witnessing, especially when it occurs within communities still in crisis.

Future research should continue to explore methods for co-producing knowledge with displaced populations in ways that centre agency, care, and complexity. Longitudinal studies tracking meaning-making trajectories over time, as well as comparative work across different host country contexts, would further illuminate how displaced youth reconstruct coherent life narratives amid ongoing uncertainty. In doing so, scholars can contribute not only to the literature on forced migration and trauma, but also to the broader ethical rethinking of what it means to conduct meaningful, human-centred research in times of war and conflict.

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