

# Protecting Refugee Students' Wellbeing After Research

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## Abstract

This study examines how Syrian refugee children's participation in an ethnographic study affected their well-being, using the premises of attachment theory and listening as care. Three Syrian children, aged 10–12 in Turkish public schools, participated in this study. The data of this study were generated by combining these children's interviews and observations in 2016 and new interviews in 2018. This study argues that the researcher may be the closest option for these children to develop a long and secure relationship because their teachers and the school community provided misguided messages about the researcher's role in the school and these children's expectations from the researcher. Given this situation, the findings of this study suggest that researchers should allocate time after research to understand how their presence affects refugee children and prepare culturally relevant and individualized exit strategies to avoid harming them.

## Keywords

refugee children, narrative inquiry, well-being, attachment theory, relational ethics

## Introduction

Ainsworth and Bowlby's (1991) attachment theory explains that children develop an attachment to at least one caregiver for their usual social, emotional, and personal development. Researchers have examined children's attachment development in different situations such as loss of parents or caregivers, post-traumatic stress, and lack of adequate care to protect children's well-being (Howes & Ritchie, 1999; Juang et al., 2018; Masten et al., 2012; Stauffer, 2008). Being part of a research project is also a situation for refugee children to develop attachment (Scott, 2019; Wihstutz, 2020). It is important to understand whether these bonds are harmful to refugee children and how researchers should develop an ethical framework if they notice that refugee children are into developing attachment.

It is widely known that children develop attachments to other adults in their immediate environment because of various social, cultural, and familial factors (Kaukko et al., 2017; Sullivan & Simonson, 2016; Tyrer & Fazel, 2014; van Ee et al., 2016). However, ethical issues that arise for vulnerable and marginalized children after they participate in research are insufficiently discussed in qualitative research literature. This issue is even more complicated with refugee children participating in long-term research projects because refugee children are likely to develop special bonds with researchers (Scott, 2019; Wihstutz, 2020).

Researchers use various ethical frameworks such as utilitarian, deontological, ecological, and relational ethics to protect human subjects and try to minimize the potential harm (Flinders, 2006). Among those, relational ethics places the human subjects at the center of research to examine individuals' growth and enhance the relationship between the researcher and participants (Noddings, 2013). In this research, I studied the influence of being research participants on three refugee children and used relational ethics because it also included the notion of listening as care. I examined how three refugee children responded to the researchers' ethical frameworks and exit strategies by interviewing them in a long-term research project.

This study originated with an encounter in a mall in 2018, 2 years after completing my research. Ahmad (pseudonym) was one of 28 Syrian child refugees whom I had interviewed in 2016. I did not expect to see any of my earlier participants. However, considering the size of the city with only two malls to go for everyone, it increased my chances of encountering my earlier participants. He was 10 years old when I first met him. Ahmad recognized me before I noticed him. He appeared

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happy to see me and called my name with excitement. However, his happiness did not last long. He began showing anger, yet he seemed hesitant to upset me. I tried to make small talk with him, but instead, he asked me, "Where have you been?" During our short conversation, I told Ahmad that I said goodbye before exiting the field in 2016. Ahmad confirmed that I said goodbye to him but still appeared upset. He asked me to visit him in his new school. I explained that the project was over, and I could no longer see him, but he insisted on meeting again. His insistence signaled that he expected to continue to communicate with me.

This incident with Ahmad made me think about other refugee children who participated in my research in 2016. I questioned if they had similar feelings. Before communicating with the refugee students, I communicated with the Directorate of National Education. In Turkey, it is required to get permission from the Directorate of National Education to conduct any school research or educational activities. After getting research permission from the local educational authorities, I communicated with my earlier participants' former classroom teachers to get their consent. When I reached out to the classroom teachers from my previous study, they told me the refugee children acted as if they were left or abandoned after finalizing my interviews and observations, suggesting separation anxiety and insecure attachment (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). Perry (2001) and Smith and Fong (2004) found that refugee children could develop an insecure attachment in strange conditions such as high parental expectations, child neglect and war. As a result, they could be confused about approaching researchers, be distressed by the separation, and react angry, confused, excited, and dazed upon reunion with the researchers. Perry (2001) explained that parents, and those with whom refugee children developed attachment could reduce separation anxiety by understanding refugee's behaviors and helping these children develop realistic expectations.

When I approached some of the children who had participated in my previous study, their reactions were strikingly similar to Ahmad's. They appeared happy, excited, and surprised. However, when I explained the purpose of the new study, they appeared angry or sad, asking me where I went after the research in 2016 or why I left them. Their reactions seemed to show they expected to continue our relationship after the research concluded. My interests and those of the refugee children did not align, similar to Ali and Gibran's (2020) observations. They found that researchers need to "make difficult choices to live with the ethical discomfiture that remains" (p. 7), balancing cultural and professional norms. Perry (2001) suggested that a transnational approach should be adopted when dealing with traumatized children and adults. As suggested in Perry's (2001) study, I designed this follow-up study to understand how the exit strategies I used in 2016 could be modified to help refugee children develop realistic expectations and healthy relationships with researchers. I sought to examine how these refugee children understood their relationship with me as a researcher and my ethical

responsibilities during and after research. Therefore, the following questions were used to guide this study:

**RQ1:** How do refugee children feel after participating in long-term research and engaging with researchers during data collection?

**RQ2:** How can qualitative researchers use refugee children's post-research experiences to develop a new post-research protocol?

This narrative study systematically inquires about three refugee children's experiences during and after research and their understandings of and expectations from me as a researcher. I argue that recent ethical measures suggested by the university and government ethics committees are not sufficient to prevent possible refugee children from developing an unsustainable attachment to the researcher. Additionally, these frameworks do not have sufficient guidelines for how children's needs for developing a consistent and secure relationship could jeopardize the systematic guidelines. My observations of the refugee children's unexpected attachment development suggest that understanding refugee children's perspectives of participation in a research project is important to avoid the unintended harm caused by unforeseen attachment. Therefore, this study investigates how refugee children feel after engaging with the researcher during data collection and how qualitative researchers can use refugee children's after-research experience to develop a new post-research protocol.

This study addresses these refugee children's longing for establishing a long-term relationship and urges researchers to take time to understand how their presence affects refugee children. The findings help prepare culturally relevant and individualized exit strategies that can help researchers be mindful of emerging ethical issues. Using attachment theory to understand the reasons and patterns of attachment development among three Syrian children during their participation in a research study, I discuss the limitations of relational ethics in protecting refugee children from developing an unsustainable attachment to researchers. I also use Ellul-Knight's explanations on listening as care framework because researchers often use listening as a caring strategy to understand their participants' feelings (Ellul-Knight, 2019). The concept of listening as care helped me to understand the refugee children's feelings and expectations. This study uses refugee children's reflections on their interactions and expectations from the researcher to develop a new post-research protocol.

## Literature Review: Refugee Children's Attachment Development to Researchers

There is not much literature to explain how researchers should address refugee children's attachment. However, some research studies have examined refugee children's attachment to researchers (Kaukko et al., 2017; Sullivan & Simonson, 2016; Tyrer & Fazel, 2014; van Ee et al., 2016). Attachment theory explains that attachment is a form of psycho-social

learning for children. Children develop an attachment to at least one caregiver, such as parents, for their usual social, emotional, and personal development (Ainsworth, 2010; Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). Listening as care points to the necessity of using “a new ethical framework” based on listening (Bath, 2013, p. 361) in understanding young children’s experiences. The following section summarizes the attachment theory’s key premises and the studies explaining how and in which conditions vulnerable and refugee children usually develop an attachment to their parents and/or strangers (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Stayton et al., 1973). It also explains why researchers actively use listening and care interchangeably during data collection processes in constructing an ethical relationship with vulnerable children (Ellul-Knight, 2019).

The following section summarizes attachment theory’s key premises and studies explaining how and in which conditions vulnerable and refugee children usually develop attachments (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Stayton et al., 1973). It also explains why researchers should actively use listening and care during data collection processes with vulnerable children (Ellul-Knight, 2019).

The term caregiver is used in this study. Bell and Richard’s (2000) study is used to provide operational definition. “Caregiver” is referred to children’s parents, close relatives such as an uncle, grandparents, and aunts, and their stepfathers or stepmothers in this study. The term caregiver also includes other people that the child or dependent chose as the caregiver for a potential attachment behavior in their study. Given this, alternative caregivers could be any persons other than refugee children’s parents, such as their classroom teachers, school principals, school counselors, researchers, and social workers, if available in refugee children’s immediate environment or past experiences.

### *Attachment Theory and Refugee Children*

Attachment theory describes attachment as a deep emotional bond that connects one person to another. However, attachment is not always reciprocal (Ainsworth, 2010; Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). Children can become attached to adults without adults’ awareness because children tend to interpret care and support as reasons for developing attachment. Ainsworth and Bowlby’s attachment theory originated in Bowlby’s earlier work on children in a residential school (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Bowlby, 1958; Bowlby et al., 1956). While Bowlby was working with these children, he noticed that some were distant and affectionless with no stable relationship with him. Others were anxious to lose him and followed him around like a shadow.

Bowlby’s observations of children suggest that children tend to become mentally healthy individuals when they experience a warm, intimate, and continuous relationship with their caregivers (Bretherton, 2006). When children are separated from their caregivers, they experience three phases of separation: protest; despair, denial, or detachment; and anxiety, anger, and frustration (Ainsworth, 2010). Separation can happen

differently due to primary caregivers’ ignorance, long hours away, or psychological conditions. Children are likely to protest these situations by showing anger and/or being affectionless (Stayton et al., 1973). In such cases, children may become attached to those who express care for them, such as teachers and social workers in their immediate environment (Ainsworth, 1979a, 1979b; Pianta, 1992). A person who expresses care for them then becomes an ad hoc caregiver and losing contact with this stranger could activate similar separation anxieties for children (Bowlby, 1958).

Attachment theory provides a useful guideline to explain when and how refugee children develop attachment to nonparental adults (Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007; Yohani, 2015). Earlier studies show that vulnerable children like refugee children tend to develop a form of relationships that could serve as an attachment function due to a lack of quality relationships with their parents and other family members (Stauffer, 2008). Wars, conflict and loss, trauma, and several migration-specific stressors are the most common reasons for insecure relationships between refugee parents and children (Howes & Ritchie, 1999; Juang et al., 2018). Attachment is important for younger and vulnerable children because it helps them learn how to form healthy relationships with others in the future and fit into their new environment. Teachers and social workers often undertake this responsibility due to their close communication with refugee and vulnerable children (Tyrer & Fazel, 2014; Verschueren & Koomen, 2012). This form of relationship with teachers, social workers, and researchers is more common in refugee and vulnerable children than those who have secure attachment with their parents because of parents’ post-traumatic stress disorder and different types of familial, cultural, and experiential stressors between refugee children and their parents (Sullivan & Simonson, 2016; Tyrer & Fazel, 2014; van Ee et al., 2016).

Information about refugee students’ attachment to researchers is limited. Still, some studies explain that rapport developed during research cause refugee children to develop attachment to researchers. Kaukko et al. (2017) study showed that researchers can fulfill one or more of three attachment functions for refugee children, which are sense of closeness, safety, and confidence. However, their study did not mention how these children felt after researchers left the field. Recent studies by Scott (2019) and Wihstutz (2020) begin to fill this gap. Scott (2019) observes separation anxiety and separation responses among refugee children when she revisited the field. She explained that refugee children perceived her as a caring adult and called her aunt after they developed a form of relationship. Her study drew qualitative researchers’ attention to the necessity of developing new exit strategies. She also recommended that researchers document supportive attachment figures in refugee children’s environments, as well as continuing to visit them even after fieldwork ends. Wihstutz (2020) mentioned that refugee children in her research developed tactics in relation to their context and situations. According to her, refugee children access resources through their strategic alliance with researchers. She concluded that “the researchers’

role was subject to continuous negotiations and (re-)adjustments, clarifying expectations and juggling with the non-center staff and ‘different-kind-of-adult’ role in the field with the different actors involved” (Allerton, 2020 as cited in Withstutz, 2000, p. 124). In this study, I also played the “different-kind-of-adult” role for the refugee children who participated.

### *Limitations of Relational Ethics for Protecting Participants After Research*

For my earlier research with refugee children, the Institutional Review Board of a U.S. higher education institution suggested my research be informed by mutual respect and consideration. Therefore, I elected to use relational ethics as my ethical framework. Relational ethics considers participants as family members or friends (Lanas & Rautio, 2013; Noddings, 2013). Kaukko et al. (2017) noted that in relational ethics, “both the refugee child and the researcher enter a process of giving, taking, teaching and learning while seeking appropriate, supportive and productive ways of working towards a shared goal” (p. 19). This process helps researchers enter conversations with their participants as they do with their friends or family without highlighting their specific interests. Given the information, I conceptualized relational ethics as building a relationship that allowed my participants and me to be involved in the giving and taking process during research. However, our interaction was bounded by the contractual relationship that I explained in the consent forms. I did not expect that the refugee children would expect to continue communicating with me after research concluded. Additionally, the ethical protocol suggested by the IRB only allowed me to provide email addresses and phone numbers to adults due to its concern that minors should not communicate with another person without their parents’ permission.

While relational ethics focus on important ethical questions of consent, moral conduct, care, and cultural awareness (Flinders, 2006), it does not offer clear guidelines to protect participants when research concludes. Poole (2021) posited that relational ethics provide many benefits during data collection and data analysis because of the relationship established between the researcher and participants. However, he made no mention of how relational ethics focuses on issues of attachment, separation, and closure after research. It is reasonable to assume refugee children involved in long-term research spend structured, quality time with researchers, leading to stronger attachment (Kaukko et al., 2017; Scott, 2019). This could cause refugee children, particularly those who lack a healthy relationship in their immediate environment, to perceive researchers’ attention as special treatment.

Kaukko et al. (2017) suggested using relational ethics because relationships with refugee children “have to be based on empathy, care, and trust” (p. 16) and urged researchers to apply moment-to-moment, socially flexible ethical considerations. Qualitative researchers should build comfort, trust, and rapport with refugee children, yet avoid sensitive topics such as

traumatic experiences and cultural differences (Mitchell & Irvine, 2008) because of refugee children’s lived experiences and inadequate living conditions (Kaukko et al., 2017; Mishna et al., 2004). Additionally, researching children with refugee and asylum backgrounds is controversial because refugee children may have difficulty in understanding the clear boundaries that researchers should use law-first and ethics-first perspectives (Zapata-Barrero & Yalaz, 2020). Withstutz (2020) argues that research with refugee children is challenging because refugee children call for “contextually, temporally and socially flexible ethical considerations” (Kaukko et al., 2017, p. 16, as cited in Withstutz, 2020). Considering the sensitivity of refugee children, the static use of ethical guidelines alone is not sufficient and requires multi-layer post-research ethical dimensions (Hopkins, 2008; Lawrence et al., 2013; Vervliet et al., 2015).

### *Listening as Care and Its Relations With Relational Ethics and Attachment Development*

In relational ethics, listening and being involved in a giving and taking process with research participants are related to the notion of care. In other words, listening and care have are terms researchers use almost interchangeably (Ellul-Knight, 2019). There has been a “growth of scholarly interest in the themes of listening young children” as a form of care (Bath, 2013, p. 361). This new understanding has motivated researchers working with refugees to consciously use listening in data collection to address contextual ethical considerations (Kaukko et al., 2017; Withstutz, 2020). As Noddings (2013) explained, research participants feel care and attention when researchers choose to actively listen, resulting in more trustworthy data.

Researchers have time for refugee children, so refugee children may personalize their interaction with the researchers (Withstutz, 2020). Both Scott (2019) and Withstutz (2020) mentioned that researchers can act as substitutes for refugee children’s primary caregivers because researchers listen, spend time, and help the children learn the local language. Refugee children’s relationships with researchers can be problematic because they form inappropriate attachment to the researchers based on these cues (Kaukko et al., 2017; Scott, 2019).

## **Method**

Clandinin (2006) noted that scholars disagree on narrative inquiry’s epistemological, ontological, and ideological origins. Therefore, she conceptualized narrative inquiry as “the study of experience as story” (p. 45). This study uses her conceptualization and regard experience as a social phenomenon. This study’s phenomenon is refugee students’ feelings of being betrayed and abandoned by the researcher after research as expressed in the stories they shared. They discussed events that included other people in the school, but how these refugee children strategically approached me was the main focus.

I used interactional analysis to examine shifts in the participants’ narratives (Riessman, 2008), combining techniques

such as coding, categorizing, and generating patterns and themes (Kim, 2015) and organizing stories around the lives of tellers and listeners (Riessman, 2008). Therefore, I could identify when, how, and why participants experienced changes in their feelings during their interactions with me. This narrative inquiry study builds on the Deweyan ontology of experience, creating a narrative methodology to study human experience with three dimensions: personal and social space; past, present, and future continuity; and place or situation (Clandinin, 2006). Dewey's ontology of experience is useful to explain how the refugee children's attachment to me began with my presence in the field and why it continued even after I left the field. His explanations of experience acknowledge "the embodiment of the person in the world" and highlight that individuals "cannot be understood only as individuals" because they "are always in relation, always in a social context" (Clandinin, 2006; p. 46). This perspective provides insight into the continuity of individual experiences in time and space. This research addressed the importance of context, personality, and embodiment claims to understand how participants develop experiences by collecting their narratives and observing their strategies to connect with other social actors in the school. This method is appropriate for examining refugee children's attachment to me and why it eventually triggered feelings of separation and loss.

### *Re-Entering the Field*

Re-entering the field to conduct another research with my earlier research participants had its challenges. First, I needed to get new research permission and clearance from the Directorate of National Education in Turkey. I developed a new research protocol and submitted it to the Directorate of National Education in Turkey. In my new protocol, I explained my aim of examining how other refugee children felt after participating in my research in 2016 and reacted to my departure from the field. Within a month, I received a new permission to enter the schools and collect data with the condition of getting consent from refugee children and their parents as I did in 2016. Second, I had difficulty finding my earlier participants and their parents to consent to the new study. I resolved this issue by checking the schools in the neighborhood. Third, in 2016, I applied to the ethics committee in a U.S. institution and the local education authorities in Turkey to follow the regulations for research. However, the Turkish schools were only seeking research permission from the local Directorate of National Education. In 2018, I did not have a university affiliation, but the local directorate's permission seemed sufficient for the schools and parents. Yet, I followed the same consent protocol for refugee children and their parents, as suggested by the U.S. ethics committee for my research in 2016 to re-interview refugee children in 2018.

According to my new research permission from the local authorities, I was allowed to communicate with my earlier participants, including refugee children and their parents, classroom teachers, school counselors, and school principals, to

examine refugee children's experiences of being a research participant in 2016. I reached 10 of the refugee children, their parents, and four classroom teachers from my earlier research participants in 2016. Before interacting with refugee children, I sought consent from their parents to interview their children. All parents gave consent for their children's participation in the new research project. After their parents' consent, I asked refugee children whether they wanted to be in the second phase of my research to understand their feelings about my departure. Among the 10 of them, only Ahmad, Fatma, and Mohamed (pseudonyms) gave consent to be interviewed about why they felt abandoned and what they expected from me during and after research. I also took these children's current teachers' consent to re-interview them in the school. However, their opinions regarding this study's aims were not taken because they were unaware of their students' experiences as research participants.

I used relational ethics to guide my earlier research, but these children's feelings showed the limitations of relational ethics in understanding their perceptions of a healthy closure. Using the premises of the relational ethics as mentioned in the literature, I still used the building rapport and using active listening approaches during the second phase of the study because they were effective in gaining these children's trust and helping them share their experiences. My earlier exit strategies based on relational ethics were informing students 2 weeks before my departure and meeting each of them before exiting the field in 2016. However, I made changes in the exit strategies in 2018. I changed the order of research protocol in the second phase and asked Ahmad, Mohamed, and Fatima how they liked me to exit from the field before the data collection rather than waiting until the end of the research. Through this strategy, I planned to reduce the risk that these refugee children could develop a form of attachment.

### *Research Participants*

This research relied on three refugee children's opinions to explain how refugee children could be influenced after being research participants in a research project. Narrative inquiry requires knowing participants' personalities and backgrounds to examine the link between what they experienced in the past and how they use their lived and learned experiences to form new personal characteristics with the pre-existing ones for future directions. Therefore, I organized participants' descriptions to provide background information about how incidents in the past caused these children to develop attachment to me. Additionally, refugee children's classroom teachers, parents, counselors, and school principals in 2016 could be considered this study's research participants because they were the participants of the 2016 research project, and their opinions and relationships were reflected in children's narratives in 2018.

**Ahmad** was 10 years old and a third-grade student when I met him in 2016. It was his fourth year in Turkey. He had no experience of school in Syria. During my observations, he appeared not to be getting on well with his peers or teachers.

Ahmad was not talkative during our first interactions, but this situation changed one day when I was interviewing him in the school garden. He saw someone outside the school and exclaimed, “Baba [father]” with a frightened expression and hid behind a bench. I stopped the interview, but I waited with him for a while before taking him to the school counselor. I never asked refugee children to share their experiences of trauma, but after this incident, Ahmad started telling me about his father and his troubled household, uninvited. In the following interviews, Ahmad reduced his earlier misbehaviors. He began following me around the school, demanding more of my attention and interrupting my interviews with other refugee children.

**Fatma** was a second-grade student in 2016. She had gone to school in Syria, but her education was interrupted after her father’s sudden death in 2014. She fled Syria with her mother and brother. She could not go to school for a while in Turkey. As her teacher told me, an older Turkish man in their neighborhood helped her and her brother register for school. The same man later married Fatma’s mother and adopted the two children. While I observed Fatma at school, she appeared very ambitious, aggressive, and short-tempered. Unlike some of the other Syrian children, Fatma did not seem to want to engage with me. Later she visited me in the teachers’ lounge to ask how she could become a Turk because she did not understand my explanation. When I explained to her that I was born a Turk and did not become one after coming from the U.S., she began to cry. I explained that she could be a Turkish *citizen* if she wanted. After that conversation, Fatma seemed to treat me as her tutor who could advise her on Turkish citizenship.

**Mohamed** was a second-grade student and eight years old in 2016. He came to Turkey in 2014 with his grandparents and mother. He had only attended school in Turkey. I observed Mohamed to be a talkative and motivated student. He seemed conscious of injustice and very opposed to anyone’s discriminative behavior. Mohamed was often alone and had difficulty fitting in at the school. In one of the interviews, he told me that he had been observing me, and when he realized that I was listening to him and his opinions carefully, he began to trust me. From that point, he shared details about his life without being asked. He told me that he lost his father in Syria, and his mother married another Syrian man after they arrived in Turkey. Mohamed lived with his grandparents because his stepfather did not allow him and his sister to move in with his mother. He saw his mother only twice a month.

### *Research Procedure and Data Generation Procedures in 2016 and 2018*

I followed two steps to gather participants’ stories about being part of the earlier study. First, I reviewed the data I collected in 2016. During that time, I interviewed Ahmad, Fatma and Mohamed three times and observed them in their classroom and school. It included interviews, observations, pictures participants drew, and photographs. I selected some of these to further the conversation with the participants. Second,

I re-interviewed my participants for approximately 1 hour each. In the 2018 interviews, I asked questions about the materials and quotes from 2016 to initiate conversations about what they had expected from me after the research and what they experienced afterward. I then analyzed the two datasets to analyze how the three children developed attachment to and expectations of me.

In both interview processes, I interviewed the participants in Turkish. Additionally, I sometimes used Arabic when refugee children had problems understanding particular words or phrases in Turkish. I did not use a translator during these data collection processes because of confidentiality issues. It might have been useful if I could have conducted the whole interview process in Levantine Arabic, but I could not rely on my local dialect skills for the whole data collection process. After the data collection processes, the data were transcribed and coded in Turkish. The quotes and conversations used in this study were translated into English for reporting purposes. The translations were controlled by other native speakers of Turkish who were proficient in the English language.

### *Data Analysis*

The data collected from the first phase of the research in 2016 were analyzed based on the reconstructive analysis. This analysis provided me with a set of enriched answers about participants’ characteristics, changes in their behaviors, and children’s perceptions of others and their school. Therefore, those findings were used to support the new data set collected in 2018. In addition to the reconstructive analysis, I created an event summary of each participant’s interviews to prepare this data set to be used in the interactional analysis.

As the first step of the data analysis for the second phase in 2018, I created an event summary of each participant’s narrative. These included refugee children’s explanations of feelings about the researcher’s involvement in their lives. I coded each summary for narrative meanings (Kim, 2015). I then grouped the codes and reduced them to categories based on areas of overlap and diversion. I focused on feelings such as security or insecurity, being protected or unprotected, vulnerability, loss, grief, indifference, and anger, as outlined in attachment theory (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Bowlby, 1958; Bowlby et al., 1956). Finally, I compared the similarities and differences among narratives from 2016 and 2018. The three themes generated illuminate similarities in the participants’ attachment during research and separation narratives after research concluded. Narrative analysis helped explain why the ethical guidelines I used to protect my participants from post-research effects failed.

### *Limitations of the Research*

Re-entering the field to conduct more research with my former participants had its challenges. Finding the children took longer than I expected because their school had been demolished in

the interim. However, I found the same school community in a new school building. Some former participants attended the new school, but others had graduated.

In 2016, my research protocol included refugee children, their parents, classroom teachers, school principals, and school counselors. However, in 2018, I only included refugee children because the new study aimed to understand their reactions to participating in a research project to revisit the relational ethics framework's exit strategies. I aimed to reach more children, but I could only reach three children due to the limitations of finding earlier research participants and not getting consent from the other refugee children.

Refugee parents were only included in the new protocol to consent for their children's participation in the new study as refugee children's legal guardians. Their opinions were not taken in 2018 because none of the parents mentioned a change in their children's behaviors after my departure when they read the study information sheet attached to the consent form. I also did not take teachers' opinions regarding the impact of research participation on refugee children because some did not interact with their refugee students after they graduated or changed their schools. Some classroom teachers were not aware of the changes in refugee children's behaviors, even though the signs of attachment development were clear. While I was getting their consent, these teachers mentioned that refugee children always had such problems. The final reason for not including teachers' opinions in the 2018 study was that I could not reach some of my research participants' earlier classroom teachers.

The data for this study were limited to refugee children's narration of their feelings. Another data set to understand how refugee children felt after participating in long-term research could have been collected with other key informants such as teachers and school principals. However, the school community was not aware of the changes in refugee children's well-being after the researcher exited the field. When I was getting classroom teachers' consent to interview these children, some of these people clearly indicated their disinterest in refugee children's emotional and psychological well-being when they returned the consent form. Therefore, this alternative way to identify the impact of research on children would not reflect how children felt after the researchers' departure. Instead, it would reflect how teachers or school principals would possibly evaluate those children's well-being.

This study does not aim to create generalizable knowledge but to alert qualitative researchers to the potential post-research impacts on participants, including feelings of being used or abandoned. It urges qualitative researchers to broaden their ethical framework by building culturally relevant and participant-friendly exit strategies based on the nature of their relationship with their participants. It aims to help researchers consider the potential impact of children's nature and contexts on their ethical guidelines and exit strategies. It serves to create an open platform for researchers to discuss the unexpected outcomes of relationships built on the notion of care and active listening (Ratnam, 2019).

## Findings

Findings from this research produced three themes: (1) signs of attachment development, (2) feelings after research, and (3) expectations after research. These themes provided information about how refugee children signal their attachment during interactions with the researcher and how their perceptions of the researcher affect their psychological and emotional well-being after research.

### *Signs of Attachment Development*

At our first meeting in 2016, these refugee children signaled insecurity, appearing anxious, depressed, distrustful, or unsociable. They ignored me when I wanted to have a conversation with them. In 2018, the three children expressed the same signs of insecurity more strongly than before. When I asked them about their behavior, they said they refused to talk because they thought I abandoned them like other adults had. Fatma explained that she avoided me in 2016 because of her earlier experience with another nonparental adult:

**Researcher:** Fatma, do you remember that you were running away from me when I came to your school. Why did you do so?

**Fatma:** Öğretmenim,<sup>1</sup> I did not want to talk to you. I was afraid. I saw that you were nice. There was a woman like you. You know, in that place [She did not remember the first city where they stayed in Turkey.] One day, we got in a car, and I cried. She said she would come after. She did not come. You did not come, either.

Mohamed and Ahmad also mentioned that the other adults, such as social workers and humanitarian aid workers, abandoned them in the past. Their experience with those people caused them to have trust issues and attachment problems. These adult figures had helped them find refuge, shelter, and protection. Mohamed and Ahmad indicated that when these people left, they were replaced by other adults. The circulation of people that they trusted made them more inclined to develop close relationships with new adults. The refugee children then developed a strategy to find the most available attachment figure. They asked people in the school community to show affection by hugging them, caressing their hair, praising their accomplishments, protecting them, and buying them food and school materials. When they received what they asked from the adults, they perceived these adult figures' behaviors as signs of care and regarded those adults as reliable and worthy of their love and commitment.

Conversely, if the person they asked for help did not meet their perceived needs, the refugee children could swiftly cut off their attachment. Refusals made them shift their attention to other adults in the school. Ahmad provided a typical example of the participants' attitude toward a potential caregiver in the school. In one of my conversations with Ahmad in 2016, I was

trying to understand why he was asking for more attention and getting angry when people refused him:

- Researcher:** Ahmad, do you know why I asked you to have a conversation with me?
- Ahmad:** Because you like me more than other children. That is why you brought me here [the teachers' lounge] the third time.
- Researcher:** No, Ahmad. I like you and the other children. I mean equally. But today, we will talk about disturbing other people . . . Disturbing means that someone is doing something a lot of times, and the other people do not like this attitude. For example, asking for more pencils when someone already has one or misbehaving when a teacher says, "I need to pay attention to other students." [This was a general explanation about disturbing others, but Ahmad immediately began defending himself.]
- Ahmad:** No. No. No. I need pencils. Öğretmenim, my teacher needs to talk with me.
- Researcher:** I see. I was just giving an example. What would you think if all students behaved this way?
- Ahmad:** They don't. Their fathers buy pencils and love them. The teacher said, "I am your father."
- Researcher:** Ahmad, I think he said, "I am like your father." It does not mean that he is your father. Your teacher says it to other students.
- Ahmad:** Then, take these pencils. You give them back to me when I ask, as fathers do. [He tried to hand me the pencils.]
- Researcher:** I am not your father, and I did not say anything like that. What if I don't take them and give them back to you?
- Ahmad:** You don't love me. I will ask him. [He pointed at another teacher in the room.] He loves me. He caressed my hair the other day. [Ahmad ran off and left the room abruptly.]

After this incident, Ahmad followed the teacher he pointed to for about a week to make him caress his hair again. When he was refused after insisting a lot, Ahmad came back to me and said, "Okay, you can talk to other children, and I am not going to ask for more pencils." His failure to win his desired attachment figure made him renegotiate his conditions with me.

Fatma and Mohamed had similar short-term attachment patterns. For example, Mohamed recited poems to different teachers, and Fatma followed people who complimented her on her clothes. Whenever they failed to get attention from others, they came back to me with new conditions. I refused to change my interview protocol, but they always came back with new requests. Mohamed explained why he came back after telling me that he did not want to talk with me:

- Researcher:** I thought you did not want to speak to me. Why are you back?
- Mohamed:** You like my poems and songs. You did not tell me to stop. You told me when you could listen. I know another song. Do you want to hear it?

**Researcher:** I can, but first, we need to talk about other things on my paper.

**Mohamed:** It is short.

**Researcher:** I know, Mohamed, but I need to do my work. As you know, we need to talk first, and then you will have 15 minutes to do something you like, as we talked about earlier. Agreed? [Each refugee child had 15 minutes to draw, sing, play games or rest after each interview. This information was written in my consent form.]

**Mohamed:** Agreed. Öğretmenim, you are like my mother. She used to tell me, "Eat first, and play after your meal." That is why I came back.

**Researcher:** I understand that you think I act like your mother, but I am a researcher. Remember, I told you what researchers do. But I may be like one of the teachers in the school.

Mohamed often compared my behaviors with his mother's behaviors. I tried to explain my role to him as a researcher, but he seemed not interested in my explanations and continued saying that I was like his mother. Ahmad and Fatma also tested me several times as to whether I was a good fit as a caring adult. My data collection procedures made me a perfect fit for their criterion that a person who could be found most of the time was reliable. I was at the school almost every school day, seeing them every 2 weeks and allowing them to have a 15-minute free time after their interviews to work on their favorite activities such as drawing, singing, or reciting poems.

My data collection procedure was a regular protocol approved by the ethics committee called the Institutional Review Board. I was told to add 15 minutes of free time to help them use their agency and establish a non-hierarchical relationship. It helped them to build trust and rapport with me. However, the children also had their subjective views about this relationship and reminding them that our relationship was formal did not change their minds. For the children, this activity time was an opportunity where they could use their agency and control their lives. In 2018, Fatma said: "I liked our activities after we talked. I did whatever I wanted. You did not ask me to answer questions." The other children also mentioned how they enjoyed the 15-minute free time because they had the opportunity to test whether I, as an adult in their lives, could keep my promises. The contractual nature of the interview protocol tacitly communicated that I was a reliable adult, inadvertently strengthening their attachment.

Fatma, Mohamed, and Ahmad were reluctant to talk about their families when I first met them in 2016. However, their attitude changed after they thought that I would be a good fit like a caregiver. As part of my research, I was supposed to meet with their parents in the school and attend parents' conferences to understand how the children's families influenced their schooling experiences in 2016. This information was written in the Turkish, Arabic, and English consent forms. Children and their parents knew that I would talk to their parents or legal guardians. However, right after talking to their parents or legal

guardians, these refugee children began inviting me to their homes and introducing me to their other siblings. I declined their invitations by explaining that those activities were not part of my research. Home visits were important in understanding these children's experiences, but the local authorities did not allow me to visit the children in their homes because of their and my safety. However, they did not accept my response and kept inviting me. One day (May 26, 2016), Fatma pushed the limits when I turned down her invitation. She said, "I will wait for you at home," before we finished the interview. As a regular procedure, I walked her to her classroom with the teacher observing us at the end of the interview. Two hours later, Fatma's teachers rushed in and asked me whether I had seen Fatma. We immediately reported the issue to the school principal. We searched the school and could not find her. I told the principal and teachers that she might be at her home because of what she said to me, and the principal asked her teacher and me to go to her home. When we arrived, she opened the door and rejoiced to her mother, "Öğretmenim came. I knew that she would come."

For these children, the overprotection of their so-called ad hoc caregiver was a sign of attachment and they considered their relationships with their teachers and me as a researcher special. In their overprotective state, they were trying to restrict their classroom teachers' interaction with the other children in the classroom. In 2016, I recorded many incidents in the classroom that Fatma, Ahmad and Mohamed disrupted the activities to get more attention. They also did not want me to interact with the other refugee children. Therefore, they either tried to sabotage other children's interviews or discredited other children by telling false stories about them. Given this situation, I told them to respect other refugee children's time. They responded positively, but they did not stop their behavior. They instead changed their behavior. As the other refugee children who participated in my research in 2016 indicated, they began threatening other children with my departure to make them behave as they wished. Fatma and I had a lot of conversations about her behavior toward other children in 2016. In 2018, I asked her to listen to one of these conversations. She reflected on it:

**Researcher:** What do you think about our conversation?

**Fatma:** Öğretmenim, you were closer to me than other refugee children. I did not want them to see you because they were making you sad. You also loved me more. We met more than Yeliz, Rasa, Ousama, Mohamed . . .

**Researcher:** (I interrupted her conversation). I would like you to look at something. (I pointed my interview schedule with her). If you do not understand, please let me know. In this paper, I wrote the number of conversations that I had with you and others. The number of meetings that I had with you is not more than the others.

**Fatma:** Öğretmenim, I did not want you to see them. They were making you busy, and you could not see me more.

**Researcher:** I understand, but the other children also needed to do the same. Nobody made me busy because it was my responsibility to see all of you.

**Fatma:** Öğretmenim, I told them not to make you sad because you were sad when I told their naughtiness to you. I protected you as you protected me.

**Researcher:** I do not recall that you told me about the others. We were talking about your days at school. Do you want to listen to our conversations?

**Fatma:** No, I don't. You did not say, but I knew that they were making you sad.

Fatma admitted that she threatened other refugee children and tried to reduce the number of meetings with them. However, she claimed that she was protecting me from the others and did not consider her behavior wrong. Mohamed and Ahmad also had a similar sense of protecting me, but they used aggression to keep other children away from me. Mohamed said, "We had only had 45 minutes. I did not want to share this time with them," to explain his aggressive reaction toward other children.

One question on my 2016 interview protocol was, "What would you do or change if you had a magic wand?" Their responses suggested that they wanted to extend their relationship with me to the future. Ahmad, for example, mentioned, "I would buy gifts for you. You would stay at my house. We would not have fathers. We would eat *lahmacun* (a round, thin piece of dough with minced meat spread). There would be a big one, and there would be a small one. You could have the big one if you want." Fatma dreamed about going back to Syria together: "You would take me to Syria in a car. I do not want to walk again. There would be only my mother, my brother, and you."

Mohamed said, "My grandfather and grandmother would make you a bed. We would read poems together. We would fight against Assad." These responses indicated that the children developed an attachment despite my efforts to remind them that our relationship was contractual for the research purposes. These responses also showed that Ahmad, Mohamed, and Fatma retold a different version of their past, intending to fix the separation and loss problems by replacing their previous caregivers with their new ad hoc caregiver. School counselors were also one of the most reliable sources for these refugee children. When I interviewed the school counselors in 2016, I brought this issue to their attention and explained that these children developed a form of attachment with me. School counselors told me not to worry because this behavior was common among refugee children. They mentioned that they heard different versions of these children wished to include them in their lives when they were talking with refugee children about their experiences or using interventions to overcome their trauma.

During our interviews in 2016, these refugee children drew symbolic pictures, told stories, and wrote notes to show their attachment and how they would feel after someone left them. For example, in one of our conversations, Mohamed drew a broken heart and then put a bandage on its right side. When I

asked him why he drew this picture, he said, “I put a bandage on my heart with you.” Ahmad made up stories about going to zoo together with me after school was over. Fatima wrote stories about how I would continue seeing her next year. These pictures, notes, and stories showed that they knew that I would leave the school sooner or later. They were trying to change my mind by creating sympathy or indirectly persuading me to stay. When I told them that I was supposed to leave in June, they ignored me and continued including me in their art and literary products. Their teachers and school counselors also showed me a lot of art materials like those received in 2016. They complained that they were often overwhelmed with the refugee children’s demands and persistent care demands. The children’s previous ad hoc caregivers, such as school counselors, mentioned that they were happy that the children chose to replace them with me.

My departure as well as the departure of other adult figures in refugee children’s past life, made these refugee children feel hurt and broken because they lost one of their most reliable people in the school. In 2018, I asked them whether they had difficulty understanding our roles as researchers and participants. They accepted that the instructions were clear. However, as Fatima said, “I thought I could make you stay.” Ahmad admitted that he was intentionally misbehaving to make me think that he needed me. Mohamed mentioned, “It was good to have you to talk about how I experienced the school. The others did not care, so I tried to get their attention. I did not need to get your attention. You were ready to listen.” Their responses indicated that they tried to develop strategies to persuade me to stay.

### Feelings After Research

During our interviews in 2018, the participants explained that they formed a special bond with me because I was available, ready to listen, and did not skip my meetings or forget my promises. They were not articulate about how they developed an attachment to me. However, they were articulate about how they felt after I left the field for the first time. Fatma explained:

- Fatma:** Ögretmenim, it was terrible. You left, and I did not want to play with anyone. They (other refugee children) made you angry, and you left me. My teacher was bad, too, because he did not stop you. I was angry at you. I told myself that I was not going to talk to you. I yelled at everyone when they talked about you.
- Researcher:** I am sorry to hear that. It must be tiring to be angry all the time.
- Fatma:** I was also quiet. I was sad. I did not eat, as well. My mom is always sad when I do not eat. Do you know I did not eat? This makes you sad, doesn’t it?
- Researcher:** I am sorry about your feelings. Did you tell anyone how you felt?
- Fatma:** I told it to Nuray Ögretmenim [the school counselor] because she asked me. She was still in school.

I finished that school, and she is still at the school. I can see her whenever I want.

Ahmad and Mohamed also expressed that they experienced protest, despair, and denial after exiting the field. Fatma was aggressive; Ahmad mentioned that he began manifesting his earlier disruptive behaviors; Mohamed said he returned to his critical and reserved manner. Each refugee child experienced separation phases based on their characteristics. As I understood from their stories, they, particularly Fatma and Ahmad, pushed the people around them away and chose to be alone. They overtly said, “I did not want to join their play; they asked me to be part of games like I did before; my teacher told me to sing if I wanted,” and all these stories ended up with a closing statement of “but I did not want to.” After my departure, they did not want to trust other adults for a while.

During my interactions with the refugee children in 2016, I also collected information about their academic progress in the school. It appeared that their grades increased after our communication started. The other refugee children, who developed secure attachment with their classroom teachers or school counselors, also had higher grades in comparison to their times with no significant relationship with an adult figure. I was curious to know what happened to these refugee children’s grades after my departure. The school principal mentioned that the year after my departure, their grades for essential subjects such as math and science were lower than the previous year. The school principal also said: “Refugee children perform better when they have a person taking care of them. I think this is how they pay back to their teachers.” Later, in 2017–2018, the three children’s academic work improved again because they began receiving care from different people. For example, the school counselor Nuray helped Fatma overcome her feelings of abandonment; Ahmad became close to the school principal; and Mohamed was finally transferred to his favorite teacher’s class. Once the children were happy with their new caring adults, they started showing progress in their school subjects.

Their old school was demolished due to the gentrification process in early 2018, and they began going to a different school. Still, the refugee children could see their previous ad hoc caregivers if they wanted to. This time, they had the opportunity to experience a healthy departure. They understood that a departure could be an ordinary situation in life rather than forced and unpleasant. Mohamed expressed that he was happy to see his old classroom teacher whenever he wanted.

- Mohamed:** I can go back to my old school and visit my teacher. He feels happy when I see him, and I feel happy, too.
- Researcher:** Do you know that he is going to retire? It means that he will not teach later.
- Mohamed:** I know. He will not teach. He told me it is called retirement. He explained to me that people usually work for a while and then stop working. I was going to my old school. I grew up, and now I go to a school with bigger children. I am retired, too.

**Researcher:** Your situation is called graduation. I have a question for you. Why didn't you think that my departure was like your teacher's retirement when I explained to you that I need to go to America?

**Mohamed:** Ögretmenim, you left before I took my Karne [grade report]. I can also see him whenever I want. I know he is there whenever I need it.

As understood from the above conversation with Mohamed, by 2018, the refugee children had developed a sense of what healthy closures meant for their relationships with their ad hoc caregivers. In Mohamed's case, his graduation and the continued availability of his teacher made the separation acceptable. Like Mohamed's understanding of relationship closure, Ahmad and Fatma did not feel separation or despair when they initiated the departure. My departure was out of their control, and it had some similarities with their past departure and loss experiences. Fatma said, "I was not ready when you left. It was like the time when we left Syria. I was not ready. Do you understand?" Ahmad said, "You could have stayed longer until there was someone else. The other teachers did so. They helped me to find other teachers." In other words, my timeline of the research and interview protocol was not their concern because these children did not like departures that other adults initiated. They wanted to have a sense of control over their life.

### *Expectations After Research*

My exit strategies for my research project in 2016 indicated when and how I would leave the field. These strategies included informing participants about the end of the research and giving them my contact information for further communication. I also visited them in their classroom and had a final meeting to thank them and explained my departure protocol and how they could reach me. Ahmad, Fatma, and Mohamed criticized my exit strategies because they claimed that I did not explain them well. They said they wanted to have a personalized explanation because they perceived our relationship as special and personal. Therefore, my effort to explain the contractual nature of our relationship was meaningless for them. Ahmad explained that he wanted me to prepare him for my departure emotionally:

**Researcher:** Can you please tell me what I should have done before I left?

**Ahmad:** You should not have left. You should have always told me that you would leave. It was like coming to Turkey. My father told me, and we came to Turkey. I did not want to come, but I did.

**Researcher:** Are you saying that you did not feel ready when I told you that I was leaving?

**Ahmad:** Yes. I did not want you to go, but you needed to go. Maybe, your father also told you to go, and you could not tell me. I could not tell my friends that I was not going.

**Researcher:** Ahmad, that is an excellent point. You are right. I should have given more time to explain the necessity of my departure.

Ahmad wanted to have personalized communication about my departure because his experience of departure from Syria was different than other refugee children. As he mentioned, his departure from Syria was abrupt. Therefore, he tried to justify my departure by thinking that I might have been forced to leave. The other refugee children also wanted the departure process to be special for them. For example, Fatma wanted me to spend some time at her house with her stepfather and mother. Mohamed wanted me to give him new books and poems to keep him busy in my absence. Fatma's request seemed unrealistic due to my ethical responsibilities, but Ahmad's and Mohamed's suggestions helped me think about alternative exit strategies designed specifically for these children's characteristics and expectations.

My departure was 2 weeks before the end of the school term. Mohamed said, "Why didn't you leave after I received my Karne (grade report). I would not have been sad because I know people leave after Karne day." Mohamed's comment helped me understand that timing of the departure was important as well as the personalization of my departure for each refugee child. As Fatma said, "If I had shared my Karne with you, I would not have felt sad." Among them, only Ahmad did not propose a clear exit strategy that would make him happy. However, it seemed that the end of the school term or their graduation time would be helpful for them to prepare themselves for a better separation based on their responses.

The refugee children also mentioned that individual interviews made them feel special. This situation was the root cause of their attachment and feelings of being deceived after the research concluded. In our meetings in 2018, I told them that I treated everyone equally and showed my interview questions as proof of my standard interview procedure. Mohamed responded, "You should have seen me with Mosa, Fatma, Ahmad, and Abdul [the names of other refugee children] if you were also seeing them. I just thought that I was more special than them." Fatma complained, "Why did not you tell me that you asked the same questions to everyone?" Finally, Ahmad snorted, "You asked me some different questions, right? I was not like the other children for you." He did not want to think that he was treated the same as the others. Their answers led me to think that I, sometimes, should have interviewed them with other refugee students to avoid giving them a false sense of specialness.

As the final step in our story exchanges, I asked the children what my role should have been in the school. They answered that I should have acted as a personal teacher for them as their teachers told them. This question revealed that the children received a wrong message from the school community without my knowledge. Fatma's explanations showed that classroom teachers also created a misconception about my role in the school, influencing refugee students' sense of being special to me:

My teacher told me to go to you. He said that you were there for me. I asked the same question to him [“How can I become a Turk?”] He told me that you were the one to answer my question, and you also came from America as I came from Syria. You were the teacher for children like me, but first, you were my teacher.

Thus, the school community encouraged the refugee children to develop a misunderstanding of my role. Therefore, the refugee children had already formed the idea that I was in the school to cater to their special needs before I told them about my role as a researcher. It seemed that the classroom teachers did not want to provide special attention, so they imposed a new role. When I told the children that I did not know what their teachers said about my role, they responded that they ignored my explanations, and I should have helped them find another person to take care of them as their teachers had. Mohamed’s explanations showed that refugee students got used to being sent to another nonparental adult when the previous person could no longer cater to their needs:

**Researcher:** Your teacher told you to read your poems to me because I was only here to listen to your poems? I did not know anything about this.

**Mohamed:** Ögretmenim, he listened to my poems and stories a lot. Then he said to go to Nuray Ögretmenim. Then Nuray Ögretmenim said, you are the teacher for me.

**Researcher:** But you were always sent to another person. I was not the only one.

**Mohamed:** But you were a teacher for Syrian children. My teacher said so. I need to read poems. My grandparents do not understand Turkish, and they say, “Speak Arabic,” and “Ya Ilahi [Oh, my God].” They do not like these poems. I am happy when there is someone to listen to and see what I do.

The refugee children were accustomed to changing their ad hoc caregivers if another adult or previous caregiver assisted the process. Therefore, they thought that being sent to me was normal. Additionally, their teachers’ explanation about my role as a teacher for Syrians or refugee children influenced them to ignore my explanation of my real role as a researcher. First, their teachers’ words served the children’s agenda to find an adult to provide attention and care. Second, the discourse finally made the children feel they were special and belonged. The children seem to have learned from their interactions with teachers that someone should help them find a caregiver or have better options. That may be why they tended to switch caregivers in a cyclical attachment pattern. The refugee children assumed that I already knew about this cyclical pattern and would help them find their next caregiver.

## Conclusion

As the findings suggested, the refugee children’s attachment pattern lacked consistency because they experienced loss and abandonment in their journey from Syria to Turkey and during

their interaction with other people after resettlement. Their attachment was usually ambivalent and disorganized—they did not feel safe, supported, and loveable and sought assurance and attention. Such children lack a strategy to continue a secure expectation (Stauffer, 2008). They develop strong feelings of being let down and can become suspicious of strangers (Eruiyar & Vosyanis, 2020). Thus, participants were trying to find a secure connection with an adult figure but appeared to feel their strategy was not effective.

Additionally, the findings showed that refugee children’s attachment pattern was cyclical: they found someone and got used to that person, and then that person pushed them away or sent them to another potential caregiver. The children experienced loss or separation at that moment, feeling deceived and angry. Then, they cycled back to their non-attachment phase, and finally, they restarted the attachment process. The school staff unintentionally reinforced this cyclical pattern. Classroom teachers’ and counselors’ characterization of the researcher as a private tutor or personal teacher for refugees disrupted the relational ethics as planned for the research. During interactions with these refugee children in 2016, I repeated that my role was to listen to them, understand their stories and added that I was not their personal tutor or teacher. However, the other adults contradicted my attempts to define myself and my relationship with the children. Relational ethics, therefore, were insufficient to frame a successful exit strategy when there were other social actors in participants’ lives. Given the impact of contradictory definitions of a researcher, this study suggests working in coordination with the other adults in the field to provide consistent messages about researchers’ role in refugee children’s life during the research. As seen in this study, these definitional contradictions may influence refugee children’s attachment with the researcher. The findings of this study inform researchers about refugee children’s motivation for finding an ad hoc caregiver and pattern and suggest using flexible, timely, and contextual exit strategies if they want to use relational ethics for their research.

Refugee children’s cyclical attachment pattern should not mislead researchers to think that it is a natural phenomenon or that such children easily recover from researchers’ departure with whom they worked closely. The results suggest that refugee children might feel depressed and insecure every time they experience loss or detachment. Refugee children may long for special bonds more than the other children because of their traumatic background and lack of a secure caregiver. Consequently, researchers’ lack of attention to refugee children’s attachment patterns may result in the exploitation of vulnerable participants and intensify their feelings of loss and separation.

Flinders (2006) defined relational ethics as a participant protection framework that suggests “research be informed primarily by respect and consideration for those we seek to understand” (p. 1). According to relational ethics, researchers should enter a process of giving, taking, teaching, and learning with participants while seeking appropriate, supportive, and productive ways of working toward a shared goal (Kaukko et al., 2017). One can argue that telling refugee children how you leave is not the matter; the matter is entering a relationship with them that

places them at the center of the research and enhancing the relationship between the researcher and participants like a member of a family and a friend, as Noddings (2013) suggested in her approach of building relational ethics based on care. However, this argument ignores participants' agency, lived experiences, desires to build humane connections, and external factors such as the other people around the participants, who can impose ideas about the researcher's role in the field. Qualitative research that requires multiple connections with multiple actors in the long term always carries the risks that participants develop their own agenda and expectations despite the researcher's perfect ethical protocol to "do no harm."

These refugee children's expectations of me developed because they longed for a secure relationship and others' encouragement to perceive me as their personal teacher, demonstrating that researchers cannot control every element of the research context. However, researchers can observe the changes in their participants' behavior and act to minimize potential harm. For example, as part of my relational ethical framework, I stringently avoided any relationship with refugee children outside school. I explained my role and drew the boundaries. Yet, the refugee children challenged our earlier negotiations, talking about their personal lives without being asked, violating school rules, and even obliging me to visit them at home by running away from school. Refugee children's expectations for the researcher may change over the research period, and the nature of their expectations is important for building exit strategies and post-research guidelines. Therefore, researchers' post-research protocols should be built with specific refugee children's expectations and signs of attachment in mind.

There were also moments where students had misunderstandings about the language that people use. For example, when one of the teachers said, "I am like your father," Ahmad took it literally. I perceived this misunderstanding as a language problem that refugee children could experience in school in those moments. Therefore, classroom teachers and I did not notice how refugee children began developing attachment because I limited myself to the research protocol. I realized how refugee children could react to strangers' presence and departure after I encountered Ahmad in the mall. After this realization, I initiated this new protocol to reflect on how researchers could fail to see the ethical minefield using rigidly constructed research protocol and contextually problematic ethical framework.

In summary, this study suggests that researchers working with refugee children should be cautious about their study's social context and participants' individual needs. Researchers should inform their ethics committee that they may need to alter their approved ethical guidelines due to participants' emerging expectations. Alteration in research protocol should not be limited to anticipated physical or psychological harm. It should extend to covering unexpected risks such as attachment and expectation development. As was illustrated in the findings, refugee children, like other children, might develop new behaviors and expectations based on their observations of social interactions in their environment. As one of the potential

social learning sources for refugee children, researchers should have post-research ethical guidelines and exit strategies before commencing research and modifying them as needed. Guidelines and exit strategies could protect refugee children from the emotional toll of abandonment and the dangers of developing antisocial behaviors post-research. They will also help refugee children overcome the loss and abrupt departure of their previous caregivers or ad hoc caregivers by experiencing healthy closure of a relationship after research. Researchers working closely with refugee children should still avoid ambiguity by being as explicit and direct as possible with their participants. However, they should also be flexible because this role is often forced to go beyond the boundaries anticipated when the research was planned.

### Author's Note

I have the ethical approval from the Institutional Review Board at Indiana University, Bloomington and the Ministry of National Education in Turkey. I collected the data in Turkish and translated the transcribed data in English for this study. Upon request, I can provide the code table.

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### Note

1. "My teacher." It is a formal address, and it includes formality rather than affection or possessiveness. Students, particularly at the elementary level, use to address teachers in the school settings.

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