



Institute for
Global Prosperity

A Relational Ethics of Care for Citizen Social Science Research

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Introduction

This paper considers the entanglement of personal and professional life in community-based research and proposes ways to expand the ethical responsibility of participatory research. The Working Paper does so on the basis of shared reflection on community-based research in the West Bank, carried out between UK and Palestine-based researchers, both before and after October 2023. The team was forced to adapt to a volatile and traumatic context while sustaining collaboration. Joint reflection revealed dynamics relevant for participatory research, especially in conflict-affected contexts.

We argue that the professional and simultaneously personal nature of Citizen Social Science requires greater attention and specific practices of care. It relies on researchers' lived experience. The situations faced by Citizen Social Scientists (CSS) in our case revealed, on the one hand, how their investment and participation in the research process is shaped by their whole selves. The research relies, often in unspoken ways, on Citizen Scientists' personal motivations, networks, and experiences. At the same time, the research also affects the 'personal' realm, including identity, emotions, social relations, and family responsibilities. We highlight in particular the reputational risk that Citizen Scientists' personal investment in the work bears, as well as the impact on researcher well-being it may have.

This understanding of the intertwined nature of the personal and the professional role of the community researcher bears several important implications for how researchers conceive of ethical collaboration and risk management – beyond the confines of institutional protocols. We conclude by proposing a number of principles grounded in this understanding of the personal-professional nexus in participatory research: enabling ongoing dialogue on power dynamics, project design, motivations and emotions; accounting for lay researchers' community-facing role; as well as providing pastoral support.

Project Background

Our research project¹ was conceived to co-produce local understandings of prosperity and the 'good life' in Ramallah, within the context of settler-colonial occupation (Veracini 2015). The team was comprised of 3 UK-based academics and 7 Palestinian CSS based in the West Bank (2 and 5 of whom, respectively, chose to co-author this paper). Working with two experienced researchers with whom the PI had a long-standing collaboration, five further researchers were recruited in mid-2023 via the networks in Birzeit University, particularly through the Institute of Women's Studies. Recruitment was based on demonstrated motivation to engage in community-based research, alongside some research experience. All CSS held at least a Bachelor's degree and most had prior research or professional experience in the public or NGO sector. A weeklong training in September 2023 introduced the project aims, research methods, as well as ethics and risk management protocols. CSS refined the research questions and co-developed an interview guide, which they translated into local Arabic dialect to ensure contextual relevance.

The seven Palestinian CSS conducted an initial round of interviews in Ramallah in late September and early October 2023. As violence rose to unprecedented levels on 7th October, the research team observed dramatic shifts in the communities in which they carried out research. Based on discussions within the team and feedback from the CSS, the methodology therefore had to be significantly adapted. CSS completed a second round of interviews in September 2024 to trace the impact of the genocide in Gaza (Amnesty International 2024, HRW 2024, Verdeja 2025) and escalating violence in the West Bank (Beirut Urban Lab, n.d.) on respondents' views and aspirations.

The collaboration between the UK project leads and the Palestinian researchers was put to the test immediately after 7th October.

For the CSS, as for many Palestinians, this time was marked by distrust vis-à-vis international actors, who generally appeared to support Israel's violent response. Initial messages from the UK team focused on ensuring researchers' safety and pausing/adapting activities in light of the severely degraded situation, while CSS wanted to focus on personal experiences of collective pain and loss, causing a sense of misalignment. Some CSS therefore voiced frustration, which was exacerbated by delayed salary payments and lack of in-person interaction due to travel restrictions. The internal discussions emerging from this moment of strain prompted the process of joint reflection that underpins this Working Paper.

Methodolgy and Approach

The paper is grounded in collective reflection and collaborative writing by the co-authors. Hanna Baumann, Dareen Sayyad, Reema Shebeith, Nawal Hamad conducted the literature review and were joined by Manar Younes, Isra Assaf, Christopher Harker in two bilingual workshops. Hanna Baumann drafted and revised texts on the basis of the emerging reflections, in an iterative process, with all co-authors commenting and editing drafts. CSS further wrote vignettes about their experience to illustrate key points – these have been included as block quotes throughout this Working Paper, to reflect the dialogic nature of the writing process. Most of these reflections were submitted in English; one CSS's reflections were translated from Arabic to English then shared for final signoff to ensure it captured the intended meanings accurately. The work draws on moments of adaptation, disagreement, and emotional reflection to examine how collaboration was negotiated and sustained amid extremely challenging circumstances.

¹ Part of the ESRC-funded project 'Transforming Financial Inclusion to Finance Inclusive Prosperity in Ramallah, Palestine' (Project Reference: ES/W006863/1).

“I think this sentence marks a key turning point – the focus on “moments” captures our lived, team-based experience, in contrast to the usual emphasis on “findings” tied to formal research protocols.

As we elaborate later in the text, before the war, the project followed a system we were used to. But after the war, that system no longer served us. It wasn’t just about producing results anymore – what became central was how we engaged with the process, the meanings behind the terminologies, and the depth of our emotional and ethical reflections.

As a team, we found ourselves navigating between fundamentally different worlds. On the academic side, formal research is governed by institutional protocols, terminologies, and expectations. On the ground, however, those frameworks often collapse – they can’t hold the depth of our lived experiences, emotions, or ethical dilemmas. We weren’t just translating between languages, but between entirely different conceptual systems.

This disconnect is what made writing together so difficult at times. The research protocol often expects neutral, depersonalized language, while for us, everything was personal. A very clear illustration of this tension – between personal conviction and institutional responsibility – is the statement by former U.S. State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller, who said: “Israel committed war crimes in Gaza, but I was obliged to express my administration’s position, not my own.” This highlights the limitations placed on what can be said when speaking on behalf of an institution.

Similarly, in our research, there were things we couldn’t say in interviews – not only because of security concerns, but because the institutional framework of participatory research isn’t yet equipped to handle such truths. This is exactly where the boundaries lie: between what we know, what we feel, and what the system allows us to express.”

- Isra Assaf

The paper contributes to a growing literature on the ethics of collaborative research (Lenette et al. 2019), especially in volatile and conflict settings (Jentsch & Pilley 2003, Shanks & Paulson 2022). In conversation with this work, we show that a crisis like armed conflict magnifies tensions in participatory research, revealing challenges of trust, positionality, and care that are always in play. These insights are therefore also valuable for research beyond the confines of Citizen Social Science and in less volatile settings. As such, the paper contributes to ongoing discussions on ensuring the increasing use of participatory approaches in Geography is accompanied by the necessary epistemological shifts and political commitments (Wynne-Jones et al. 2015).

The personal-professional nexus in Citizen Social Science

The inspiration for this paper draws on the feminist adage ‘the personal is political’ (Hanisch 1970). This phrase suggests that private experiences – such as family dynamics or emotional life – are political in nature, as they reproduce broader social hierarchies and systems of oppression. Political structures, in turn, shape ostensibly private matters – like self-presentation, financial autonomy or access to healthcare – especially for less privileged individuals. In a similar way, Citizen Social Science relies on the entanglement of personal and professional dimensions, as researchers bring their lived experiences, networks, and identities to the work. The following section shows how project success depends on these personal factors, and how the work in turn affects private lives.

Research relies on Citizen Scientists’ personal contributions

Unlike conventional forms of Citizen Science, utilised primarily in the natural sciences and entailing mainly data collection, Citizen Social Science engages citizen researchers in developing research questions, methods and analysis, ensuring relevance to the local contexts in which they live and work (Mintchev et al. 2024). From the point of view of professional researchers and their institutions, it offers access to diverse perspectives, hard-to-reach publics and local knowledges that can enhance research outcomes (Jallad et al. 2022), also by making them more societally relevant (Mumelaš & Martek 2024). These important contributions are grounded in CSSs’ private lives: Their decision to get involved in research in the first place is shaped by their personal trajectory and identity, their social networks

facilitate the access on which community-based research depends, and the skills they have acquired beyond the research allow them to navigate difficult research situations.

a) Personal motivation to contribute to research

In order to engage non-professional researchers, Citizen Science must offer them tangible benefits, particularly since these are often volunteer roles, or paid on a casual basis as in the case of this research. Participants in Citizen Science research may have self-directed or altruistic motivations, and motivations may change over time (Kragh 2016, Ngo et al. 2023).

Initially, most CSS on the team were driven by the prospect of enhancing their research skills, seen to enable further employment and educational opportunities. The Citizen Social Science approach in particular, including involvement in formulating research questions and methods, was a draw for the Palestinian researchers. Over the course of the project, however, the work took on a heightened meaning for the team members. The impact of Israeli attacks on Palestinian knowledge-production, including the obliteration of Gaza’s 12 universities, caused the CSS to view their work in the context of ongoing ‘scholasticide’ (Agha et al. 2024, Dader et al. 2024, Hajir & Qato 2025).

“I must admit that before the genocide in Gaza, research felt like an adventure I was eager to pursue – driven by a passion for inquiry, even when the path was uncertain, often controversial, and at times unsettling in its conclusions. I believed I was simply navigating my own way to investigate, interrogate, and reveal facts. But as I immersed myself further into this journey, I began to realise that my motivation ran deeper – though I couldn’t fully articulate it at the time. It wasn’t until the Gaza genocide began, bringing with it the widespread destruction of educational institutions, the targeting of universities, and the killing of scholars, professors, students, and teachers – including two close friends of mine who were promising researchers in the field of economics – that the deeper purpose of my research became clear.

Research, for me, is not only about academic exploration. It is a moral and ethical responsibility to my community – to speak to their rights, their struggles, and our collective reality under a settler-colonial regime that has endured for over seven decades. In line with decolonial traditions of knowledge production, I see research as a political commitment: to stand for the rights of my people – and all people – in alignment with the globally recognised ethical responsibility of researchers to serve justice, give voice to the silenced, and help transform the concept of a “good life” from theory into lived reality.”

- Manar Younes

A professional development opportunity therefore became both deeply personal and political. For the CSS, involvement in the research beyond the initially-planned time scope and under much more difficult conditions was closely tied up with their identity as Palestinians, and viewed as part of an effort to fight against epistemic erasure.

“I viewed our persistence in conducting interviews, gathering data, and documenting Palestinian experiences as an essential act of resistance and steadfastness (sumud) against attempts to silence Palestinian voices and erase Palestinian narratives.”

-Reema Shebeita

Most team members were initially driven by the prospect of improving their research skills to enhance future educational and employment opportunities. However, following the October 2023 war, the research team observed a notable shift in motivations, both among interview participants and within the team itself. It became increasingly clear that participation in the next phase of the project could not simply be explained by career-oriented aspirations. The urgency to document violations and contribute to the production of knowledge rooted in people's everyday experiences under occupation emerged as a compelling motivation – even if it was not the original reason for joining this new round of research. We felt that this shift could not be overlooked, as it represents an ethical and epistemic necessity imposed by the new reality. On a personal and collective level, we, as a research team, felt that perceptions of the ‘good life’ among participants have clearly shifted since the war. The circumstances of the conflict have fundamentally reshaped people's priorities and basic needs.

This transformation has also affected the research team itself, as we recognized a significant gap in continuing the research without taking this new post-war reality and its deep impact on people's lives into account.”

-Dareen Sayyad

b) Personal networks for participant recruitment

Citizen Social Science relies on the positionality and personal connections of lay researchers, who are able to access ‘hard to reach’ groups as peers (Den Broader et al. 2018), thereby lowering thresholds of contact and trust that external professional researchers might face. Our project sought localised insights at the neighbourhood level and therefore built on the Palestinian researchers’ knowledge of and networks in those communities. The interviews were arranged to cover a spread of areas in the Ramallah-al-Bireh conurbation. CSS recruited in neighbourhoods where they had existing ties, often their own or former places of residence. Dareen Sayyad explains how trust relied on long-established relationships:

“For me as a local researcher, building relationships with the community I live in has been essential – not only as a means of gaining access, but as a way of entering people's hearts before their homes. Through years of volunteering in schools and working across various jobs in Ramallah, I developed a wide network of connections. These included former students, parents, local colleagues, and friends of my husband – many of whom offered strong support for my work and readily agreed to participate in the research or facilitate connections in their neighbourhoods. One particularly striking moment of trust occurred in Al-Am’ari refugee camp, a space known for being wary of outsiders. A participant from the camp offered to drive

me around in his car, so that people would see me with him and understand that I was not a stranger. In Palestinian refugee camps, it is common practice for residents to stop unknown visitors and ask them to identify themselves, as a way to protect the privacy and safety of the community. His gesture was not just an act of personal kindness; it was a form of social endorsement that helped make the camp a safe space – for me, and for the integrity of the research.

This experience reflects what I see as a central pillar of ethical and situated research in occupied contexts: knowledge production must be grounded in relationships of trust and accountability. It also became clear, especially after the October 2023 war, that research engagement could no longer be reduced to professional development or data collection. In contexts where people's everyday lives are profoundly shaped by violence and political rupture, building trust is not only a method – it becomes a political and ethical responsibility.” -Dareen Sayyad

c) Lived experience shapes ad hoc responses in unpredictable research settings

Citizen Social Scientists bear significant responsibility for adapting their research approaches as they see fit. As Jallad et al. (2022) note, the knowledges and skills that CSS need to contribute meaningfully to research are often ‘already present within the team’ prior to formal training. Especially in dangerous research settings, the safety and success of research relies strongly on local researchers’ past experience and adaptability in uncertain circumstances (Doyle & McCarthy-Jones 2017, Vlassenroot 2006).

Conducting fieldwork in the West Bank, especially after 7th October 2023, presented distinctive risks. While institutional risk assessments were developed and continuously updated with input from CSS,

in concrete situations, Palestinian researchers relied on informal risk-assessment methods rehearsed during years of fluctuating security situations, such as word-of-mouth and social media to share information about danger at checkpoints and on inter-city routes, military invasions, or violent attacks by Israeli settlers.

Local researchers often had to make judgement calls on the spot, as the conditions on the ground could change quickly. Dareen Sayyad, for instance, had to abandon an interview in a refugee camp when she became aware of an impending invasion by the Israeli army.

“One of the central concerns that surfaced from the data collection process in conflict areas was the task of prioritization in the context of security risks. At times the researcher was between a rock and a hard place, the between of conducting the interview despite clear signs of danger or “getting the most” from the interview while ensuring that the participants were in a safe and stable place.

In such a scenario, ensuring safety of researcher and interviewee was always given a priority over securing the interview at any cost. It was obvious that information collected under unsafe circumstances or because of military risk won't necessarily be accurate, precise intelligence gathered in a safe place. For instance, if they are threatened for security reasons or if individuals are troubled by anxiety for their own safety, the researcher can potentially fail to control the dialog or to take the most accurate information to serve the research endeavour.”

-Dareen Sayyad

Others encountered interviewees disclosing sensitive information and chose to promptly steer the conversation away from topics that might pose future risks for them. Isra Assaf did so as she felt

that even some previously commonplace information shared by interviewees had become more sensitive. She noted that certain topics, however ‘central to people’s lives’ had to ‘remain unspoken during interviews’, reflecting a heightened environment of arrests, surveillance, and harassment in the post-7th October context.

“This section connects directly with [my] reflections – particularly around the types of information that often remain unspoken during interviews. This silence isn’t only due to security concerns, but also because research protocols and institutional structures are simply not equipped to receive or respond to such information. There’s a deeper question here: what kind of knowledge is the system prepared to engage with, and what kind is it not?”

Additionally, because we often know our participants personally or are embedded in the same communities, there’s an unspoken agreement – a sort of silent contract – about which topics should not be raised. These topics are sometimes central to people’s lives and their sense of well-being, and yet we collectively avoid them because they fall outside what the research system can safely or meaningfully accommodate.

Another layer is the fear that sharing certain information might cause harm rather than bring support. I remember that our research protocol included a clause about possible institutional intervention if a participant shared something requiring help – but in practice, we know that such support is often absent because systems of accountability on the ground are weak or non-existent. This disconnect is critical and deserves further attention in how we reflect on the ethics and

limits of participatory research in these conditions.”

-Isra Assaf

Although work in pairs was part of the original risk protocol, several CSS completed their interviews individually, as reflection sessions later revealed. In some cases, this was due to scheduling difficulties; but more importantly, researchers often preferred to conduct interviews alone, anticipating that participants might distrust outsiders and where cultural norms required male relatives to be present if women were interviewed by men. At the same time, CSS developed innovative workarounds to enhance trust. As Manar was unable to travel to Ramallah due to the security situation, for instance, Nawal hosted interviewees at her house, serving them coffee and providing a safe, welcoming atmosphere as Manar interviewed them via Zoom.

These ways of coping with high levels of risk relied on knowledge CSS had developed living under Israeli occupation their entire lives, and for many came automatically, as they were extensions of everyday navigations of insecurity and uncertainty.

“It is important to focus on the concept of real “risk” when we discuss safety measures for local researchers in the context of ongoing wars and conflicts. When a local researcher is asked to describe the level of risk while traveling between roads, for example: “A normal day, just one roadblock. “There is gunfire but we are used to hearing it.” Indeed, as I mentioned, many times local researchers have become accustomed to the risks as a result of their frequency in conflict zones, leading to lax or negligent identification of the real risks that may threaten their lives or safety. This may include getting used to the constant presence of the military and settlers, and ignoring real signs of danger, which is something that needs to be carefully considered and discussed.” -Dareen Sayyad

The tools used to increase the sense of safety and ensure successful interviews relied on implicit rules of behaviour and were often only articulated during the joint reflection sessions with the UK researchers, indicating the level of individual responsibility CSS took conducting their research.

Research affects Citizen Scientists’ personal lives

Not only does community-based research rely deeply on lay researchers bringing their personal motivations, networks and skills to the work – conversely, the research also impacts on Citizen Scientists’ lives beyond the scope of the project. The positive impacts of participation in Citizen Science for lay researchers are widely discussed and include increased knowledge of a specialist subject, research skills, enhanced scientific literacy, and increased sense of community (see Volten et al. 2018 p. 351f for an overview of evidence). But ‘extreme’ forms of Citizen Science involving participants in all stages of the research process also bear a higher level of complexity and risk (Chiaravalloti et al. 2022, Haklay 2013). The relative novelty of the approach results in a lack of ethical regulations addressing the power imbalances, Citizen Scientists’ dual roles as both objects and subjects of research, as well as their non-employee status (Tauginienė et al. 2021), especially in work with vulnerable groups (Adams & Moore 2007). While CSS emphasised the positive impact of the work in terms of new friendships and support systems within the team, we use this section to highlight two understudied risks: the reputational risk associated with representing a project to one’s own community as well as questions of psychological safety which may originate from factors beyond the project but can be affected by the research.

a) Reputational risk

While the CSS’s strong ties to their communities enabled collection of data that outside researchers would have struggled to access, the reliance on their personal networks also generated risks, as they came to be seen as representatives of an external

agenda.

The Palestinian researchers’ affiliation with an international research project heavily influenced how they were perceived by participants. There has long been distrust of foreign institutions in Palestine, and this only deepened with the onset of the war in Gaza (see Mshasha 2024). For local researchers, whose personal lives are closely bound up with those of their participants, this presented a significant challenge. Nawal Hamad, for instance, was accused of collaborating with institutions that were perceived as complicit in the occupation, facing accusations like that of a participant who refused to take part in a second interview: ‘The University of London is supporting genocide in Gaza, and now you want us to give our information to them!’ She reflects on this experience:

“As a Palestinian researcher working with a British university, I find myself in a thorny and doubly dangerous situation: While I may be subject to security prosecution simply for documenting daily life under colonialism and settlement, my community is suspicious, even accusing me of betrayal or concession. They view this collaboration as a betrayal or a concession, as if working with a foreign institution completely negates the essence of our work in exposing the brutality of this occupation. In their view, I have become a “beneficiary” seeking academic status, or a “naive” fooled by Western rhetoric disguised as scientific research to obtain information and data that will help facilitate genocide.

I know that collaboration with Western universities carries contradictions, but it is also a struggle for survival. Using the tools of the same epistemological system to undermine the legitimacy of colonialism is an epistemological victory. Research here is not an academic luxury, but rather an act of

resistance and accountability to the international community using its tools. This task is daunting! How do we translate our oppression into the language of knowledge and international politics? How do we articulate our suffering in the language of numbers and reports? Perhaps this is the most difficult task: to maintain our humanity while being forced to transform our pain into “standard-responsive data.” The truth is not told once, but a thousand times, in a thousand places, and in a thousand ways. Until the day comes when the researcher is not questioned about his patriotism, but rather his work is measured by the extent of his contribution to the liberation of his land and his people.”
-Nawal Hamad

When recruiting participants, CSS are often asked to explain the benefit that participation offers their communities, or justify approaches taken, especially where research fatigue is common.

“This also reflects our direct experience as researchers embedded in the community. Many participants are already familiar – even exhausted – with being involved in research projects. This isn’t the first initiative they’ve encountered, and often, they’ve seen little or no tangible impact on the ground. While participation might sometimes offer a temporary space for emotional release, many people express a sense of resignation, saying things like: “Maybe the university will benefit, but we know nothing will change here.” This scepticism stems from a long history of extractive research practices and unmet promises, which places an added layer of responsibility on us as researchers who remain present in the community even after the project ends.” - Isra Assaf

If research is completed without the promised or hoped-for impact for researched communities, Citizen Scientists, may also be deemed responsible.

b) Impact on well-being

Researchers exposed to violent or emotionally taxing situations face the risk of psychological trauma (Woon 2013). They develop coping techniques (Manohar et al. 2017), but this additional emotional labour can take a heavy toll on their well-being (Warden 2012). Fenge et al. (2019) therefore argue that institutions have a responsibility to support researchers in managing emotional risks as much as physical ones.

Witnessing the genocide in Gaza unfold, while also seeing their local communities under increasing attack, left CSS in a state of deep emotional pain, with some experiencing loss of appetite, inability to concentrate, and what Dareen Sayyad called ‘psychological torment’.

“As a local researcher, it was not easy to acknowledge the deep psychological impact of witnessing and documenting the daily violence. For a long time, I resisted the idea of seeking any kind of psychological support, believing that speaking about anxiety or negative emotions in such a context was a luxury I couldn’t afford. But as the exhaustion deepened – accompanied by loss of appetite, inability to focus, and emotional detachment – I realized I could no longer maintain even the minimum level of mental stability required for fieldwork. Eventually, I agreed to attend sessions with a psychological counsellor. The decision was not easy, but it was necessary. Talking about fear, helplessness, anger, and anxiety was not only a way to release pressure it became a step toward inner recalibration. Fortunately, the research team’s leadership recognized the emotional toll and facilitated access to free counselling sessions, creating a

space to process our pain collectively and individually. I came to understand that caring for my mental health did not conflict with my commitment to the cause; rather, it strengthened my ability to continue my role as a reliable witness.”

-Dareen Sayyad

In this time, several team members prioritised caring for their families, especially to shield children from the impact of the violence (Hamad 2023).

“As a Palestinian mother and a social science researcher, I experience daily the weight of the simplest tasks of motherhood as a gamble in the face of practices of erasure and identity obliteration. Motherhood here is not merely a social role; it is a double burden: caring for children and family, ensuring a livelihood in a fragile and shattered economy, and preserving family identity. In this context, intimate moments of motherhood, such as singing to children or telling grandmothers’ stories, are transformed into an act of resistance to preserve identity in the face of a colonial system that seeks to erase memory. Here, “steadfastness” becomes a condition for remaining in the homeland.

In a context where even our breath is besieged, “daily resistance” becomes a necessity. We confront displacement attempts, the effects of settlement, the siege of cities with iron gates, passage through military checkpoints, and the temporal and spatial restrictions they impose on our movement, draining our physical and emotional energy. As mothers, we pay an indescribable physical and psychological price. Getting to work, not missing a day of work, which is our sole source of income, or visiting our extended

family sometimes exposes us to practices that degrade our human dignity. These practices are carried out by soldiers at a military checkpoint, whose presence has created a distorted geography. They may close the checkpoint, forcing us to take very difficult and remote roads, exposing us to the danger of brutal settlers on the roads. Nevertheless, I continue to resist, not because I am “strong” in the romantic sense. Strength here is not a choice, a luxury, or a response to empowerment and gender equality programs. Rather, it is a tool for preserving survival and national identity. Weakness here means a double erasure: of family and identity.”
- Nawal Hamad

In practical terms, the project accounted for the significant toll the violence took on CSS by continually reviewing timelines and risk protocols in line with CSS’s suggestions and the changing situation on the ground. To address emotional distress, professional psychological support sessions (in Arabic) were offered virtually, based on recommendations from another CSS team working through traumatic circumstances. The team members who took up this offer said it allowed them to process their difficult experiences, despite the stigma that mental health support carries in Palestinian society, with Manar Younes describing it as ‘one of the project’s greatest gifts.’

“Over time, we come to realise that, whether consciously or not, we are shaped by the cultures of the societies into which we are born and raised. This influence becomes evident in our daily behaviours – individually and collectively – and in how we respond to the situations we experience. In prolonged colonial contexts such as Palestine, certain concepts become even more complex to accept and apply meaningfully on the ground.

One such concept is mental health. For many Palestinians who have lived through the Nakba, the Naksa, and successive uprisings – or belong to families who have – mental health is often seen as a luxury they cannot afford to consider. Faced with more urgent priorities, such as survival and protection from the daily violence of occupation, it is unsurprising that the topic is frequently dismissed or viewed as a sign of weakness – an indulgence incompatible with the strength required to endure long-term struggle. This perception remained with me until the genocide in Gaza began. It was then, as a researcher, that I realised fulfilling my role required strength – and that strength includes caring for my own mental health. I accepted the support offered by my university without hesitation, only sharing my experience once I had completed it. I began by speaking to project colleagues, then with close friends.

I don't claim to lead a mental health awareness campaign, as that demands sustained and structured effort. But I did contribute to creating a sense of safety around me: a recognition that tending to our mental well-being is not weakness, but strength – and a responsibility we owe ourselves in order to serve our communities and causes, wherever we are.”

-Manar Younes

The emotional support addressed pain caused by the broader context rather than the research activities themselves, but it also allowed CSS to regain stability and continue working, and supporting others, despite the challenging circumstances. However, other CSS felt that this was not the right time to strengthen psychological coping mechanisms:

“At that moment, I personally found it difficult to retreat into personal coping mechanisms while others around me were struggling to secure even basic physical safety. I had already developed ways to care for my mental well-being, but during that period, it didn't feel like the right time to focus inward. What supported me most was participating in a collective holding of pain – being present with others, trying to make sense of what we were all experiencing together. For me, tangible, physical safety in the face of relentless violence felt more urgent and louder than the psychological toll of the massacre. Emotional processing wasn't separate from the collective experience – it was embedded in it.”

-Isra Assaf

Conclusion: Accounting for the Personal–Professional Nexus in Participatory Research

As Citizen Social Science draws its depth and richness from the lived experience and personal capacities of Citizen Scientists, it must also reckon with the impact of research on their personal lives. In contexts where lay researchers are asked to bring their whole selves to the work – benefiting the research through their private motivations, personal networks, and lived experiences – the responsibilities of research leads also extend beyond professional parameters, into the private and affective domains.

This reconceptualisation necessitates an ethics of collaboration and care that is not solely defined by institutional protocols but is understood as a relational and ongoing process – shaped by context, vulnerability, and the unpredictability of conflict-affected environments (Bhattacharya 2014, Knott 2019). The challenges that emerged from this project allowed us to productively address tensions arising from our differing positionalities, and some of this paper's authors have expanded upon themes arising by asking how we might 'decolonise' Citizen Science (Younes et al. forthcoming). This project took place in the extreme context of settler-colonial occupation and genocide, but its experiences nonetheless offer important insights for participatory research more broadly. We propose here a range of principles and approaches which account for the links between the personal and the professional in Citizen Science research.

Open dialogue across the personal/ professional boundary

Our experience underscores the need to embed structured opportunities for shared critical reflection at every stage of a project, particularly where research is undertaken under conditions of volatility. As others have suggested, such regular 'health checks' (Rüfenacht et al. 2021) must attend not only to methodological rigour, but also to the emotional and political dimensions of research practice (Krause 2021).

First, participatory approaches often aim, or claim, to level the power dynamics between full-time academics and lay researchers (Lewenstein 2022), but in practice, these dynamics are shaped by structural inequalities – particularly in international collaborations, where funding flows and historical inequities determine research agendas (see Abu Moghli 2023 and Giacaman 2023 on how this manifests in Palestine specifically). In our case, the outbreak of outright war exposed and intensified existing asymmetries of security, decision-making and financial dependency. Participatory research must acknowledge that it does not erase inequality; it can magnify the uneven distribution of power and risk unless addressed explicitly.

Second, regular discussions around methodological adaptations and the effectiveness of risk management strategies offer a space to interrogate what is working, what is not, and what may be incongruent with local needs or shifting political realities. In the case of this research project, these discussions enabled a range of adaptations to the research methodology, including a second round of interviews, proposed by CSS.

Such practices were critical to building and sustaining trust, and increased local researchers' sense of ownership.

Third, attention should be paid to the evolving motivations of both academic and citizen researchers. These are often shaped by intersecting identities, lived experiences, and changing research contexts. Creating space to revisit motivations can assist project leads in recognising emerging tensions or unmet needs, and identifying directions for more productive partnership.

Transforming lived experience into academic text requires significant translation that must be acknowledged and negotiated by all parties involved. During interviews and collaborative analysis, the terminology and frameworks used are shaped by different systems of knowledge production. This creates a gap: not of trust, but of epistemological grounding. It's crucial for social scientists, especially those coming from different cultural or academic traditions, to understand that they are engaging with a fundamentally different knowledge base. This doesn't mean that one is more or less valid – but rather that concepts, motivations, and even the meaning of certain terms are informed by distinct social, historical, and political realities. The way knowledge is structured and expressed in the global North often reflects a particular temporal and institutional evolution. In our context, however, terms and frameworks carry different cultural weight and implications. This must be respected and accounted for in collaborative research, not only as a matter of ethics but as a core component of rigorous methodology. A protocol acknowledging that we only ever access a partial truth – shaped by these differences – could be a valuable addition to future projects.” -Isra Assaf

Creating space for acknowledging and productively addressing these tensions, in turn, can contribute to more enduring collaborations, which can further trust and enhance the local relevance of research outputs (Mintchev et al. 2024). In our case, CSS's motivations to contribute to the research shifted post-October 2023. Reema Shebeith explains how the project sought to offer opportunities that addressed the changed needs and motivations of the researchers, who were keen to share their observations with a global public in light of the silencing of Palestinian viewpoints:

“The university's response to our situation provided additional crucial outlets for this resistance through scholarship. We were given opportunities to engage in academic writing about our circumstances, which proved to be incredibly meaningful and therapeutic for our team (cf. Shbita 2023, Sayyad 2023, Hamad 2023). This academic platform allowed us to articulate our experiences as researchers operating under genocide in scholarly terms, transforming our trauma into knowledge production and ensuring our voices reached academic audiences worldwide. Furthermore, UCL organized dedicated discussion groups specifically designed to address our current situation as researchers working within the context of scholasticide and genocide. These university-sponsored forums created formal academic spaces where we could discuss the unique challenges of conducting research under such extreme circumstances, validating our experiences within institutional frameworks and demonstrating the university's recognition of the extraordinary conditions we faced.”
- Reema Shebeith

Fourth, structured opportunities for emotional reflection – particularly in group settings – are vital, as they acknowledge the significant impact the 'personal' can have on the research work, and

because they reflect a team's collective responsibility for all members' well-being. In our collaboration, candid expressions of fear, anger and helplessness created a sense of solidarity among team members based in Palestine and the UK, despite the geographical and experiential distance. Regular check-ins about well-being beyond the project activities via informal channels further reinforced that these were not solely professional relationships. As Reema Shebeith observed, the honest engagement with the uncertainty caused by war ultimately led to deepened team relationships:

“The emotional reflection sessions (through our meetings) became a crucial lifeline for our research team, serving both as a methodological necessity and a form of collective healing. These sessions were particularly concentrated during our meetings with the UK-based researchers, who demonstrated genuine emotional, human, and academic interest that went far beyond mere formality. Their authentic engagement and care had a profound impact on our ability to continue the project, as we felt genuinely supported rather than simply managed from a distance. Operating under the unprecedented psychological pressure of witnessing genocide in Gaza while experiencing escalating violence in the West Bank created unique challenges that traditional research protocols had not anticipated. The daily reality of living under siege – where team members worried about family safety, navigated military checkpoints, and processed the constant threat of home invasions – inevitably affected our capacity to maintain academic objectivity and research focus. However, rather than viewing these emotional responses as obstacles to overcome, our UK colleagues strengthened and deepened understanding.

I consistently advocated for the critical importance of continuing our research work precisely because of the extreme circumstances we were facing. I viewed our persistence in conducting interviews, gathering data, and documenting Palestinian experiences as an essential act of resistance and steadfastness (sumud) against attempts to silence Palestinian voices and erase Palestinian narratives.

During moments when team members questioned whether academic work could feel meaningful amid such devastating violence, I emphasized that our research represented a form of intellectual resistance - a way of asserting our right to exist, to be heard, and to contribute knowledge about our own lived experiences to global academic discourse. By insisting on the scholarly and political importance of maintaining our research activities this helped reframe our academic work from a potentially extractive exercise into an act of cultural and intellectual survival, demonstrating that Palestinian researchers would continue producing knowledge and contributing to global conversations even under the most severe attempts at suppression.

-Reema Shebeith

Protecting lay researchers’ role in their communities

Participatory research should attend carefully to the role of CSS within their own communities. As intermediaries, they often assume reputational risk that extends beyond the formal boundaries of the project. Their embeddedness as part of the community – crucial for gaining access and legitimacy – can also expose them to political and social repercussions. While community-led research often aims to achieve positive outcomes for communities, plans for these longer-term impacts must also consider potential negative side-effects, and how community researchers might be affected by them. We argue that research design must anticipate and mitigate such risks, on an equal level to risks usually considered in formal and institutional processes, such as those to physical health. Particular attention must be paid to how CSS wish to frame their involvement in the research and relationship to institutions. Clear strategies should be put in place for preventing potential harm, including reputational damage or other negative social impacts.

Pastoral care and professional support

Finally, pastoral care should be recognised as an integral component of ethical research collaboration. When lay researchers are drawn from communities facing (structural) violence or working in precarious contexts, their well-being cannot be treated as ancillary. Full-time researchers lack the skills to provide adequate psychosocial support and should seek professional assistance where needed. Based on the benefits to members of our research team, we strongly recommend that counselling services be made available to all team members exposed to physical or emotional risk, whether during or beyond the research encounter (Caretta & Jokinen 2017).

In the longer term, researchers utilising participatory approaches should also enable the sustainability of collaborations by creating salaried positions among community researchers and support local communities to lead self-directed projects by directing research funds to them (cf. Mintchev et al. 2024). If participatory research is to genuinely benefit from the lived experience, situated knowledge, and emotional labour of Citizen Scientists, it must also assume responsibility for the wider consequences – affective, relational, and political – of that collaboration. This entails a sustained commitment to care, reflexivity and accountability that extends well beyond the immediate demands of data collection.

“To establish new methodological foundations for ensuring the quality of research in dangerous contexts and to develop ethical and scientific standards, we need to be more sensitive to:

- *The specificity of research work in dangerous contexts, focusing on “research work under occupation”*
- *Existential threats to the researcher and the researched*
- *Ethical controls that treat risk not as a marginal variable but as an inherent element of research work in dangerous contexts.*

Such a framework needs to also better recognise:

- *the vulnerability of local researchers*
- *the rights of participants and researchers to protection during and after research publication*
- *and the psychological costs to researchers in fieldwork.”*

- Nawal Hamad

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