

Reflections on Ethics in Research with Older Displaced Persons in West Timor: Considering the “Time Effect”

Victoria Kumala Sakti, Deastry Yulita Taek

Abstract

The perspective of time towards migration and displacement has emerged as a key research interest. However, less attention has been granted to the role that time plays in shaping methodological and ethical considerations in research settings. This paper develops this point by reflecting on the authors’ research process with older East Timorese adults living amid ongoing displacement conditions for over two decades in West Timor, Indonesia. Examining their ageing experiences provides insight into what it means to live through displacement over time and space. However, older people are among the groups of displaced populations considered most vulnerable, requiring the researcher to consider particular methodological sensitivity. This paper argues that understandings of time, reflexivity and the ways lives are linked in relation to people’s later-life experiences in exile can provide useful tools for dealing with ethical and pragmatic dilemmas.

Keywords: Research ethics, older persons, displaced persons, time, life course, reflexivity, vulnerability, East Timorese, West Timor, Indonesia

Introduction

In a poignant reflection on the relationship between time and the refugee camp, Yousif M. Qasmiyeh, a Palestinian poet and scholar of Refugee Writing, declares that “the camp is time” (Qasmiyeh 2020: 61). By “camp”, he refers not only to material objects and a place, but also to “the people who live in the lapse of camp’s time”, including “the bodies yet to be born” (ibid.). The perspective of time on migration and displacement processes has indeed become a key research interest.

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Scholars writing on forced migration have focused on such aspects as migrants' experiences of waiting for legal status,¹ existential immobility or "stuckedness" (Hage 2009), and the long-term and experiential dimension of displacement as an ongoing condition.² Less attention, however, has been granted to the role time plays in shaping methodological and ethical considerations in research with people living through displacement.

This paper develops this point further through a reflection on our research process on the experiences of older East Timorese adults who have resettled in West Timor, Indonesia. In 1999, widespread violence broke out in their places of origin in present-day Timor-Leste following its vote for independence from Indonesia. The violence forced 250,000 people to cross the border into Indonesia. Over twenty years later, those who chose to remain in West Timor continue to live in the former refugee camps where they first arrived or have moved to resettlement sites and local dwellings and obtained Indonesian citizenship. Nevertheless, their living conditions in the present continue to reflect their displacement pasts, shaped by poverty, inequalities and uncertainty about the future (Sakti 2022). While the East Timorese displacement-turned-resettlement case cannot be immediately compared with that of Palestinian refugees living through statelessness and dispossession for over seven decades, as described by Yousif Qasmiyeh above, their respective experiences of "rupture" (see Holbraad et al. 2019) continue to reverberate across time, space, and generations. We are interested in the ways in which ethical research can be done in places where the echoes of violence endure. Specifically, we aim to demonstrate how research and analysis of older East Timorese adults' experiences can provide unique insights into what it means to "live in the lapse of camp's time" (Qasmiyeh 2020: 61).

Older people are among the groups of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) considered to be most vulnerable (along with children, women at risk and people with illnesses or disabilities, among others). Yet popular and policy discourses often ignore the perspectives of older refugees (Delgado et al. 2013). While we recognise the vulnerabilities that are often associated with this population group and those that shape the context of our research, these do not always reflect the way older East Timorese interlocutors see and present themselves. Older East Timorese adults are often the main breadwinners and caregivers of their families and take on leadership roles in the community. Nevertheless, we also recognise the intertwinements of factors such as old age, poverty, memories of violence and loss, illnesses and declining cognitive function that may place older interlocutors at a disadvantaged position. In research settings, these conditions compel methodological sensitivity from the researcher.

1 Cf. Brun 2015, Gil Everaert 2020, Griffiths 2014, Horst / Grabska 2015.

2 Cf. Feldman 2018, Ramsay 2017, Sakti / Amrith 2022, Von Poser / Willamowski 2020.

This article draws on ethnographic research, conducted separately and collaboratively between the two authors, with various East Timorese groups in West Timor. Victoria Kumala Sakti has conducted longitudinal research since 2010 on East Timorese individuals and families separated by state borders and their memories of conflict in Indonesia and Timor-Leste. Deastry Yulita Taek has assisted the research of several anthropologists and ethnomusicologists in West Timor since 2016. This paper is based on our collaborative work between 2019 and early 2020, and a follow up visit in 2022 – six months in total. Overall, we interviewed 40 older East Timorese adults (20 men and 20 women). Our respective empirical knowledge and lived experience of the regions and East Timorese groups in West Timor further inform this study’s findings. Grounding our findings in the broader context surrounding the East Timorese displacement and resettlement in Indonesia, and drawing on existing literature on reflexivity, life course approach and vulnerability, we argue for the importance of temporal aspects when considering the ethical challenges that may emerge in the research process.

The narratives people told us about their embodied experiences of time in displacement shaped our epistemic awareness towards time and temporalities. We refer to this methodological trajectory as the “time effect” and consider people’s experiences related to their ageing bodies, memories of displacement, intergenerational relations, and sociocultural constructions of older age. Specifically, we discuss these interconnections in the ways in which they have influenced older interlocutors’ agency and voice and have propelled us to rethink and adjust our methods. In line with this Special Issue’s focus on research ethics in volatile and vulnerable contexts (see Fleschenberg / Castillo 2022), we aim to delineate what we consider the “time effect” by illustrating the methodological challenges we have faced during fieldwork.

Following this introduction, the paper provides a conceptual discussion of the life course approach to ageing and displacement, and on the challenges of researching a vulnerable group. This is then followed by a brief context of the East Timorese in Indonesia. The remaining part of the paper will discuss ethnographic encounters in the field. The case illustrations reflect the messy reality, mishaps and complexities involved in carrying out research with older people in difficult settings.

A life course approach to ageing and displacement

“Who do you mean by older people?” community leaders and members frequently asked us when we inquired for their help in suggesting people to interview during our first visits to East Timorese neighbourhoods and camps. Sometimes, the persons asking would themselves be of “retirement age” as typically defined by the Indonesian and Timor-Leste states (around 60 years old). Other times, people did not know their exact chronological age. They would get their identity cards to see what birth year was officially registered when they took up Indonesian citizenship, and asked us whether that made them count as “old”. In other cases, the question of older age invoked yet other considerations that needed careful conversation.

The ways we as researchers implicitly or explicitly understand older age inevitably shape our ethnography. For our study, we adopted an anthropological life course approach that emphasises local conceptions of age and ageing. Such a perspective understands ageing as not only biologically but also socially and culturally constructed. A life course approach to ageing challenges static notions of “natural stages of life” – which emphasise deterministic age-related roles and activities and assumptions of steady progress or decline – instead highlighting the fluid and dynamic nature of ageing (Foster / Walker 2021). As Jason Danely and Caitrin Lynch put it:

A life-course approach to ageing recognizes that as individuals age, their lives unfold in conjunction with those of people of different ages, and that all of these actors, who occupy different and changing positions and multiple cultural and physical environments over a period of historical time, are shaping and influencing each other in important ways. (Danely / Lynch 2013: 3)

Relationships in time and the life course emphasise the principle of “linked lives” – that the lives of individuals affect and are affected by the lives of others (Stettersten 2015: 217). People’s life trajectories, in turn, are shaped by distinct and interrelated “transitions and transformations” or “the changes that people experience and those that they create”, including to bodies, spaces, temporalities, families, economies and aspirations (Danely / Lynch 2013: 3). Danely and Lynch refer to “transformations” as the large-scale and dramatic changes in life that may occur locally, nationally and/or globally whereas the term “transitions” describes the changes that accompany different kinds of social and psychological developments (*ibid.*: 3–4). For the older adults we spoke with, major transformations included multiple experiences of displacement, loss of loved ones, material and land dispossession, and their subsequent resettlement to West Timor in 1999. Our research aimed at examining the implications of these experiences but also their dynamic interplay with the more fluid and gradual changes affecting older adults’ lives in exile (George /

Ferraro 2016). Following Danely and Lynch, we attended to how “the individual’s life course experiences and the social, cultural, and historical structures and meanings that shape the life course interact with and permeate each other” (2013: 4).

A focus on the life course reveals not only individual ageing processes but also intergenerational conflicts and relations, and the ways in which values, roles and ethics of care are reconfigured over space and time (Sakti 2020, Von Poser 2017). This perspective is particularly relevant for exploring the East Timorese context, where living arrangements in former refugee camps or new settlements are largely made up of multi-generational households shaped by poverty. Understanding the role of a person’s age and position in the life course is valuable in understanding displacement processes in general, particularly when we consider how displacement is often experienced as collapsed time and how the changes or decisions affecting individuals and families can reverberate across generations (Feldman 2018). One way the life course approach can inform research is by enabling older people’s narratives to be understood not in isolation from but rather always linked with those of other people and their life courses, including those of the researchers. We will consider this relational dimension of ageing in our methodological discussion of case study illustrations in the subsequent sections.

Researching and representing vulnerability

In popular and policy discourse, vulnerability is often framed as a condition of being without (Liamputtong 2007). For instance, Linda Moore and Margaret Miller refer to “vulnerable” individuals as people who “lack the ability to make personal life choices, to make personal decisions, to maintain independence, and to self-determine” (1999: 1034). They point out that some groups may also experience overlapping factors that diminish their autonomy and marginalise their lives. In this sense, vulnerability implies not only to a condition of dependence, weakness, fragility or incapacity that pertains to a particular group, such as older people and children, but also their need for extra care and protection.

While many academic disciplines share this tendency to frame vulnerability as a “problem” of specific individuals, social groups or nations that needs to be “solved”, there is a critical body of literature against the usage of “vulnerability” as a form of depiction for particular groups.³ Attaching vulnerability to personal characteristics diverts the focus from the social, economic and historical structures of power, and the unequal distribution of risk and harm, that undergird the discourses of vulnerability in the first place. At the same time, such

3 For a cross-disciplinary discussion on this see Browne et al. 2021.

approaches, while well-intentioned, “can isolate, stigmatise, or disempower particular groups of people, fostering paternalistic institutional responses to vulnerability that can be damaging rather than constructive” (Browne et al. 2021: 7). Elisabeth Schröder-Butterfill (2013) shows that facing a risk does not automatically render people vulnerable. In the case of older persons in Indonesia, where support from children in later life is very important, she found that not all childless, poor elders are prone to destitution or a bad death when they become dependent. Some manage to mobilise support from alternative sources and have strong coping capacities (Schröder-Butterfill 2013: 6). Here, the author raises the importance of human agency in contemporary understandings of vulnerability.

Anthropologists have argued against reductive approaches to vulnerability and “precarity” (Butler 2016). They show the merits of bringing together conceptual and discursive analysis with ethnographic research as a means of grasping and reckoning with the concrete complexities of vulnerability (and care) (Browne et al. 2021: 18). For instance, Clara Han emphasises the importance of ethnographic descriptions in showing the ways in which such concepts, such as vulnerability and precarity, emerge in life. We agree with this approach because it helps researchers focus on older persons’ lived experiences of vulnerability and care, rather than thinking about the socially or politically ascribed categories under which they fall. For the East Timorese in West Timor, their classification changed from refugees to new residents, but this change of legal status did not result in the resolution of their displacement problem. This is evident in the structural inequalities that restrict their everyday possibilities and future horizons, impacting on older people’s lives.

While conducting research with vulnerable groups can present many challenges, Pranee Liamputtong (2007) argues for the necessity of such studies in order to identify the groups’ needs and concerns. She emphasises that research with “vulnerable” groups is crucial and feasible, but also requires a deeper knowledge of the context under study (cf. Russell 1999). The researcher must uphold the moral responsibility of continuously observing ethical considerations that can ensure that the research process remains sensitive to the needs of people with whom we conduct our research and the potential psychological impacts that may arise (e.g. the danger of re-traumatisation when interviewing survivors of violence).

Liamputtong puts forward an approach to conducting sensitive research that is guided by feminist and postmodern theories. A feminist and postmodern approach to sensitive research, she argues, is one that commits and attends to the gender dimensions and inequalities of what is being studied (2007: 17). She draws on critical debates within social and cultural anthropology on the ethics and politics of representation, highlighting the need to promote marginalised voices in the text. She advocates a “dialogue approach” in the text, for

example, to show how ethnographic knowledge is produced through the polyphony of voice while, at the same time, minimising the editorial power of the researcher (Liamputtong 2007: 19).

The anthropological life course approach we adopted for our research was similarly guided by feminist thinking, as well as by an awareness of the intersubjectivity and power imbalances inherent in ethnographic encounters and modes of representation. We opted for a reflexive practice that reflected our awareness of how we connected to and influenced our research situations. For instance, our relative age difference to the research participants (with us being female researchers much younger than our older interlocutors) influenced the interview situations in various ways. Older women treated us like their (grand) children and spoke to us with the gentleness of a grandmother, inspiring a similar tone from us. Older men (depending on their age, role and position in the life course) would take on a more protective attitude, helping us find research participants, or in some instances treating us more dismissively. At the end of each work day, especially after each interview, we reflected on these interactions, the power imbalances of these encounters (also between the two authors) and any other issues that might have emerged during our daily planning and evaluation sessions. We will zero in on the relational dimension of encounters and conversations with regard to what we consider the “time effect” after the contextualisation of our research localities in the next section.

The East Timorese in West Timor

Today, there are more than 88,000 East Timorese people living across West Timor (Damaledo 2018). They arrived when their country of origin, Timor-Leste, a former Portuguese colony that was invaded and then occupied by Indonesia between 1975 and 1999, voted for independence. Truth-finding reports documenting the occupation period estimate that some 200,000 people, about a quarter of the population at that time, died as a consequence of extrajudicial killings, hunger and illness, forced displacement, torture and other atrocities. Following the announcement of the referendum result, Indonesian security forces and their East Timorese militia groups forcibly displaced large numbers of people, placing them into trucks and transporting them over the border to West Timor (CAVR Executive Summary 2005). By 2003, over 225,000 people had safely returned to Timor-Leste, while independent and smaller-scale repatriation continues to this day.

Former members of militia groups remain living in former refugee camps and relocation sites in West Timor. Their control over the East Timorese groups has waned but their refusal to take accountability for their crimes in Timor-

Leste has resulted in their ongoing exile in Indonesia and a general stigma against those who continue to remain there. The ability of older adults to return or visit their places of origin is affected by the immobility of family members who were involved in past serious crimes. In such cases, older adults have chosen to stay with their children's families in the new settlement. Many of those involved in past crimes are themselves growing older in West Timor. Former members of the Indonesian military, police and civil service also choose to stay in Indonesia and receive state pensions upon retirement. These small pensions are often the main income of East Timorese multigenerational households, rendering the position of older pension recipients significant within their families (Sakti 2022).

Some East Timorese groups continue to live in the former refugee camps to which they first arrived in 1999. The homes in these camps consist of small structures measuring 5 x 6 metres, and the walls and roofs are made of material from *gewang* leaves. Over time, these homes have often undergone multiple expansions due to the increase in family size per household. Families who can afford renovations have extended their homes and replaced the *gewang* roof with metal sheets and cemented the dirt floor. However, not all camp houses have undergone changes. In fact, there are residents who still occupy their original camp houses under the same conditions, which has led to the patching of damage with makeshift building materials. An 80-year old great-grandmother whom we often visited in a camp on the outskirts of Kupang lived behind an old kindergarten building, where the rooms were partitioned only with tarpaulins. When it rained, water came through her roof. She lived there with her two adult grandchildren and their children, and they would often have to flee for shelter during bad weather. In early 2021, when West Timor was struck by a devastating tropical cyclone, the grandmother and her family survived but had to relocate.

Other members of the East Timorese displaced population have relocated within West Timor, purchasing land as collectives and building homes with financial or material assistance from the Indonesian government. Most of the relocation sites we visited in Kupang and Atambua were built by the military. These were semi-permanent and permanent low-cost housing consisting of two bedrooms and one living room. Depending on the family size, multiple households lived in the small spaces (one house we visited was inhabited by 12 persons). Some relocation sites consisted of close family members and people from the same place of origin, making the relationship between neighbours very close and providing opportunities for them to create livelihoods together. Whenever we came to conduct interviews with older research participants, their neighbours, young and old, would join us to sit. The interactions among them were familiar and warm. While the solidarity between East Timorese neighbours was palpable in most of the settlements we visited, these sites were often located at a remove from local dwellings. This spatial segregation, which was part of the

government’s resettlement policy, resulted in limited everyday social encounters between East Timorese and non–East Timorese groups. However, cooperation between these groups does occur. The majority of East Timorese refugees arrived as agricultural farmers. Having no land in their new home, they work for local landowners and share the crops.

Older interlocutors’ stories included multiple experiences of displacement, as well as concerns that the situation back home in East Timor remains dangerous. One older East Timorese woman recounted that the first time she had had to flee from her home was to the mountains when the Indonesian military invaded, and the second time was to West Timor. She said, “I don’t want to go back, I don’t want my family to go back, if people are still killing each other there” (interview on 24 March 2019). Over time, many older adults we spoke had visited their places of origin. For those who never did, they continued to maintain a connection with their ancestral land and East Timorese identity through ritual practices for their ancestors, by following the ways of the ancestors and passing on this knowledge to the younger generation, and through place-making activities, such as gardening.

“When my body is already bent” – ageing bodies and protective relatives

As mentioned earlier, one way we became aware of the “time effect” in our research was through the ageing bodies of our interlocutors and the different ways these were expressed. Comments such as “age factor” (*faktor “U” or usia* in the Indonesian language) or “body already bent” (*badan sudah bungkuk*) were uttered by our older interlocutors and others as a marker of time. Sometimes, they would use these phrases to describe or excuse themselves or others in relation to their mobility, memory and other physical capacities. Others would point at or mention particular objects like a walking stick, tattoo,⁴ white head of hair or medicine collection. However these ageing bodies were communicated, their presence in the research process was palpable. In terms of practical considerations, we had to consider a time and place of interview that met the needs of persons with different physical conditions. This included adjusting our speaking volume, splitting an interview over several visits or following the everyday tempo of the interlocutor. Some of those we interviewed continued

4 Self-inflicted body tattoos among older women were a common phenomenon. Older women interlocutors showed tattoos on their arms, which they had made during the Japanese invasion and occupation in the mid-1940s. In Kamanasa, Belu regency, Victoria Sakti was told that they made the tattoos at that time to signal that they were “married” and thus could protect themselves from being taken by the Japanese as comfort women. In an East Timorese settlement in Kupang sub-district, an older woman showed her arm, which was tattooed with the names of people she had “cried for”. This meant that she often went to wait for deceased people in funeral rituals, a role that is often assigned to older women.

to do physical labour despite their age (sometimes well into their mid-70s). We would then adjust our visits to their preferred time.

Ageing bodies, particularly those of advanced older age – described by interlocutors as “bent”, “needing a walking stick” and “no longer able to work in the field” – invoked other people’s concern and involvement during ethnographic encounters and interview processes. While our research aimed primarily at placing older displaced people’s perspectives at the heart of our research, we observed that their agency and voice in participating were not always a given. Younger family members were often present during the interviews, at times intervening and controlling their older relatives’ stories or even speaking on their behalf. When we encouraged the older person to speak, a younger family member would interject by saying things like “I’m just worried that she will say something rubbish because of her memory” or “Grandmother doesn’t have the right words. She can only speak in her native dialect”. In such cases, the time effect became visible not only in the ageing bodies of our interlocutors, but also in the way other people constructed them as “incapable” and “frail”, thereby denying their personhood (Lamb 2014).

Elsewhere, Victoria Sakti (2020) shows that although an older person’s family members may have been motivated by the desire to protect and care for their elderly, their involvement in the latter’s everyday lives can also extend to restricting the older person’s agency, voice and influence in decision-making processes. In one encounter with Avó (grandmother) Maria, an 80-year old East Timorese woman in Kupang, our conversation, which at first had been pleasant and dominated by her telling of stories, turned into a tense family affair when Avó Maria’s daughter and grandchildren showed up and began answering for her. Avó Maria became silent and slipped into the background of her own narrative. On the next day that we were supposed to meet, her family told us that she was no longer available to speak with us (Kupang, 10 August 2019).

Navigating familial relations in the context of research with vulnerable communities on sensitive topics proved challenging but crucial for understanding the ways in which older East Timorese people’s lives and agency were linked to those of their families. In places where echoes of violence endure, where people’s involvement in past crimes are often silenced, families also work together to survive. Deastry Taek noted from lived experience how East Timorese families worry that their elderly members might spill family secrets and scandals to outsiders, which could bring harm to the family. Thinking about methods and ethics requires approaching the ways in which these life courses within the social, political and historical context intertwine with one another over time.

“We are like family” – group interview with older people

While a more person-centred approach with older interlocutors was at times difficult to achieve, as the example above shows, group interview settings offered a useful way of prioritising older people’s voices. After having visited Avó Alina several times before, we had become friendly with some of her neighbours. As a result, we were able to organise a group interview (16 March 2019) with her and three other older East Timorese in their new settlement in Tuapukan. Besides Avó Alina, who was around 70 years old at the time, there was Mama Elida (55 years old), Tiu (uncle) Thomas (60 years old) and Tiu Alex (65 years old). They were all originally from Timor-Leste’s sub-district of Lospalos. When we explained to them that our research was interested in the experiences of older adults, most of them responded by saying that they didn’t consider themselves as “old”. Instead, they talked more about their ongoing activities and efforts in securing livelihoods in later life.

Within the group, they talked about their displacement experiences. The youngest among them, Mama Elida, was around ten years old during her first experience of displacement. This was during the first years of the Indonesian invasion in 1975, when large numbers of the population fled to the mountains with Fretilin (Frente Revolucionária de Timor-Leste Independente, the pro-independence movement) (CAVR Executive Summary 2005). Her recounting of memories from that time prompted the others to talk about their experiences as well, and these were all quite different, as the following dialogue will show.

Mama Elida: I still have some memories from that time of being displaced and I also know from the stories told by my parents. We fled to the mountains when the Indonesian military invaded and the war broke out. We stayed in the jungle for three years. Those were very difficult years, so when we had to flee again in 1999, I voted for special autonomy and chose to stay here. I thought it was better than having to flee to the mountains again and endure what we had to go through back then.

Tiu Thomas: Different people had different experiences. She stayed three years in the jungle. I stayed for only three days.

Mama Elida: We stayed till 1978 and this uncle stayed for only three days! Some people stayed longer than we did. Those who couldn’t stay too long in the mountains were usually town people, like this uncle.

Tiu Thomas: [chuckled] I didn’t have it too hard. I only fled to the field but then joined the Indonesian troops.

Mama Elida: Aaaiyh, you had it easy. It was very difficult for us in the mountains. We saw eight households all dead. There was never enough food, my development was very much delayed. That’s why I stayed small; we were always hungry. There was never enough water. We were only allowed to ask for half a cup of water and the rest was saved for the [freedom] fighters. Teacher here [referring to Tiu Thomas] never experienced that.

Tiu Alex: I stayed for one year in the mountains but I was captured by Fretilin in 1976. They put me in a pig pen for one week. When I escaped, I went down to town and began to volunteer for the Indonesian troops. In the 1980s, I was part of RATIH [*Rakyat Terlatih*, a civilian branch of the Indonesian security forces in that time] and from then on, I formally joined the Indonesian military in 1990 until 1999. The husband of this Tia here [referring to Avó Alina] was the same as me.

Victoria Kumala Sakti: [asking Avó Alina] Can you tell us a bit more about that?

Avó Alina: Aaaiyh, he was the same [referring to the similar trajectory of volunteering for the Indonesian military]. We only got paid very little and with rice but he died of illness just before 1999. I didn't receive pension money like him [Tiu Alex] for very long.

Mama Elida: But now she does, at least for the last several years. We all helped her get her husband's papers and death certificate registered here to be recognised as a veteran. Now she gets 1 million rupiah [approx. 70 Euros] a month.

Tiu Thomas: That's what we do here, we help each other.

Tiu Alex: Back then in Timor, we lived far from each other. We didn't all know one another. But here, we think of ourselves as coming from one place.

Mama Elida: We're like family. Every day we see and help each other out, also when our children need help. Like teacher Thomas here: he lives alone next door and just recently retired. So, he comes and helps us look after the vegetable stall. Tiu Alex and his wife also often come by to sit like this after they finish working in the field. We just talk, laugh, keep each other company.

Interviewing in a group setting where the interviewees were familiar with one another enabled us to focus on several key themes while, at the same time, receiving different perspectives with regards to memories of the past and outlooks for the future of growing older in the new settlement or one day returning to Timor-Leste. The group interview also provided a window into the workings of support networks and how these were mentioned as particularly meaningful for the older people we worked with. On the theme of daily activities, our interlocutors within the group spoke of the different ways they kept busy. Although some received pensions for having served in the Indonesian military or as a school teacher, like Tiu Thomas, or survivors' pensions like Avó Alina, they continued to work to support their families. The notion of keeping busy through physical work was also seen as an expression of "active ageing" (Lamb 2014) in contrast to the notion of old age as being passive and dependent on others.

In their interviews, our interviewees often emphasised the conscious choice they had made to stay in Indonesia and not return to Timor-Leste. It was important in our research, we found, to respect this and allow time for people to elaborate their decisions rather than to fall into the simplified narrative of the displaced population as being either perpetrators or passive and "vulnerable" victims of the situation. Through such openness, the speakers revealed how for some, ageing in exile was seen as a period of enjoying retirement and claiming the care to which they were entitled from the state for which they had worked and which they had defended.

“Maybe it’s age, maybe he was thinking too much of the past” – the possibility of re-traumatisation

Avó (grandfather) Augusto was immersed in his work when we first visited him. He was knitting a fishing net that was suspended from a tree in front of his house. He did not hear us greet him good afternoon. We were there with Pak Fidelis,⁵ an East Timorese healthcare worker with whom we often made home visits to his older patients in the Kupang district. “*Botarde Avó!*” Pak Fidelis said again, louder this time. Avó Augusto looked up. He rubbed his eyes to clear his vision. “Oh my, a visit from Señor Fidelis! Come and sit,” he invited us to his porch. His reception towards us was warm, not unlike other encounters in our research.

Pak Fidelis: How are you today Avó? [turns to speak with us] Ooou, this Avó is one of a kind. He is a *liurai* [local king from a noble family in Tetum] from Viqueque and knows a lot about local histories from the area. He is also very strong!

Avó Augusto: [chuckles] Pak Fidelis here I’ve known since he was just a child. We come from the same area.

Pak Felis: Ha! Children were afraid of this Avó! He used to scold us and hit us if we played too loudly. But he always helped us during difficult times. [turns to Avó Augusto] I’d like to check your blood pressure to see if everything is all right.

Avó Augusto: [waiving one hand in the air dismissively] I’m fine! Go check on others instead. There is nothing wrong with me. I may be 74 years old, but no blood pressure of mine needs checking.

Pak Fidelis: Aah, I see. [he looks at his chart and glances at us] Okay, we can talk later. Perhaps you would like to answer some questions Ibu [“Mrs” in Indonesian] Victoria has? She is a researcher from Germany but is also Indonesian and is collecting life-stories of older people from Timor-Leste in this area.

Victoria Kumala Sakti: Thank you Pak Fidelis. Indeed, Deastry and I are researching about the experiences of older East Timorese people living here. If you are willing, we would love to hear you tell us a little bit about your life before and after the displacement...

Avó Augusto: My life? Oh! You would have to take many notes! In the 1970s I was already fighting in the war. It was a war! I was fighting for the Portuguese, then for the Indonesians ... for the red and white [the colour of the Indonesian flag]. But then I was captured by Fretilin and tortured like an animal. I did not think I would survive to this day. After coming here [narrative jumped several decades later], I can still go back to Viqueque whenever I want! Why wouldn’t I? I am a *liurai* there! One time, a Portuguese police officer [during the UN transitional administration] had dared to question me about why I was there [unclear] and I told him off in front of many people. He was being disrespectful! This is my land, I told him! He apologised.

5 *Pak* is an Indonesian word to refer to adult men. Although Pak Fidelis is East Timorese, his position at the community health centre prompted an impulse in us to call him “Pak”. This was perhaps out of habit and the context of relating to official figures in Indonesia.

Avó Augusto continued to talk nearly without pause. In recounting his life events in Timor-Leste, he often jumped between timelines. This made note-taking quite challenging. However, we did not interfere with the process by asking clarification questions. Two other older East Timorese, a married couple, had joined us from next door. Pak Fidelis was attending to them, and once in a while, the three would give additional comments to Avó Augusto's story. The day ended with Avó Augusto, perched on a green plastic armchair, declaring that he had more to tell us but for another day. We asked him when we could visit him again for an interview to which he simply replied with a self-assured, "Well, tomorrow!" After setting a time to meet that was convenient to him, we thanked everyone and headed home.

The next day, however, it seemed that Avó Augusto did not remember meeting us. Pak Fidelis had not joined this time, as he had not seen the need to. Arriving shortly before the agreed time, we greeted him politely and asked how he was doing that day. Avó Augusto gave us a cold stare. He asked us sharply who we were and what we were doing at his property. As we answered politely, he began to look agitated and started shouting expletives at us in words we could not understand. He told us to leave. Confused, we apologised and took a step back. A younger woman came out of the house. She was his granddaughter whom we had greeted the day before. She berated him for yelling at us and told him to go inside. A man, who we later found out was Avó Augusto's nephew and lived next door, was suddenly standing next to us. Like the younger woman, the man yelled at him, and instructed him to go inside. He then turned to us and said, "Come with me. When the old man is acting this way, nothing can help and I can't guarantee your safety."

The episode happened so quickly that in her fieldwork notes, Victoria wrote that it took a moment to realise that we, the researchers, were now sitting with Avó Augusto's nephew and granddaughter, at a "safe distance" from the person we intended to interview – that in the pursuit of including older people's voices in the research, we were at that moment excluding them. Avó Augusto's nephew told us that in the years that followed the displacement, his uncle had become increasingly difficult (*susah* in the Indonesian language). His daughter, the younger woman who sat with us, lived with Avó Augusto and helped cook for him. She said, "It is also very difficult for us. The older he gets, the angrier the outbursts. Some days he is fine but other days he could threaten to chase people away with a machete!" The nephew told us that he had cautiously observed our visit the day before but because Pak Fidelis was there, he was less worried. Victoria asked, "How would you typically handle such outbursts?" He shrugged, "We all just best leave him alone, don't come near him. We don't know what else to do! Maybe it's age, maybe it's because he was thinking too much of the past in Timor," then added, to our dismay, the exclamation: "We're just waiting until that old man dies on his own!" We sat in silence for a while. For them, it

seemed that there were no positive methods of dealing with Avó Augusto’s outbursts. We apologised for having caused them inconvenience and took their suggestion to call it a day.

During an evaluation session, Deastray pointed out that Avó Augusto’s nephew had mentioned how his uncle’s condition had worsened with age and over the twenty years he had spent in displacement. Given the nature of his condition (angry outbursts), we understood that this was connected to another aspect that the nephew mentioned, namely, thinking or talking about the past. Wartime experiences can have long-term and far-reaching implications that can continue to resonate in people’s everyday lives as they age (Sixsmith et al. 2014). Avó Augusto, like many older East Timorese men and women of his generation, endured multiple experiences of wartime and displacement. However, there has been little to no attention whatsoever, among the East Timorese population in West Timor, to the psychological effects of past traumatic events on people’s physical and mental health as well as familial and communal bonds, and how these manifest in different stages of the life course.⁶

Shortly afterwards, we met with Pak Fidelis who, despite seeing himself as one of Avó Augusto’s care providers, had not been aware of the outbursts we described. He had known the older man since childhood as an authority figure to be respected. Avó Augusto himself asserted this aspect of his personhood in the narrative he presented to us. This picture of authority became severely challenged, however, in the way his family members had treated and spoken about him. Such disjuncture often indicates a shift or decrease of status over time among older people. Importantly, this also shows the importance of considering the effect of time in displacement processes in research with older people.

Concluding remarks

The paper thus far has discussed a life course and time-reflexive approach to research with older people living through displacement. It has advocated for the importance of considering how time plays a role in ageing and displacement processes when navigating methodological and ethical concerns. The case illustrations show how research plans, discussions and trainings on ethics, and other preparations, may be insufficient when faced with fieldwork realities. They also show how people’s life courses always unfold in conjunction with one another. Moreover, in our research, as well as in the later phases of data analysis and writing up, we were guided by the constant awareness of our positionalities, as female researchers, in relation to our interlocutors.

6 The lack of psychosocial interventions as well as small-scale financial assistance for elderly East Timorese in West Timor is in contrast, for example, to the programmes existing in Timor-Leste for veterans and survivors of sexual violence committed during the Indonesian occupation.

Our biographies further played a significant role in researching older people in the context of East Timorese exile. Deastry's East Timorese background and lived experience of displacement gave her a deeper understanding of our interlocutors' everyday experiences. Her biography and networks opened up access to finding groups of interlocutors otherwise difficult to reach due to their "invisibility". Her understanding of the local beliefs, traditions and histories of the researched areas further informed the process of interpreting and analysing data. At the same time, however, she recognised the biases that emerged precisely from her proximity to the research subject. In our correspondence while preparing this paper, she wrote:

As an East Timorese, I feel that their stories are my story. The hardships and sadness they encountered are mine as well. Yet I realised when we first started the research, I had doubts about whether or not the older people we wanted to speak with would be able to tell us anything coherent at all. I was thinking like their family members, who thought that the Avós were too forgetful already or that they would say things that could embarrass the family. I realise now how meaningful it was for them that we came to listen to their stories and spend time with them. (fieldwork entry by Deastry Yulika Taek, 31 March 2021)

Similarly, Victoria's background of being a social and cultural anthropologist from Indonesia but based in Europe influenced the research process in different ways. Her long-term involvement with East Timorese communities and issues, grounded in the careful analysis of the broader social, historical and political context of the region, provided ethnographic insight to the research. Coming from Indonesia, however, she was constantly aware that her Javanese ethnic background held the potential to trigger negative memories among the interlocutors. For her, building trust was an ongoing pursuit in each ethnographic encounter. Her longstanding ties with the communities she worked with helped in this process, as it allowed her, along with her collaborator and interlocutors, to explore issues that emerged organically (Pedersen / Cligget 2021: 6).

In the East Timorese context in West Timor, this included appreciating how the lapse of time created shifts in interlocutors' perspectives of home and sense of belonging in the new settlement. The desire to return to the ancestral land once articulated by an interlocutor in 2010, for example, had changed when Victoria asked the question again in 2020. Keeping a temporal perspective of how decisions in exile may shift along with the life courses of others, particularly those of the younger generation, requires the researcher to remain open to alternative narratives over time and space.

East Timorese concepts of old age entail respect but also fear (Bento 2017). Older people are considered to be in closer proximity to ancestors, whose influence is believed to shape people's everyday lives, health and misfortunes. The notions of respect and fear also play into people's motivation to protect their older kin. When we consider the effects of time on people's ageing and dis-

placement processes, and the fact that encounters with outsiders like us could bring no immediate change in their lives, we could begin to understand families’ cautiousness and negative constructions regarding their older members. Nevertheless, our research emphasised the importance of including older people’s perspectives, as these challenged the notions of vulnerability that are often attached to this population group. This did not always work out in practice, of course, but the dynamic between ageing bodies, perceptions of older age and family life courses was always something to consider.

In this paper, we have discussed how a reflexive approach to life course research on ageing and displacement experiences was useful in helping us navigate the emerging ethical and methodological concerns specific to our research. Such an approach allowed us to attend to the temporal dimensions of people’s experiences as well as how these were constantly linked with the lives of others. As researchers, we felt the moral responsibility of *being with* the older people we interviewed before, during and after interview processes. By this, we mean being mindful and present in establishing relationships, listening and responding to their stories. Specific interview questions, even those that begin simply with “Tell us a little about your life”, have the power to take interviewees back in time to moments in their lives that presented extreme hardship, trauma and loss. Having knowledge of historical events that could present as major transformations in people’s lives while remaining open as to how interlocutors interpret them can prove useful in understanding their decisions with regards to their migration trajectories.

The account of our encounter with Avó Augusto reminds us of the importance of working together not only with the older person who is sharing their life story, but also with their family members and, whenever available, their healthcare provider, to be aware of the danger of retraumatising survivors of violence. Such risk could be mitigated through the careful and continuous process of consent and by providing a safe space for older interlocutors to speak or choose not to. Identifying the older person’s emotional support network is also imperative when considering potential methodological and ethical challenges in research. We also had to be sensitive to older interlocutors’ general needs, including the need for breaks and increased speech volume, as well as to their mental and physical health conditions.

Another way of *being with* our older interlocutors was to visit them multiple times, whenever this was possible. This helped shift the focus from “collecting data” to establishing relationships, and in a conscious way that prioritises older people’s personhood (Dewing 2002). Honouring relationships, however small the gesture may be (e.g. coming back to visit when promised, printing out photos for them or simply spending time beyond interview sessions), can help a researcher navigate familial dynamics while, at the same time, gaining trust that allows older people to speak for themselves.

A methodology that prioritises the perspectives of older people can challenge common assumptions of vulnerability and powerlessness among older refugees and those experiencing displacement. In terms of methods, researchers may consider adopting a life course approach that involves interviewing both older individuals and their family members to gain a comprehensive understanding of their experiences. For example, older interlocutors may respond differently to questions about returning to their places of origin depending on where their children and grandchildren are in their life journey. Although, this approach may require more time and engagement, it has the potential to minimise harm when researching sensitive subjects and “vulnerable” populations.

A life course and reflexive approach informs research ethics with older people living through displacement by considering issues related to agency and voice. The cases illustrated above show how, on the one hand, family members may restrict older interlocutors’ agency and dismiss their personhood in the name of care and protectiveness. On the other hand, however, there were cases where failure to consult with family members resulted in the researcher missing out on the particular conditions the older person might have in relation to his or her past experiences. These fieldwork experiences evidence the need for flexibility in the application of methods on a case-by-case basis. Nonetheless, striving for reflexivity and ethical collaboration with participants should be at the heart of ethnographic inquiry. For our research with older East Timorese people living through displacement, including their voices also required understanding consent and research ethics through the lens of time.

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