Part I

Researching and Conceptualizing Displacement in a Moving World

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Negotiating research and life spaces: Participatory research approaches with young migrants in the UK

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Introduction

In the past few decades, participatory approaches have been widely used in research with young people and migrants, pointing to the importance of doing research *with*, rather than *about*, research subjects (Thomas and O'Kane, 1998; Kindon *et al.*, 2007). Departing from traditional research approaches, they are predicated on the principles of action, participation and social justice, by engaging research participants in different stages of the process (for example, design, fieldwork, analysis, dissemination). In this line, many scholars have argued that participation could help to overcome (or at least to minimize) ethical dilemmas in terms of power differentials and, in so doing, would make research more ethically responsible and socially relevant (Porter, 2016).

However, a critical literature has emerged in recent years, problematizing the process of participatory research and its ethical purposes. This literature has mainly centred around two key issues: power relationships and the complexity of representation (Horgan, 2017; Strohm, 2012). Cooke and Kothari (2001), for instance, see participation as a 'new tyranny', in the name of which vulnerable subjects are 'coerced into activities and decisions for which they are unprepared, which almost always overburden them in the name of (limited and largely spurious) empowerment'. Individuals are then constrained into spaces of participation – spaces that have often not been designed in their own terms. Paradoxically, people might then experience participatory research as disempowering, as this may systematically facilitate certain dominant voices while silencing others (Kapoor, 2002).

Our aim here is to examine these ethical dilemmas associated with participatory research from the perspectives of research participants or 'co-researchers', highlighting the need to problematize the ways knowledge is produced (Ansell *et al*., 2012). This chapter is written from our three different voices, which dialogue in the space of this text as well in the space of research and our lives. While ethical dilemmas are presented in the first voices of Habib Rezaie and Semhar Haile, our reflections have emerged from a dialogue between our respective experiences and questions. In what follows, we will begin by briefly presenting the research project, and then we will delve into Habib's and Semhar's insights.

The research context

We worked together on a three-year project aiming to analyse the life-worlds of unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors in the UK, and their transitions into institutional adulthood.[1] Beside more traditional qualitative and ethnographic methods, the project also included a participatory methodology: ten former unaccompanied minors were recruited as co-researchers and became an integral part of the research team. With ongoing support, training and supervision, their role was to participate in each stage of the research through to the analysis of findings. More specifically, they acted as intermediaries with potential interviewees, facilitated contact for longitudinal work interviews and ethnographic work, discussed emerging research findings and participated in the research-dissemination stage. During interviews with research participants, a senior researcher (Elaine Chase or Francesca Meloni) and a co-researcher conducted the interview together. Often, as we will see from Habib's experience in what follows, co-researchers acted as cultural translators and interpreters, but had to navigate a difficult double role as both insiders and outsiders.

Habib's experience: Negotiating roles

Let me start from the beginning: how I became a member of this research project. I was introduced to this research by a community organization in Leicester. I was told that there was a project that aimed to examine what happens to young people who migrate to the UK on their own, when they turn 18. I found this question very interesting, and I thus applied for the position. However, at the moment of the job interview, it was all very

confusing. I was not sure about the nature of the research and what my potential role and responsibilities were in this project. Although Elaine Chase, the project leader, explained everything to me during the interview, it was still confusing for me. However, as the project started, we had our first training and we got to know other team members. Slowly, it became clearer to me what the work was about and what our roles were.

During the research process, we participated in regular trainings, where we were given the opportunity to ask questions and share experiences. Over many group discussions, I could raise my concerns, and we could collectively reflect on our work, learning and gaining new knowledge from each other. We also attended workshops with academics, NGOs and policymakers who are experts in various fields of migration. As co-researchers, we were given a chance to share our thoughts with them, and to see how they viewed the issue of young migrants from their point of view – compared with how we looked at that issue as researchers who also had insider knowledge as former unaccompanied minors.

Yet, many things were also challenging. First of all, it was sometimes difficult to convince potential participants to take part in this project. Some people I contacted were sometimes unfamiliar with the nature of the research and felt uncomfortable in talking about their life experiences. They were sometimes very anxious and cautious about taking part. Many preferred to not reveal any information about themselves because of the precariousness of their current immigration status and the fear that we could give their details to the Home Office. Many participants who took part in the research were people whom I knew from my community – we went to the same college, played in the same football team and some of them were good friends of mine. As I was a trusted member of their community or I was their friend, many people were often willing to take part in the research. Some of them openly told me that they decided to participate because they trusted me and because they knew that I would be there during the interview – otherwise, they would not have chosen to participate.

Organizing the research interviews was often a difficult task. Getting hold of participants and finding a convenient time that suited everyone was tricky. I often had to change date and location several times, as people had other commitments and were unable to attend, or they were unsure about taking part in this project. When someone did not show up at a meeting, I was quite frustrated that the situation did not go as I had originally planned. I felt I had wasted my colleagues' time and resources. But then, as I discussed this more with Elaine and Francesca, I learnt to adapt to the complex nature of the process, and I accepted the fact that things did not always go according to plan.

Research and life spaces

One of the most challenging situations that I have struggled with was when, during interviews, my friends shared their childhood experiences of migration and the troubles they faced in their lives. What was particularly challenging for me was my complex role, as a researcher who had also experienced circumstances that were similar to the ones shared by research participants themselves. This meant that I was very sensitive and self-aware about the issues that my friends spoke about, and this sensitivity was created by the close relationship that I had with them. I felt emotionally close to what they were saying; I knew and I understood their feelings and their worries.

Being in the middle – as academic researcher, friend and research participant – was a demanding role to play. I had to make sure that my friends felt safe and were willing to speak without any fear. During the interviews, a vital task for me was to create a friendly and safe space for engaging my friends in research. I wanted to give them a space for their voices to be heard, and I also wanted to help to build trust with my colleagues, in order to overcome the potential barriers of sensitive questions, culture differences and language.

Managing my multiple positions was sometimes very difficult. Once, a friend of mine whom I had just interviewed with Elaine for the research told me something that I did not expect. He told me that he wanted to commit suicide. This broke my heart. I felt the need to engage him in a deeper discussion. I took him to one of his favourite restaurants, where we spent long hours discussing the general issues of our lives, our childhood and our migration journeys. This was the first step to let him open up to a deep-hearted discussion about his suicidal thoughts. Sharing with him my own journey made him feel more relaxed. I told him how I dealt with it, how I tried to be strong and to not self-harm. After that evening, I am still in regular contact with him. I often invite him to my house and I offer him my support and help, which I hope is making a positive impact on his life.

Although we had research training on how to deal with ethical issues, I did not expect to face such a personal and powerful event. It made me reflect on my own life and appreciate it more than ever. I felt that the way I dealt with this ethical dilemma came naturally: I used my heart to talk to my friend. It took me several weeks to decide whether I had a right to share what I have learnt about my friend with my colleagues. I felt that the story was so personal that I was haunted by this dilemma for quite a long time. In the end, I considered what was the greater good for my friend and I informed Elaine. In this way, I made the

right decision, as I was able to receive Elaine's and the team's advice on how to further support my friend. Overall, being part of this research was very demanding and yet a very enjoyable experience that allowed me to gain new knowledge and to work together with amazing people.

Semhar's experience: What stories to tell?

This is the first participatory research programme that I have been part of, and before joining it I had little understanding of what participatory research might entail. Through this process, I have come to learn the various complexities that such research presents, especially with regard to issues of cross-cultural translation and the dynamics of migration processes. At first, I was enthusiastic about the idea of having an active role as someone who could serve as a bridge between the research programme and potential participants. However, as the project progressed, I came to realize some of the difficulties that participation may involve. For instance, the very notion of 'recruiting' potential interviewees caused some discomfort for me. The idea of selecting potential interviewees based on the fact that they satisfied a few criteria made me feel as if I was already defining who the interviewee was meant to be, or to represent. Most importantly, I had an extensive debate within myself: When does the label of 'refugee' or 'migrant' cease to be relevant? And to what extent do these labels essentialize identity, almost becoming synonyms for one's story?

As these questions occupied my mind, my role in the research became even more difficult to fulfil. The potential participants were my own friends whom I know deeply through their various facets, beyond their experience of refugeehood. As a friend, I had the responsibility to protect their identities and stories. I had to understand that the label 'refugee' was for many of them part of their past, or that they now identified themselves through other, different identities. I felt that I could not ask them to participate in research where they had to retell their stories and journeys, and to revive memories of such personal events. Participating ran the risk of replaying the same violence that they have already lived through, and that they were perhaps trying to move on from. In many of my relationships with friends, we have never had a long discussion about our migration or journeys. Instead, everything I knew about their migration history happened in the context of brief casual conversations or discussions, which enabled me to better understand my friends (and what they did not want to say). Asking them to narrate their migration stories in the research space – stories that we often left aside from our conversations – would have completely changed the dynamics in our friendships.

These were not only my concerns. Some of the friends that I approached also shared with me their doubts about participating in the research. There were two main reasons for this. On the one hand, people who had settled and had finally established a 'normal life' were reluctant to reclaim the label of 'refugee' or 'unaccompanied minor'. On the other hand, people whose asylum claims had been rejected did not see any purpose in their participation if this did not lead to a tangible outcome that could help them in their asylum claim. In this case, they were willing to use the categories of 'refugee' or 'asylum seeker' in order to get help in sorting out their legal status.

As I also argue elsewhere in this book (Haile, this volume), the 'refugee' label comes with its own bureaucratic and political weight, and its non-participatory nature needs to be problematized. That is, given that labels play an important role in constructing an identity (especially a political one), refugees ought to be allowed to participate in the labelling process, thus 'enabling [them] greater access to and control over decisions about their own lives' (Zetter, 1991: 60). Issues of labelling and categorization, while they might be useful in their own right, fundamentally 'freeze groups in time' (Polzer, 2008: 493) and obscure the nuances and complexities of people moving between categories. Individuals should therefore be able to decide when and how they want to be recognized under the refugee label, or decide not to be recognized under this label at all (also see Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2016). In this sense, many of my friends' reluctance can be understood in relation to their desire to remain invisible from the hyper-visibility that the refugee category creates. By remaining 'invisible', my friends claimed a form of normalcy or a voice outside the refugee or migrant paradigm. This is particularly the case among individuals who have been settled in the UK for a long time, and whose experience of refugeehood belongs to their past, having now redefined their identity away from that of 'refugee'.

Taking charge of research methodologies

If *what* story people are asked to narrate is important, equally significant is *how* they are asked to narrate such a story. Indeed, research methods profoundly shape how participants convey their message or the ways in which they present themselves (Smith, 2012). During the research process and in the context of many discussions that I had with Francesca, I suggested the use of alternative research techniques such as photography and art. This idea emerged from our mutual discomforts in the use of interviews. While interviews can give us considerable insights about individual experiences, they can also reproduce the violence or distress of the interviews that these people had to face during their asylum process.

Moreover, the interview spaces can fail 'to capture the everyday nuances and complexities of migration and [the] health of refugees' (Guruge *et al.*, 2015: n.p.). Cultural or linguistic barriers can make interview spaces even more constrained. In the context of our research, which focuses on highly subjective concepts such as well-being or the future, it becomes easy to miss the cultural and linguistic nuances in the ways in which different people conceptualize well-being (for other approaches to the study of refugees, health and well-being, see the chapters in this volume by Krause and Sharples, Chatterjee *et al.*, and Seguin).

Using creative research methods such as photography enabled us to capture various forms of knowledge and expressions, including emotional experiences and tacit knowledge (Veale, 2005). In our experiment, it allowed our participants to engage with the research programme in a less restrictive and intimidating manner than in interviews. Encouraging people to take pictures of their everyday lives meant that they could allow us to enter into dimensions of their lives that they were happy for us to see, or aspects of their migration processes that could have easily been overlooked in the context of an interview. Using such creative and participatory methods also meant that people were in control of the narrative that they wanted to share with us. Of equal importance is the accessibility of the final outcome of our research, especially for individuals facing language barriers or who are unfamiliar with academic spaces in which scholarly work is usually disseminated. Indeed, the creation of a final tangible product – a photographic book that people could touch, share and be proud of – was very important for them (see Meloni *et al.*, 2017; on the role of documentary making as research, see Franceschelli and Galipò, this volume).

Concluding reflections

The experiences presented above show some of the complexities and ethical dilemmas of participation. In Habib's experience, he had to navigate the difficult role of mediator between his life spaces and research spaces. He intimately knew the people who participated in the project, and sometimes he knew them 'too much' and from 'too close'. When a friend shared with him his suicidal thoughts, Habib was suddenly confronted with an unexpected ethical quandary. How to deal with his friend's suffering? Did his friend's pain have to remain in the intimate space of a confession between friends? Or was this also a kind of research material? Should Habib tell the other members of the research team, thus breaking his friend's trust? In the end, Habib resolved these ethical tensions using

his double role – 'naturally' and using his 'heart', as he put it. As a friend, he comforted him and shared his own personal story and coping strategies. As a researcher, he also revealed his situation to other colleagues, in order to protect him and to receive further support from the team.

Semhar's experience also sheds light on her complex positioning, going beyond the dichotomy of researcher and researched. Differently from Habib, she did not accept the ethically difficult role of mediating between the research and her intimate relationships. She felt that this role would have replicated the violence of labelling her friends as 'refugees', and that it would change too drastically the rule of silence that she shared with her friends about their respective migratory experiences. In a sense, recruiting her friends as participants would have caused an additional violence to the ways in which she knew them, and the ways in which they wanted to be represented. However, during the research process, she carved out a new research position for herself. She became an active and core part of the team, by taking a self-reflexive role and by critically proposing creative methodologies in order to better understand people's lives.

In our experience, the most haunting (and illuminating) ethical dilemmas are often the ones that we do not expect to happen – the ones that unsettle our positions, our common wisdoms and our understandings. Over the past two years, we slowly discovered what our multiple positions involved, and how we had to navigate the potential tensions arising from them (without necessarily resolving them). Rather than assuming an inequality or a polarized difference between researchers and research subjects, and what the role of people should be, in our case knowledge was co-produced in a third space of encounter (Qasmiyeh and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2013; Strohm, 2012; Meloni *et al.*, 2015). Homi Bhabha refers to the Third Space as a 'contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation', arguing that 'it is in this space that we will find those words with which we can speak of Ourselves and Others. And by exploring this interstitial space we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves' (Bhabha 2006, cited in Qasmiyeh and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2013: 133–4).

In this context, we adopted a form of 'collaborative research uncertainty' wherein we were often exposed to the limits of our respective practices and assumptions, and we were forced to open ourselves to new ways of seeing or new ways of doing. The making of a third space does not thus grant a voice or a visibility to the other. Instead, through exposing and discussing dilemmas in resonance, a new space is formed – something that is not entirely ours, but neither is it completely different from ourselves.

Note

1. Project Research Title: 'Becoming Adult: Conceptions of Futures and Wellbeing among Migrant Young People in the UK', funded by ESRC, grant number ES/L009226/1. Further information available at www.becomingadult.net.

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