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# Report on action research methodology and innovation in youth related migration and integration research with focus on vulnerability and resilience

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# 1 Introduction

by Jan Skrobanek

Research with young people in vulnerable conditions has been a prosperous and controversial field of discussion during the last 50 years. Most of the controversies over the recent decades have comprised, for example, definitional – How to define young people in vulnerable conditions? – methodological – What kinds of methods are adequate to research young people in vulnerable conditions and work with this target group? – and ethical issues – What are ethical challenges in researching young people in vulnerable conditions and in working with them? Against this background, it has been concluded that researching and working with young people in vulnerable conditions poses a range of theoretical, definitional, methodological and practical challenges (Block, 2013; Chase, Otto, Belloni, Lems, & Wernesjö, 2020; J. Couch, Durant, & Hill, 2014; J. R. Couch, Durant, & Hill, 2012; Lee & Renzetti, 1990; Robertson, Harris, & Baldassar, 2018; Russell, 2013: 47; Skrobanek & Tillmann, 2015; Vervliet, Rousseau, Broekaert, & Derluyn, 2015; Ånensen et al., 2020).

Parallel to this debate, youth research has shown the multifaceted dynamics regarding young people's transitions from a life course perspective (Robertson et al., 2018). A critical driver of these complexities is the growing interconnectedness of specific ecological settings and the character of how young people manoeuvre in these settings, especially under conditions of mobility and migration during life course (Robertson et al., 2018: 206; Skrobanek, Jobst, Grabowska, & Louise, 2020). 'Varied, multiple or fragmented migration routes' (Robertson et al., 2018: 206), resulting in contingent, changing and risky migrant statuses (Skrobanek, Ardic, & Pavlova, 2019) and the presence of multifaceted institutional frameworks which both foster and hinder integration processes in the conditions of varying forms of embeddedness (Ryan, 2018; Skrobanek et al., 2020: 10) has led to a growing awareness that concepts assuming 'singularity, linearity and teleology in the context of youth transitions' (Robertson et al., 2018: 206), both in general and with regard to integration (Skrobanek & Jobst, 2019: 7) have become problematic.

These challenges have led to a broad and controversial debate around the methodologies used in research on young migrants in vulnerable conditions. Additionally, 'new' or 'innovative' methodologies have been developed to tackle classical methodological approaches' shortcomings and challenges. Liquid, dynamic and more process-oriented methodologies like participatory action research with the ability to 'keep pace' with multifaceted migration and integration-related dynamics have become introduced to foster our understanding of contemporary transitions patterns and related chances and pitfalls of young people in vulnerable conditions. These methodologies address a broad range of themes like order and embeddedness of territorialised, slow and contemplative social practice, as well as temporal, speedy, exiting, situational and contingent practice, claiming to innovate existing research on young people's social lives in vulnerable conditions in the context of migration and integration (Adey, Bissel, Hannan, Merriman, & Sheller, 2014: 503-504; Merriman, 2014: 16). Action and participatory research aim to promote the 'autonomy and voices' of young people in vulnerable conditions (Aldridge, 2012 2015: 7) and it needs specific methods for getting them on board of our research and to engage them actively. Most importantly, the participants are supposed to define the design, process of data collection and analyse and reflect on the information generated, in order to obtain the findings and conclusions of the research process. These trends have led to an extension of our methodological toolbox that promises better possibilities to research specific contexts and individual practices in the context of mobility and migration. As Adey et al. (2014) point out, the aim here is not to replace existing methodological tools but to extend our repertoire for an even better adjustment of our methodological approaches and tools to idiosyncratic and specific mobility or migration contexts (Adey et al., 2014: 504).

Against this background, in the following report, we want to explore and critically evaluate the latest methodologies to approach young migrants in vulnerable conditions. Hence, we provide an enquiry of relevant methodologies for approaching young migrants in vulnerable conditions while moving or staying. Given the strong emphasis in MIMY on using and furthering a participatory approach with young migrants, this report will focus on participatory approaches and methods with their existing possibilities and challenges, as well as new developments and innovations in this field. The gathered/collected/systematized information will be critically assessed concerning its effectiveness in approaching young people in vulnerable conditions. We want to draw out this critical reflection concerning our emerging work in MIMY and what can be learned from this review.

For doing all this in chapter 2 we will offer some general reflection on methodological issues researching young people in vulnerable conditions. In chapter 3 the results of a comprehensive literature review regarding innovations in participatory and action research methodology will be discussed. In a final step conclusion will be drawn regarding opportunities and challenges of innovative participatory action research methodologies targeting young migrants in vulnerable conditions.

## 2 Some general reflections on methodological issues researching young people in vulnerable conditions

by Jan Skrobanek<sup>4</sup>

Studies that focus on young migrants in vulnerable conditions have, especially over the last decade, become multidisciplinary as well as multifaceted regarding their theoretical and methodological approaches (Gifford, Bakopanos, Kaplan, & Correa-Velez, 2007: 416). Though, as Gifford writes, ‘...this provides a rich context for approaching research questions, it also presents many complexities as there is no straightforward approach to theory, method or design’ (Gifford et al., 2007: 416).

Bourdieu argues that empirical research practice ‘finds its adequate scientific expression neither in the prescriptions of a methodology which is more often scientific than scientific, nor in the anti-scientific caveats of the mystic advocates of emotional fusion’ (Bourdieu, 1996: 17-18). He calls for a ‘reflex reflexivity based on a sociological ‘feel’ or ‘eye’ which according to his reflexive understanding is supposed to enable researcher ‘to perceive and monitor *on the spot*’ (Bourdieu, 1996: 18).

Basically, ten key issues – time, context and empowerment as a basic layers, target group complexity, the framing-selectivity-problem, selection bias, recruiting bias, how to research young migrants in vulnerable conditions, researching sensitive topics and innovation or novelty – can be identified which generate a substantial methodological background noise regarding the validity, rigour, generalizability and potential of existing research in the field of mobility, migration and integration of young migrants in vulnerable conditions (Aldridge, 2015; Block, 2013; J. Couch et al., 2014; Russell, 2013; Daniela Sime, 2017). This does not only count for ‘classical’ methodologies for approaching young migrants in vulnerable conditions while moving or staying or hard to reach young people in general. It also has consequences with regard to latest methodological developments in innovative and alternative research methods (e.g. non-participatory and participatory action research or arts-based methods just to name a few of them).

Before starting to cast light on latest methodologies for accessing and researching young migrants in vulnerable conditions, we want to address in a nutshell overarching core methodological issues which

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<sup>4</sup> And the following sub-chapters.

have direct consequences regarding the validity, rigour, generalizability and potential of research with or about young people in vulnerable conditions (Aldridge, 2015: 4).<sup>5</sup>

## 2.1 Time: a basic layer

Time plays a crucial role in the life course of young migrants in vulnerable conditions (Elder, 1994, 1995; Gifford et al., 2007; Ryan & Mulholland, 2015; Griffiths & Anderson, 2013). Hence, past, present and future time elements (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998: 963) are decisive for understanding and critically evaluating the appropriateness of methodologies to approach young migrants regarding their integration, vulnerability and resilience and the intersection of these dimensions from a life course perspective (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006: 820).

All the following discussion points are directly or indirectly related to time, the time during life course of the young when the research is done. Take for example, the issue of ‘integration experiences’ of young migrants in vulnerable conditions. The methods appropriate for researching these kinds of experiences vary with the concrete time or concrete time-point during the life course where the young people meet the researcher (Gifford et al., 2007: 425). Meeting the researcher or taking part in an investigation addressing young migrants’ vulnerability from a life course perspective can happen before, during or after their migration journey, when the young migrant has just arrived or has settled or starts moving again. Depending on the concrete time, the ecological settings or contexts in which the young are embedded – like the borderland, a reception camp or a reception centre in a destination country or a segregated neighbourhood – will vary (Agier, 2016; Ryan & Mulholland, 2015). Here we could think about methods like interviews or discussions in contrast to less language-focused methods like audio-visual methods (Gifford et al., 2007: 415). Interviews or discussions might be less applicable before, under or shortly after arrival at a place, while more language-focused methods gain applicability substantial time after arrival/longer stay/resettlement in a destination country.

Hence understanding and evaluating methodologies to approach young migrants in vulnerable conditions cannot be done without considering temporality, meaning the concrete time or timespan of the ecological contexts the young migrant is embedded. Processes of defining or framing ‘the vulnerable’, the use of strategies for selecting or recruiting the ‘relevant young’, the decision process regarding the choice of methods for doing research or of data analysis strategies or of ways for interpreting and presenting results are all depending on concrete time and time specific past and present ecologies the young and the research are embedded (Nilsen & Brannen, 2014).

## 2.2 Context: a basic layer

MIMY argues that the context in which young people in vulnerable conditions live, must be considered in the choice of methods to research those young people. Reception centres, inequalities between neighbourhoods, supportive or hindering networks are boundary conditions under which the young migrants’ manoeuvre (Skrobanek et al., 2020: 12). This ‘differentiated embedding’ frames migrants’ ‘differentiated and multilayered depths of attachment and belonging’ (Ryan, 2020: 14) as well as their contingent practices across the manifold fields of integration (Ånensen et al., 2020; Ryan, 2018; Ryan & Mulholland, 2015).

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<sup>5</sup> We will not address the *how to analyse* the data since there is a much lower risk of pitfalls compared to the other issues since the set of possible analysis strategies is less complex. Creswell and Poth identify three common data analysis strategies or perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018: 183) one based on critical ethnography, a traditional systematic approach of qualitative inquiry and classical ethnography and case study approach. They conclude that ‘These three influential sources advocate many similar processes, as well as a few different approaches to the analytic phase of qualitative research.’ (Creswell & Poth, 2018: 183).

Recognising the differentiated ecology of practices (Skrobanek et al., 2020: 20) of young migrants in vulnerable conditions has substantial consequences for choosing suitable methods for doing action or participatory focused research and thus involving young migrants as agents in the research process. Recognising the multilevel contextual complexities of embeddedness of young migrants' practices (Grabowska & Skrobanek et al., 2020: 23ff.) prompts and encourages us as researchers to explicitly situate our methods and adjust them to the idiosyncratic and specific mobility or migration contexts (Adey et al., 2014: 504).

This insight establishes research itself as a learning process, within which research methods and tools are adjusted to specific youth and contexts. However, this philosophy of 'autonomy of method application' constitutes boon and bane at the same time. On the one hand, it provides a floor for variation, change, adaptation and development in the context of liquid integration processes. It promotes young people's agency within research decision-making and resonates with best practice guidance on ethical youth-centred research, promoting an ongoing, reflective and negotiated approach (Alderson & Morrow, 2011). On the other hand, it constitutes a range of challenges regarding the rigour of the research process, comparability of results and the navigation of ethical dilemmas that will emerge within processual research practice.

Thus, issues of rigidity of methodological concepts, the guidance of our research within open or fixed framings, and fluidity, processualism and complexity have to be considered. Additionally, methodological problem-of-order essentialism needed for meeting the standards of social research and its ethics – although often pushed under the carpet – are omnipresent. They must be solved regarding the specificity of target groups and ecological contexts in which the research takes place. However, at the same time, classical standards of scientific research practice like validity and reliability as well as comparability, transparency and verifiability of research and research outcomes have to be met. It is vital providing 'good quality of research' (Hugman et al., 2011, p. 1276). However, this can lead to contradictions between the ambitions regarding flexibility and 'innovativeness' of action and participatory action research methods (applicability of tools and research ethics) and existing (classical) standards in contemporary social-scientific research.

### **2.3 Empowerment: a basic layer**

A third basic layer concerning action and participatory research methodology and innovation in youth-related migration and integration research focuses on 'empowerment'. We posit that empowerment is understood as an outcome of negotiation and resource distribution practices on the intra- and interpersonal, socio-cultural, socio-economic and socio-political level (Parsons & East, 2013). One of the key elements of empowerment is 'taking control of resources' through to modes of (re)distribution of cultural, social, economic, symbolic or power resources and so enabling or giving voice to those normally unheard and/or dominated (Arnstein, 1969: 24; Atzhaky & York, 2000: 225; Lee et al., 2011: 421). Action and participatory research methodology and innovation 'empowers rather than disempowers the participants through the research process; this involves developing an awareness of the potential power imbalance between the young participants and the adult project workers and researchers' (Lee et al., 2011: 421). As Person & East (2013) formulate 'empowerment is a counter to perceived and objective powerlessness' based on practical action or transformative ideologies. Hence, empowerment tries to change status quo, both on the interpersonal, socio-cultural, socio-economic and/or socio-political level (Parsons & East, 2013).

Especially in the context of migration and integration, this becomes a central challenge regarding the exchange and negotiation possibilities in power-driven and power structured contexts (Skrobanek, 2015). Almost every exchange process is structured by two basic processes: the redistribution of



resources and/or the symbolic recognition of resources (Fraser & Honneth, 2003). The continuum of redistribution and recognition lies, as Arnstein (1969: 24) points out, between forms of ‘empty rituals’ or ‘practices’ which neither foster redistribution nor recognition vs ‘rituals’ or ‘practices’ which have ‘the real power needed to affect the outcome of the (negotiation) process’ (Arnstein 1969: 24). Following Arnstein’s argument, one can conclude that exchanging practices without redistribution of resources or symbolic recognition are marked by an ‘empty and frustrating process for the powerless. It allows the powerholders to claim that all sides were considered but makes it possible for only some of those sides to benefit. It maintains the status quo.’ (Arnstein, 1969: 24).

It is precisely here where ‘liquid integration processes’ (Skrobanek & Jobst, 2019; Skrobanek et al., 2020) meet action research methodology aiming at empowering young migrants in vulnerable conditions. Bringing the processual contingent element of empowering young people to the fore follows a radically situational approach to integration. It helps to recognise that micro-processes on the individual and institutional level and the ecological interconnections between these levels are open and contingent regarding redistribution and recognition.

There have been substantial debates regarding redistribution and recognition in the context of mobility, migration and integration of ‘hard to reach’ young people over the last decades. However, stability focused problem-of-order perspectives are still the dominant frame of reference regarding redistribution and recognition processes in the context of migration and integration (Skrobanek et al., 2020; Ånensen et al., 2020). Hence, although action research methodology is understood as engaging migrants, non-migrants and institutions of social and systemic integration on different levels to play an equal part, research findings indicate that existing socio-cultural and structural characteristics are nevertheless conceptualized as reference points for young migrants in vulnerable conditions adjustment. Hence, empowering and integrating young migrants seems (still) more ‘reproduction’ than ‘change’ focused. ‘Young migrants in vulnerable conditions are expected to accept established ways of social and system integration (namely existing social, economic, political and cultural parameters), to show willingness and the ability to fit in, while the existing national, regional or local regimes of social and system integration are (only) thought to provide opportunities for young migrants in vulnerable conditions’ (Ånensen et al., 2020: 71).

This all poses a challenge for the researcher using action and participatory research methods. They are confronted with fundamental questions: To what extent is power negotiated or redistributed within the action research method? Does it foster status change? If yes, does it foster it for the better – hence more control and power, whatever it is defined – or does it lead to dependence, powerlessness, or status reproduction? Since empowerment is framed by the personal, interpersonal, socio-cultural, socio-economic and socio-political conditions – thus the ecology in which the action or participatory research takes place – how are other actors and institutions affected by these empowering actions and practices? What legitimatises these actions and practices? What are forms of resource redistribution and recognition? Are they legitimate and from whose perspective?

A final point we want to address here is the issue of collaborative decision-making within the action and/or participatory research process, and how this relates to the foundations of quality within the research. In action-oriented and participatory research, the aim is that participants are given control over the research agenda, the process and actions. Most importantly, the participants – in our case young migrants in vulnerable conditions themselves – are supposed to define the design, process of data collection and analyse and reflect on the information generated, in order to obtain the findings and conclusions of the research process. However, to what extent should power and control in the context of redistribution and recognition be given to the participants as co-researchers? Is this the outcome of negotiations? And if yes, what are the parameters of the negotiation? What aspects of the research methods, ethics and practice are not negotiable? How can university researchers, and young



co-researchers or both, guarantee that their research meets the scientific and ethical standards regarding their scientific field of research, and who will be the owner of the research and/or the produced results?

Here, we look to the field of ‘co-production’, which emphasises that research processes can bring together academic, research and community experiences within a ‘boundary space’ (Pohl et al. 2010, 268). Within this space, there is participation from actors otherwise positioned on different sides of the boundary, and there are clear lines of accountability for this participation. Reflective learning processes bring together knowledge(s) to build shared understanding; critical to this is acknowledging the validity of lived experience in informing research. Within this and participatory action research, positionality and power relations are critical influences that must be considered in every part of the research. Therefore, strategies are needed to deal with these challenges.

## 2.4 Target group complexity

The contemporary debate on how to define ‘young migrants’ is marked by the existence of different concepts and understandings in the scientific, political and public debate (Ånensen et al., 2020). Concepts like ‘asylum seekers’, ‘refugees’, ‘unaccompanied young migrants/minors’, ‘young migrants with third-country nationality’, ‘young undocumented’, ‘young stateless’ or ‘young born in a third-country’ can be found in the debate (Consortium, 2019: 5). Additionally, it can be said that ‘young migrant’ concepts or understandings are not always used systematically within and across the different scientific, political or public debate fields (Ånensen et al., 2020: 56). For making the definitional issue even more challenging, research reveals that there are other concepts in use in the young migrants in vulnerable conditions debates that are not or only partly covered by the above-named concepts. ‘These include concepts such as ‘single mothers’, ‘pregnant women’, ‘young women victims of trafficking and prostitution’, ‘victims of trafficking’, ‘victims of genital mutilation’, ‘forced marriages and female circumcision’ – here with a particular focus on ‘young women’, ‘traumatized young people’, ‘being without health insurance’, ‘victims of xenophobia and discrimination’, ‘young migrants with disabilities or mental disorders’, ‘homeless men’, ‘young migrant workers’, ‘young ill migrants’, ‘traumatized migrants’, ‘young migrants’ excluded from social insurance and health care’, ‘exploitation’, ‘victims of violence’, ‘young persons in risk of honour-related violence’, ‘young people with criminal activity and newly arrived young people’” (Ånensen et al., 2020: 56).

This debate presents a challenge regarding the development, application, the evaluation and comparison of classical and innovative methodologies to approach young migrants in vulnerable conditions from a life-course perspective. The heterogeneity of concepts and understandings in use poses pressure on the rigour and consistency of methodological tools' use and innovation. Which methods to research the different sub-groups of ‘young migrants’ should be used? Where precisely do we need innovation and where does the already existing methodological toolset hold? How can a common ground for understanding method induced differences and similarities of research outcomes be provided?

## 2.5 The framing-selectivity-problem

Prior research has shown that vulnerability, although often used in the debate, is an open and fuzzy concept lacking clear cut and a comprehensive definition (Ånensen et al., 2020: 13).<sup>6</sup> This is especially the case when considering the various definitions and classifications adopted in research governance and ethical frameworks, in health and social care discourses, and with respect to the self-perceptions of those young people defined as ‘vulnerable’ (Aldridge, 2015: 11). This has, without any doubt, led

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<sup>6</sup> See here for the debate regarding young people and ‘drop out’ (Skrobanek & Tillmann, 2015).

to many confusions and misunderstandings within and across different scientific fields (Skrobanek & Tillmann, 2015: 200). However, with their analysis, Ånesen et al. 2020 underline that the common conceptual understanding which can be found is multidimensional. It considers a variety and combination of aspects of ‘vulnerabilities’ like psychic, relational, health related, socio-cultural and socio-economic, educational, criminal and violent, legal-status-related, as well as gender- and ethnicity-related aspects (Ånensen et al., 2020: 63).

Hence, the definition, the focus, and therefore the choosing of young people depends on the aspects thought of as being of importance for the researcher as well as other agents participating in the research (Skrobanek & Tillmann, 2015: 200ff.). This definitional problem – the framing or labelling of young migrants as vulnerable – defines the spectrum of young we are looking for. Since these categorisations and typifications are based on a selection of situational frames, they only represent parts of social reality while excluding other parts from our attention (Skrobanek & Tillmann, 2015: 200ff.). Quite commonly, this ‘definition of situation’ and its contextual embeddedness is not in focus or problematised in the context of methodological reflections regarding young migrants in vulnerable conditions. It instead seems that in the sense of taken for granted reality, research with young migrants in vulnerable conditions assumes that these young migrants are per se in a ‘vulnerable risk zone’ (Skrobanek & Tillmann, 2015: 200ff.).

Therefore, the process of selecting a ‘vulnerability frame’ and ascribing attributes indicating ‘vulnerability’ is fragile, vulnerable or even contingent. Thus, the process is marked by a high risk of bias regarding who is defined as ‘vulnerable’, or perceived as ‘living under vulnerable conditions’ and what social, cultural or economic dimensions are part of ascribing ‘vulnerability’ to the young migrants. This ‘framing-selectivity-problem’ becomes even more relevant if one considers who has chosen the respective dimension or criteria for labelling someone as ‘vulnerable’. Do we account ‘vulnerability’ from the perspectives of the young people themselves? Or is it the perspectives from institutional agents or the researcher? In other words, do we base the ‘meaning of vulnerability’ on ‘first grade constructions’, i.e. the constructions of individual or collective idiosyncratic perspectives of the different actors (Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2010: 26). Or do we base our understanding and related framing as well as selection processes on ‘second grade constructions’ based on shared common-sense typification and categorisation (Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2010: 26)? This becomes further complicated due to the fact that contexts of interpretation – definitions, understandings or framings – strongly depend on the concrete research fields where the term ‘vulnerability’ is used (e.g. social care, health, psychology or sociology and within their sub-fields) (Aldridge, 2015: 11).

While using or applying concepts like ‘young vulnerable migrants’, ‘young asylum seekers’, ‘young women victims of trafficking and prostitution’, ‘victims of trafficking’ etc., we somehow ‘essentialise’ forms of being and thus reinforce forms of essentialism although we want to circumvent it. On the one hand, these categories help choose the ‘target groups’ of our research endeavour. On the other hand, these practices put us in a risk zone to attribute inadequate labels to those we want to research. In participatory research, participants in negotiation with the researcher exercise control over the research agenda, content, processes, and actions in the ongoing research. Most importantly, then young themselves are the ones who are encouraged to analyse and reflect on the information generated, in order to obtain the findings and conclusions of the research process. However, taking selection processes based on essentialised categories, the selection process itself can come under fire, for example, when the young do not share our attributions. Thus, we could describe to young ‘young migrant in vulnerable condition’, but the young could tell us a rather different story.

A final issue worth to be mentioned here is the overlap of the connotative and denotative (respective analytical) dimension when the concepts of ‘young migrant’ and ‘vulnerability’ are used. This produces even more definitional ambiguities regarding the analytical perspective used for describing the

phenomenon on the one hand, and assessing the phenomenon and drawing conclusions based on the value guided assessment on the other (Skrobanek & Tillmann, 2015: 202).

## 2.6 Selection bias

The processes of ‘target person or target groups constructions’ somehow determine which young come into focus as potential study participants (Aldridge, 2015; Chase et al., 2020; Skrobanek & Tillmann, 2015). This **selection process of the researcher** (Skrobanek & Tillmann, 2015: 202) is accompanied by ‘**agent selectivity** (gatekeepers, stakeholder, guardians) who might provide or not provide access to young people (Couch et al., 2014: 18; Sime, 2017: 8), by ‘**self-selectivity**’, and **selectivity induced by field-specific opportunity structures** (e.g. kinds of local fields, less or more accessible localities, social, cultural or economic conditions of localities) (Sime, 2017: 11), which provide institutional or structural constraints for accessing and recruiting young people (Skrobanek & Tillmann, 2015: 201-202). As Chase et al. 2020 writes ‘... there may emerge certain biases with respect to determining which young people get onto the potential participants’ list.’ (Chase et al., 2020: 459). For example, ‘working only through formal systems and structures automatically excludes those young people who are no longer eligible for statutory services or who may have purposefully disengaged for fear that maintaining contact might jeopardise their ability to remain in the host country.’ (Chase et al., 2020: 460). Due to these types of ‘selectivity windows’ the process of choosing participants is vulnerable and selective (Skrobanek & Tillmann, 2015).

Researching young migrants in vulnerable conditions, it is the common case that researchers often have context and case specific and thus biased, scarce or less reliable information at hand who actually belong to a vulnerable population, its characteristics, qualities and composition for assessing the ‘typicalness’ of the chosen cases.<sup>7</sup> The resulting selection bias prompts us to explicitly reflect on what kinds of contexts and actor related selectivity there are in accessing young migrants in vulnerable conditions. This is important for understanding what kind of young people or groups of young have managed to become part of our samples due to obvious or hidden self or external framing and selection processes. This might imply the findings and conclusions we draw from our examinations. Otherwise, it is – in a methodological selection bias perspective – almost impossible to gauge the possibilities and limits of the selective cases pool. It could be all different!

This selection bias risk – whatever the reasons might be – marks a challenge for methodologies focusing on young people in vulnerable conditions. Hence, methodologies addressing young migrants in vulnerable conditions cannot avoid this risk unless one finds access to a whole population and can research this population without any risk of uncontrolled selection into a study group. Moreover, this makes us aware that there is always the issue ‘of silencing particular voices and of spotlighting certain experiences while ignoring others.’ (Chase et al., 2020: 458). That implies a range of challenges regarding the kind of knowledge production in research with young migrants in vulnerable conditions, verification or falsification of research results, comparability or incomparability of research results, their reliability and their generalisability (Bourdieu, 1996: 17).

If one looks at the steadily growing body of research about MIMY’s target group of young migrants in vulnerable conditions, the heterogeneity, colourfulness and perspective related complexity of available studies is overwhelming. However, comparative as well as replicative oriented studies, are rare. Thus, one looks almost in vain for studies that try to replicate or verify or at least try to compare the results of prior studies. Instead, the huge range of modes of existing field-specific selection and sampling strategies of varying analysis and interpretation of results makes it difficult to identify

<sup>7</sup> Knowing the ‘typicalness’ of the cases allows for (at least) middle range generalisations.

common ground regarding theoretical perspectives, methods and results.<sup>8</sup> Hence, it is not of surprise that methodological reflections regarding approaches to young migrants in vulnerable conditions and the life-course related time-specific embeddedness of the research process face a range of challenges: namely contingency, arbitrariness and selectivity in field-specific cases selection which result in difficulties comparing and generalizing study results across wider or different populations.

## 2.7 Recruiting bias

Directly connected to the selectivity problem is the question of how researchers recruit young migrants in vulnerable conditions for participating in their studies. Chase et al. (2020: 460) write, 'As researchers, how we negotiate and navigate access to participants fundamentally shapes the extent to which we can articulate the nuances and complexities of migrant young people's lived experiences for the purposes of enriching theory, policy and/or practice'. From using young people, gatekeeper, peer researcher, social media groups and networks, contact information etc., it is said that many roads lead to Rome.

However, different navigation and negotiation of access leads to different recruiting trajectories, often with different outcome concerning whom, when and where we recruit our informants and under which conditions we realise our research – e.g., face to face or in the digital space or both.

In researching young migrants in vulnerable conditions 'recruiting contingency' is of central importance. Researching young 'dropouts' in Germany, Skrobaneck et al. (2010) used a mixed method recruiting strategy combining cases specific survey data information, hints from the gatekeeper, and a snowball strategy based on the contact information provided by participants for reaching marginalized young people beyond social care (Skrobaneck, Tillmann, & Moegling, 2010). Although they reached a substantial number of informants in their study, they were cautious in generalising their findings due to the intersecting type of access induced idiosyncratic negotiating processes while recruiting study participants. Nevertheless, the research team assumed to have undertaken 'meaningful' recruitment (Skrobaneck et al., 2010: 48).

Hence, researching young migrants in vulnerable conditions provides insight into the manifold facets of life of the young in the context of mobility, migration and integration. However, the stemming heterogeneity of research impressions prompts us to question if these results result from recruiting biases or representing the manifold life of young migrants in vulnerable conditions?

## 2.8 How to research young people in vulnerable conditions?

The next central issue in researching young migrants in vulnerable conditions is how concrete research methods should be chosen since the kind of chosen method defines the kind of data that is supposed to be collected. Contemporary research suggests a potpourri of methods for researching 'hard to reach' young people: classical observational approaches, different types of interviews, methods activating self-reporting, approaches for visualising experiences and art or creative method-based approaches (Lenette, 2019: 115-236; Liamputtong, 2007: 93-163; D. Sime, 2017: 147-149). It is further proposed to separate between more 'traditional or classical approaches' like interviewing with all its sub-methods, 'flexible and collaborative investigative methods' and 'innovative' or 'alternative' research methods (Liamputtong, 2007: 93-163).

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<sup>8</sup> For example Miles and Huberman identify 16 common sampling strategies in qualitative research! (Creswell & Poth, 2018: 157-160; Miles & Huberman, 1994: 28) – which clearly underlines the challenges regarding cross-sample and cross study comparison of research results.

This complexity and colourfulness of available research methods pose both boon and bane. On the one hand, it provides a variable set of tools that allows approaching young migrants in different vulnerable conditions. Hence, to adjust the research method to varying concrete life circumstances at a certain point in young people's life course. On the other hand, the variety of research methods fosters complexity regarding data collection, data analysis and research results, impeding or even hindering comparability, generalisability and synthesis of findings across studies (Timulak, 2014).

Researching young migrants in vulnerable conditions considers the context and the embeddedness of the young and thus 'cherishes more contextualized knowledge' (Timulak, 2014: 493). This prompts the researcher to adjust the how-to of his research strategy to the ecological characteristics of the study's contexts within the study and the idiosyncratic characteristics (traits and states) of the young migrant. Hence, 'the ambition to provide a more comprehensive picture or understanding' (Timulak, 2014: 493) is somehow contradicted by the variability of a unit of analysis and the corresponding diversity of research methods chosen against the background of the nature of the unit of analysis.

## 2.9 Researching sensitive topics

It cannot be doubted that researching young migrants in vulnerable conditions poses a real challenge in choosing methodologies as they might expose the researcher and/or the young research participants to many sensitive topics. Sensitive topics are ones 'which potentially poses for those involved a substantial threat, the emergence of which renders problematic for the researcher and/or the researched the collection, holding, and or/dissemination of research data.' (Lee & Renzetti, 1990: 512). Lee and Renzetti (1990: 512) name at least four areas with high potential to be threatening. Including 'intruding the private sphere' or 'delving into deeply personal experience', issues of 'deviance and social control', 'coercion or domination' and where research 'deals with things sacred to those being studied which they do not wish profaned' (Lee & Renzetti, 1990: 512).

All this reminds us as the researcher to be very cautious, reflexive and transparent in choosing our methods for researching young migrants in vulnerable conditions not to expose them to sensitivity challenges. However, as Lenette et al. (2019) clearly state regarding participatory research, this does not only count for the research subjects but also for the researchers themselves. Since researching young people in vulnerable conditions 'inherently involves a 'delicate balancing act' to negotiate specific partnership rules, while safeguarding research's integrity and academic rigour' (Lenette et al., 2019: 169). Hence, researchers have an ethical responsibility when it comes to choosing the target group, to decide the field for investigation, to select concrete methods/methodologies to approach the chosen target group, to do specific ways of data analysis and to disseminate the results (Nind, Wiles, Bengry-Howell, & Crow, 2012). It must be ensured that both target groups and researchers are not misguided, misrepresented or disadvantaged by their research and research findings (Sime, 2017; Sime & Fox, 2015).

## 2.10 What are methodological "innovations" or "novelty"

A last issue of central importance is that of 'innovations' in the field of young migrant research. Innovations in methodologies approaching young 'hard to reach' people have become a central field of discourse in social research. This has at least two reasons. Firstly, researchers' growing awareness that 'traditional' methods of reaching, involving and researching young people in vulnerable conditions – due to complexities, dynamics and differentiation regarding mobilities/migration and vulnerabilities – are no longer adequate means for researching these young people. Secondly, there is an increased pressure on researchers 'to develop novel methodological approaches' (Wiles, Bengry-Howell, Crow, & Nind, 2013: 18). Wiles et al. (2013: 18) write: 'The context of research is increasingly one in which

the funding of individuals and institutions and indeed individual career progression rests on the ability to demonstrate novelty and research ‘impact’.

Reflecting on ‘methodological innovations’ or ‘methodological novelty’ in researching young migrants in general, as well as concrete sub-groups, poses several questions. What is ‘innovation’ or ‘methodological novelty’ (Johannessen, Olsen, & Lumpkin, 2001; Travers, 2009)? Where does the need for ‘methodological innovations’ come from? ‘What impact do innovations have and what is the purpose and process whereby innovations achieve ‘breakthrough’ status and widespread take-up’ (Bengry-Howell, Wiles, Nind, & Crow, 2011)? These questions are not easy to answer since the concepts of ‘innovation’ or ‘novelty’ depend on the position of the ‘appraiser’ who judges a special methodology as innovative against his own or group ‘taste’, based on the background of the social context and therein existing contextual constraints or based on recognized or hidden research field-specific power relations and struggles (Bourdieu, 1996; Lammers, 2007).

It also has to be considered that researcher who practically use a specific method often do not make ‘grand claims to innovations’ or do not ‘state that their specific methodological development should replace other existing methods or should be adopted wholesale’ (Wiles et al., 2013: 29). Hence ‘innovation’ or ‘novelty’ becomes ascribed to certain methodological development, and those labelling processes are seldom the purpose of research field-specific reflections or debates across different research fields.

Researchers operate in borderlands while being innovative. They must manage risk while being innovative and they have to take risk for being innovative ‘operating within a culture in which procedural ethical regulation acts to limit methodological development and in which they (and other users of their method/approach) communicate the safe qualities alongside the innovative qualities of their approach’ (Nind et al., 2012: 650).

## 2.11 Reflexions

To address these challenges effectively, we fall into line with Aldridge’s reflections that it needs ‘greater clarity, rigour and consistency’ (Aldridge, 2015: 4) regarding methods used in accessing and researching ‘hard to reach’ young people in general and young migrants in vulnerable conditions in particular. A clear, transparent and reflexive debate on how to reach this goal in vulnerable group research ‘with reference to recognised models, typologies or frames of reference’ (Aldridge, 2015: 4) is too seldom on the radar and only cowardly discussed among the different research fields (Block, 2013; Chase et al., 2020; J. Couch et al., 2014; Lee & Renzetti, 1990; Lenette et al., 2019; Liamputtong, 2007; Russell, 2013). This is even more important since it is assumed that ‘People’s realities – their lives and livelihoods, the multifarious conditions they experience, their relationships, their values, their awareness and aspirations – are complex and in continuous flux. The realities they commonly face have been characterised as local, complex, dynamic, diverse, uncontrollable and unpredictable.’ (Chambers, 2015: 329).<sup>9</sup>

However, validity and reliability, as well as comparability, transparency and verifiability of research and research outcomes, still count as key pillars of scientific research independently from the daily life complexities of the present, from research ideologies, policies and economies. They help us to tackle the range of challenges discussed above. Sticking to these key pillars of scientific research guarantees the credibility of action and participatory research methodology in the context of scientific knowledge production. Moreover, this is even more important since researcher and co-researcher that work through action and participatory research co-produce knowledge by combining idiosyncratic research

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<sup>9</sup> This has to be seen as a hypotheses which is contested in social sciences.



knowledge with idiosyncratic collective and/or subjective knowledge. Combining these types of knowledge does not automatically, although sometimes implicitly or explicitly assumed (Chambers, 2015: 329), make the research valid or reliable or comparable or empowering. Sticking to these key pillars also helps to prevent us from ‘amnesia’ or being ‘New Columbuses’ with a kind of ‘discoverer’s complex’ (Sorokin, 1956: 3; Travers, 2009: 175). Furthermore, sticking to these pillars provides us with the necessary information to judge our action and participatory research endeavour against the ‘golden standard’ – redistribution of power needed to shape practice outcomes (Arnstein 1969; 216) – research to really improve the situations of those (in our case young migrants in vulnerable conditions) we are doing research together.

Action and participatory research aim to promote the ‘autonomy and voices’ of young people in vulnerable conditions (Aldridge, 2012 2015: 7) taking explicitly into consideration that those young are often ‘hard to reach’, that it needs specific methods for getting them on board of our research. That approaches are vital to engage them actively in this research. Consequently, Aldridge (2015: 30) concludes that action and participatory research methods ‘need to evolve and develop according to coherent and realistic research objectives and agendas and the commitment of researchers (as the originators and designers of research projects) to participatory and emancipatory agendas.’

Additionally, these methods need the understanding and commitment of the young who are addressed by us researchers. Young people’s practical involvement and engagement as well as equal power relations within and accepting exchange practices between research participants, co-researchers, researchers, and other social agents, means that action and participatory research methods are taken seriously. Without that kind of practices, participatory action research becomes a potpourri of bloodless theories or theoretical fragments combined with arbitrary methods which claim to be ‘innovative’ but only feed the hunger for distinction, reputation and surviving in the field of science without any positive implications or changes for the young who are addressed by these actions.

### 3 Innovations in participatory and action research methodology – a review

#### 3.1 Methodology

*By Jan Skrobanek*

In the following, we want to cast light on and reflect upon latest developments in action and participatory research methodology and innovation in youth related migration and integration research with a focus on young migrants in vulnerable conditions. In this chapter, we will present the strategy used by collecting the appropriate literature. Our methodological approach took inspiration from the document analysis framework provided by Hiles, Moss, Wright, and Dallos (2013). Based on Hiles et al. (2013) approach we gathered, synthesised and examined in-depth the latest methodological developments in existing research addressing young migrants in vulnerable conditions (Hiles, Moss, Wright, & Dallos, 2013: 2061). As already underlined, we focus on work around participatory and action research approaches and methods, existing challenges, but also new developments and innovations in this field.

In undertaking this review, we used a two-step strategy for identifying relevant articles. Given the strong emphasis in MIMY on using and further developing a participatory approach with migrant young people and given the substantial expertise among the partners in action and participatory methods, we invited all MIMY consortium research partners to contribute to the task by making their recommendations and signposting us to work that, in their view, represented innovative approaches

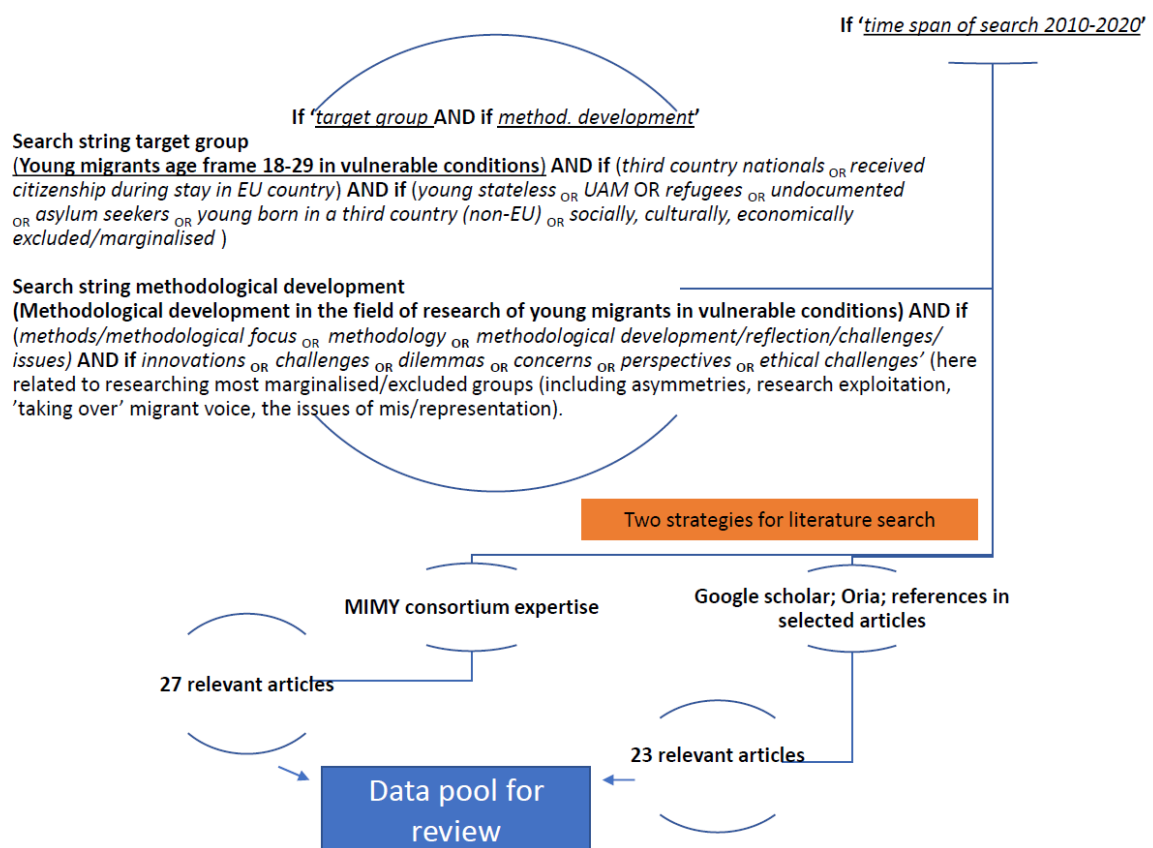


to researching young migrants in vulnerable conditions. Based on MIMY expert recommendations, 27 articles were selected for the document sample.<sup>10</sup>

In a second step, we used the databases Google Scholar and Oria<sup>11</sup> and selected articles literature overview for identifying relevant contributions to the field. For searching and identifying relevant contributions, the path selection criteria represented in Figure 1 were used. Subsequently, based on a general overview of the methodological approach and used techniques, the most relevant articles – here 23 articles – became selected into the data pool.

We do not claim that the identified literature is exhaustive since we didn't use – due to complexity reasons – other platforms or channels. Rather, this review aims at capturing and reflecting on some of the established and more emerging innovative practices that we found relevant and meaningful to mention in the context of researching young migrants in vulnerable conditions. For this, we used a kind of 'intended deepening' approach by following up key types of innovations/research and reflections on this.

Figure 1: Path selection for review of methodological innovations in approaching and researching MIMY target group



For analysing the relevant contributions and for providing a systematic analysis approach, we used the following questions as a kind of guide for the literature review:

<sup>10</sup> For choosing relevant contributions MIMY partners were invited to use the path selection criteria recommended by UiB (Figure 1) as guideline.

<sup>11</sup> Oria is the University of Bergen's library database.

- What is this method about?
- Why has it been introduced?
- When it became introduced/used for the first time – field and timeframe?
- What is thought about to be innovative?
- What kind of knowledge is produced?
- What are the advantages/shortcoming discussed/reflected in the contribution?

## 3.2 Participatory research methodologies

*By Joakim Jensen and Rebecca Dyer Ånensen*

Participatory methodologies have been applied or discussed in several research projects concerning vulnerable groups such as migrants (Aldridge, 2015; Duarte et al., 2018; Gilhooly & Lee, 2017; Hugman et al., 2011; Ní Laoire, 2016). Participatory Research (PR) approaches are where people with direct experiences of, or interest in, the research topic, participate in all or some aspects of the process, including research design, data collection and analysis, and reporting and dissemination (Lenette et al., 2019). PR reflects a paradigm shift from conventional and extractive methodologies towards subjective and context-specific approaches, as well as going beyond superficial insider-outsider interactions among academic and co-researchers, collapsing artificial boundaries that define who can create new knowledge. In PR, people with lived experiences are not seen as research subjects but as co-researchers and agents of change with a vested interest in projects who are actively engaged in critical discussions. In the following, we will first look at participatory methodologies more generally, and how these are used in relation to research on young migrants, before we take a closer look at specific types of participatory research addressing young people in vulnerable conditions.

It is common to make a distinction between participatory research (PR) and participatory action research (PAR) (Duarte et al., 2018). PR is characterised by collaboration between researchers and practitioners, with the intention to enhance the research process. The purpose is to ‘gain deeper and better understanding of the targeted group while bringing them on board as research partners’ (Duarte et al., 2018: 2-3). Participatory action research (PAR) takes this a step further, including research participants in a democratic process as co-researchers with the purpose to develop a tool or lead to some form of action. PAR ‘...combines aspects of popular education, community-based research, and action for social change. Emphasizing collaboration within marginalized or oppressed people, groups or communities, participatory action research works to address the underlying causes of inequality while at the same time focusing on finding solutions to specific community concerns’ (Williams and Brydon-Miller, 2004: 245). Still, it is important to be mindful of the fact that in reality, ‘in many cases, people are ‘participated’ in a process which lies outside their ultimate control’ (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995: 1669).

Participatory action research (PAR) is underpinned by an understanding that people, in particular those with experience of oppressive power relations, hold deep knowledge about their experiences, and should be the architects of research about their lives (Torre and Fine, 2006). This position is deeply connected to the fact that PAR is historically located within liberationist, feminist, antiracist, decolonial, activist, social justice movements (Freire, 1970; Falso-Borda, 1979; Smith, 1999; Mike Kesby, 2005; Cahill, 2010; Tuck & Yang, 2012; Lykes & Crosby, 2014). The intersections between these different critical research positionalities lie in commitments to democratise research methods and subvert power inequalities in research relationships, knowledge creation and representation. These critical participatory research positions involve recognising that issues of race, gender, class and colonialism are present in processes of knowledge creation. They establish that knowledge is

historically situated, that people hold multiple subjectivities, and that diverse forms of knowing about the world should be valued. Further, that ways of telling and knowing that come from ‘within’ communities can support counternarratives, to the dominant, often negative, discourses about ‘marginalised’ populations. From these critical positions, participatory action research is a political commitment within which people affected by injustice lead processes of research and analysis to transform their own lives and communities (Cahill, 2007).

Against this background, participatory approaches are seen as promising when working with young migrants and have been used in several projects with migrants as target groups. For instance, Ní Laoire (2016) discusses the use of participatory design in a research project where the target group was young people in return migrant families. As young migrants are in complex social and cultural positions, they may express ambiguous identities that reflect uncertainties related to being both young and migrants. Ní Laoire (2016: 482) argue that ‘multiple and participatory methods are therefore particularly helpful in creating spaces for expressing these ambiguities.’ Furthermore, Gilhooly & Lee (2017: 132) argue that PAR can ‘promote new awareness and agency for minority youth’. For example, it is argued that ‘co-production of knowledge can be an important way for refugee youth and teachers/co-researchers’ to be actively engaged in ‘evocative research that is pedagogically meaningful’ (Gilhooly & Lee, 2017: 153). In a similar vein, Aldridge (2015: 125) highlights the need for ‘bottom up’ approaches when working with vulnerable groups. This is an alternative to ‘top down’ pressures from the academy or funders, which are often at odds with more adaptive and inclusive approaches that are necessary when working with such groups. For example, the researcher’s perceptions and definitions of vulnerability might not be in accordance with the participants own self-perceptions. The participants may ‘see themselves as resilient rather than vulnerable in certain contexts’ (Aldridge, 2015: 113).

By using participatory methods, it is possible to ‘promote inclusion and participation’ of vulnerable groups, as well as recognize the ‘value of the *voices* of individuals and communities in social research’ (Aldridge, 2015: 115). Nevertheless, ethical consideration must be considered when applying participatory methods. For example, Hugman et al. (2011: 1278) point out that once the researcher leaves the field, ‘participants are effectively reduced to being sources of data.’ Thus, they argue that the rights and interests of the subjects should be primary. In this regard, action and participatory research is suggested as a strategy for developing sound research ethics when working with vulnerable groups. This argument is supported by the importance of good quality research in refugee studies, which is ‘vital for the development of better policies and practices by governments and service providers’ (Hugman et al., 2011: 1276).

### 3.3 Types of Participatory research

*By Rebecca Dyer Ånensen*

In the following, we will look closer at some types of action and participatory research that are especially used when researching young people in general and young migrants in particular. Under the ‘community research’ umbrella, we have included some interesting studies using the methods peer research, community workshops and collaborative housing, which we discuss below. Thereafter, we will have a closer look at ‘art-based methods’, including studies using theatre and performative practices, film-making and visual interventions, digital storytelling, walking methods, and social interventions and exhibitions.

### 3.3.1 Community focused research

By Dominika Blachnicka-Ciacek and Agnieszka Trąbka

In recent years, participatory research engaging members of researched communities have become more and more common and they have attracted significant attention in social studies, including migration and refugee studies (Goodson & Phillimore, 2010). Stemming from participatory and action research, community research may be defined as an approach that ‘can cross cut a number of methods with an overall intention being to ‘enable participants to develop their own understanding of and control of the process and phenomena being investigated’ (Gonsalves, 2002, in: Goodson & Phillimore, 2010). That said, it should be highlighted that among the methods applied in this stream of research, qualitative methods such as interviews, participant observations and/or ethnographic methods prevail. Growing recognition of community methods also stems from funding bodies' intention to make research contribute to community development and engagement.

There are several rationales behind using community focused research. The first one is to empower members of the research community by giving them control over how their community is researched and over the production of knowledge. The second – with a longer time perspective – is to provide them with know-how and tools to be able to introduce changes and influence relevant policies in the future. However, it must be mentioned that engaging community members to research may also result from the inability of outsider researchers to access less available persons or groups and/or gain insights available solely for insiders.

#### 3.3.1.1 Peer research

By Rebecca Dyer Ånensen

Peer research is one way of doing research where the members of the local community have a central part. Bell et al. (2021: 19) define peer researchers as ‘members of a community, kinship, or other social networks, who often with no prior research experience, undertake training in research methods, become trusted, equal members of a research team, and work as researchers within their own communities or networks.’ Peer researchers can be an integral part of several stages of the research, from developing the questions for study, recruitment of participants and data collection, to interpretation and analysis of the data (Bell et al., 2021). Even though most qualitative researchers acknowledge research participants’ role in the co-production of knowledge, *co-investigation* – where participants take a more active role in shaping and doing the research – is still relatively rare (Porter, 2016). Emerging from the PR paradigm in the late 1970s, peer research is not new as such, but there has been an increasing call for more active participation in and ownership of research by and of marginalized groups (Bell et al., 2021).

Bell et al. (2021) see peer research as a method with the potential to help decolonise research. In their study of Aboriginal young people’s sexual health in rural Australia, involving both Aboriginal professional researchers and Aboriginal young people themselves in the research process was paramount, ‘...recognizing that young Aboriginal people have expert knowledge about themselves, their circumstances, and the solutions to their needs and problems’ (Bell et al., 2021:22). In a similar vein, Porter (2016) sees the use of peer researchers as a way to mediate the power imbalance between researcher and participant, especially when doing research on vulnerable groups in the global south in a post-colonial world. Involving children and young people as peer researchers in their study on children’s mobility in Ghana, Malawi and South-Africa, enabled them to access and highlight the voices of vulnerable groups such as children in poor areas, as well as giving back to the communities by building local competencies and influencing policies in a way that reflected the children and young people’s needs (Porter, 2016). Participation in peer research may also empower local community

organisations to better be able to address and deal with specific communities' needs (Goodson & Phillimore, 2010).

Many researchers highlight the very important role of the peer researchers in gaining access to the local community and to vulnerable groups within them, and in gaining their trust and cooperation (Bell et al., 2021, Porter, 2016, Goodson & Phillimore, 2010). Goodson and Phillimore (2010) found that engaging members of the refugee community in Birmingham, UK, as peer researchers enabled them to reach participants who would be inaccessible for outsiders and uncover problems (e.g. mental health related issues), that people were too ashamed to speak about to doctors or social workers. In Porter's (2016) study the young peer researchers managed to uncover issues that the children and young people did not raise directly with the adult academic researchers. There can also be positive long-term effects for the peer researchers themselves, like acquiring competences in doing research, writing reports and recommendations etc., and these competences could be applied in other contexts (Goodson & Phillimore, 2010). It has also been reported to have enhanced the peer researchers' communication skills and self-esteem significantly (Goodson & Phillimore, 2010), as well as making them feel empowered from being paid for their expertise<sup>12</sup> (Bell et al., 2021).

It is important to keep in mind that communities are not homogenous and static entities, but something that changes over time and can involve a very diverse group of people. This raises the question of who are defined as 'peers' and on what grounds? Ryan et al. (2011) argues that in the same way that it is important to discuss and account for the positionalities of professional researchers, the positionalities of peer researchers also need to be paid close attention too. It is also important to assess the contexts and aims of the research and how best to access the information needed when using peer research. For example, scepticism among local stakeholders and policymakers to the validity and rigour of research involving young peer researchers made it important for Porter's (2016) study to also have a strong involvement of professional researchers so that the findings of the research would be taken seriously by the local policymakers. Ryan et al. (2011) found in their study involving Muslim communities in the UK, that the fear of local gossip made the participants wary of the local peer researchers. This made it important for the peer researchers to establish themselves as professionals and to distance themselves from the local community. In other words, their position as 'insiders' made it in some instances more difficult for them to gain the trust of the research participants and they needed to reposition themselves more as 'outsiders' (Ryan et al., 2011). Another issue is connected to translations of the tools elaborated in a dominant language (e.g. English) into native languages and then translating the gathered data back into English. These challenges can be minimized by close collaboration with tutors/mentors (Goodson & Phillimore, 2010: 496-498).

When involving peer researchers, it is important to keep them informed, even after their direct contribution to the project is over. Bakunzi (2018) writes that as a seasoned peer researcher himself, he has seen and experienced first-hand how not being informed about the result of the research or what will become of these results, have been discouraging to peer researchers. Not prioritising proper follow up in this regard can make peer researchers and participants wary of new research, not seeing how the result of the research will be fed back into the community. Similarly, one of the biggest limitations mentioned by Bell et al. (2021) is that there was no room for involving the peer researchers further '... in the dissemination of the research findings from this study, to conduct research beyond the activities in this study, or indeed to find to find pathways to further career development in this area' (Bell et al., 2021: 24). They argue that there should be more opportunities for young Aboriginal people to acquire and use research skills, suggesting that a nationally accredited certificate program for peer researchers in community health research could be a start to ensure further decolonization of health research in Australia (Bell et al., 2021).

### 3.3.1.2 Capacity building through community workshop

*By Dominika Blachnicka-Ciacek and Agnieszka Trąbka*

The issues of mental health identified as one of the problems in the community project described by Goodson and Phillimore (2010) were also in the focus of pilot study by Im and Rosenberg (2016). They stress that although refugees often experience numerous physical and mental health problems, there are barriers impeding culturally responsive and efficient help. Among those obstacles, authors enumerate the language barrier, unfamiliarity with the U.S. healthcare system and, the concept of preventive interventions, particularly in the field of mental health (Im & Rosenberg, 2016). The proposed community-based participatory research among Bhutanese refugees may be an effective way to overcome some of the mentioned barriers. In the frames of the project, first, a four-day training on mental health and psychosocial support was provided to Bhutanese community leaders, then some of them were additionally trained on how to conduct workshops. Second, they took part in preparing a Community Health Workshop so that it was culturally relevant. Subsequently, they were supposed to provide the 8-session training (covering issues of healthy eating, stress and coping, mental health, daily problems of resettlement) to 27 Bhutanese refugees who had difficulties accessing healthcare and social services (Im & Rosenberg, 2016: 510-511).

The evaluation (focus group discussion) revealed that apart from the direct and assumed results of the project, namely health promotion, it contributed to the development of social capital in the researched community. When it comes to health promotion, the beneficial results of the project encompassed an increase in knowledge about a healthy lifestyle, raised awareness of the psychological problems connected with forced migration and resettlement, learning coping strategies and self-help skills. The relation between body and mind, individual and community health was also discussed as it turned out to be closely connected with the holistic views on a person in Bhutanese culture. In terms of social capital, the workshops constituted an opportunity for regular meetings and expanding social networks. Providing participants with knowledge and instruments to help co-nationals contributed to developing a support system within a community and building community capacity, which led to increased participation and facilitated integration (Im & Rosenberg, 2016: 513-515). This pilot study was dedicated to health issues, but similar participatory community-based programs could be applied to other problems, such as domestic violence, youth delinquency or cultural bereavement (Im & Rosenberg, 2016: 515).

### 3.3.1.3 Facilitating integration through collaborative housing

*By Dominika Blachnicka-Ciacek and Agnieszka Trąbka*

The last example of a community-based project is described by Czischke and Huisman (2018). They applied ethnographic methods to evaluate an innovative, collaborative housing project<sup>13</sup>, bringing together young refugees and young Dutch introduced in 2016 in Amsterdam. The project aimed at solving the problem of lack of affordable accommodation for young adults in large cities in the Netherlands while at the same time facilitating the integration process of recently arrived refugees.<sup>14</sup> It was introduced by the social housing provider focused on apartments for young adults, an NGO working with refugees and the municipality of Amsterdam. In Startblock, there are over 450 bedsits inhabited by young single adults, half of which are refugees. The tenants are supposed to self-manage, and there is an obligation of an equal share of refugees and Dutch in all the managing bodies.

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<sup>13</sup> The project is named Startblock; <https://startblock.nl/>

<sup>14</sup> The issue of migrant integration through participatory housing initiatives is a focus of recently initiated H2020 project MERGING. For more information, see: <https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/101004535>



Moreover, the buildings are designed to offer both a sense of privacy in individual studios and a sense of community thanks to a lot of common spaces encouraging spending time with other tenants.

In their preliminary evaluation, Czischke and Huisman indicate that this kind of collaborative housing facilitates developing social capital in its various forms: bridging and bonding. Having in mind MIMY's target group, what must be highlighted is the fact that forming social bonds was perceived as easier by participants due to age affinity (2018). This was one of the few projects applying the life-span perspective so directly and excluding people who were older or had families.

#### 3.3.1.4 *Considerations and dilemmas in engaging youth in community participatory methods*

*By Dominika Blachnicka-Ciacek and Agnieszka Trąbka*

An important observation is that participants' engagement in community-focused research should occur at every stage of the research process. With reference to participatory and community-based research, Liddiard and co-authors (2019: 155) state that 'being a participatory researcher means a fundamental commitment to believing that children and young people can and will shape your research, construct and challenge your ideas and bring their own ideas and agendas to the table'. The authors focus on disability research, claiming that although participatory research *with* children and young people (instead of research *about* them) have proliferated, disabled children and youth are less often engaged in this kind of studies. In their own study, the co-researcher collective was formed and engaged at each stage of doing the project: from preparing the research plan and recruitment strategy to co-authoring publications and disseminating the results. This involvement (facilitated by the extensive use of digital communication technologies), on the one hand, facilitated the empowerment of young co-researchers and, on the other hand, revealed the themes that academics could not think of and access.

What is clear from the examples of studies presented above, is that such methodologies are often more time-consuming than traditional ones. Both Lems (2020) and Liddiard et al. (2019) highlight the necessity to consider different time dynamics working in a participatory way with young people in vulnerable conditions, be it refugee status or disability. Participants need time to gain a sense of security and trust, which is crucial if they are to open up, be creative and ready to bring up intimate issues of particular importance. As a result, the time-span of the analysed projects was often rather long. Together with more equal or collaborative relations between researchers and participants, this time dynamic poses dilemmas regarding finishing the project and disappearing from the community or young participants' lives.

It must be kept in mind that the extent and forms of participation and collaboration in research activities vary and can range from tokenistic participation to full control in decision-making. The analysis of different models of community based participatory research (CBPR) indicate that there is a significant variability in participation levels, with community control and equal partnership being less common than the term might imply. Achieving genuine participation requires careful attention to how the concept is understood and what activities support it. Many activities might be labelled as facilitating co-researchers' participation, but it is unclear whether these strategies lead to processes that privilege co-researchers' agendas and perspectives. Claiming to privilege participation does not necessarily equate to explicitly adopting models where marginalised people can negotiate power relations and exercise agency in decision-making and 'make the target institutions responsive to their views, aspirations, and needs' (Arnstein, 1969: 217). Along these lines, Banks et al. (2013) suggest four degrees of participation: (i) fully community-controlled; (ii) community-controlled in collaboration with professional researchers; (iii) co-production, with equal partnership; (iv) researcher-led initiatives with some community partnership. Importantly, participation is fluid and may shift at different stages of the research. The extent to which community members are engaged in the research process is closely linked to the above-mentioned issues of empowerment and positionality and power.



Community based research also raises several specific ethical concerns. As Banks et al. (2013: 4) argue, they can rarely be regulated in terms of rules or principles. Instead, what is crucial is the 'everyday ethics' - the daily practice of negotiating the ethical issues and challenges that arise through the life of CBPR'. Thus, for the community-based research to be meaningful and really empower participants, the researchers should keep this open and reflective attitude.

### 3.3.2 Art-based methods

*By Dominika Blachnicka-Ciacek and Agnieszka Trąbka*

Art-based methods employ different forms of artistic practices and interventions that aim to engage research participants in different or complementary ways to traditional research. In the migration and displacement context, the use of art-based methods can, for instance, enhance or enable the engagement of research participants in the research, try to reduce the asymmetries between researcher and research participants, empower those who might be not fully comfortable with 'formal' forms of producing knowledge or enable different forms of producing knowledge that would not be available through an interview situation. As Veena Das (2007) argues, some experiences sometimes cannot be put to words or that the worlds fail to 'represent' the experience. While the art-based methods described below also have its limitations, they allow a different way of 'seeing' (Berger et al., 2008) and 'sensing' (Pink, 2009) and 'listening' (Back, 2007) to the lived reality of migrants and in particular of young migrants. Bearing in mind the miscellany of art-based methods, we will discuss some of them to reflect on the possibilities and limitations of employing them in migration studies.

#### 3.3.2.1 Theatre and performative practices

Kaptani et al. (2021) used in their research various theatre techniques such as Playback Theatre and Forum Theatre to support two groups of participants: young migrant girls and their mothers to construct their own experiences and life stories through the use of theatre devices. These experiences were then acted-out to other participants who would be able to intervene and suggest changes to the protagonists' course of action. These theatre techniques were then supplemented with walking with the participants around their neighbourhoods to open up space for exchange of experiences between participants and for the emergence of shared memories which were then mapped and revisited through drawing exercises. At the end of the workshops, the two groups of participants (migrant mothers and girls) were invited to share their experiences and performances. Those exchanges allowed both sides to see the perspective of the other side in new and unexpected ways. While time demanding, this work allowed participants to gain something from participation in terms of ability to look at one's lives and others' lives reflexively from new and unexpected angles.

Similarly, Shahrokh and Trevese (2020: 97) used what they call 'a layered participatory arts-based methods' to support developing a place among ten young female migrants in Cape town. This process involved using multiple arts-based methods, which facilitated the process, which lasted a year. It began with using artistic workshop aiming to support young women through the mediums of drama and arts, and to understand the meaning of belonging and home in their present lives, and subsequently discussing their aspirations for belonging and ideas about their future (what I want to know more about). The process also used movement-based methods such as dance therapy to strengthen individual sense of safety and trust and develop a relationship between participants. The therapeutic practice of improvisational movement allowed participants to engage bodies to explore and express themselves and share the experience through the group-based movements (2020: 101). Another process involved creating a joint body map to strengthen their sense of to create a sense of empowerment and connections between bodies. Authors argue that the 'embodied practices of making art 'generated an understanding of belonging that is both relational and in process' (2020: 105). Through these processes, young women migrants were creating an understanding that building

belonging ‘does not have a fixed or identifiable end goal’, but is a continuous and dynamic process (2002: 105).

### 3.3.2.2 *Filmmaking and visual interventions*

Art-based methods often employ photography and film-making to make the research more engaging for young migrants and give access and insight into non-verbal aspects of migration experiences. For instance, Barabantseva and Lawrence (2015), on the ground of International Relations research, employ ethnographic film-making used by visual anthropologists and sociologists to get insight into the everyday lives of young Chinese migrants in Manchester. Following the tradition of observational cinema, the filmmakers and researchers did not want to impose their own perspectives and analytical tropes and instead wanted the threads and themes to emerge in the process of filming. It was the research participants/protagonists themselves who chose certain plots. The filming process lasted over two years, and this time was crucial in establishing relationships between research participants and the subjects and making the process more dialogical and collaborative.

In a similar vein, Blachnicka-Ciacek (2016) uses a combined methodology of oral history interviewing and filming to trace the stories and memories of migration of three generations of the Palestinian diaspora in the UK and Poland. The actual sites and journeys of where the camera should travel were agreed in collaboration with the research participants, and the researcher then followed these places with the camera. The camera was adding the visualisation of the materiality and texture of the experience of displacement and dispossession. The important part of the process was the moment of returning to research participants from these journeys. The ethnographic etudes *The Chronotopes of Palestine* that had been produced subsequently are not a representation of participants’ experiences but rather a form of dialogical engagement with their memories mediated by the mutual exchange of experiences and stories in the process of conversation and editing.

### 3.3.2.3 *Digital Storytelling*

Another example of combining interviews with visual and digital methods is called Digital Storytelling (DST). Lenette et al. (2015) present its innovative and empowering character on the example of a small research project engaging three lone mothers with refugee background living in Brisbane, Australia. DST is defined as ‘a form of narrative, where life stories are reconstructed using computer software, where text, photos, narration and music make up the story’ (Lenette et al., 2015: 991). It is a dialogical approach, enabling participants to create their own narratives in the way they see as the most appropriate in cooperation with a researcher and at the end, to disseminate their digital stories as they like. Thus, in the frames of the project women first shared their stories in IDIs, and then prepared a script of their digital stories, which included their narratives, photographs (both from Africa and from Australia) as well as music. Then they presented the recorded film to their close ones and communities. Lenette et al. (2015) argue that this approach is empowering on an individual and communal level. Participants were proud of their film stories as during the process of creating it they became aware of the agency and resilience they demonstrated during their life journey. Moreover, they received supporting feedback from their communities. On a collective basis, such stories may produce counter-narratives to the deficit and often negative discourses present in the media. The authors claim that DST could be a useful tool not only in research, but also in social work compliant with client centred approach.

### 3.3.2.4 *Art-based walking methods as a way of opening up different spheres of dialogue and exchange*

O'Neill (2018) uses what is called ‘art-based walking methods’ to engage with the experiences of racialised migrant women from Africa, Asia and the Middle East in vulnerable social positions. By walking the streets of Teesside's town, the project aimed to ‘make visible’ the lived experiences and issues that often remain undercover. In her words, ‘the performative act of walking, by racialized migrant women, in public spaces, can be a radical act that creates space for critical thinking and

discourse’ to emerge (p.78). The walking itself has a crucial role in terms of the sensuality of corporeality of this experience and understanding – through the eyes of research participants, who become co-researchers – the perceptions, constructions and relationships with the places that these women develop.

Rishbeth and Powell (2013) reach out to migrants of first-generation, giving them little audio-recorders with an enquiry to reflect on their connections to their neighbourhoods, local landscapes and surroundings at their own pace and on their own terms. They were asked to narrate their routines and thoughts, feelings and memories triggered by the landscapes and spaces they walked around. This method enabled Rishbeth and Powell to capture rich ethnographic accounts about the fabrics of migrants’ everyday lives and memories of home, but also engaged young people in marginalized positions that would not necessarily have been keen or able to participate in formal academic research. The extracts were then recorded and used by the local radio, which offered new ways of engaging with migrants’ experiences and stories.

In a broader scope Back and Sinha (2018) asked to accompany 30 young migrants in their experiences of living as adolescent migrants in London over an extended period of time. The project has become a ten year long dialogue, reflection and exchange with the migrant youth about their lives and processes of becoming in a city like London. Its length, changing scope and evolution of its goals, have also become a telling commentary on the limits of formal research restricted by timescales and rigid plans and funding.

#### 3.3.2.5 *Social interventions and exhibitions*

Carolina Ramirez (2014) combines interviews and participant observations with analysing photographs and sound recordings that she found in the personal archives of the Chilean diaspora in London. The exhibition *‘The Chilean diaspora of London: an exhibition on ‘home’ and home-making’* displayed the visual objects collected throughout her work combined with notes generated during the fieldwork. The photographs, video, and sounds enable the author to capture the evolution of everyday lives of Children migrants in London through attention to details that often remain obscure in the formal academic analysis (the Chilean diaspora of London: an exhibition on 'home' and home-making. September 8-10, 2014). Nunn (2017) embarked on a collaboration with Australian- Vietnamese migrants artists members of the second and 1.5 generations and their families. After conducting the interviews with the families of the artists, she passes a summary of the interview data and further materials to the artists, and this material provides a basis for their artistic work. While the researchers set the process, the monthly meetings between the artists and the researcher allow discussion and reflection about the process. The outcome of the project *Translations-Generations* multi-art event was produced as a 30-minute multi-art presentation and was showcased as part of a biennial community-based arts festival in Melbourne.

#### 3.3.2.6 *Art as a tool to support classic research*

Art-based methods are also used in combination with classic forms of research with young migrants. For instance, Guruge et al. (2015) used drawing to stimulate data generated by focus groups participants. Each participant was asked to draw a picture representing personal roles and responsibilities before migrating and repeated a similar exercise to refer to their post-migration situation. This task enabled individual reflection and changes and evolution in roles and comparison, but also collective summaries and conclusions. In a similar vein, Wilson and Milne (2016) used an array of visual and auidial methods (photos, sound recordings or videos) to elicit narratives about the use of public and private spaces by young people living in foster, kinship and residential care. Although their research was not focused on youth with migrant or refugee background, this multisensory approach may also shed light on how such persons negotiate their sense of belonging and ‘home’ in new environments. The results demonstrate that while some participants displayed an attachment to

conventional understandings of home as a private and tranquil place, others felt ‘at home’ in public spaces such as buses or parks. Thus, to understand the process of forging a sense of belonging of young people in vulnerable conditions, we should challenge the taken for granted division between private and public spaces and the assumption that the unsupervised presence of youth in public spaces is connected with troublesome behaviours.

### 3.3.2.7 *Methodological and ethical considerations of using art-based methods.*

Reflecting upon using innovative and art-based methods with young migrants, Chase et al. (2020) warn against over-essentialising migrant experiences. On the one hand, we should not assume that migrants labelled with one category (unaccompanied minors in the case of their study) all share the same experiences, and on the other hand, that their existence is fundamentally different from their peers without migratory background. The authors stress that migration is only one aspect of their lives, and having the opportunity to open up during exploratory, participatory methods they prefer to relate to other themes, such as their interests, aspirations etc. (Chase et al., 2020: 462). This was evident in a project engaging young refugees in radio storytelling (Lems, 2020). Initially, in the case of participants who felt constantly forced to ‘over-perform their deservingness as child refugees’, ‘the ability to tell a good and acceptable story took priority over expressing their intimate stories’ (Chase et al., 2020). Giving a chance to tell the stories of their choice, they preferred to speak about celebrities or public figures using music as their mode of expression rather than lengthy narratives.

The above examples clearly indicate that it is not enough to engage young people in the process of data collection. In fact, they should take part in the process of formulating research questions and themes as well as choosing methods. Although innovative and often more engaging for participants, art-based methods have their limitations too. For instance, Wilson and Milne (2016) highlight some concerns about using visual or multisensory methods, indicating that not everybody feels comfortable in this way of expressing themselves. Some forms of artistic expression, such as playing in a theatre, painting, or drawing, may not be a natural or preferred way of expression. Also, the authors emphasize that the analysis of art-based methods poses particular challenges for researchers. Visual, aural or multisensory material provided by participants should be interpreted cautiously, preferably together with the participants, not to reproduce harmful stereotypes (Wilson & Milne, 2016: 152).

## 3.4 Reflexions

*By Dominika Blachnicka-Ciacek and Agnieszka Trąbka*

The analysed research stream encompassing participatory and action research methodology can be seen as a response to the challenges faced in ‘classic’ methodologies in mobility, migration and integration studies. There is a founding conviction that in order to adequately and justly grasp young migrants’ experiences in vulnerable conditions, we need to engage them in a research process in an innovative way. In line with action and participatory research methodology studies are field-, not theory-driven. Thus, the majority of the analysed research were aimed at solving particular social problems in the field of migration or integration of young migrants in vulnerable conditions with significant participation of migrants themselves, which has both advantages and limitations in terms of the results.

First of all, since they are aimed at solving particular problems, they are often site- and context-specific. The fact that they are tailor-made to answer the needs of research participants and requirements of the field results in them being purposefully processual, open and flexible. While it enables localised learning and understanding of migrants’ experiences, it also influences the kind of knowledge they generate. The methodological openness cannot always be pre-planned and tend to be very circumstantial. Moreover, this localized, contextualized and unconventional data generation may lead to the situation in which the findings tend to be very descriptive and lack the needed analytical

breadth. The results – often the description of case studies or a particular project or intervention – are difficult to generalise, compare, not to mention, replicate. It is also difficult to scale up and draw theoretical conclusions from one case. More reflexive analysis of the meaning of particular cases and methods used would be a valued asset in terms of generalizing the impact of such research.

Action and participatory methodologies often provide hints from which future researchers can draw inspiration in their own actions. They can contribute to improving ethical and methodological reflexivity, often placing dilemmas regarding meaningful engaging, exploitation and power relations in the centre of their attention. Participatory and action research methodology strive to recognise and respond to the research asymmetries between the researchers and research participants. These asymmetries can be particularly pronounced when it comes to researching people in migratory and vulnerable positions whose legal, socio-economic status, and cultural capital such as language might be very different from those of the researchers. These forms of collaboration strive to de-centre the researcher's position (as the one who knows) and offer more agentic power to the research participants. They may become an important space for reflection around own bias, own privilege and the implications for conducting research, as well as to pose more ethical challenges and responsibilities in ensuring well-being, safety and trust of the research participants.

Action and participatory research try to actively reduce the asymmetrical relationships by doing research 'with' rather than 'on' participants (Mackenzie et al., 2007). This is thought to come into life through different forms of engaging participants in collaboration, co-creation or artistic practices, often over extended periods of time. Space and tools are provided, which help research participants to share their experiences and ideas in settings that feel more comfortable and in ways that enable a more nuanced experience-sharing. Some frame the research to develop forms of 'giving back' to research participants and recognise their contributions by developing particular skills or enabling connections beyond the research situation.

These more profound and more meaningful exchanges enable more inclusive forms of generating academic and practice-relevant knowledge. They enable different forms of research intimacies (Fraser & Puwar, 2008) to shine through the research and different ways of learning to be unleashed. The findings can be more spontaneous, messy and produced on or off the 'edges' of traditional forms of learning - but nevertheless provide a nuanced and contextualized knowledge into the lives and experiences of research participants (Timulak, 2014: 493).

## 4 Concluding remarks

*By Jan Skrobaneck, Joakim Jensen and Rebecca Dyer Ånensen*

MIMY wants to investigate the lives and conditions for young migrants in vulnerable conditions, both by researching vulnerability itself, what that means to young migrants and stakeholders, and understanding what makes vulnerable conditions. MIMY also wants to look at the opportunity structures around the young migrants in vulnerable conditions in the different country contexts and how, if at all, they are empowered to navigate, participate, and maybe also transform these structures. By involving young migrants, for example as peer researchers and involving them in workshops together with stakeholders, the idea of MIMY is that participants will have an active role in shaping the project as well as getting some transferable skills and being valued for their expertise. For doing so the participatory part of the methodology must be substantially anchored in every part of the project aiming at the 'golden standard' of participatory action research, namely, to enable young people in vulnerable conditions to change the outcomes.

Through involving young migrants themselves, MIMY is valuing their expertise and knowledge about being a young third country migrant in Europe and involving them in the knowledge creation in a more



active way. Young migrants' 'insider' knowledge is a big resource when recruiting other participants as well as when interpreting the data collected seeing as some ways of expressing oneself might be misinterpreted by an 'outsider' or contextual clues might be missed. As we have seen in the participatory research presented in this paper, using participatory research for example in the form of peer research or other participatory methods is not just about the research findings produced but has a broader ambition of breaking down and redistributing power in the relation between researcher and the researched. In MIMY peer researchers are supposed to have a central role during the research process. However, practical questions like what constitutes adequate compensation for the work done by the peer researchers, and what kind of 'peers' (eg. what ages and backgrounds) is it realistic and practically feasible to involve as peer researchers are challenging questions that need to be answered at a national and local level. It is essential when doing peer research that participants do not become subject to exploitation, neither during the research nor in the course of the research result production.

Regarding MIMY's research process it is a central conclusion from our discussion to be aware that the process of selecting a 'vulnerability frame' and ascribing attributes indicating 'vulnerability' is fragile, vulnerable or even contingent and thus marked by a high risk of bias regarding who is defined as vulnerable, defined or perceived as living under vulnerable conditions and what social, cultural, economic or institutional dimensions are part of ascribing 'vulnerability' to the young migrants. MIMY tries to deal with this challenge since its research methodology explicitly stresses a bottom-up process of defining vulnerability. Although MIMY takes as starting point existing and taken for granted understandings of 'vulnerability' or 'vulnerable conditions' in the respective research field, it moves the idiosyncratic understandings and definitions of the young migrants and stakeholders into the centre of the analysis. Being aware that the researcher's perceptions and definitions of vulnerability might not be in accordance with the participants own self-perceptions and taking this as starting point of the participatory action methods used in the project, MIMY opens up for fluid, contingent and embedded understanding of 'vulnerability' and 'vulnerable conditions'.

This principal 'openness' and 'contingence' of 'vulnerability understanding' calls for multiple participatory action research methods which are able to take into consideration both the 'definitional openness of vulnerability' and the contextual embeddedness of these definitional processes. MIMY tries to address this by opening for different methods during the course of the research project and taking into consideration the local embeddedness of concepts and definitions. Hence, multiple complementary methods are at the core of MIMY since they are particularly helpful in creating spaces for expressing these ambiguities. However, this also poses a challenge of how to integrate these methods into a sound coherent methodological approach ensuring consistency.

Building on feminist and decolonial perspectives, participatory research and participatory action research brings into question how we as researchers relate to the target groups of our research, which perspectives we privilege and in what way both the skills that come through the practice of research itself, and the knowledge produced through the research, is fed back to the community under research. In this way, participatory research prompts us to be mindful throughout the research process to the wants and needs of, as well as the resources within, the communities or target groups of the research project, with the intention to empower or give back to this community in some way. This does not come without its challenges. In the MIMY project we need to reflect on in what ways are we making room for young migrants to participate and influence the project in real ways. This relates to the broader issues around empowerment discussed in this paper – are we empowering them to participate in already set structures or are we empowering them to influence and transform these structures in a more processual way?

MIMY starts from the assumption that the relationships between researchers and co-researchers are more profound than relationships between researchers and informants when using more traditional

qualitative approaches. When using participatory methods, research relationships are complex and nuanced interactions that lack a clear distinction between informant and collaborator. Therefore, participatory methods challenge researchers to navigate ‘grey zones’ (Lenette et al., 2019, p. 164). Co-researchers may share personal information in a moment of forgetfulness, which they might regret at later time. In such scenarios, agreeing on what constitutes data might be challenging. Problems of this nature may especially arise if the relationship with the researcher transcends the research relationship. MIMY is aware that consent should be given on a case-by-case basis so that risks of breaching trust are minimalised and tries to create a ‘safe space’ to promote trust and openness between researchers and co-researchers (Duarte et al. 2018: 3:7). This must also include the rights on provided data.

Participatory and action research methodology poses for the researcher somehow a dilemma. The *How to* guarantee and provide good research can challenge the open, processual or contingent knowledge production, especially when researchers and co-researchers, who work through action and participatory research, co-produce knowledge by combining idiosyncratic research knowledge with idiosyncratic collective and/or subjective knowledge of young migrants in vulnerable conditions or stakeholders. Combining these types of knowledge does not automatically, although sometimes implicitly or explicitly assumed (Chambers, 2015: 329), make the research valid or reliable or comparable or egalitarian or power free. Quite the opposite, it makes the research process itself and the knowledge production stemming from this research contingent, processual, negotiable and as such vulnerable. Hence, while action and participatory research opens for knowledge production and methodological processualism, it poses risks and challenges regarding validity and reliability, comparability, transparency and verifiability of research and research outcomes.

This becomes even more virulent since action or participatory research has the ambition to bring forward recommendations of good practices or solutions of social problems in the field of integration or inclusion of young migrants in diverse vulnerable conditions. However, while co-producing knowledge by combining idiosyncratic research knowledge of the researcher with idiosyncratic collective and/or subjective knowledge of the young in vulnerable conditions or stakeholder, it cannot be taken for granted that knowledge produced per se improves the life situations of the participants, empowers them to gain control over their lives, and to change the outcomes. Engaging young migrants in vulnerable conditions in meaningfully participatory action does not automatically make them powerful actors in the field-specific battles for recognition and distribution and thus does not automatically change the rules of the game regarding recognition and distribution. However, reflecting about and working with young migrants in vulnerable conditions on their life circumstances – can, as the various research practices show – empower them to put strain and in some cases also change on society (Puwar & Sharma, 2012: 43).

Action and participatory research aim to promote the ‘autonomy and voices’ of young people in vulnerable conditions (Aldridge, 2012; 2015: 7), taking explicitly into consideration that those young are often ‘hard to reach’, that it needs specific methods for getting them on board of research and that approaches are vital that help to engage them actively in this research. Understanding and commitment, as well as empowerment of the young people who are addressed by us researchers, are essential. In doing this participatory action research provides a chance to enable young in vulnerable conditions to take control of their lives and thus helps triggering positive implications or changes in outcomes for these young people.



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