

Migration Studies: How Should We Approach Them? Learning Through Participatory Practices. The So-Close Case Study

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Abstract

Community members such as migrants are involved to collect data but not included in the actual research process, for example, in developing research guidelines or in using research tools such as data analysis. Participatory methodology enables investigating a specific issue while including the community involved. In the So-Close project, we applied this approach to investigate how we study migration and the role of the cultural heritage of forced migration through four multi-stakeholders participatory focus groups (FGs) in Spain (involving Refugees, NGO and Cultural Institutions representatives, Academics and Policy-Makers). From the FGs, emerged the need to investigate complex issues from various angles and contexts to create sustainable, community-approved, and shared solutions.

Keywords

co-creation, focus groups, migrants, participatory methodology, community-based approach, multi-stakeholders approach, H2020

For Communities, Without the Communities

In academic research, migrants have traditionally been seen as knowledge beneficiaries (Turin et al., 2021). Researchers instead are always portrayed as knowledge creators, knowledge users or knowledge mobilisers who aim to create social or economic impact that benefits communities and society (Anderson & McLachlan, 2016). Despite all knowledge being elaborated for the community's sake, communities generally have been seen as the place to conduct research or as the data source rather than treating them as co-researchers and partners in the programme of research (Robertson, 2000). Community-based participatory research embraces a different approach. It promotes investigation for the community, in the community, and with the community fostering the presence of trans-cultural, transgenerational and multi-stakeholders solutions and viewpoints while analysing and selecting data. Participatory research is a people-centred approach to conducting research that fosters the concept of involving community members

such as migrants across the research process continuum (Israel et al., 2005).

Co-creation and Participatory Practices With Communities

Research involving participatory approaches was developed and designed by Kurt Lewin, a German psychologist in the early 1900. Lewin's idea was to transform research from a simple analysis and transcription of data to a participatory practice aiming to foster social change. His new method

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started to influence several academics, among them Paul Freire, a Brazilian pedagogist whose book *Pedagogy of the oppressed* inspired by Lewin introduced the idea of constructing an active and dual dialogue between students and educators, able to decrease power relations and power discourses. From that moment, several researchers, and scholars, inspired by the new concepts of democratization and decentralization of research power, started to approach Participatory research. Macdonald, for example, defined participatory methodology as a participatory practice where participants in the study are embodied in the design, execution, and dissemination of the result (Macdonald, 2012). In participatory methodologies, both participants and researchers take part in the process of decision-making. As Hall (1978) underlines in *Breaking the Monopoly of Knowledge: Research Methods, Participation, and Development* “the researched” and the researcher should be both included actively in the formulation, development, discussion, analysis, and interpretation of the findings to guarantee co-creation as Van Praag (2021), underlines in *Co-creation in Migration Studies: The Use of Co-creative Methods to Study Migrant Integration Across European Societies*. Co-creation for the author happens “where participants are also the protagonist of the identification and resolution of a specific challenge and not just passive participants”. This guarantees a deeper understanding of a specific phenomenon, a prioritization of research themes and fosters what Arjun Appadurai (2006) calls “democratization of the research process” making results, data collection and analysis accessible to everyone who is inside, and, outside the academic and educational context. The So-Close project embraces this approach.

SO-CLOSE and Co-Creation

The Project

The 3-year So-Close Horizon 2020 project, through a participatory methodology, has the ambition to contribute to social cohesion and fight refugee marginalization or exclusion by facilitating the encounters between similar life stories, through the mediation of innovative digital and artistic tools. Based on theories of cultural heritage-making, exposing the commonalities of past and present experiences, listening to the target groups’ needs and the developing a methodology template of co-creative design of replicable digital tools and cultural products, So-Close aims to improve social cohesion and promote mutual understanding between refugees and their local communities.

To do so the research teams of the So-Close consortium conducted 200 interviews and 16 focus groups on migrant integration strategies and needs, co-creation and cultural heritage, in Greece, Italy, Poland and Spain involving a multistakeholder team of participants. The results guided the technological partners of the project to co-create three educational and digital tools based on personal memories: a web

documentary, a story map and a participatory virtual exhibition. All the tools were co-created with the team of participants, tested by them, and then re-evaluated by them. The digital tools can now be used by all participants in their own communities.

There is no standardized way to define “who is a migrant”. For the purpose of the So-Close project, and this paper, we consider as migrant ‘any person who is moving or has moved across an international border or within a State away from his/her/their habitual place of residence, regardless of the person’s legal status, whether the movement is voluntary or involuntary, what the causes for the movement are and what the length of the stay is’ (IOM, 2019).

The Participatory Methodology in So-Close

As briefly mentioned above, from the 200 interviews arising emerged the need to create digital and artistic tools to foster awareness about similarities between migration of the past, in the case of Spain “the migration of Spaniards in France during 1939” and migration of our days, so that citizens could identify commonalities and communal aspects of migration and understand better the newcomers. The interviews also stressed the importance of deconstructing migration research. After the interviews, four participatory workshops were conducted in Spain aiming to explore the needs emerged in the interviews in detail, and to create together: (a) a possible structure for the digital tools; (b) and a co-created guidelines for conducting new migration research. The digital tools are aimed to be used by the team of participants in their own communities. The co-created template will be used for future research on migration involving our team of participants, or other groups. This study will concentrate on the findings related to this co-created research guidelines.

So Close embraces the participatory methodology outlook (Wakeford et al., 2016) in each part of the project by: (1) being careful not to monopolize the research with researchers’ knowledge or practices; (2) respecting and combining skills and expertise with participants, considering them as co-researchers; (3) not using exclusively researchers’ own culture to interpret facts but adopting cultural relativism to evaluate events and data; (4) being open to local values, manners and beliefs in discussion and creation of knowledge; and finally communicating research results, not only in a scientific complex style but using also alternative more accessible channels. Participants in So-Close are not seen just as “knowledge receivers” but as co-researchers, involved in the investigation.

Four Multi stakeholders’ participatory focus groups have been conducted in Spain after the first phase of interviews. Multi-stakeholder participatory focus group bring together representatives from different areas such as, civil society, NGOs or policymakers to collaborate on the development and implementation of a research project. Focus groups allow researchers to evaluate four aspects: (1) have a wide range of

responses (diversity aspect); (2) observe conflict lines, solidarity, and hierarchies (interaction aspect); (3) detect the limits of what goes said and discuss in a group/detect sensitive topics (normative aspect); (4) produce data or ideas that might not have been uncovered in individual interviews simulated by the group dimension (synergetic aspect), (Grønkjær et al., 2011). In So-Close, Focus Group discussion was chosen as a qualitative research tool to guarantee co-creation, no hierarchies among roles but horizontal relationships and a bottom-up approach.

Target Groups and Structure

In the research conducted in Spain, data were collected through four focus groups. This article will focus on the results that emerged in the four focus groups. In order to ensure a deeper understanding of the cultural heritage of forced migration and a critical analysis of migration studies, the participants in the focus groups were: (1) different stakeholders involved in the field of migration, (2) and migrants. Participants joined voluntarily the Focus Groups. Emails, flyers, and images were shared on social media, and in several organizations to invite participants (Table 1).

Storytelling as a Dialogue Facilitator

Arts, in cultural and linguistic heterogeneous contexts, are emotionally and politically evocative, can overpass language barriers and reduce power imbalance (Barone & Eisner, 2011; Foster, 2012; Leavy, 2018). In So-Close, the artistic practice of storytelling was used in the four focus groups to facilitate dialogue and mediate the discussions:

- **Body mapping**, the practice of telling a personal story using the shape of a body, was used to investigate the main challenges refugees face during their journey to Europe and their integration needs. In the focus groups conducted, this practice facilitated the opening of the dialogue.

- **Object storytelling**, the practice of using objects to tell a story, was used to describe elements of migrant cultural heritage migrants would like to share/should share in the country of arrival and possible tools for co-creation. Participants filled the suitcase positioned in the middle of the room with sentences representing elements about their cultural heritage they want to share in the country of arrival. This practice sparked a discussion about the elements that could be included in a digital tool to raise awareness about forced migration among two generations.
- **Image storytelling**, the practice of telling a story using images, was used to describe migrants' actual condition in the country of arrival. During this discussion, the conversation moved around representation of migrants in research, and the need of including intercultural competences to interpret data.

Data Analysis

A qualitative approach enables a deeper understanding of various phenomena (Straubert & Carpenter, 2010). Content analysis allows researchers to study meanings and matters constructed by text (Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999) and facilitates the use of systematic grouping and categorization to research a subject, to subscribe to data and topic of interest in a condensed form (Flick, 2014). For this reasons, qualitative content analysis was used to explore the perceptions of stakeholders involved in So-Close.

Qualitative content analysis has five main steps. First, the data to be analyzed is chosen and the researcher seeks a holistic understanding of the data. Next, the data is reduced by listing relevant particles, for example, quotations from transcriptions, which forms the base for the next step: grouping. After grouping, the researcher makes interpretations based on the groupings. Lastly, the researcher evaluates the reliability of the research (Titscher et al., 2000). To reach a holistic and comprehensive picture of the target group's experiences, Kinnunen and Simon (2012) emphasize the importance of choosing participants who represent the wide diversity of the target group, in our case stakeholders with different roles inside the project.

Table 1. Focus Groups.

Focus Group 1	4 Migrants: 2 from Syria, 2 from Afghanistan 2 women, 2 men
Focus group 2	3 Academics and 2 policymakers: All from Spain 3 women, 2 men
Focus group 3	4 representatives from NGOs, 2 representatives of cultural institutions All from Spain 3 women, 3 men
Focus group 4	4 Migrants 4 from Syria 2 women, 2 men

Participatory Observation

As Atkinson suggested in his book *Thinking Ethnographically* participatory observation allows researchers to investigate the told and the untold and the explicit and implicit amongst groups (Atkinson, 2017). Participatory observation is a method in which the researcher takes part in the activities, interactions, and events of a group of people as one of the means of learning the explicit and tacit aspects of their routines, ideals, and goals (Musante & DeWalt, 2010). Boccagni & Schrooten (2018) invite researchers to use participant observation following five fundamental steps during their

fieldwork: (1) preparation before the field work, (2) accessing the field, (3) being in the field time, (4) getting out of the field and (5) the writing process (from fieldwork to text work).

In our case: (1) the preparation before the field was dedicated to tuning and discussing personal perceptions around migration, and structuring the activities within the research team; (2) the access to the field was facilitated by the Focus Group facilitator that introduces the main stakeholders involved in the project; (3) the fieldwork was characterized by listening to the various stakeholders' testimonies, by moments of informal dialogue, always looking at knowledge distribution, power, prestige and social relations; (4) the "getting out from the field" and the (5) text work process started simultaneously, with the elaboration of a field diary with quotes, reflections and inputs emerged during the focus groups.

Findings and Discussion

European and Western Terminology and Ideologies Under Analysis: Empowerment and Integration

One aspect stressed by co-researchers who joined the multi-stakeholders So-Close focus groups was to start analysing and deconstructing the European and western terminology often used by researchers. Research questions and activities proposed by academics often reproduce the researchers' ideologies and cultural backgrounds, underestimating the meaning of certain words in other cultural contexts.

Co-researchers underlined that the idea of empowerment may differ depending on culture and personal experiences. In several academic studies, migrant empowerment is seen as the ability of a migrant to re-create a new life in an environment, transforming sufferance into resilience, but "empowerment" has different shapes and meanings. One of the participants that works with migrants underlines what had been discussed by several migrant women as empowerment:

"I think it is also important to be careful with the terms we use. For example, when I was working at Gururu I was joining a group for the empowerment of women. They were introducing women to the risks they may encounter in Europe such as human trafficking [...] one of the women told me that she decided to travel with a man for the entire journey, which abused her all the time. She said that her empowerment was based on the fact that she was abused just by the same man, and not every day by a different one. I just want to say that we need to use relativism [...] there is not just a way to think about things"

(NGO representative_1)

Through this quote it is possible to see that if we look at empowerment from a different perspective, we may not see it from our position of privilege, and the meaning changes. The idea of empowerment that a researcher has while developing a research question, may completely differ from the idea that a migrant, who personally experienced migration has. As

researchers, it is essential to contextualize research concepts and questions.

Integration was another concept under analysis. During a discussion about his personal experience in Spain, one co-researcher said:

"I feel we should start talking about interaction, instead of integration. Why do I have to integrate? Why don't we say interaction? I interact with your culture, and you interact with mine. Integration for me is interaction."

(Migrant representative_1)

A term such as "integration", which may sound general and commonly understood, can lead to several meanings depending on personal experiences. For this, as [Chin et al., \(1997\)](#) stated in *Participatory Analysis: Shared Development of Requirements from Scenarios* it is essential to co-create a common and shared terminology in research that our participants share with us, to be able to fully analyse and understand a phenomenon, in this case, integration. Ethnocentrism, the tendency to use our "cultural lens" to evaluate an action or to communicate, should be avoided while structuring research ([Hammond & Axelrod, 2006](#)). In short, researchers should study the socio/cultural contexts of the people that will be involved in the research to reduce as much possible cultural misunderstanding or any situation of involuntary disrespect and be open to eventual misuncomprehension or suggestions by the co-researchers during the investigation.

Stereotyped Images Can Interfere in the Research: Victimization.

All the migrants involved in the research complained about how often in research and different studies they are seen and portrayed "just as victims". In this regard, one of the participants stressed:

"You know, we are not just victims of the system, I think it is really important that we don't generalize. We are also activists, writers, let's show all the aspects"

(Migrant representative_2)

These stereotyped images can influence the design of research and promote a victim-centred and colonial perspective ([Mohanty, 2013](#); [Puwar, 2004](#)) that does not allow seeing agency and resilience in migrants. To overcome the vision of migrants just as victims, oppressed, and just made of their traumas is needed a shift from victims to survivors, and So-Close co-researchers made this aspect clear during all the focus groups discussions. Including members of communities involved in a study in the creation and evaluation of research can be a solution. This approach acknowledges that survivors are not just their experienced of abuse and exploitation, as they are

experts of their own experiences: active agents (Andrijasevic, 2010). This perception embraces the non-Eurocentric research method (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2012) and promotes change. If members of a target group are included in the research development, eventual stereotyped images can be discovered, analysed and deconstructed.

As one of the representatives of academics underlines:

“We need to be careful with the risk of assistencialism and victimization generated by our stereotyped images when we think about migrants. We can’t just see migrants as vulnerable. This stigma can influence their lives, it can just contribute to see them just as victims, fragile [...] like the common quote ‘first babies and women’”

(Representatives of Academics_1)

Held (2019) suggests that an essential requirement to prevent Western-centric knowledge production and stereotypes, such as victimization, is for paradigms to be co-created jointly between the communities. Cross-cultural collaboration, where the community studied is involved in the knowledge analysis, production and selection may facilitate a deconstruction of stereotypes (Yacob-Haliso, 2016) and a process of “rethinking thinking,” “unthinking,” and “learning to unlearn in order to relearn” (Hoppers & Richards, 2012; Tlostanova, 2017). Researchers need to tune personal or societal stereotypes because they may influence the answers of co-researchers and the entire research process. This practice needs to be put at the first stage of research, before entering the field.

From the Perfect Migrant to the Human Being

Another aspect that as researchers we need to consider when conducting research and projects involving migrants is the process of “othering”: a tendency to see migrants as part of distinct and distant categories: others (Grove & Zwi, 2006).

This aspect was underlined by several co-researchers. In fact, one of them stated:

“I think we have the right to be imperfect. Sometimes people expect us to be perfect, to be on top of things every time, but it’s hard, you know? I want to have the possibility to make mistakes. Emotionally and mentally is quite heavy to keep all these pressures on me. We are human beings, not perfect”

(Representatives of migrants_3)

When studying integration or migrant inclusion it is important to ask ourselves “Do we expect migrant to be perfect?”, “Do we see their integration as linear, with no changes or contradictions?”, “How are we portraying them?”, “And their personal experiences?”. These questions will allow us to see our positionality and expectations and tune them to recognize the eventual reproduction of power dynamics in writing and conducting research.

As one of the co-researchers emphasized:

“It’s essential to check our privilege and how we use it at any time while conducting research involving migrants.”

(Representatives of Policy makers_1)

Often our position of power and privilege guide us in the creation of research, the analysis of data and in research dissemination, continuing an involuntary or voluntary reproduction of the image of migrants as a passive collective with no voice. For instance, an academic said:

“I think that one important thing is to amplify their voices, and I am not saying giving them a voice [...] I think is essential to amplify their voices, for example in cultural and academic spaces. I mean we should include them in our academic environment which are quite Eurocentric, and heteropatriarchal”

(Representative from academics_2)

Table 2. Guidelines.

Actions	Description
Check personal bias and own positionality	Before conducting research and during the entire research process, discussing personal bias and stereotypes with an intercultural team may avoid interpretations conditioned by personal own culture, position and experiences.
Intercultural research team	When conducting research about migration the presence of people with a migrant background from the specific area of study can support the research consortium in better understanding a context and can promote transcultural awareness. Transcultural awareness can guide the process of writing research questions and methodology, avoiding using just a Eurocentric library of concepts and ideologies.
Define your positionality: Co-researcher or participants?	While defining the structure of the research is fundamental to delineating the way the research team approaches the target group. Are we seeing the members of the target group as co-researchers, co-mobilisers of knowledge, or as passive participants?
Eurocentric terminology	While defining the research questions, methodology and theoretical framework, the research team needs to evaluate the terminology with an intercultural team to try to not cause cultural misunderstanding, although it is hard to completely eliminate the risk.

“How do we perceive and portray migrants?”, “As people who have a voice or as people without a voice?”, “Do we see and recognize their agency or do we portray our research as the tool that will give migrants a voice?” These are questions, stimulated by the co-researcher’s quote that can allow researchers to see if they are reproducing what in the anthropological field is called the “White Saviour Syndrome” (Willuweit, 2020), the colonial tendency to see “us Europeans” as the saviour, as the people with the power to change the condition of a certain group, without interpellating their willingness or positionality.

As Bishop underlines, researchers should go forward the “giving them voice” or “empowering them” approach, that may imply that communities are unable to achieve on their own what researchers are able to study or provide (Bishop, 1998). Promoting a change of paradigm where participants are co-researchers, and where their self-determination is recognized can avoid the risk of what Fine (1994) refers to as “a contradiction-filled, colonizing discourse of the Other.”

As researchers, we have the responsibility to constantly evaluate our positionality. Working in a cross-disciplinary team of researchers from several socio-cultural backgrounds can help the entire research group in deconstructing eventual power dynamics and attitudes that induce involuntarily discrimination. This approach leads to the process of decolonizing research methodologies by focusing on respectful collaboration, dynamic storytelling, and reciprocity throughout the research process.

Conclusions

Altogether, our multistakeholder participatory FGs auto-generated and co-created guidelines for migration researchers. With this paper, we report a case study of the use of participatory practices in the field of migration studies. This resulted in a set of guidelines that are not just the reflections of a researcher involved in migration studies, but also integrate the observations and impressions of the migrants and the other stakeholders involved in the study.

The co-created guidelines can be summarized in the chart below: (Table 2)

This study demonstrates the value of a participatory action research model in shaping community responses to research. Interdisciplinary, multi-stakeholder and intercultural research can foster meaningful interaction for a solution-oriented approach through a process of mutual and interactive learning. Researchers are not just the ones holding the power and privilege to conduct an investigation, but they are also listeners and active learners. Participants are not only passive listeners, but co-researchers and co-mobilizers of knowledge.

Notwithstanding, it is important to recognize that it can be difficult to fully define participatory research since the concept of participation varies by culture, language, and academic setting. Therefore, this participatory research, structured on the basis of participatory research in the social sciences, may

generate debate on the concept of participation. Other limitations in this study include the limited number of participants in focus groups, so future studies should involve a greater number of stakeholders. Despite this, the FGs allowed for the development of guidelines containing a variety of perspectives and reflections about how migration studies should be approached by researchers. In addition, it is interesting to note that migration is a complex phenomenon, and while migrants are frequently portrayed as a fixed and compact group, the reasons for migration are as diverse as each individual’s experience of integration. This study aims to provide recommendations to migration researchers while keeping in mind that migration is a fluid and diverse phenomenon that must always be contextualized. Finally, it is crucial to emphasize that there is a margin for error influenced by the researcher’s bias as participants’ responses can be influenced by the researchers’ origin, manners, gender, sexual orientation, and own positionality. This aspect has been considered in data evaluation, with the goal of contextualizing answers and perception as much as possible.

To summarize, this research shows the importance of exercising critical reflexivity while structuring, conducting and analysing research, and the importance of embracing others’ ways of knowing and interpreting. This can be done through: (a) constant analysis and observation of researchers’ positionality, privilege and socio-cultural state in the investigation; (b) using a non-ethnocentric approach and; (c) promoting intercultural research teams where terminologies, ideologies, and interpretations can be discussed and re-evaluated.

This approach of re-considering participants as co-researchers, especially in the field of migration, is recognized by several scholars as a process of decolonizing methodology, but in line with Zavala (2013), we see decolonization not a methodical checklist nor a defined endpoint; but a life-long procedure that actively works to dismantle and reformulate within and outside academia.

Finally, cross-cultural research can be conducted ethically “only when done in collaboration and partnership with members of the cultural communities being studied” (Tapp et al., 1974, p. 233) and this can be done through unlearning and re-imagining how we construct, produce, and value knowledge. As the researcher Davis (1998) said “In a racist society, it is not enough to be non-racist, we must be anti-racist.” Aligned with this viewpoint, investigators must consciously take part in reflexive engagement of their assumptions and interpretations, in the pursuit to work from a decolonial perspective, and further research should focus on methodologies and strategies to propose this approach.

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