Methodological Innovation in Research: Participatory Theater with Migrant Families on Conflicts and Transformations over the Politics of Belonging

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Keywords: participatory theatre, convivial practice, migrant families, intergenerational research, creative research methods.

Abstract

This paper introduces notions of conviviality as both a research practice and a research outcome through an exploration of the racialised and gendered experiences of migrant mothers and young girls in the current hostile environment for migrants in the UK. We argue that innovative, participatory theatre and walking methods constitute a convivial practice, particularly helpful for addressing the everyday lives of migrant families within the current racist climate in the UK, characterised by the effects of the hostile environment on migrant families. Furthermore, the innovative participatory arts and action research methods in this project allowed the creation of relations between research participants and with the research team. These methodological and conceptual tools, we argue can strengthen research that challenges and goes beyond current xenophobic and racist conflicts. The innovative methods support research for social transformation, challenging prevalent racist discourses on migrant families, through building creative groups to express and publicly share their lived experiences.

Introduction

This paper describes how participatory theatre and walking methods forge a convivial research practice, which impacts on the lives of research participants. Participatory arts methods stem from a convivial practice by creating the processual conditions for validating participant experiences and negotiating differences and vulnerabilities. Furthermore, conviviality refers to a notion of living together within diverse populations comprising people of different genders, ethnicities, classes, ages, etc. (Nowicka,
The research explored the experiences of migrant mothers and young girls, as these two groups are often problematized or pathologized in public and policy debates: migrant mothers are often portrayed as standing in the way of their families’ integration, as they are seen as ‘too traditional’ and young girls are viewed as torn in a culture conflict between the parental and UK culture. As young Muslim women, they are also seen as suspect of potential radicalization. An empirical focus on migrant families’ intergenerational relations, speaks to central debates about conflict, belonging, migration and racialization. The study sought to understand participants’ lives by devising and sharing performances of their lived experiences. This experiential process of reflecting and working together to bring alive personal experiences of what it means to be a migrant mother or migrant girl in London fosters new insights into what kind of practices support or hinder convivial ways of living with each other. This process was part of a collaborative two-year research project on ‘walking and participatory theatre methods for co-producing knowledge’ funded by the National Centre for Research Methods, UK. The research took place during a period where state-driven initiatives of assimilation, control, surveillance and hostility towards migrant families, were fuelled by austerity measures and aggressive policies in the UK (Bassel and Emejulu, 2017). This paper will briefly identify these state discourses before moving on to describe the concept of conviviality, which informed the participatory arts methods for the research and subsequently became part of the research findings. It will then argue that participatory arts in social research have created a convivial research practice. Finally, we will illustrate how the research practice of bringing groups together to share their lived experiences, through performance, can promote convivial ways of living, in this case challenging the idea that migrant families are characterised by intergenerational conflict, instead building mutual understanding among the different generations. We will demonstrate how this research practice transformed socially and politically constructed perceptions, which had hindered conviviality in family relations, institutional and public practices.

**Convivial research as a challenge to the hostile environment for migrants**

The mothers’ and young girls’ groups involved in this research performed their own experiences of social encounters and hostile state practices. Their shared performances illustrated the state-driven discourses that pathologise migrant families, and how they were manifested in their everyday interactions. In this section we will
describe these discourses, which stemmed from a state-engineered hostile initiative, that seeks to target different migrant and racialised groups, of Muslim populations, as well as, long-established Caribbean, South Asian and African families (Reynolds, 2005; 2018; Bhambra, 2015; Phoenix, 1991).

In 2013 Theresa May, then Home Secretary introduced the ‘hostile environment’ policy, which avowedly targeted undocumented migrants, to render their everyday lives so difficult, that they would want to leave the country voluntarily. Yet, these policies also affected documented migrants and even ethnic minorities with citizenship.

*The Government requires employers, landlords, private sector workers, NHS (National Health Services, authors) staff and other public servants to check a person’s immigration status before they can offer them a job, housing, healthcare or other support. Landlords and employers can face fines and even criminal sanctions if they fail to do so.* (Liberty 2018, p.5)

Liberty is very clear that these policies amount to state-sanctioned discrimination and flout human rights laws (2018: 50). Anti-migration discourses are also connected to a rise in racist attacks, especially since the Brexit referendum in 2016, where all migrants are constructed as ‘potentially illegal’ (Phillimore and Sigona, 2018). In this way, the hostile environment policies are an example of racist ‘conditions under which social inequality and marginality is socially generated, lived and experienced’ (Amelina, Schafer, & Trzeciak, 2019, p.2). One important instance of these hostile environment policies was that many Black British people and their children who arrived shortly after the World War II from Commonwealth countries, such as the Caribbean among others, due to being labelled unauthorised migrants, in a series of bureaucratic failures of the Home Office, were left without access to documented work, social and health services. A main consequence of these failures, combined with the hostile environment agenda is that they now face the threat of deportation, despite having resided in Britain for decades – and in most cases held British citizenship (The Guardian, 2018). This shows the harrowing, racist effects of the hostile environment policy, which mis-recognized the Windrush generation as migrants without right to settlement, rather than as citizens, illustrating how ‘classificatory struggles over migration-related phenomena as a field of knowledge that has ‘real’ effects on the social practices’
These hostile environment policies include unlawful practices of deportation, withdrawal of welfare benefits and the right to work forcing migrants into destitution, exploitation and social isolation. These targeted ‘groups’ are deprived of their citizen rights, as governmental policies are drawing the boundaries between deserving and underserving welfare recipients including those who deserves to belong to and not belong to the UK. These policies disregard established families’ social ties, postcolonial links and long-term residency statuses in the U.K. (Reynolds et al 2018; Lonergan, 2015; Turner, 2008).

Furthermore, state discourses view young people from migrant families as potentially dangerous agents of radicalism. In addition, migrant parents from racialised and Muslim cultural backgrounds are blamed for a supposed deficit of skills and practices conducive to integration, while at the same time being called on to protect and police their children against radicalisation. Our research took place during the ‘Prevent’ governmental initiative against radicalisation in schools. During the fieldwork in a London school, teachers undertook Power Point presentations about Prevent at the schools’ assembly. The ‘Prevent’ initiative targets young people of ‘Muslim’ backgrounds, who are constructed as bodies at risk of extremism and radicalisation (Kundani, 2009; Gupta, 2017). Migrant parents and especially mothers are put in a position to act as informants for and invigilators of their children’s everyday moves against extremism (Gupta, 2017). Hazel Blears, the then Communities Secretary, stated: ‘resilient communities can only exist where women are playing a full and active part’ (in Woolf, 2008). Evidently, the government intervenes in the lives of migrant mothers, as demonstrated through public statements, including then Prime Minister David Cameron’s speech of January 2016, where he declared: ‘We won't let women be second-class citizens. Forcing all migrants to learn English and ending gender segregation will show we're serious about creating One Nation’ (The Times 18.01.2016). Cameron suggested that these women’s lack of English skills was a key factor in explaining their children’s potential disengagement from British life. Cameron’s speech simultaneously targeted settled migrant communities, asylum seekers, Muslims, new migrants, and other ethnic minority groups as the ‘enemies within and without our borders’ (Redcliff, 2014, p.579).
As described above, the current governmental gaze views migrant women as subjects that obstruct their children’s integration because they are viewed as constraining them within cultural and religious frames, and are failing to integrate into the wider society (Erel et al, 2018). This construction leads to the assumption that they are not willing to ‘empower’ themselves, with governmental initiatives willing to address this. Furthermore, they are assigned the responsibility for promoting social cohesion, by monitoring their children’s lives, to counteract terrorism (Gupta, 2017). In this research project, we witnessed performances relating to these discourses, on the part of the participant groups. Responding to these experiences, it was important to counteract these hostile incidents and state discourses by using an alternative convivial practice where migrant families’ experiences and subjugated knowledges could be validated and disseminated to other groups. The following views on conviviality informed the participatory arts methods and underpinned the research process, from its conception to dissemination.

The theoretical concept of conviviality has been widely used in research on ‘race’ and migration. The analytical concept of conviviality was developed by Gilroy (2004) and later analysed by Novicka & Vertovec (2015), Back (2016) and Phoenix (2016). Through the concept of ‘conviviality,’ Gilroy (ibid) rethinks the notion of cosmopolitanism, as the concept of cosmopolitanism might invoke class, gender and racial privileges (cf. Binnie and Skeggs, 2004). According to Gilroy (2004: xv), conviviality refers to ‘the processes of cohabitation and interaction that have made multiculture an ordinary feature of social life in Britain’s urban areas and in postcolonial cities elsewhere’. Racist discourses often view cultural difference as an obstacle to equality of rights of diverse citizens and residents, constructing thus a hierarchy of cultural difference which translates into a hierarchy of belonging, where ethnic minorities and racialized citizens and residents are seen as less legitimate members of society. This is why understanding conviviality is important for challenging racist exclusions (Back 2016; Nowicka & Vertovec, 2014). In other studies conviviality is broadly understood in relation to the peaceful co-habitation of members of dominant and subordinate ethnic groups. In our own research, we explored the complex ways in which conviviality helps us to understand how differences of age, gender,
generation, class, and education intersect within marginalised and racialized groups. These differences do not necessarily lead to antagonistic relationships, but can be mobilised for communicating and sharing across differences. However, as asserted by Phoenix (2016) conviviality should not distract us from developing awareness of the structures that uphold oppression. This would run the risk of convivial studies being reduced to experiences of amicability and friendliness. Instead, we would like to use the concept of conviviality as a tool that challenges and goes beyond racist discourses and practices, while not denying their effects on everyday lives. The application of theatre practices in this research project intended to collectively reflect upon, question and renegotiate the research groups’ experiences of asymmetries of power relations manifested in everyday practices. Their gender, ethnicity, age and migratory experiences intersected, and created different visceral responses and perceptions regarding their everyday encounters and interactions. Paulo Freire’s (2001), pedagogical work on participatory ethics and on the creation of social interventions for equality and social justice influenced the Forum Theatre (Boal, 1979) method used in this research. Reflecting on this, as part of our research, we found that arts-based methods created a space for convivial modes of sociality and knowledge production. This allowed research participants to reflect together on issues, which are often taboo amongst themselves, it also allowed the participants and research team to reflect together, and thus we suggest that these participatory arts and action research methods are particularly suited to intervene into the contested politics of knowledge production in migration research. Nowicka & Vertovec (2004) view conviviality as a state of affairs that incorporates in-betweeness, fragility, (re)negotiations, rituals and places. This view also resonates with the improvisational practices of participatory theatre and walking maps we used in this research project, as described below.

**Participatory arts methods for convivial social research**

In this section we describe the research design and methods, in particular highlighting how participatory arts and action research methods can challenge existing knowledge production on migrant families, by enabling a convivial dialogue between groups of participants and researchers. In the process, all can work towards a new and socially transformative mode of knowledge production.
This research process highlights participatory arts methods as action-based practices of their own merit. These practices are constructed as convivial processes that lead to convivial outcomes and feed into feminist and participatory epistemological frameworks of research praxis. These frameworks are characterised by the visibility of lived experiences, embodied and situated knowledge, and transformative action (Collins, 1990; Gorzt, 1993; Haraway, 1998; Kaptani & Davis, 2008; Stanley, 1990). Within this context, when creative practices become part of the research, their scope cannot be compartmentalised, as often takes place in social scientific studies, where methods, data production, analysis and dissemination are seen as separate and linear processes of knowledge production (Stanley, 1990). Rather, the methodology is in itself seen as a creative convivial practice that flows into all sections of the research, from conception to dissemination.

The research team took part in participatory theatre practice with the research fellow, who was also an experienced theatre maker and drama therapist. We worked with 2 groups of 16 migrant mothers and 12 young girls from Year 8 (13-year-old secondary school students), from two different schools in North London. The groups were recruited through our research partner organisation that will remain anonymous in this piece for reasons of confidentiality, which runs activities for migrant families in schools.

A worker from our partner organisation advertised the research workshops in the school, which the children of the migrant mothers’ group were attending. This worker continued to attend all the sessions, participating in the exercises and creative scenes. While much of the research did not require a high level of English skills, where necessary, she helped by interpreting during the workshops. After running 11 weekly sessions, we concluded with an event, where both of the groups showcased their performance-based creations to each other. The majority of the group members in both the mothers’ and young girls’ groups were from Muslim cultural backgrounds as they were recruited by the partner organisation. The central questions explored in the workshops were: ‘What does it mean to live in London as a migrant mother?’ and ‘What does it mean to be a young girl from a migrant family living in London?’
It is important to clarify our use of the phrases ‘migrant group’ or ‘migrant mothers’, as they feature throughout this paper. By using these designations, we refer to the way research participants are affected by the British state’s policies, exercised through immigration controls and related restrictions on rights and access to social welfare. The notion of ‘migrant’ is also mobilised by media and public discourses, which construct them as a group that is outside of the nation and therefore less deserving of solidarity and welfare (O’Neill et al., 2019). However, it is important to underline that we do not assume a homogeneous migrant identity, even if many of our research participants have to confront a homogenised stereotypical construction. Nevertheless, their social positioning, their experiences and their own strategies of identification are diverse. Most of the mothers in the particular mothers’ group we worked with are Bangladeshi and of Muslim faith. One was British, from a Somali family background, and one was from Nigeria and of Christian faith. The women had different social positions regarding the intersecting social divisions of migration status, linguistic knowledge, educational background, class and citizenship. A small number grew up in London, while most arrived as adults to join their future husbands. Different stories and experiences of living in London were the result of these intersections, as will be described below. Furthermore, we became aware of the impact these differences could have had on the research practice, as sometimes different expressions of participation were either enabled or hindered based on the participants’ social locations. These were partly processed through drama as an enabling way of participating in the research, and by supporting one another in their smaller theatre groups.

The research workshops were based on the combination of participatory arts and social research practices, in particular participatory theatre and walking methods (Kaptani 2008, 2009, 2012, 2016, and 2017). Participatory arts-based methods do not follow common academic applications and understandings of research methods, which can be viewed as impartial tools for extracting data. Rather, the methodology in itself is a creative convivial practice that challenges racist classifications of migrants as outsiders who should be entitled to lesser rights. The exchange of researchers’ and participants’ stories echoes Fals Borda’s (1999:13) concept of ‘symmetrical reciprocity’ in participatory action research, where participants are viewed as subjects contributing to knowledge production. Participatory theatre methods created a visceral
and emotional process that stemmed from anger, fear, pain and hope. These feelings were part of the migrant mothers’ everyday interactions with other members of society, and within their communities and families. As Ahmed (2004) asserts, the emotion of fear is projected onto migrants and shapes their movements and visibility in social places. Furthermore, according to Yuval-Davis (2006), emotions are woven into the fabric of exclusionary national projects and identity reifications. In *Black Skins, White Masks*, Fanon (1967), analysed the psychic pain that comes from the projective mechanisms of racism. Therefore, creating a research space where emotions can be made visible, reflected upon and ‘de-ideologized’ is a central aspect of our work. In doing so, we develop practices of conviviality that can support social justice. The experiences of conviviality as part of the groups’ involvement in this research project are described below.

The group work with the mothers started with two sessions of Playback Theatre (Fox, 1979) where personal experiences are shared and played back by professional actors and a live musician. The young girls group started with theatrical exercises, rather than Playback Theatre, as this was more appropriate for their age. The workshops with both groups then proceeded with theatre and group exercises leading to Forum Theatre (Boal, 1979) where the research participants are ‘trained’ in the ‘techniques’ of Forum Theatre to theatrically construct their own stories into scenes of issues, conflicts, and dilemmas they face. They act out the scenes to the other participants, who intervene by taking the place of the ‘protagonist’ and suggesting new strategies for changing the course of action. We integrated these theatre methods with walking methods. By walking with the participants in the places they inhabit in their everyday lives, we sought to open up a space for dialogue where embodied knowledge, experience and memories can be shared (O’Neill and Hubbard 2010). This was achieved in various ways. We introduced participants to visualisation exercises to create a reflective space for them to ‘revisit’ and focus on places that were meaningful for them. These included places where they felt they belonged or did not belong, as well as places where they felt safe or unsafe. Subsequently, we invited them to draw a map of these places and to talk about them. Following this, we walked with the participants in their local areas, taking photos, short video clips and sharing the phenomenological experience of walking. As a result, these combinations of creative and inquiry-based processes influenced the participants’ perceptions of people and
places and consequently their understanding of them. These transformations constitute the purpose and outcome of participatory arts, as they act as a space to rehearse practices for a convivial way of life, by creating interventions in the perceptions of and relationships among people who take part in the process (Boal, 1979; Yarrow, 2012; Nicholson, 2005; Kaptani & Davis, 2008; Erel et al, 2017).

These arts processes, when used as methodological practices in social research (Kaptani & Davis, 2008, 2008), make conviviality a lived concept that can be experimented with, practiced and carried through to the everyday lives of the research participants. In the next section, we will illustrate how theatre methods produce convivial research practices and outputs.

**Mothers’ Group: “I did learn something about myself”**

An important aspect of this method is the opportunity for participants to develop and articulate shared subjugated knowledges, in particular about issues such as racism which are rendered unspeakable (Erel et al 2017). In order to do so, we engaged with emotions and created a space where participants could exchange their experiences and feelings. The mothers could act out their frustrations, laugh, move, play and learn from each other’s experience. This reinforced and strengthened the relationships they had started building up as mothers whose children were attending the same primary school. One of the observations on the process below illustrates the outcomes of this practice.

Ikram: “**This workshop, it did help me actually. This was a part of something that, you know, will stay in me that I enjoyed. If it was boring, I wouldn’t have turned up, believe me (laughing). I did learn something about myself and the parents. Even though they’re neighbours and stuff, we say, “Hello, hi”, but I didn’t really know them. So, you get to know their personality, what their thoughts are, you know. It’s really good. So that way in the future, if we bump into each other, we can have a conversation instead of just saying hi and bye, you know**.”
The mothers’ reflections align with what Novicka and Heil (2015) comments that interviews can give an insight into life narratives but miss the fragmented gestures, movements and images in places, the everyday rituals. However, ‘it is such practices and their relative unimportance which reveal the social constitution of people’ (ibid, p.16). During the sessions, we saw how the women built networks. The mothers were able to create connections and cohesive narratives from the fragments of their life histories. They were bridging different cultures and histories, and were enriching their children’s cultural and social capital by creating a home and sense of belonging, despite official discourses, which do not acknowledge these labour-intensive practices (Reynolds and Erel 2016; Reynolds 2005). The mothers, while they were walking in a group with artists and researchers, were stimulated by the physical, spatial and visual aspects of the process. These aspects brought up memories and created associations with the local area as well as their places of origins. They were surprised that these walks created a reflective space and a feeling of belonging.

Ikram: It just reminds me of my childhood. It’s really nice, it’s like, I’ve never done a walk like this. I do go out every day in my local place or even far, but you just don’t have the time to think and analyse, and you know, go back to your memory, childhood memory. But because we were stopping and talking in a group and... It took me so far back, and it was such a nice...

Girls’ Group: “We came up with our own ideas”

Similarly, the young girls affirmed that arts-based methods created a reflective and active space for articulating their shared subjugated knowledges which can challenge oppressive and racist discourses, by exploring their own everyday lives on their own terms rather than reproducing oppressive classifications of themselves ‘Muslim’, ‘Black’, ‘migrant’ girls in need of ‘integration’. Through the creation of theatrical images were able to reflect on their everyday encounters in public spaces, and the kind of relations, and interactions that were generated in these spaces. They also engaged in emotion-based theatrical exercises which brought to the fore different emotions
connected with public and personal life, to enable an in-depth reflection on their lived experiences. These theatre exercises provided them with the tools to further create their own scenarios, with the assistance of the researchers as co-creators.

According to their own reflections on their experiences of the research, a convivial practice was created, different from their non-convivial everyday experiences of school, where their teachers and other authority figures exert control and disciplinary practices. The oppressive nature of repetitive everyday practices, such as sitting down, receiving top-down information, the dominance of the written text, and the threat of disciplinary reports was shared during the research sessions. Furthermore, the young girls were caught between the tides of busy and stressed parents, as well as task-oriented and stressed teachers, as reflected in their following comments:

Azra: “when you walk into that classroom they’re just like, “alright children, sit down, get your books and pens out”, and you just have to start writing the date and everything. And coming to the workshop every day is just like oh, we’re going to do something new and it’s not, finally, like, you know writing or something. It’s moving around, you know, like meeting people, like you know, like actually speaking to them. Not… like in class, even if you are talking about the work, they’re like, “alright, can we talk about the work?” It’s like you’re trapped in one”.

Omera: “Box. (...) we don’t sit in a classroom and just expect to do what the teacher tells us. What I mean by that is we did what we wanted to. We came up with our own ideas and we came up with what to do rather than the teacher telling us. But we came up with our own script, like our own lines, so even though we had to memorise it, it wasn’t that hard because we enjoyed it so whatever we enjoy, it always sticks in your head. But other things, such as like lessons, we have to go over it, over it, to get it in our heads, because they push us, like, too much”.

The young girls are describing a ‘banking’ and an extractive method of education, which creates passive recipients of knowledge, rather than active subjects of knowledge (Freire, 1970). Hooks, (1994), contests this method of education by asking
for Black women’s subjugated knowledges to be part of the curriculum. This is also an important matter of the de-colonising national curriculum debate in schools and in Higher Education where Black Asian and Ethnic minority histories and lived experiences are not included in teaching and learning (Alexander et al, Runnymede, 2015).

In addition, a convivial practice of reciprocity between those who facilitate knowledge and those who take part in this facilitation can be formed by enabling the expression of lived experiences and subjugated knowledges within the context of participatory ethics. In this process, the young girls started ‘seeing’ us differently as the research team was not there to deposit or to extract information but rather to facilitate reciprocal learning.

_Omera: “I also liked that you were not telling us what to do but you were there to support us in what we were doing”._

Their perceptions regarding adults as researchers have changed, as well as their perceptions on migrant mothers by sharing their performances with the migrant mothers’ group in the final event, as we will discuss bellow.

**Intergenerational convivial research: “They showed what we don’t really see”**

The workshops culminated in an exchange event where the two groups came together to enact their experiences of being respectively migrant mothers and girls from migrant families living in London. This performance-based exchange offered the opportunity for the groups to see each other’s experiences through a different lens, leading to a reassessment of the perceptions they had had of each other before they had entered the creative space. As explored earlier in this paper, in governmental rhetoric, migrant mothers carry the burden of promoting social cohesion and facilitating integration for the British nation, at the same time as they are blamed and deprived of welfare and social care resources (Erel, 2018). On the one hand, they are encouraged to participate in courses to ‘improve’ their life skills, while on the other hand, their skilled efforts to generate resources for their children’s upbringing are disregarded and further
sabotaged by cuts in welfare support. These state-engineered views and practices, without a doubt, do not contribute to convivial family relationships, as they generate tensions by placing migrant mothers in these contradictory positions, which can only undermine intergenerational negotiations in everyday family relationships. On the other hand, the young girls, through their performative creations, showed us that they have to bridge this deficit of resources, through the transactions between their parents and social agents, often required to translate and mediate between their parents and statutory services. Children become frustrated and pressurised to act as negotiators within an increasingly hostile institutional service of welfare provision to migrant parents. Adding to their frustration, parents are asked to adopt the role of ‘policing’ their children, which can create further damaging tensions. These contradictory positions often cast mothers and children as antagonistic, foreclosing convivial intergenerational encounters. The young girls were nervous meeting the parents as they were expecting to be told off or be told what they should be doing and at the same time they had very low expectations of the mothers’ group regarding their creative abilities. Some of the mothers were nervous that they will be looked down upon by the children because of their limited linguistic and cultural capital and that the children will be misbehaving towards them.

In response to this situation, we wanted to facilitate a convivial space assisted by the creative participatory arts practice, for the two groups to share and reflect on their experiences together. After three months of working with each group on a weekly basis, we brought the two groups together to perform their Forum Theatre scenes for each other. We observed that what made this day a memorable experience for both of the groups was their involvement in the participatory theatre practice. Both of the groups ‘trained’ in ways of expressing themselves through similar theatre-based exercises, while in the workshops, they created together; shared their vulnerabilities and affected each other by expressing themselves in an embodied and visceral way, as well as by developing their confidence by playing back their experiences to each other. It was because of these processes that a rich dialogical communication took place, as Pinar points out it boosted the girls’ confidence, as talking to adults was a “kind of like a challenge, but then we overcame it”. Similarly, the mothers overcame
their own anxieties and “felt very proud that they could act in front of those girls and that they were appreciated, also made them happy”. (Parents’ Worker).

The Forum Theatre scenes described below facilitated a convivial process, which opened a space for the groups to reflect on the perceptions they held of each other.

In the ‘Embarrassment’ scene, a Somali mother performs her experience of when she was herself a teenager and was looked down upon by her brother because she did not follow the gendered and religious traditions of her family regarding her choice of friends, appearance and modes of entertainment. The mother was trying to contain her own anxiety about her daughter’s choices and at the same time was trying not to further alienate her daughter. The scene depicted the mother’s actions of trying to comfort her daughter and renegotiate her brother’s attitude towards her. When the young girls watched this scene, they responded with several sighs because they were touched by the story and the mother’s feelings and actions. They validated the mother’s creative negotiations and emotional labour. The character of the young girl in the scene was played by a - now adult – participant from the mothers’ group. This enabled the girls to gain an understanding of their own mothers when they were young themselves and were going through similar situations as the girls. This enabled the young girls to challenge the oppressive roles assigned to their mothers and reinforced by state initiatives, and rather to see that they were trying to negotiate creative solutions.

Another scene depicted a migrant mother with limited command of the English language, who had just given birth. She had not been given enough time or support to explain to the nurse what she needed and was abandoned on the hospital bed. The girls commented on this as an example of institutional racism. The girls could gain an insight into and empathise on a deeply visceral level with the experiences that their own migrant mothers went through, as creative methods foreground emotions and affective relations (Grant, 2017; Yarrow, 2012; Anonymised, 2008). The whole event made evident that despite these negative experiences and hardships, the mothers
were still able to perform and share their resilience, which was validated by the girls’
gaze and affirmative visceral responses.
As Pinar, one of the girls stated:

“I also liked meeting the parents because it was funny, because I can now imagine my Mum doing stuff like that. And normally I wouldn’t imagine stuff like that, but seeing parents from different countries, it makes me feel like parents can have fun, and they’re good with, not always being like, “Do this, do that”. So, I enjoyed that”.

On the other hand, the mothers witnessed the pressure exerted on the girls as they
sometimes had to mediate between their mothers’, or even their extended families’
needs, by ‘retranslating’ these into an accepted form, to meet the expectations of state
institutions. The young girls created and performed a scene about the mother going to
the doctor and trying to get medicines for her family members who lived abroad. The
mother was expressing herself through her own cultural ways of communicating her
needs. One could see the struggle in the daughter’s body, trying to hide the mother’s
intentions and actions to get the medicines. Based on this scene, the girls spoke about
their own mothers, mentioning that their ways of conducting themselves made them
feel ashamed, while they were trying to create a good impression on the doctor. They
had to mediate between the needs of their mothers and the expectations and practices
of the doctor regarding patients’ behaviours.

Some of the mothers did not feel confident to perform in English, but nevertheless,
they performed and contributed to the groups’ dialogue. In doing so, they proved that
state-based announcements regarding the lack of migrant mothers’ involvement in
their children lives, due to a lack of English language skills, are oversimplified
(Reynolds and Erel, 2016).
Below are accounts of the participants’ experiences of this creative exchange between
mothers’ and girls’ groups.

Azra: The parents showed us what we saw in our eyes about parents, they showed
what we don’t really see, they showed us what we, like, miss out- We only see the
things that we don’t like, like if your parent says, “oh, don’t do something”, you would only see that and not the other times when they tell us ‘go ahead’ with that.

Ikram: “Yes, the girls can pick up and learn, how mothers really feel, to be honest. Because the only interaction with their own Mum, they don’t see other parents. They don’t really know them, so it’s good that they met us and you know, I’m sure they’ve got a different point of view about their Mums now as well”.

Bema: “I think when the parents came in it was useful because I thought that like I thought because when me and my mum, we’re like talking about something, I think that we’re always like against each other, but like we still care about each other, but I feel like she’s always against my ideas, but then, like when I saw from the parents that came in, from their perspective, like, I understood my mum more, like, how she felt about my actions and stuff. I think it, like, changed my view on how, like, I thought my mum felt about me”.

This intergenerational event allowed for a convivial space to exchange lived experiences through performances, and to produce a different social methodology, where knowledge is co-created and shared among participants. During this process, knowledge can have a direct impact on participants’ relationships by changing their perceptions of each other. Furthermore, this methodology challenged the idea that intergenerational differences within migrant and racialised families are often conflict-driven, hence closing the door on imagining a different way of living together.

This study proposes a new methodological model for working with groups of different ages and from different cultural backgrounds, by seeking to create a space for dialogue and reflection. While our work directly challenges some of the categories of intergenerational research on migration, we argue that it can be more widely applied to working with groups of different ages, cultures, migration and other experiences. Our work brought together women and girls with some similarities (e.g. being a migrant mother or girl from a migrant family), but was careful not to assume that their experiences, social positioning, as well as their social, political and cultural views were
the same. Instead, the creative workshops with each group allowed them to articulate their differences and offered the embodied and reflective means to engage in dialogue about their experiences, feelings, values and views. The workshops thus offered a space where they could experiment with and develop a repertoire of convivial modes of engagement among themselves and with the researchers. A key ingredient of this convivial engagement was the way in which the group members — both as individuals and as a group — developed both their reflexive skills, to understand and challenge social structures, as well as their sociological imagination (see Wright Mills, 1959), to understand and question the social processes, dilemmas and oppressions in their everyday lives. These skills were also key to developing a dialogic ethos within each group, and enabled a dialogic encounter during the intergenerational event (Kaptani & Davis, 2008).

This model foregrounded new processes of inquiry, as it went beyond the expectations of particular capacities connected to individuals and groups based on age and cultural capital. For example, we did not assume that younger participants would be more creative because of their age. Neither did we assume that the older participants would have more ‘valuable’ experiences to share and thus possess a greater understanding of social issues. In this way, we ensured that they would not be the privileged ‘storytellers’ in an intergenerational event. We did not assume therefore, that the younger participants should be there mainly to ‘learn’ from the adult participants. Both groups practised the same set of theatre methods and both performed the scenes that each group had worked on. Therefore, both the mothers’ and the girls’ groups were validated knowers who presented their creativity and cultural resources equally. The parallel workshops, which led to the mutual exchange of scenes, required the same skills from all the participants, hence setting a different model of working in an intergenerational and multicultural context.

As outlined above, the workshops specifically nurtured and developed skills and modes of engagement that valued convivial reflection and dialogue. This enabled the same respectful, dialogic ethos throughout the intergenerational event. Intergenerational exchanges usually involve divisions based on the age and culture of the participants, which can lead them to reproduce fixed versions of themselves and only to a limited extent promote active listening. The success of this dialogic convivial ethos was reflected in the discussion after the two groups had shared their theatrical
presentation of their lived experiences. Evidently, both adults and young people felt
they were listened to and their work was recognised. For this reason, the young girls
felt open to talk about their experiences with their own families in front of other parents,
who in turn offered them the space to be heard. Furthermore, the parents’ creativity
was witnessed by the young girls, while the parents gained an insight into the young
people’s experiences by watching the scenes. The parents, who had initially not been
confident to verbally communicate their own experiences, became more confident
after the presentation of their theatrical scenes. They began to speak up in the general
discussion because of the recognition they obtained through drama. Importantly, the
discussion through the Forum Theatre workshops did not only stay on a personal or
family level but moved to the naming of structural inequalities, as the scenes
foregrounded places/spaces, interactions with people in positions of authority, and
mechanisms of oppression.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have demonstrated that participatory arts and research methods can
make an important contribution to research on migration and racism, by intervening
into classificatory struggles, and by challenging racist ideas of integration and
belonging. As we have shown, these methods offer rich data, allowing participants to
explore emotional and embodied aspects of their everyday lives, their experiences of
racism, as well as practices of resistance in their everyday lives. The research process
contributes to the articulation of migrant families’ subjugated knowledges, which can
become socially transformative.

For future studies, migration researchers need to engage with and address the ways
in which social policy and public discourses construct categories such as ‘migrant
mothers’ or ‘girls from migrant families’. Yet, it is also important that researchers
recognise how migrants themselves present their own experiences, views and values
as individuals, and how they engage in processes of building collective stories (see
Richardson 1988, 1997), which in turn are validated or contested in their groups, rather
than only becoming the reflexive object of the skilled researcher.

Furthermore, this project has shown how convivial methods such as participatory
theatre and walking can contribute to research on intergenerational relations. We
suggest that the key aspects of embodiment, and the dialogic ethos, namely a refusal of a priori identifications and an emphasis on reflection, are key ingredients in conceptualising and empirically researching a more reciprocal relationship between researchers, migrant adults and young people.

This offers a response to Nowicka and Heil’s (2015, p.13) question of “whether conviviality can be achieved (socially engineered) at all, or whether it is just going to happen”. Participatory arts-based research projects support the provision of convivial spaces that include creative, affective, reflexive and transformative processes, which, unlike other convivial practices neither just happen nor are directed through a ‘top down’ engagement. This convivial process requires intention, facilitation and resources to address structural oppressions and inequalities. These convivial research practices as a response to political and institutional practices that exclude particular groups from convivial ways of being are long overdue in the context of research, education, community building and public engagement. As academics, social and arts researchers, it is about time that we should employ research methods that incorporate approaches that place an emphasis on: process versus outcome, dialogical-relational group work versus individualised expression in interviews, reflection that leads to consciousness raising, affective awareness versus a ‘one way’ deposit of facts/information, practices of care and valuing the person in process, through fun and play.

These convivial arts’ practices support and align with feminist and decolonising knowledge debates mentioned throughout this paper that need to be disseminated and researched further, to create more relevant knowledge production practices and pedagogies in the lives of research participants. Furthermore, in this participatory arts and research practice, the researcher changes function from being mainly an extractor of data to becoming a co-facilitator and co-creator. This echoes what both of the groups directly and indirectly ‘took away’ from this convivial research practice, as they stated that they were longing for these practices to be an integral part of the institutional and social spaces, which their gendered and racialised bodies occupied.

The conviviality created in these arts and research processes related to several levels. Firstly, within each group, participants were enabled to exchange their experiences,
formulate their own subjugated knowledges and reflect on these. This challenges the social isolation often experienced by migrant mothers and girls, who do not have a legitimate social space to exchange and validate their own experiences. Secondly, the creative and participatory research practices enabled the development of a convivial space for researchers and participants to encounter each other and develop a collaborative ethos, which stepped away from deeply engrained extractive research approaches, validating participants’ knowledges, and reflecting on these together by co-producing new forms of self-representation. Thirdly, by bringing together the mothers’ and girls’ groups, the project allowed for the emergence of an intergenerational convivial space for exchanging experiences and understanding the pressures placed on mothers and children. It also challenged the idea that intergenerational differences are often formulated as antagonistic, as expressed in much of the discourses and debates on migrant integration within an environment that is overall hostile towards migrants.

Research practices that use participatory theatre and walking methods have the potential to introduce and deepen the convivial and dialogic processes between different groups. This is forged by enabling groups to get to know each other, and to reflect on the social context in which they live, and on the ways in which they make meaning of their lived experiences. This goes counter to the current intensification of a hostile environment where migrant families are seen as outsiders. Against this backdrop, creative, participatory research methods can strengthen convivial modes of cohabitation, as an important way of countering the rise in hostile encounters in intimate, institutional and public spaces.
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