

Chapter 4: PAR: Resistance to racist migration policies in the UK

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Abstract

In this chapter we share research findings from our collaborative research project 'PASAR: Participatory Arts and Social Action in Research' (<http://fass.open.ac.uk/research/projects/pasar>), which combines participatory action research methods of participatory theatre and walking methods in order to understand the way in which racialized migrant women challenge their exclusion and subjugation in the context of the UK. The situation of migrant families in the UK is currently characterized by the 'hostile environment' policies. This policy 'is a sprawling web of immigration controls embedded in the heart of our public services and communities. The Government requires employers, landlords, private sector workers, NHS staff and other public servants to check a person's immigration status before they can offer them a job, housing, healthcare or other support.' (Liberty 2018:5). The currently hegemonic political discourse, views migrants as outsiders to the nation and challenges their right to access welfare. Migrant families are cast as outsiders to citizenship, challenging the social and cultural cohesion of the nation. Indeed, UK immigration policies render it difficult for migrant families to secure their social and economic reproduction. Against this backdrop, the research explores how racialized migrant families develop their subjugated knowledges to claim belonging and participate in the society they live in. In this presentation, we share the key methodological findings, challenges and benefits of working with a PAR approach for co-producing transformatory knowledge with migrant families and advocacy organizations.

In line with the aims of this book, we reflect on the transformatory potential of research and knowledge for the common good through 'alternative collaborative system of co-researchers and co-learners engaged in dialogue with civil society and social movements' (Bacal, Introduction p. 1, see also Andersen and Frandsen, this volume).

PAR: RESISTANCE TO RACIST MIGRATION POLICIES IN THE UK

Introduction

This chapter introduces a participatory arts-based research project with migrant families, reflecting on how the elements of the project contribute to a wider political project of resisting racism in the contemporary UK. The chapter argues that by working together with migrant mothers and young girls, as well as organisations that focus on the rights of migrant and Black and Minority Ethnic people, research can co-produce knowledge that challenges racist and sexist subjugation of migrant girls and mothers. This project has the potential to not only generate new knowledge and insights, but it also illustrates that participatory arts-based research can be considered challenge racist representations and generate consciousness of the injustice of contemporary UK policy of enacting a hostile climate towards migrants.

There is currently increased interest in creative and participatory approaches to research. This is in part due to the decolonial challenge to extractive and procedural research practices, which treat research participants' knowledge as 'raw material' for academics to 'interpret' and

add value (Tilley 2017). While such decolonial critiques have been formulated with a view to challenging the ways in which indigenous communities have been targeted by the intertwining of colonial and research projects (Smith 2012), they also more broadly challenge the ways in which academic knowledge production is tied up with colonial conceptions and interests (e.g. Bhabra 2014; Mignolo 1999). Another reason for the increasing interest in creative and participatory research approaches comes as a result of the recognition of the sensual and affective aspects of knowledge (Ahmed 2013). Furthermore, there is a need to explore how social research methods can address embodied knowledge (Kaptani and Yuval-Davis 2008; Vacchelli 2018). As creative methods are particularly apt at 'resisting binary or categorical thinking' (Kara 2015:14), these methods are also helpful for questioning and challenging the strict delineation of categories of 'researchers' and 'research participants' and the categorization of 'migrants' versus 'citizens', a key concern of our research project (Jeffery et al 2019).

We begin the chapter by describing the Participatory Arts and Social Action Research project on which we draw. Then we briefly present the arts-based methods of participatory theatre and walking used in this project to show how they can contribute to resisting racism.

The Participatory Arts and Social Action Research Project

This chapter draws on the Participatory Arts and Social Action Research project (PASAR <http://fass.open.ac.uk/research/projects/pasar>), which aimed to gain a better understanding of how participatory action research approaches engage marginalised groups in research as co-producers of knowledge.

Funded by the National Centre for Research Methods/Economic and Social Research Council, PASAR combined walking methods and participatory theatre to create a space for exploring, sharing and documenting processes of belonging and place-making that are crucial to understanding and enacting citizenship. Participatory Action Research, based on the principles of inclusion, valuing all voices and action-oriented interventions (O'Neill and Webster 2005; O'Neill et al 2019). Our research is inspired by critical, collaborative approaches, including community based participatory research approaches which seek to benefit the communities they are working with through generating theories, knowledge and action collaboratively. The research itself is seen as a process of learning together (Minkler 2005), instead of viewing academic researchers as generating theories and knowledge while collaborators and partners are simply providing data. It is located within a transformative, rather than pragmatic, ethos of Participatory Action Research, which is allied with movements for social justice, following the approaches of Freire and Fals-Borda (Bacal 2018:52). As Bacal points out in the introduction to this volume (p. 3), the project aimed to produce and share useful knowledge with vulnerable communities as co-researchers and co-learners.

The project created a model for bringing together practitioners and marginalized groups to engage with each other through creative and innovative methods for researching migrant families' citizenship, specifically, arts based participatory methods of walking stories and theatre. The project developed methods and methodological knowledge of participatory theatre and walking methods. To do this, we included three strands in the project. Firstly, we employed participatory methods with migrant parents' and young people, exploring issues of intergenerational communication (strand 1). Secondly, we employed participatory methods with families affected by the No Recourse to Public Funds Policy¹ (NRPF) to facilitate conversation of participants with policy-practice (strand 2). The final strand (strand 3), building upon this, developed training tools for social science research (cf. O'Neill et al. 2018).

¹ This policy deprives many migrants from the right to access benefits and housing support, driving them into poverty, will be discussed in more detail below.

For reasons of space, this chapter focuses on strand 2, where we explored how theatre and walking methods can be used to research a particular policy issue and engage with policy makers and the people affected by the policy through these creative methods. We invited migrant mothers who are affected by the No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) policy to explore and reflect on their experiences through theatre and walking methods. Later in the process we organized a workshop in collaboration with Runnymede Trust that brought policy makers and practitioners into dialogue with the research team and mothers with no recourse to public funds. Here the participants presented their experiences, views and reflections through a short theatre performance piece, which allowed them a degree of control over how they presented their experiences. This facilitated a more equal level of discussions with attendees, who were practitioners, such as workers in local authorities and third sector organizations and policy makers, such as a member of the House of Lords. This short performance served to highlight the detrimental effects of the policy, and to enable participants to share their personal experiences in a way that enabled dialogue with practitioners and policy makers on a more equal footing (for more detail on methods see below).

The participatory theatre aspects of the project were led by Erene Kaptani, the research fellow and experienced theatre practitioner and drama therapist, who also trained team members in the early stages of the project. The idea of collaboration was very much at the heart of this project and we discussed our approach, limitations, challenges, opportunities and pitfalls with our partner organizations who also critically engaged with the design and process of the project. We worked closely with Counterpoints Arts an arts organization promoting work by migrant artists and about migration (see: <https://counterpointsarts.org.uk>). Film maker Marcia Chandra also accompanied the project throughout its different phases. We also worked closely with Renaisi, a family support organization (see: <https://renaisi.com>) and Praxis (see: <https://www.praxis.org.uk>), a migrant support and advocacy organization, who were both crucial in recruiting participants and, providing advice to participants where needed.

Finally, we collaborated with Runnymede Trust, a race equality policy organization, in particular on our policy workshop involving shared dialogue with practitioners and policy makers about the project (see below for more detail) and a briefing paper (Reynolds et al 2018) for social researchers (for more detail on collaborations see O'Neill et al 2018). All of the resources produced during these collaborations, formed part of the project Toolkit (O'Neill et al 2018). We will now discuss in more detail the context in which the project took place, that is how racialized migrant families in the UK are positioned and represented.

Migrant Families resisting racism

In our research we explored the experiences of migrant women as mothers and young girls from migrant families in London, from 2016-2018. The participants in the larger project came from a range of ethnic backgrounds and had a range of migration experiences (for more detail see O'Neill et al 2019, Kaptani et al 2021). We sought in particular to understand how intersections of gender, age, racialization, mothering, and migration status shape migrants' experiences. Racialized migrant women are often not recognized as legitimately participating and socially, politically and culturally shaping the societies in which they live. Their belonging to the nation of residence is seen as tenuous, and their social positioning is that of racialized, gendered Others who are often relegated to a precarious status (Standing 2014), engaging in poorly paid and unskilled employment (Erel, 2016). Often seen as cultural outsiders to the nation, black and racialized migrant women are positioned as a potential threat to the social and cultural cohesion of the nation (Lentin 2003; Tyler 2010). They are suspected of transmitting the 'wrong' cultural and linguistic resources to their children, with migrant mothers often blamed for a supposed lack of 'integration' of their children (Reynolds et al 2018) or even their political radicalization (Ryan and Vacchelli 2013; The Times 18 January 2016).

While the cultural practices and resources of racialized and migrant communities are often marginalized and excluded from public representation, when racialized migrant mothers, as part of their 'kin-work', transmit such cultural resources to their children, this does not only serve to connect them with kin and family members, it is also an aspect of equipping them with the cultural identities to resist everyday racism (Reynolds et al 2018). This 'culture work', essential for resisting and challenging racism, is an important part of racialized migrant women's mothering work (Reynolds, 2005; Hill Collins 2009).

When, despite racist and exclusionary immigration regimes, migrant families live, work, and engage in community building, they claim the right to participate, reside and belong. By claiming such a right to belong and participate for themselves and their children, migrant families bring into being new understandings of who can and who cannot be part of their locality, city and nation. Furthermore, by bringing up a multi-ethnic new generation of citizens, migrant families change our understanding of who can legitimately form the social and cultural community on which the polity is based. With this participatory arts based research project, we set out to learn more about how migrant families practice, imagine, reflect on and theorize their participation and belonging.

Participatory theatre and walking methods

In this section we describe the research design and methods, in particular highlighting how participatory arts and action research methods can challenge existing knowledge on migrant families by foregrounding participants' own knowledges, which often in challenge official discourses on migrant families as problematic and potentially threatening social and cultural cohesion. By articulating their experiences in their own terms, positing which issues they would like to focus on in the theatre scenes and walks, participants shaped not only the research, but also began to share their experiences with each other, reflecting on their social positioning collectively and developing collective 'subjugated knowledges' (Foucault 1980).

For reasons of space, here we focus on one strand of the larger project where we worked with a group of 20 mothers affected by the No Recourse to Public Funds Policy. Our partner organization, Praxis, a migrant rights advice and advocacy organization helped us recruit participants (<https://www.praxis.org.uk>). We also explored how the idea of 'legislative theatre' (Boal 1998) could be used to allow those affected by the policy to voice their experiences and views of the policy to practitioners and policy makers. Boal developed the practice of legislative theatre during a period when he served as a councillor in Rio de Janeiro, he used participatory theatre to find out which issues mattered to poor and marginalized residents and how the law making process could address these issues in their interests. In our own project, of course, as researchers we have much more limited access to the legislative process. In addition, the project took place during a period when migrants' rights were under increasing attack from a government that introduced a range of policies that made access to housing, education, health care and other services more difficult for migrants, reinforcing a politics of bordering between those deemed to be 'migrants' and those deemed to be citizens with a broader range of social rights (Yuval-Davis et al 2019). That is why our work with legislative theatre focused on firstly making visible the effects of a policy on those it targets, and secondly involving the people affected by the policy into dialogue with practitioners and policy makers on the detrimental effects of that policy. This was important as the people affected by this policy have been marginalized and rendered excluded from policy debates. For that purpose, we brought two social workers into the workshop space for three sessions, allowing participants to share their experiences, critiques and frustrations with them and reflect together on how this policy pushed families into poverty and destitution. This was important as social workers constitute the front-line staff whom families with No Recourse to Public Funds encounter when applying for support. The role of the social workers is to assess whether families are eligible to receive support and to refer them for housing and other support. While the law is clear in stating that families with children should receive support from their local authority, many professionals,

including social workers try to deter families who have no recourse to public funds. This means that many families, despite being legally entitled to some minimal support because they have children, in practice take a long time to argue for this support (Flynn et al 2018, NELMA). We then produced a short play which was shown at the policy workshop to practitioners and policy makers (including social work professionals, migrant and family support organizations, race equality and children's rights organizations) and at the Houses of Parliament (facilitated by MP Kate Green the Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group on migration)

The research workshops were based on a combination of participatory theatre (principally forum theatre) and walking methods (Kaptani and Yuval Davis 2008, Erel et al 2017, 2018, O'Neill and Roberts 2019, Reynolds et al. 2018).

Our use of participatory theatre draws on Augusto Boal's body of work on Theatre of the Oppressed (2000). Forum Theatre is one key tool of the Theatre of the Oppressed, where participants are invited to show a particular situation of oppression or a dilemma they have experienced themselves. Once they have shown this dilemma, other participants are invited to step onto the stage, replace the protagonist, and change the course of action. This can be thought of as a 'rehearsal' for social change outside of the theatre stage (Boal 2000, Ganguly 2010). Theatre of the Oppressed transforms the role of audiences, they are not any more seen as passive spectators, but instead invited to take centre stage. Boal (2000: 98) broke down the boundaries between actors and spectators, audience and the 'sacred space of the stage' to allow participants to become 'spect-actors'. This form of theatre developed as part of wider social movements and campaigns, for example, for literacy and land reform in South America. Training participants in basic theatre skills through a series of games and exercises allows them to create theatre scenes as an arena to rehearse challenging inequalities of power. Participants' interventions were about trying out different solutions and experiencing the steps necessary for social change. While interventions may not be successful in achieving the spect-actors' aims fully, they can nonetheless lead to a changed situation (cf. Erel et al 2017).

With regards to walking methods, walking as a methodology helps us to understand peoples 'routes and mobilities' and that 'social relations are not enacted in situ but paced out along the ground' (Ingold and Lee 2008). As Clark and Emmel (2010) describe, walking interviews can be useful to understand how interviewees 'create, maintain and dissemble their networks, neighbourhoods, and communities'. Drawing on O'Neill (2012:74) we see walking as an arts based, *ethno-mimetic* method that forms part of a biographical research approach that enables "a deeply engaged relational way of attuning to the life of another that evokes knowing and understanding" for when "walking with another we can engage in an embodied and corporeal way and attune to the narratives and lived experiences of research participants". Taking a walk with someone can open a space for dialogue and communication in reciprocal ways because the "physical embodied process of walking, remembering, sensing – attuning – is constitutive and the relational shared process opens up a discursive space that can also be a reflective space" (O'Neill 2014:76).

These participatory arts-based methods, forum theatre and walking methods, are not only helpful in understanding the everyday lives of participants, they are also generative, so that knowledge is not simply retrieved, but constructed in collaboration between arts practitioners, researchers and participants; it is 'collaboratively made' not found (O'Neill 2008, O'Neill et al 2019; Jeffrey et al. 2019). Arts based approaches reflect 'the multidimensional, complex, dynamic, inter-subjective and contextual nature of human experience' (Cole and Knowles 2011 cited in Jeffrey et al. 2019:7; cf. Kaptani and Yuval-Davis 2008), and as such are particularly useful in challenging stereotypical racist representations of migrants.

Participatory theatre and walking in combination as a research method can be mobilized to reflect on shared experiences, building community and belonging. They can also lead to the articulation of collective subjugated knowledges to challenge racist representations of migrant families. Furthermore, as we will show in the following section, research using such methods within a socially transformative framework can become a way of constituting migrant families as rights claiming subjects.

Migrant Families with No Recourse to Public Funds Enacting Citizenship

The project explored how we can use participatory arts-based methods to enable a group of racialized migrant mothers to engage in dialogue with practitioners and policy makers about a policy which deeply affects their everyday lives. The No Recourse to Public Funding (NRPF) policy means that migrants subject to immigration control are not allowed to access many benefits, tax credits or housing assistance. While this policy has been effective for decades, since the introduction of hostile environment policies in 2012, it has been widened to cover all migrants deemed 'subject to immigration control'. It now applies to a wider range of different statuses, such as those on spousal or student visas, migrants with leave granted under family or private life rules, and dependents of a person with settled status, as well as those without legal residence status (<http://www.nrpfnetwork.org.uk/information/Pages/who-has-NRPF.aspx>). This policy is based on a racist system of immigration controls, defining migrants as outsiders who should not be entitled to social rights and has the effect of pushing racialized migrant families into poverty and destitution.

Migrant families often become aware that they are subject to the NRPF policy when they encounter a crisis situation, such as family breakdown, unemployment, health issues or housing problems. At that point, they approach social services for support only to learn that, due to this policy, they are not able to access support such as social housing or social security.

As a consequence, they often find themselves pushed to the margins of society as a result of poverty and racism. Many of these migrant families include young children, who are among the most vulnerable people affected by this policy. While the policy foresees some exceptional support to families with children – those without children are excluded from any public support – local authorities and social services providers often make it extremely difficult for these migrant families to substantively claim these rights (Flynn et al 2018, NELMA).

These precarious circumstances can make it very difficult for migrants to participate in reflection and critique of this policy, because all of their energies are focused on day-to-day survival. In our research project, we used the arts-based participatory methods to work with a group of migrant mothers affected by the NRPF policy to enable their collective voice to be heard. These methods were important as they allowed the women to share their experiences with each other and the research team, to develop collective knowledge, overcome stigma, and articulate a critique of the policy's detrimental effects. Together we developed short theatre scenes shared at a workshop with policy makers and practitioners. The theatre methods allowed the women to be actors, directors and story tellers, who could imagine and try out social interventions, rather than simply showcasing their vulnerabilities as a result of this dehumanising policy.

We developed a short theatre scene, which gave rise to discussion with workshop participants from public and voluntary sector organizations and activists, which is documented in a short video (Performance by the Mothers with No Recourse to Public Funds Group, <http://fass.open.ac.uk/research/projects/pasar/videos/policy-day>). The theatre scene is based on Elaine's experience, but was further elaborated to articulate the collective experiences of

participants. Elaine had been working for many years for a large supermarket. As the Home Office required her to sign into the Immigration Reporting Centre, she needed to take time off every two weeks to do so. Her manager used his knowledge of her vulnerability to bully her and change her onto an unfavourable shift work pattern: from midnight to four o'clock in the morning, even though she had just had a baby. When she approached her union representative, they were not supportive, but instead, told her she should be glad to have a job at all as an immigrant! Her fellow workers also stigmatised her as a supposedly 'illegal immigrant' and she eventually lost her job. As her husband was unable to work for health reasons, she was not able to pay rent and subsequently the family, including her six-year-old son, had to live in houses of friends and acquaintances, surviving on their monetary support for four years. Elaine's experience shows how racism, anti-immigration policies and austerity exacerbate the effects of racialized migration policies to render it increasingly difficult for migrant families to bring up their children in dignity (Erel 2018).

Theresa, another of the mothers who shared her experiences of this policy, has lived and worked in the UK for 20 years and, like all the women in our project who were either born in the Caribbean or West African nations, she expressed strong links with UK because of colonial ties. Theresa's landlord increased her rent to a level she could not afford to pay on her low income as a care worker on a zero-hours contracts. When she was consequently evicted, she approached the council for accommodation only to learn she was subject to NRPF. The council therefore refused to help her, instead sending her on a circuitous route to a range of other organizations. When finally she approached our partner organization, Praxis, she was able to successfully claim her right to temporary accommodation because, despite its claims to the contrary, the local authority has a duty under section 17 of the Children's Act to prevent children from becoming destitute. However, this did not address Theresa's needs, as the accommodation was unsuitable. Along with her three children she was housed in a one bedroom flat, where she had to sleep in the kitchen due to lack of space. Furthermore, this accommodation was located in a different London borough from where Theresa had previously lived. As we learned, it is an increasingly common practice for local authorities to house families affected by NRPF out of borough (Flynn et al 2018). For Theresa, this meant she had to travel for over an hour to her youngest son's school.

Despite the increasing number of families affected by the NRPF policy, there is little awareness of it in wider society. Thus, when we organized the policy day in February 2017, we encountered interest from a wide range of organizations. One of the pernicious effects of this policy, we found, was that it increased the social isolation of families affected by it. Being subject to NRPF was seen as stigmatizing the family as being potentially 'illegal' migrants, and also opened those affected by it to economic and sexual exploitation, as many participants had found it difficult to talk about their status. Within a broader discursive climate, where migrants are seen as outsiders to the nation, it was furthermore made difficult to claim 'the right to claim rights' (Isin 2017:506). By using arts based participatory methods, the PASAR project was able to bring these migrant mothers into dialogue with practitioners, activists and policy makers. This happened using a range of formats, including keynote talks by Ruth Lister, a member of the House of Lords, and Colin Yeo, an immigration barrister; talks by the research team; the performance and discussion of the short theatre scene; breakout small group discussions between research participants and workshop attendees; and a closing roundtable.

The range of different interactions fostered by these different formats encouraged and permitted a range of ways for research participants to engage. Beyond simply showcasing their difficult situations, they were also part of discussions and exchanges. As a consequence of this event we were invited by the All Party Parliamentary Group on Migration to show a short play we developed together about their experience of NRPF at the House of Commons, and further took this short play to a range of events to highlight this problematic policy, including to migrant community organizations, statutory organizations, activist events and arts

venues. We also developed a longer play performed at a theatre (<https://richmix.org.uk/events/me-i-just-put-british/>) and produced, with Counterpoints Arts and film maker Marcia Chandra, a short film 'Black Women Act!' (<http://fass.open.ac.uk/research/projects/pasar/videos>) which we were able to present at a range of community, arts and activist events and conferences.

While each of these occasions presented opportunities for different forms of engagement with different types of audiences and spect-actors, throughout these different engagements the research participants became increasingly articulate on the detrimental effects of the NRPF policy, but also about their own position in society as people with the right to claim rights. By claiming the right to claim rights, participants struggle against the injustice of this policy, which excludes them from taking part in the welfare state to which they themselves have contributed, as individual migrants, but also, they argue, through their colonial history.

Conclusion

The PASAR project explored the uses of participatory arts-based methods for creating understandings and representations of migrant families that can make visible their experiences and subjugated knowledges. We worked together as researchers, arts practitioners, participants and with our partner organizations to explore and challenge the marginalized positioning of migrant families in current debates on migration, characterised by a hostile climate to migrants.

While we recognize that such challenges have their limits, the processes where both participants and researchers work together to reflect on their experiences and construct new understandings that challenge the racist logic of these policies of constructing them as undeserving outsiders are important for engaging with activists, practitioners and policy makers, as well as communities of other migrant families. By claiming centre stage to initiate and enter such debates about a policy designed to marginalize and silence migrant families, participants directly challenged these racist practices and claimed the right to equal participation.

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