MiReKoc Working Papers

Arts-based methods for self-reflexivity and dissemination in migration research

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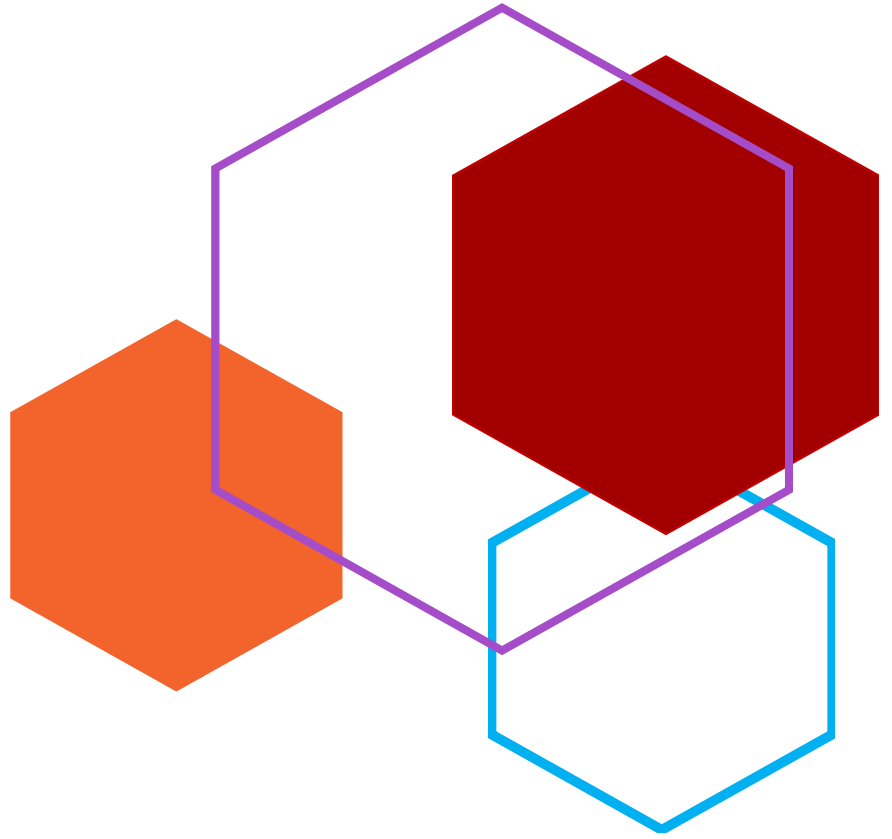
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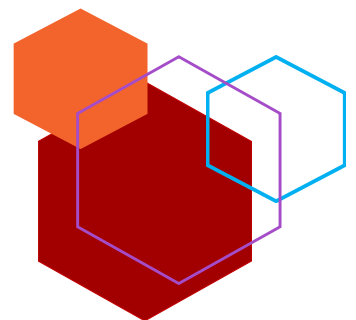
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This working paper examines the use of drawings/sketches as a strategy for self-reflexivity during data collection and data reporting stages in qualitative migration research methodology. By doing so, this paper aims to open up a discussion about, first, how art-based methods may help researchers to enhance their self-reflexivity in the research process, and secondly how it may enable researchers to better tackle with ethical concerns in the study of irregular migration.

The paper starts with a description of the master's dissertation - a qualitative study which was carried out during a visiting research fellowship at Migration Research Center at Koç University in Istanbul. It further explains how I approached the migration field through self-reflexive positioning and ethical considerations by using observational sketching as a method. Both the advantages and the limitations of this type of arts-based method are discussed. Lastly, the challenges and ways forward in using arts-based methods in the social sciences are presented.

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Introduction

As the scope of irregular migration research is rapidly growing, the importance of self-reflexivity and ethical considerations becomes all the more pertinent. This is a challenge that inevitably brings with it "difficult questions" that many qualitative researchers face when they enter the field – questions that need to be reflected upon well in advance and which continue throughout the fieldwork process and beyond. As a visiting research fellow and young scholar at Migration Research Center of Koç University in Istanbul during spring 2019, I found myself in this same situation when setting out into an unknown field without a map or a compass[1]. The research topic which fell under the categories of 'vulnerable groups' or 'sensitive topics', aimed to explore how young Afghan adults experienced and coped with their irregular status and 'ghorbat-hood'[2] in Istanbul. As such, the study intended to unravel how liminality and belonging was shaped in the process of being 'in transit'. What came to serve as an invaluable coping tool to solve the challenging epistemological and ethical questions that emerged along the fieldwork process was the use of arts-based methods, or more specifically *observational sketching*.

This working paper attempts to explore some of the perspectives and challenges on self-reflexivity and ethical considerations in qualitative research within the migration environment. The paper starts with a description of the master's dissertation - a qualitative study which was carried out during a visiting research fellowship at MiReKoc and as part of the EMJMD Master MIM. Crossing the Mediterranean. It further explains how the field was approached by using *observational sketching* as a method for reflexivity and ethics, while taking into account its limitations and how these may be overcome in future studies. Lastly, the challenges and ways forward in using arts-based methods in the social sciences are presented.

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[1] My academic background is in social work (University of Gothenburg, Sweden). In addition to this, I completed the EMJMD Master MIM. Crossing the Mediterranean (a two-year programme jointly offered by Università Cà Foscari Venezia, Italy, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain and Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3, France) in Mediterranean exchanges, intercultural dialogue and migration studies.
[2] The Persian word 'ghorbat' (غربت), in Arabic 'ghurba' (غربة) and in Turkish 'gurbet', describes the state or condition of feeling like a stranger and being far away from one's homeland.

The qualitative case study method used

The aim of the research was to explore young Afghan adults' experiences of their irregular position in Turkey. Using qualitative interviewing and observational sketching as method, the study attempted to understand youth and young adults' experiences of migrant irregularity in the context of Zeytinburnu, a district with a large Afghan population in the south-east of Istanbul. Secondly, it aimed to explore what coping strategies research participants adopted in their liminal situation in order to deal with their irregular status. The research further examined which experiences fostered a sense of belonging in Turkish society[3].

Drawing 1. *Extract from interview with Hussein (29)*

As the research study was of exploratory nature, a qualitative research approach was applied using a case study method, including fieldwork observation (both virtual and physical contexts), observational sketching as method, field notes and in-depth interviews. The applied methods of qualitative representation thus ranged from more traditional to creative and artistic approaches. Nevertheless, the observational drawings were used as a complement to other more traditional qualitative methods of inquiry.

The fieldwork was conducted from March 2 to April 7 (2019) during which I visited the research site ten times. Due to missing data, I returned to the field for two days, on May 4 and May 5 (2019). Young Afghan undocumented male and female migrants were

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[3] The Turkish society is not homogenous. The sense of belonging was viewed in relation to the "society" of the area, Zeytinburnu – a district with its own particularities in terms of class, gender, ethnicity, citizenship etc.

identified as the sampling frame. The age of the research participants ranged between 17-29 years. Although I initially decided to not interview individuals under 18 years of age due to ethical reasons, one interview was conducted with a 17-year-old Afghan youth after permission was obtained from both his parents. Fifteen face-to-face interviews were conducted in total in different settings in the neighborhood including cafés, by the seaside or at the home of the informant with interviews lasting between 30-45 minutes[4]. Thirteen of the participants were young men and the remaining two were young women. The ambition was to interview an equal number of men as women which turned out to be more difficult than had initially been expected. This was partly due to the absence of women in the streets and partly because one of the gatekeepers who was expected to help me reach young Afghan women informed me that none of them were willing to participate in the study. Moreover, nine interviews out of the total of fifteen were conducted in pairs. This meant that during the interviews, there was another or other people present. Firstly, I believe that the atmosphere of suspicion and insecurity due to increased police controls made the informants feel safer to come in pairs.[5] Moreover, the reason for this could also be related to suspicion of researchers as well as gender dynamics which are inherent in relational research. Having said that, it is important to note that the target group population were frequently encountered in groups and rarely alone.

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[4] Prior to the interviews, the informants received information about anonymity and confidentiality as well as about the purpose of the study, including an information sheet in Farsi. All the interviews were conducted in Farsi, apart from two which were carried out in English. All the interviews apart from one were recorded. Pseudonyms have been used for the research participants in order to protect their privacy.
[5] The fieldwork was conducted a couple of weeks before the Turkish local elections (2019-03-31) which was most probably the reason why the police controls had increased in that district.

Drawing 2. *Extract from research on self-reflexivity and positionality*
* Please note, pretty as in quite (!)

Existing literature highlights that reflexivity is defined as the reciprocal effect of the research phenomena and researcher–participant relationship on qualitative processes (Finlay, 2002; Gilgun, 2006; Longhofer and Floersch, 2012; Probst, 2015, Oliphant and Bennet, 2019). It thus considers how the research context - the external voices of the participants and the phenomena under study - affects the internal world of the researcher (Oliphant and Bennet, 2019; Longhofer and Floersch, 2012). A researcher's positionality, including the personal and philosophical perspectives (e.g. worldview), and the position they adopt influences the assumptions, research design, and methods for a study (Gary & Holmes, 2020). In the following, the paper attempts to explain how the process of self-reflexivity was put into practice using *observational sketching*.

Challenging positionality and power relations in the research field

From the onset of the research, it indeed was a struggle to integrate being an individual and a researcher owing to the sensitivity of the topic i.e. individuals living in 'migrant irregularity'. The reflexive process in this regard highlights the perception of my positionality in relation to the research participants. Namely, the power dynamics between me and the informants in terms of multiple, intersecting factors, which were constantly at play, such as social and economic class, gender[6], ethnicity[7], nationality[8], age, First World vs. Third world citizenship, political leanings, personal values, language proficiency[9] and ethnic conflict issues[10]. Moreover, drawing on my experience as an 'insider' which i.a. involved respecting some specific culture- and social-related codes posed a challenge to not create too much emotional engagement with the research participants[11]. The overall situation was an 'ethical discomfort' for me, and I needed a coping mechanism. The research context itself thus called for self-awareness and self-reflection, and thereby raised some crucial questions: How should a researcher go about to start the journey into self-reflexivity and positionality? How does one adopt an approach that is more rigorous than one or two pages of text about the researcher's situated perspective?

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[6] Cross-gender dynamics are inherent in relational research and can sometimes pose difficulties during the research process (SONG & PARKER, 1995).

[7] I have Iranian origins and my informants are of Hazara, Pashtun or Tajiks background.

[8] I was born and raised in Sweden and my informants were born in Afghanistan. Some of them had work experiences in Iran, some were raised in Iran and a few had no experiences of living in Iran except for border crossing.

[9] My mother tongue language is Farsi. However, I also have an intermediate level in Dari (listening comprehension).

[10] This factor refers to the fact that some of the research participants had faced multiple forms of discrimination in Iran on the grounds of their ethnicity.

[11] However, this issue can occur regardless of emic-etic perspective in ethnographic research. Note that my own perception of myself as an 'insider' does not mean that all my informants considered me as one.

Observational sketching as a coping tool for reflexive practice

Which words, O writer, will you use to describe with similar perfection the entire configuration that this drawing here provides?

Leonardo Da Vinci
(1452 – 1519)

Drawing 3. *The first day of fieldwork*

The use of *observational sketching* not only became a way for me to cope with the 'ethical discomfort', but also a way to practice self-reflexivity. The idea to start drawing came spontaneously while sitting on the tram on my way to the first day of fieldwork. The sketches took the form of a comic which shows events occurring during the fieldwork, certain parts of the in-depth interviews, descriptions of theories and the researcher's situated perspective, including reflexive positioning. The drawings were made at intervals – during a coffee or lunch break and later on, during longer time periods. This was carried out as a parallel process in the field research and beyond: I engaged in self-reflection and self-interrogation and made the drawings concurrently.

One of the main reasons for the growth of arts-based approaches in research is recognition that life experiences are multi-sensory, multi-faceted, and related in complex ways to time, space, ideologies, and relationships with others (Greenwood, 2019, see Cole and Knowles 2011; Kara 2015). While social scientists in the migration field have predominantly privileged verbal, textual and cerebral representations of knowledge and experience, there is an increasing engagement with artistic practice as a means to

illuminate migration (Jeffrey et. al, 2019). During the fieldwork process and beyond, the act of drawing allowed me to continually renegotiate my experience of the researcher identity in relation to personal, emotional and cultural self. The drawings represented a mental conversation with the subject(s) being drawn, or as Berger (2005) puts it "a search for meaning in the context of social relation". It became a sanctuary that I turned to within which the introspection of my position as researcher in relation to the subject matter took shape, developed and matured through the expression of drawing as a complement to field notes[12]. Drawing is made 'on location' and intersects the "inner and outer worlds" – seen, remembered, reflected upon, imagined, drawn (Berger 2005:70). Thereby, the making of sketches allowed me to explore the impact of my unconscious biases and personal experiences on the researcher-participant relationship. In addition, it seemed important to, by way of pictorial representation, make manifest that "I have been there" and "they have been there". Unlike a photograph, which freezes time, drawing as process encompasses time (Berger, 2005). As Taussig (2011) claims in *I swear I saw this,* observational sketching as method is not only a way of proving what was observed, but also a way of disguising and distorting the inherent subjectivity of the ethnographic approach. Indeed, a crucial aspect of going into the field to draw was that as a researcher, the reader "sees" me apart from reading a couple of pages on researcher's situated perspective. In this way, the drawings serve as a complement to textual analysis - as researcher I become more than just someone who observes the research field, thereby opening the paths to reflexivity (e.g. see Drawing 5).

An important critical reflection on the method of drawing used in this research is that it was an introspective approach which carries inherent biases. Namely, as a reflexive researcher, I draw myself as I view myself and I draw my informants as I view them. The drawings are not necessarily a representation of how they view me or how a third party may view me, nor is it a participatory approach. While using the arts as a means to co-produce knowledge and by offering the informants to draw themselves, the researcher

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[12] Note that this was not a participatory but rather an introspective approach. Although, in hindsight and after reviewing studies that apply Participatory Action Research (PAR), I realized that it may have been preferable to triangulate these different approaches. In other words, by offering the informants to draw themselves, it could have resulted in increased co-creation of knowledge and greater levels of empowerment and participation of my research participants.

or the interview situation could admittedly have presented a more agentive role for migrants to shape the research process and outcome (Jeffery et. al, 2019), Considering the sensitive nature of the research associated with sharing personal accounts of adverse, often traumatic, life events, one needs to evaluate the suitability of such approaches.

Drawing 4. *Our life baggage (frame of reference) and the process of self-reflexive positionality*

A few examples of insights unlocked by using reflexive sketching

The process of reflexive sketching - observing, interacting, remembering, reflecting upon[13], imagining, drawing – facilitated the learning process for me as visual learner to an extent that, in my view, solely the use of field notes or other methods such as photography would not have generated[14]. Some examples of insights that surfaced through the act of sketching will now be shared. *Drawing 2, 4 and 5* allowed me to make these insights transparent to myself and to the reader. Behind these drawings lies the idea

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[13] Research subject(s), locating multiple intersecting positionalities, power relations and hierarchies, migrant vulnerability, migrant resilience, and agency

[14] Note that visual learners are suggested to make up about 65% of the population (Mind Tools. 1999).

that unconscious biases exist in all of us and thus it is the researcher's duty to address and analyze them more explicitly. The illustrations take the reader on the journey of 'who I am': a social worker, who is born in Sweden - a country that has long been classified as a socialist welfare regime (Esping-Anderson, 1990), who has Iranian origins and who is a third culture kid (TCK) and a cosmopolitan in spirit.

As a visual learner, thinking reflexively throughout the entire research process with the help of drawings, might have reduced the risk of being misled by my own experiences and interpretations. For instance, this could occur by viewing the selection and wording of questions before and during the interview. Notably, during one of the first interviews, my way of responding to the research participant who was telling me about their, in my view, extremely precarious housing condition in Turkey could be considered as leading. The informant was describing their housing condition (sharing a room without beds with 8 people) as something that is normal for single men. I asked questions in line with: *"isn't it difficult?"*. I gave statements in line with *"I understand that your situation must be hard"*.

Drawing 5. *The researcher's duty – make potential biases clear to oneself and explicit to the reader*

After the interview, I reflected on the methodological challenges and mistakes in the specific situation and how my unconscious biases might have impacted the research decision and outcome. According to Probst (2015: 38), through this kind of intersubjective process, reflexive researchers "become aware of their own projections, attachments, assumptions, agendas, and biases—like an eye that sees itself while simultaneously seeing the world". Thus, I gained a deeper understanding of the reasons behind my way of responding in the field based on cultural, emotional and socio-political frames of reference, i.e. based on perceived Swedish standards of decent living conditions or

viewing the informant through a victimization lens. This experience made me gain a better understanding of the multiple lines of difference and power hierarchies between me and my informants (along with improvements of the interview technique for the upcoming interviews). Drawing 4 helped me to make an illustration of this insight.

Moreover, the drawings helped me to gain an awareness of how my experiences could serve as a strength. For instance, this could occur by viewing what aspects that are emphasized in my drawings, notes or findings report. In line with Oliphant and Bennet (2019), I came to understand that apart from my Middle Eastern appearance, Iranian origins and other social divisions mentioned above, language proficiency in Farsi and Dari[15] played a decisive part in the interpretation and analysis of data. In brief, if it would not have been for my language skills, many of the important accounts of the informants' experiences of 'migrant irregularity' through certain linguistic nuances and modes of signification (Aidani, 2010) would have been unaccounted for in the findings (e.g. Drawing 1 about the concept of 'Ghorbat'). Accordingly, this type of perspective-taking model of communication indicates that the assumptions on the partner's knowledge impacts the way the conversation proceeds, and which and how the messages are passed between the participants, e.g. through shared group or social category membership of the conversation partner (Krauss & Fussell, 1991).

On a similar note, my positionality as female researcher and shared group affiliation with the informants could be considered as an advantage in reaching out to the target population. In some cases, however, cross-gender dynamics and gender-related assumptions in the field posed challenges (Song & Parker, 1995). Being a young female researcher conducting interviews with young men could both lead to various protective remarks and misapprehensions, such as exclamations like "a young women like you should be careful in this neighborhood, you should not be alone". In situations where researcher-participant boundaries were not clear for some of the informants, I took basic

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[15] My mother tongue language is Farsi. However, I also have an intermediate level in Dari (listening comprehension)

precautions that I viewed as necessary which illustrates the importance of gender-related considerations in the research process[16].

The emergence of creativity throughout the research process - to take the pen and draw as complement to the other more traditional qualitative methods of inquiry helped me to uncover the elements of subjectivity, emotionality and ethical judgment while transforming them into valuable sources of insight. As emphasized by Glesne & Peshkin (1992, p. 104):

> My subjectivity is the basis for the story I am able to tell. It is a strength on which I build. It makes me who I am as a person and as a researcher, equipping me with the perspectives and insights that shape all that I do as a researcher, from the selection of topic clear through to the emphases I make in my writing.

I would want to add: …and to the emphases I make in my drawings.

Ethical considerations in irregular migration research through reflexive sketching

Drawing 6.
Interview with Maryam

The human face is the epiphany of the nakedness of the Other, a visitation, a meeting, a saying which comes in the passivity of the face, not threatening, but obligating. My world is ruptured, my contentment interrupted. I am already obligated. Here is an appeal from which there is not escape, a responsibility, a state of being hostage. It is looking into the face of the Other that reveals the call to a responsibility that is before any beginning, decision or initiative of my part.

The ethics of Levinas by Olthuis, 1997, p. 139
In the SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research (2011)

Drawing 7.
Interview with Abdul-aziz

To do research is to *take decisions*, and for *every decision* that you make as researcher, there are ethical ramifications. The cited statement refers to Emmanuel Levinas ethical

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[16] E.g. politely declining different proposals, such as offering me food or drinks.

theory which articulates social beings in relation and the duty that this encounter invokes (K. Denzin & S. Lincoln, 2011). Ethical issues need to be raised and reflected upon from the conceptualization of the research until the dissemination of the findings and beyond (Van Liempt & Bilger, 2018; Glazer 1982). Having said that, existing ethical guidelines are formalistic recommendations still bearing the hallmarks of medical research and life science (Van Liempt & Bilger, 2018; Duvell et al. 2008). As important as general ethical guidelines and recommendations may be, I am inclined to agree with some scholars that they are not enough of a guideline for the difficult choices that need to be made in research with vulnerable migrants[17] (Van Liempt & Bilger, 2018; Knapik, 2002). Adapting ethical considerations as an ongoing part of research can be difficult for researchers as there are a number of ethical choices that need to be made for which the general guidelines may not have an answer (Duvell et al. 2008; Mauthner et al. 2002).

Ethical considerations in the qualitative case study

In the study on young Afghans' irregular situation through the lenses of liminality theory, general ethical considerations were taken into account throughout the research process. It was important that obtained consent was voluntarily from the fifteen informants and that I was very clear that they were under no obligation to take part in the study. In addition, I made it clear that they could decide to cease participation at any time during the course of the research. Other ethical considerations included data, fieldnotes and interview transcripts being ethically managed in a secure manner. In addition, pseudonyms were used for all the informants. However, as important as these guidelines are according to ethical codes and research standards, other ethical dilemmas surfaced through the reflexive process that posed difficulties in the decision-making process and that needed to be addressed. In the following, the process of ethical self-inquiry and how *observational sketching* was used as a coping tool will be discussed.

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[17] Although, Düvell, F. et al. (2010). 'Ethical Issues in Irregular Migration Research in Europe' as well as the work of a few other scholars were of great help.

Challenging ethical issues in irregular migration and coping-by-sketching

Researching migrants who are categorized as 'irregular' entails various implications and challenges for the research process, and places responsibility on the researcher with regards to research conduct and ethics (Thomsen, 2012). Feminist scholars, as well as scholars from the field of critical sociology, have not only advocated the role of reflexive engagement in the research process to challenge power relations, but also the liberating
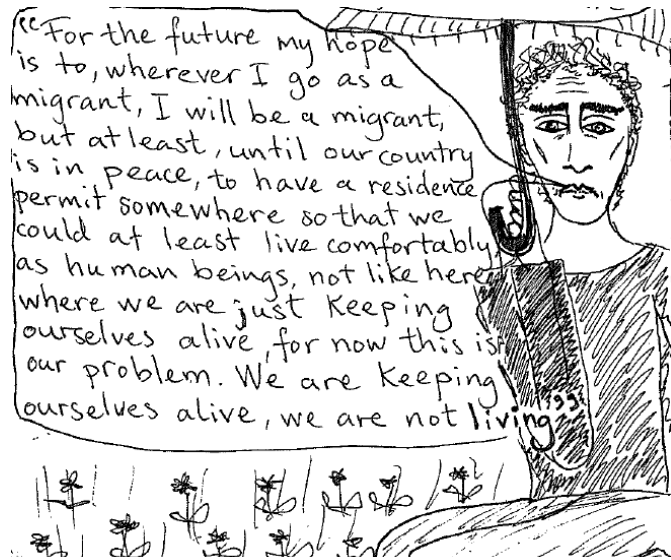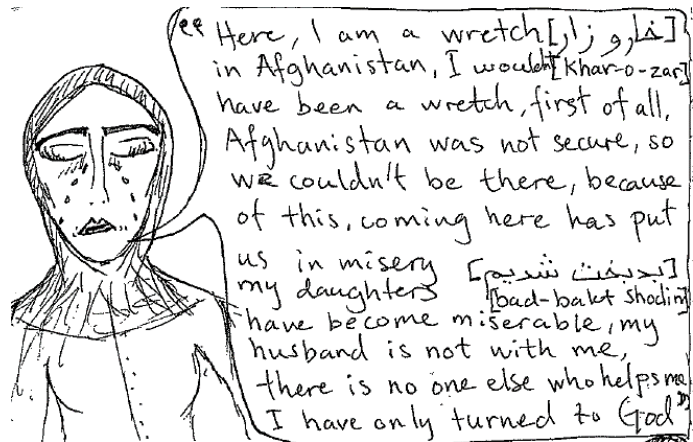
Drawing 8. *Extracts from the interview with Farid*

potential of storytelling (Esposito, 2017). I would argue that reflexivity and ethics are inextricably linked and that together both can expose and rebalance power relations between researcher and participant (Etherington, 2007). In the act of sketching in connection with ethical issues, *Drawing 8, 9 and 10* portray the informants as I viewed them along with extracts from the interviews, thus helping me to uncover the elements of subjectivity, emotionality and ethical judgment while transforming them into valuable sources of insight, or as Taussig (2011) puts it, disguising and distorting the inherent subjectivity. Also noteworthy is the relationship between the informants' personal accounts and the act of drawing the informants – that is, what was heard, recorded, translated, and transcribed, which of the interview extracts that were written down in speech bubbles, and how the researcher drew the informants. Moreover, during the initial stage of fieldwork, I was mainly thinking about what the possible benefits for the research participants are to participate in the study?[18] How does the research influence

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[18] A question that was also asked by a third party who convinced one of the potential research participants to not participate in my study.

their situation?[19] And then, while getting more familiar with the field, instead anxiously asking myself: what could be the harm to the research participants with respect to the unsafe research field?[20] Are there any other ethical challenges and difficulties?[21]

Admittedly, during the interviews with for instance Farid, Maryam and Abdul-Aziz (see Drawing 7, 8 and 9), I felt this 'ethical discomfort' in my gut given the sensitive nature of this kind of research which Levina's citation above quite aptly describes. While centering myself as researcher from a social work perspective conducting ethnographic research, I needed to deal with "*my world being ruptured,*

Drawing 9. *Extracts from the interview with Maryam*

my contentment interrupted" and with *"feeling obligated*" in relation to the research participants (Levinas, 1997). At the same time, I strived to not have a "victimized" presupposition in relation to the target group, thus taking into account the complex nexus between "vulnerability" and "agency" within which the experiences of many migrants are constructed. An important aspect in this context was the issue of triggering painful memories during the interview and how, as researcher, we need to be considerate and deal with the situation in an ethical way (Van Liempt & Bilger, 2018). The interview process can have a profound effect on the well-being of the informant, in the case, e.g. hidden psychological wounds, triggers, and the issues faced which have never been mentioned to anyone before (Van Liempt & Bilger, 2018; Knapik, 2002). In many of the interviews, similar situations occurred where I found the skill of listening and confirming (without leading) to be valuable skills that could provide some support, as well as keeping

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[19] Could it have a positive/negative impact? How? Or, could it have both positive and negative implications?

[20] The fieldwork was conducted a couple of weeks before the Turkish local elections (2019-03-31) which was most probably the reason why the police controls had increased in that district. In this time period, there was a rise of policing and racism that raised a number of ethical issues for the researcher.

[21] E.g. researcher's responsibility when triggering painful memories.

in touch with the informants after the interview to ask about their well-being[22] (van den Anker 2006).

Moreover, my ethical reasoning on issues of power, privilege and justice in a human rights framework was clear and disturbing: I was a migrant in Turkey, just as in the case of the target group of my study. Yet, there was a stark difference between my privilege and their privilege. I was a privileged migrant

Drawing 10. *Extracts from the interview with Abdulaziz*

from Sweden[23] who traveled by plane to Turkey (voluntarily and temporarily), they were, most of them, non-privileged migrants who passed a dangerous, and for some, fatal journey from Afghanistan[24] or Iran to Turkey[25]. I reflected on this asymmetric relationship, and then I reflected on the justification of the research: the aim of addressing a pertinent societal problem and the ethical duty to speak about the social injustice that I saw playing out before me (e.g. Drawing 9, 10). As researcher, conducting and disseminating research without the purpose of raising awareness of issues of social justice, equity, non-violence, peace and universal human rights would not be an option. This compromise was, however, riddled with ambivalence and little did I know that also this would have ethical implications[26]. Namely, raising awareness about a matter of such 'sensitive nature' as this carries certain risks, if it for instance reaches the wrong audience and thereby creates the opposite effect than intended (Düvell, F. et al., 2010). This might be an audience that is unsympathetic to the target group of research. Due to the increase

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[22] From time to time, some of the informants still receive texts.

[23] Swedish citizens have visa-free or visa on arrival access to 186 countries and territories (ranking the Swedish passport 6th in the world). Source: Henley Passport Index (HPI)

[24] Afghan citizens have visa-free or visa on arrival access to 28 countries and territories (ranking it 106th and worst in the world). Source: Henley Passport Index (HPI)

[25] While this was my perspective in that moment, it is important to critically reflect upon the act of ascribing the informants with preestablished categories and consider to also draw attention to the intersectional perspective. E.g. some of the informants grew up in the middle or upper classes, out of which one travelled to Turkey by plane.

[26] This was due to the information I gained about the risks of irregular migration, as mentioned in Düvell, F. et al. (2010).

of police controls and deportations of unaccompanied male migrants, I reconciled with the informants to choose the meeting point having in mind the potential risks. For those interviews which were scheduled in an outside setting, great attention was thus paid to the choice of location. Whereas most of the interviews were conducted in a secure manner, one of the interviews was experienced as an ethically problematic situation. A police raid took place outside the restaurant where the research participant had agreed to meet. The informant was therefore exposed to a great risk but managed to get away and inform me about a new meeting spot. The decision of agreeing to the new spot at such a short notice posed some difficulties as I was aware that for *every decision* that was made, it entailed ethical consequences. In the end, the interview was conducted at a safer spot without any troubles or additional perils. Another important ethical challenge connected with the research purpose of awareness-raising was the risk that the research results reach the hands of a 'hostile' audience. While being aware of this risk based on existing literature, I did not believe that this would be likely to occur. Given the EU closing its doors, there are however many institutions and official bodies interested in research on irregular migration. The ethical endeavor to find the right way of conducting research with respect for human dignity continues.

Conclusion: On ways forward for creative methods in irregular migration research

Social scientists and arts and humanities scholars alike increasingly engage with artistic practice as a means to illuminate migration (Jeffrey et. al, 2019). The purpose of this working paper was to open up a discussion about the importance of reflexive engagement and ethical reflection in irregular migration research and explore how arts-based methods can complement traditional social science methods as well as providing a valuable reflexive coping tool. Whereas verbal, textual and discursive language may be the most useful scientific tool humans have created, the arts provide qualities and nuances of deep and contemplative reflections that words have no power to disclose. Art-based methods can thereby better equip researchers to capture aesthetic, emotional, sensory and tacit experiences that cannot easily be expressed in words (Jeffrey et. al, 2019: 5). At the same time, migration studies scholars have called for more inclusive, participatory and ethically accountable research *with* rather than *about* migrants (Temple and Moran 2011). In this regard, a few limitations in this arts-based method needs to be re-emphasized for it to not be used as an end in itself. Firstly, the researcher needs to be aware that observational sketching as reflexive coping tool which represents the researcher's interpretation of the researcher-participant relationship might carry some biases – this needs to be addressed and discussed in the research. Secondly, the researcher needs to take into account that this method could either be employed through a participatory or non-participatory approach - one needs then to reflect on the limitations of the latter, but also on the suitability of the former. Namely, by not involving the research participants, what could be the weaknesses from an ethical and reflexive point of view? Or, on the contrary, how could the use of arts-based methods be used through a participatory approach taking, at the same time, into consideration the vulnerable and precarious situation of migrant irregularity?

Lastly, in order for arts-based approaches to research to gain higher legitimacy in academic circles, a series of challenges need to be addressed: researchers need support and encouragement to explore new creative tools to enhance the reflexive practice; the need to deal with the ethical issues that the researcher faces in the study of irregular migration; the need for deeper methodological reflections; the opportunities

of providing an alternate form of knowledge to the reader; and lastly, the quest to challenge the conventional academic 'standard' rooted in positivism. Despite the challenges at the intersection between arts and research, the learning journey that it pushed me to take - the understanding of myself as an integral part of the research process and the reflections on the quality of the relationship that emerged between myself and research participants, was worthwhile and rewarding.

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