What are the influences that govern how people view their worlds? What are the embedded values and practices that underpin the ways people think and act? Discourses We Live By approaches these questions through narrative research, in a process that uses words, images, activities or artefacts to ask people – either individually or collectively within social groupings – to examine, discuss, portray or otherwise make public their place in the world, their sense of belonging to (and identity within) the physical and cultural space they inhabit.

This book is a rich and multifaceted collection of twenty-eight chapters that use varied lenses to examine the discourses that shape people’s lives. The contributors are themselves from many backgrounds – different academic disciplines within the humanities and social sciences, diverse professional practices and a range of countries and cultures. They represent a broad spectrum of age, status and outlook, and variously apply their research methods – but share a common interest in people, their lives, thoughts and actions. Gathering such eclectic experiences as those of student-teachers in Kenya, a released prisoner in Denmark, academics in Colombia, a group of migrants learning English, and gambling addiction support-workers in Italy, alongside more mainstream educational themes, the book presents a fascinating array of insights.

Discourses We Live By will be essential reading for adult educators and practitioners, those involved with educational and professional practice, narrative researchers, and many sociologists. It will appeal to all who want to know how narratives shape the way we live and the way we talk about our lives.

As with all Open Book publications, this entire book is available to read for free on the publisher’s website. Printed and digital editions, together with supplementary digital material, can also be found at www.openbookpublishers.com.
20. Participatory Approaches in Critical Migration Research

The Example of an Austrian Documentary Film

Annette Sprung

Annette Sprung discusses a participatory research project that created a documentary film about the experiences of migrants working as adult educators in Austria, and then analyses this collaboratively to consider issues of stereotyping and ‘otherness’ from multiple perspectives.

Social change due to migration has become a topical issue for many scientific disciplines. The number of pertinent research activities has significantly increased against the background of the large-scale refugee movements to European countries since summer 2015 (Eurostat, 2017) and was enhanced as migration became a key factor in political developments around the globe. Powerful discourses such as those on ‘belonging’, representation and ‘othering’ shape the debate. Individuals’ biographies and identities are viewed through the prism of ascriptions and discourses of differentiation, with research often contributing to the construction of certain images of the ‘other’. It is therefore necessary to analyse and reflect on the way in which we look at such phenomena in scientific contexts. The related question of representation is a well-known topic in social sciences and cultural studies and has been debated intensely under the slogan of the ‘crisis of representation’ (Berg & Fuchs, 1999; Marcus & Fischer, 1991). I will refer to it against the background of specific power relations in migration societies.
The aim of this chapter is to explore critical aspects of migration research in adult education by reflecting on the construction of ‘the migrant’, the phenomena of representation and othering and the role (and responsibility) of researchers in reproducing or deconstructing problematic categories, which ultimately also shape the political and public discourse. Furthermore, appropriate methodologies of research and dissemination — such as participatory research and artistic approaches — are discussed in order to explore possibilities for deconstructing hegemonic discourses. My perspective is inspired by postcolonial studies and critical migration research (e.g., Bhabha, 1994; Mecheril, 2016).

As a concrete example, I will present the case of a documentary film, which I produced, together with Klaudija Sabo, a cultural scientist, filmmaker and adult educator. The film portrays (or in other words, represents) experiences and strategies of professionals with migrant biographies in adult education, but also provides a (self) reflection on othering by questioning the role of the filmmakers and their way of dealing with the narratives. Consequently, it is not only interesting to look at the product as such, the film; but also to discuss the processes of concept development and film production, where we tried to lay open the ‘illusionary’ character of documentary filmmaking. The role of the filmmaker is set as an analogy to the role of the researcher and should thus inspire discussion on a variety of aspects.

The film was created within the wider framework of a participatory research workshop, with a group of migrant adult educators as co-researchers. The setting of self-directed research workshops was one of several efforts to cross the border which is often constructed between a (White, hegemonic, academic, etc.) ‘we’ and the (migrant) ‘other’. The workshops were part of a transdisciplinary research project (2012–2014), which analysed the representation and access of people with migrant biographies to professions in the field of adult/continuing education in Austria. The findings from other segments of the project have already been presented in earlier publications (Kukovetz, Sadjed & Sprung, 2014; Sadjed, Sprung & Kukovetz, 2015).
Representation and the Construction of ‘Migrants’

The Challenge of Representation

Critical migration research deals with different meanings of ‘representation’. Firstly, there is the communicative dimension of representation, related to the way in which we depict something/somebody, for example in research (who talks about whom? in which way? etc.); this is a well-known point of reflection in social sciences and cultural studies. Secondly, representation in the political sense points to the question of defending one’s interests and making one’s own positions and claims heard. It can be realized as direct or indirect representation. Relevant questions in the migration context are: What opportunities for self-representation in political participation are given? Who is legitimated to speak out as a proxy? Whose voices are heard? (Kukovetz, Sadjed & Sprung, 2014, p. 53ff.). Moreover, we use the term ‘representation’ when we talk about equality in participation and access to resources.

The practice of speaking for or about others makes hierarchical social structures apparent. In many countries, current forms of migrant representation in public or scientific spaces are still dominated by external representation by members of the majority society (Sprung, 2011). In these scenarios, the perspectives of the individuals, groups and communities of minorities remain largely unconsidered; the voices of migrants tend to remain unheard. A lack of representation can be identified in diverse spheres of society, for example regarding the visibility of migrants in the media (Bleich, Bloemraad & de Graauw, 2015) or their opportunities for political participation (Chaudhary, 2016).

The crisis in terms of the representation of others constitutes an especially important challenge for research, which has been discussed — not only in terms of migration but also more generally — since the 1990s (Berg & Fuchs, 1999; Marcus & Fischer, 1991). One central idea from these debates points to the need for academics (and in the concrete field I would like to add, White academics) to reflect on their privileged position to speak, and the related power of their interpretations. A common answer to the problem is to promote self-representation of minoritized groups as commonly occurs in politics,
social life and science. From a critical viewpoint, it also has to be stated that representation always means the proxy or the depiction of a special group and thus automatically creates a categorization and, as a result, homogeneity within this group (Broden & Mecheril, 2007, p. 12).

Representation and social justice can be seen as central ideas of the theoretical framework of our research: addressing the question of representation of underprivileged groups is a basic condition for an inclusive society. In this sense representation is part of a concept of justice that aims for an equal participation in all economic, social, cultural and political resources (Fraser, 2008; Perko & Czollek, 2007). The equal access of citizens with migration biographies to the field of education is a constant topic of political and social contestation. The exclusion of migrants can also be identified in the scientific field and in adult education (Broden & Mecheril, 2007; Sprung, 2011).

The Migrant as the Other

Representations are always connected to power relations (Broden & Mecheril, 2007). This has been shown, for example, in cultural and postcolonial theories, through a critical reflection on practices of external representation, which generates knowledge about others (Castro Varela & Dhawan, 2004; Said, 1991; Spivak, 2010). Critical migration research consequently has to consider the phenomenon of ‘othering’. Research can contribute and point to discrimination and to barriers that avoid equal representation of minoritized groups. At the same time, migration research — as well as education — often reproduces the categories on which exclusion is based.

The construction of the migrant as ‘other’ tackles diverse groups in different ways. Beside historically passed-on images of the other, the socio-economic disparities have proven to be one of the strongest lines of differentiation between and within various migrant communities. In many European countries the descendants of low-skilled labour migrants, who were needed and recruited as a cheap labour force in the 1960s and 1970s, could not achieve significant upward social mobility. This is also partly caused by their stigmatization and their lack of symbolic capital as an expression of social recognition and power (Bourdieu, 2005; Gächter, 2012). Nowadays, stigmatization and stereotyping often takes
place by means of attributes like ‘refugee’, ‘Muslim’ etc. and are linked, for example, to attributions like threatening, violent, backward, etc. A public discourse on ‘migrants’, which is currently influenced and highly instrumentalized by political forces such as the far right (but also other groups), in reality mostly addresses only specific groups and countries of origin. Racist and anti-Muslim politics have contributed significantly to recent electoral successes of extreme right parties in several countries.

An undifferentiated and negative stereotyping of migrants in public is presumably one reason why many people are reluctant to identify with or talk about their migration biography, and often even hide their origins if possible. This attitude became quite evident in our research outcomes, especially when we interviewed members of the so-called second generation who work in adult education. It must be stated that even just addressing subjects as ‘migrants’ in research brings about the risk of re-inscribing the practices of othering and, as a further consequence, of discriminating against individuals. It is therefore understandable that we had difficulty in finding interviewees, especially amongst the second generation. By way of summary, Vina Yun (2011) aptly observes that the ‘post-migrant’ subjectivity is characterized by a self-conception that questions conventional, ethnic-nationally defined identities and instead develops a new vocabulary of belonging. Consequently, critical migration research has to pay attention and to find ways to give space to articulate these self-conceptions, which might extend and transcend the predefined, rigid categories that the majority society tends to offer.

The demand for such spaces of self-representation within a research context was a central aspect in our project. Which is why, in addition to reflecting on these issues theoretically throughout the whole project, we also tried to find appropriate methodological approaches to involve migrants and their knowledge beyond addressing them as interviewees.

Methodologies: Participatory Research and Artistic Approaches

For the research workshops the core team of three researchers (which was also ‘mixed’ in terms of origin) invited seven people with migrant biographies to participate. We involved individuals who had a professional background in adult education and/or research and
who had grown up in Austria, but still shared some experiences of being ascribed as ‘others’ (for example, because of wearing a headscarf or certain physiognomic attributes). They were remunerated for their participation in the workshops, which took place over one year. All group members were included in an interactive communication process to make decisions on topics and methods, dissemination, etc. The group finally decided to conduct five sub-projects in teams of two, of which the film production was one. Nevertheless, the whole group came together regularly to discuss critically the work of the single sub-teams. The film, which will be described in more detail below, portrays careers of adult educators with migrant backgrounds and picks up the question of representation — implicitly and explicitly.

Through the workshops, we aimed to open up a space for representation of migrants in research as a general goal. Furthermore, we wanted to create opportunities to bring diverse perspectives and voices into a dialogue. Finally, we aimed to include different modes of knowledge within a non-hierarchical perspective, such as embodied knowledge, which is usually seen as not being equal to academic knowledge. Research workshops invite people, whose circumstances and strategies are being explored, to engage (Bergold & Thomas, 2010). They aim to integrate target groups into the entire research process, including decision-making. Research workshops not only open a multi-perspective space for research but imply at the same time a collective learning process (Pilch Ortega & Sprung, 2010; Willis, Jost & Nilakanta, 2007). Similar to approaches of action research, they have an exploratory character and employ the use of qualitative methods. In general, communicative research processes entail hierarchical relations in regard to different forms of knowledge and speaking positions, which has to become an integrated point of critical reflection.

Based on a critique of objectifying research methods and following the desire to encourage social change through research (including making unheard voices of minoritized groups heard), researchers have been looking for alternative approaches since the 1970s. Participatory concepts, especially in the social sciences, are connected with the history of social movements and emancipatory struggles (Freire, 1970; Hall, 1992). ‘Participatory Action Research’, or PAR, aims to encourage actors to engage in changing the circumstantial/structural conditions of their
own lives. Another important idea of PAR is to ‘redefine the relationship between researchers and the participants in a non-hierarchical manner’ (Glassman & Erdem, 2014, p. 215). Glassman and Erdem show that origins of PAR include anticolonial movements as well as feminist ideas (Joyappa & Martin, 1996) and other perspectives. Referring to anti- or postcolonial theories suggests analogies between colonialism and traditional paradigms of scientific research, where the researchers (‘data-owners’) are in power and use (or exploit?) the researched as their resources to draw profit from them (ibid., p. 15). Some participatory approaches are connected to the development of action-research, which was founded by Kurt Lewin in the 1940s (Reason & Bradbury-Huang, 2008). But not all concepts of action-research — especially the earlier ones — deal explicitly with marginalized people or aim necessarily at emancipatory goals (Glassmann & Erdem, 2014). Additionally, there are particular developments in different scientific contexts. German-speaking action-research, for example, made strong references to a Marxist analysis of capitalism and was geared towards a wider political impact than anything Lewin had done (Unger, 2014, p. 15).

I have been exploring the potential of PAR for migration research in diverse settings over the past fifteen years. These processes led to highly interesting and differentiated experiences and results (Pilch-Ortega & Sprung, 2010). But the approach of ‘insider research’ also implicates questionable assumptions, for example, because it reconstructs ‘the migrant’ once more and reproduces problematic understanding of group belonging (Nowicka & Cieslik, 2014). A critical debate about the (dichotomist) insider-outsider divide in migration research suggests a more differentiated view on positionality. One has to be aware that insider-outsider divides are often a relational construction and that a migrant biography does not necessarily cause a different perspective; moreover, there are other intersectional aspects that might play a role (Carling, Erdal & Ezzati, 2014).

Another idea behind the project under discussion was to use artistic approaches, which are often connected with participatory research. Some reference points to Artistic Research (Knowles & Cole, 2008; Peters, 2013) or Performative Social Sciences (Denzin, 2001) can be found. Artistic or Arts-Based Research (ABR) is mostly situated within the qualitative inquiry tradition. The term was first coined in 1993 (Wang,
et al., 2017). ABR follows the idea that arts could be useful to gain a deeper understanding of human action and social conditions. It became popular especially for researchers who feel committed to contribute to social change (Savin-Baden & Wimpenny, 2014). Therefore, ABR often deals with minoritized groups, for example via theatre work or analyses of artistic products such as paintings or film material. Most approaches aim to link different modes of knowledge as well, following a political, emancipatory goal and engaging community members in diverse action. In the field of Performative Social Science, artistic approaches are seen as methods to help in answering the research questions, but also to disseminate the results to a broader public. Performative Social Sciences highlight spontaneous moments of insight, which elicit awakening and a change of perspective. They should facilitate the analysis of underlying, unconscious dynamics of social situations by opening up spaces beyond the cognitive and rational (Battisti & Eiselen, 2008). From my point of view, artistic approaches have great potential to unearth tacit knowledge, and also to speak diverse ‘languages’, which helps to address different people in terms of participation. Many issues can be made understandable in a special way because diverse dimensions of perception (just like emotional ones) are inspired.

‘On the Other Side of the Desk’ — a Documentary Film

Idea and Concept

Embedded in the research workshops, Klaudija Sabo and I worked out a concept for a 30-minute documentary film. The production process lasted about 15 months. As we had no extra financial resources, we handled the whole production on our own. The other workshop participants contributed by engaging in on-going discussions about the script, the choice of protagonists, the mise-en-scène and especially the question of how to deal with the tension between representation and the problem of othering. The title of the film, ‘On the Other Side of the Desk’, reflects a quotation from a scene in the film: an adult educator told us about the empowering effects that migrant participants experience when there is a migrant in the teaching position, and she expressed this as being ‘on the other side of the desk’ (i.e., the teachers’ desk).
To open up a space for self-representation in the context of the research topic we invited adult educators with migrant biographies to tell us their individual career stories (in an interview setting), and also to share their expert view on diversity in adult education in general. The narrations covered issues such as the motivation for their career choice, influential factors and people in their lives, individual strategies and the meaning of the migrant biography as cultural capital and/or as a disadvantage. We tried to enable a mostly free and self-directed narration. The film would be released later on to present research outcomes to a broader public and to institutions involved in adult education. We finally invited four people (two men, two women) to participate in the film. They had diverse family backgrounds (in terms of origins, social and educational status) and worked in different fields and positions in adult education. To give an example, the parents’ education level ranged from university professor to illiterate labourer. By selecting such socio-demographic characteristics, we also wanted to consider some intersectional aspects.

In the first part of the film, the protagonists are shown individually telling their stories against a black background. A ‘talking heads’ format was decided after long discussions in the research workshop. We wanted to put the subject at the centre, and no other factors should deflect from their (verbal and non-verbal) narration. We were aware that there is no ‘neutral’ background, but in the end, we decided for the colour black as aesthetic and technical aspects also played a role. For the first part of the film, cuttings from the four interviews were edited along thematic lines. In the second part of the film we show a cinema screening room where the four protagonists sit together with the filmmakers and discuss the draft version (rough cut) of the film, which they had just watched for the first time. The cinema room points to the idea of the film as a reflection about itself. While we discussed the first screening critically, the camera was again in operation and generated new material. An important point at this stage was that we, as filmmakers, stepped into the scene and became visible. Thus, we explicitly put our role (and power) as constructors of images and assertions up for discussion.
A central idea we wanted to deal with in the film was to reflect on the phenomenon of othering — we also wanted to question the medium in this respect. What is described in theory and numerous studies had also been confirmed in our empirical findings: adult educators with migrant biographies often have to struggle with ethnic/racist ascriptions or simply a general ‘otherness’ (Bhabha, 1994; Said, 1991). The diverse ways of dealing with ascriptions and discrimination range from total denial of one’s origin up to creative ways for using migration-related experiences and embodied knowledge for career advancement (Sadjed, Sprung & Kukovetz, 2015).

Because of its visual and acoustic dimensions, the medium of film allows self-representation in a wider and more direct sense in comparison to a written depiction (usually written by the researcher). On the other hand, it is clear that visual media are often used to generate stereotypes — not least about ‘migrants’. A film project therefore can — potentially — be a chance to promote alternative images and question usual (hegemonic) patterns of perception.

There are several analogies between research and filmmaking. The director of a film chooses the topic and decides on questions and perspectives. The material — be it interview transcripts or film — is edited by her/him and the team. Finally, the presented results are always a construction — created by the researcher or the filmmaker. According to critical migration studies, research often contributes to reproducing images of ‘otherness’. The researcher, just like the filmmaker, usually holds the more powerful position and creates meanings (Koch, 1992). In particular, documentary film pretends to be a representation of ‘reality’ (maybe another analogy, to the sciences). We therefore felt challenged to find an appropriate methodology to make our film a reflective space and to lay open the illusionary character of the medium. Basically, we reference the movement of Cinéma Verité, which was developed in the 1960s (Beyerle, 1997; Nichols, 1991). In particular, we drew inspiration from the film ‘Chronique d’un été’ (Chronicle of a Summer, 1960), produced by the sociologist Edgar Morin and the anthropologist and filmmaker Jean Rouch. This film also involved the protagonists in the process and engaged the filmmakers as part of the story. Morin and
Rouch aimed to make visible the fictional character of documentary film, breaking with conventional approaches within the genre in these times. Questions of authenticity could thus be reconsidered.

What does this mean for our concept? Even if positioning the camera directly in front of our speakers, giving space for free narration and leaving out props or symbols — it was still us, the filmmakers, who finally edited the material and designed the story through our own lenses. To set up a corrective procedure, we had the idea of inviting the protagonists to join us in a cinema for a common screening of the rough cut with a follow-up discussion. With a collective reflection upon our product, we tried to create a participatory space, which had different functions: firstly, the status of the protagonists and the power relations within the process was to undergo a shift.

The protagonists were invited to criticize, correct or confirm the interpretations, which we had suggested, after having gained a more distanced perspective on their own dialogue. The group make-up was to support this process. Secondly, they also had the opportunity to comment on our role as filmmakers and we decided together how to develop the script and how the discussion should be included in the final version. Thirdly, we thought that a debate in the group would bring up new perspectives on the subject of the film — this was definitely the case.

Here is just one example: after having watched the film together, one of the protagonists criticized the omission of negative experiences and aspects of discrimination in the film. He had the impression that we had just shown a ‘happy story’ about four successful migrants. This statement opened up an interesting debate because we learned that some of the protagonists could not even remember that they had been asked explicitly about experiences of discrimination. In fact, with one exception, they never told us that they had had any bad experiences. They thus started to reflect in the group setting on the reasons for their not talking about negative stories, while the message of mainly positive career development seemed somewhat erroneous to them now when watching the film from a more distanced position. Subsequently we had an exciting discussion on dealing with discrimination and on strategies to counter victimization. Within this discussion the influence and intersection of race, class and gender clearly emerged. These sequences play an important role in the second part of the final version of our film.
In general, the protagonists felt very well represented. Furthermore, they appreciated the process as a chance to reflect on their respective biographies and especially on their methods of dealing with and representing their migration backgrounds. I would say that the process of realizing the described documentary film was not finished with the final cut but when it was premiered at the closing conference of the research project. Around 100 stakeholders from the field of Austrian adult education watched the film at a cinema screening and engaged in a public discussion with the protagonists who, in responding to the audience directly, were able — once more — to be in a position of power when sharing their narrations.

Conclusion

Our aim in producing a documentary film was to create a concise summary of the overall research outcomes, open a space for representation and critical reflection on migration and adult education research and also to establish an alternative mode of disseminating research findings to the broader public. The film should contribute to the aim of Participatory Action Research to intervene in present discourses about migrants by making their voices heard and, at the same time, to reflect critically on the related problems. Looking at the feedback we have received for the film so far, it can be supposed that many people felt inspired to develop new and more differentiated perspectives on the topic; viewers emphasized that they had perceived the speakers as competent and self-determined agents and that they had discovered nuances that might have stayed invisible in a conventional research report. The film was also honoured with the Ludo-Hartmann-Preis — an Austrian scientific award for research work in the field of adult education — in 2015.

Nevertheless, a permanent critical reflection is necessary, because every approach produces new constructions and implicates certain problems. Therefore, a project like the present one can never actually be seen as ‘completed’. The research workshops had essentially supported the whole process by providing input, evaluating suggestions, offering critical feedback and challenging the filmmakers to share and expound upon their own intentions, images and positions. Generally, it can be
stated that self-representation of migrants or specific groups does not necessarily deconstruct images of the other but could also be an essentializing practice and lead to a sort of ‘authentication’ of the ‘other’ voices. This opens up again the question of ascriptions as well as the question of legitimate representation (Broden & Mecheril 2007, p. 20). The research workshops were, therefore, also defined as a space in which to reflect on these challenges and dilemmas. Aside from the concrete sub-project, the film; the research workshops encouraged all participants to reflect on their thoughts, identities, responsibilities — not least on how we can directly contribute to social change. Our methodology presents an opportunity to articulate forms of resistance against common representations and research practices, and to find a language which supports a critical discourse for migration research.

References


