**(De)constructing ‘the migrant’? Methodological reflections on critical migration research in adult education: the example of a documentary film.[[1]](#footnote-1)**

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**Abstract**

This paper explores 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 of researchers in reproducing or deconstructing problematic categories and discourses. Furthermore appropriate methodologies such as participatory research and artistic approaches are discussed. As a concrete example I will present the case of a documentary film, which was produced within a participatory research workshop as part of a project on ‘migrants as professionals in Austrian adult education’. The aim of the film was not only to depict biographical narratives of migrant adult educators but it also tried to open up a space for critical reflection on the named issues. Moreover the analysis of the film production draws analogies to research processes, tries to lay open the ‘illusionary’ character of documentary film and to engage the researchers/filmmakers into a critical discourse on their work.

**1. Introduction**

Social change due to migration and integration is as a topical issue for adult education research and practice. Even though it is not a new challenge, the number of pertinent educational and research activities has especially increased against the background of the big refugee movements to European countries since summer 2015. Amongst the manifold interesting research questions, which could be identified in this area, I will focus on some general reflections about the construction of ‘migrant subjects’ and narratives by research, and the responsibility and role of the researcher in this context. Powerful discourses such as on ‘belonging’, representation and ‘othering’ shape the field, not only in terms of the social conditions of education but also regarding the way how researchers look at phenomena. The 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). I will refer to it against the background of specific power relations in migration societies. Not least individuals’ biographies and identities are tackled by ascriptions and discourses of differentiation and it is interesting to ask which strategies they develop to face these ascriptions. Finally it has to be discussed how we, as researchers, can deal with the named challenges? Are we able to contribute to deconstructing hegemonic discourses about ‘migrants’? And if yes, what are appropriate methods of research and dissemination? My approach is inspired by postcolonial studies and critical migration research (e.g. Bhabha 1994; Mecheril 2016).

The paper is based on a transdisciplinary research project (2012-2104), which analysed the representation and access of people with migrant biographies (first and second generation) to professions in the field of adult/continuing education. Working closely together with stakeholders in adult education, one aim of the project was to develop strategies for moving institutions towards diversity and anti-discrimination. The findings of the study have already been presented in several publications (Sadjed, Sprung & Kukovetz 2015; Kukovetz, Sadjed & Sprung 2014, and others) and will not be at the centre of this paper. I will pick out a specific part of our research which not only looked for answers to the research questions about fostering and hindering factors in the careers of migrant adult educators, but which also dealt with critical self-reflection on research in the migration context. We therefore choose the methodological approach of participatory research workshops with a group of migrant adult educators. This setting 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 opened up a space for a kind of meta-reflection on the whole research project, but also generated autonomous contributions to our research questions. The participants were free to choose alternative methods and foci in their research.

In the first part of the paper I will make some theoretical remarks on representation and refer to selected key issues of critical migration research. I will then illustrate the reflection using a concrete example from the participatory research workshops – the production of a documentary film, which I realised together with my colleague Klaudija Sabo[[2]](#footnote-2). 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 but also to discuss the processes of concept development and the film production. 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.

**2. Representation and the construction of ‘migrants’**

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 interest and making one’s own positions and claims heard. It can be realised as direct or indirect representation. Relevant questions in the migration context are for example: what opportunities for self-representation in political participation are given? Who is legitimated to speak out as a proxy? Whose voices are heard? etc. (Kukovetz, Sadjed & Sprung 2014:53ff.). Moreover, we use the term of representation when we talk about equality in participation and the access to resources.

The practice of speaking for or about others makes hierarchical social structures apparent. In Austria, as in many other 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.

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). Academics (and in the concrete field: white academics) have 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 minoritised groups in politics, social life, science etc. 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 categorisation and as a result homogeneity within this group (Broden & Mecheril 2007:12).

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 (Perko & Czollek 2007; Fraser 2008). The equal access of citizens with migration biographies to the field of education is a constant topic of political and social contestation. Phenomena of 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 practises of external representation, which generates knowledge about others (Said, 1991; Spivak, 2010; Castro Varela & Dhawan, 2004). 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 minoritised 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. To give an example: in Austria and some other Western European countries the so-called ‘Gastarbeiter’ (literally: ‘guest workers’) and their descendants represent the largest group of (labour) migrants, recruited by the Austrian government from mostly rural areas of Turkey and former Yugoslavia in the 1960s and 1970s as cheap labour. The perception of (specific groups of) migrants is closely intertwined with this history and for descendants of the ‘Gastarbeiter-Generation’ upward social mobility is quite restricted due to this stigmatisation. Their position is characterised not least by a lack of symbolic capital as an expression of social recognition and power (Bourdieu 2005). Nowadays, stigmatisation and stereotyping often takes place by means of attributes like ‘refugee’, ‘Muslim’ etc. and is linked for example to attributions like threatening, violent, backward etc. A public discourse on ‘migrants’, which is currently influenced and highly instrumentalised by political forces such as the far right (but also other groups), in reality mostly addresses only specific groups and countries of origin.

A rather 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 quiet evident in our research outcomes, especially when we talked to members of the so-called second generation who work in adult education. It must be stated that even just the fact of addressing subjects as ‘migrants’ in research brings about the risk of reinscribing the practices of othering and in further consequence of discriminating against individuals. Therefore it is 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 characterised 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.

**3. Appropriate methodologies? Participatory research and artistic approaches**

Based on a critique of objectifying research methods and following the idea to encourage social change through research (including making unheard voices of minoritised 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 1973; 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 2014:215). Glassman and Erdem show that origins of PAR include anticolonial movements as well as feminist ideas and other perspectives.

Nevertheless, 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).

One of several methods we opted for was to organise research workshops with our target group – migrant professionals in adult education. Research workshops invite people, whose circumstances and strategies are being explored, to engage (Bergold & Thomas 2010). In our project, 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[[3]](#footnote-3).

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 (Peters 2013) or Performative Social Sciences (Forum Social Research Vol 9/2, 2008) can be found. Artistic research often deals with minoritised groups, for example via theatre work. Most approaches aim to link different modes of knowledge as well, follow a political, emancipatory goal and engage 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. 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.

To come back to the concrete implementation of research workshops within our project: three members of the research team (which was also ‘mixed’ in terms of origin) invited seven people with migrant biographies who were active in adult education and/or research to work together.[[4]](#footnote-4) Their participation in the workshops was realised on a remunerated base and took place over one year. All group members were included in an interactive communication process for the decision-making on topics and methods, dissemination etc. Research workshops do 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). 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 portrays careers of adult educators with migrant backgrounds and picks up the question of representation – implicitly and explicitly, as I will describe in more detail below.

**4. ‘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 and handled the whole production on our own. There were no extra financial resources and the production process lasted about 15 months. 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 which occur for migrant participants just because of the fact that there is a migrant in the teaching position, and she expressed this position by calling it 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 (in a interview setting) to tell us their individual career stories 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 a university professor to an 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. The decision for the ‘talking heads’ format was made 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.[[5]](#footnote-5) 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 out to the scene and became visible. Thus we explicitly put our role (and power) as constructors of images and assertions up for discussion.

 

 

**Potential and challenges of the medium**

A central idea we wanted to deal with in the film was to reflect on the phenomenon of othering – also by questioning the medium as such 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’ (Said 1991; Bhabha 1994). 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 obvious that visual media are often used to generate stereotypes – not least about ‘migrants’. A film project therefore could – 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 choses 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…). Therefore we 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). 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 Rouche aimed to make visible the fictional character of documentary film, breaking with conventional approaches within the genre in these times. Questions of [authenticity](http://dict.leo.org/#/search=authenticity&searchLoc=0&resultOrder=basic&multiwordShowSingle=on) 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 any kind of props, symbols etc. – 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 organising a common screening of the rough cut with a follow-up discussion in a cinema. With the 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 should be shifted. The protagonists were invited to criticise and to correct (or confirm) the interpretations, which we had suggested, after having gained a more distanced perspective on their own dialogue. The group makeup should also 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 criticised 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 they had, with one exception, told us that they never had had any bad experiences. They thus started to reflect in the group setting on the reasons for their not talking about any negative stories, while the message of mainly positive career development seemed somehow biased 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 victimisation. Furthermore, 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 own biography and especially on their own dealing with their migration background in terms of self-representation. I would say that the process of realising 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 in a cinema screening and were engaged in a public discussion with the protagonists afterwards. Once again, the protagonists had the opportunity to comment on the reactions of the audience and to answer questions, which put them – once more – in a position of having the power over sharing their own narrations.

**5. 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 feedbacks 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 emphasised 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. 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 in fact never 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 essentialising 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 2007:20). Therefore the research workshops were also defined as a space to reflect on these challenges and dilemmas. Aside from the concrete sub-project, the research workshops had encouraged all participants to reflect on their thoughts, identities, responsibilities and not least on the way in which we can take action to contribute to social change. The opportunity to also articulate practises of resistance against common representations and research practices and to find a language which supports a critical discourse showed the potential of the methodology for critical migration research – not only in terms of transfer but also as a research methodology in itself.

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1. This is a revised and extended version of the paper ‘Crossing Borders: The potential of participatory and artistic approaches in critical research on migration and adult education’, published in McGray, R. (Ed.). *Proceedings of the 34th CASAE/ACEEA annual conference.* 2015, Université de Montréal. Ottawa. Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education, pp. 335–339. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Klaudija Sabo is a cultural scientist and filmmaker and works in Higher Education. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. A more detailed discussion of the social architecture in research workshops, power relations etc. can be found in Pilch-Ortega & Sprung 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. We included persons who had already grown up in Austria, but still shared some experiences of being ascribed as ‘others’ (for example because of wearing a headscarf or physiognomic attributes). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. We are aware that there is no ‘neutral’ background, but in the end we decided for the colour black; aesthetic and technical aspects also played a role. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)