Research corner: initial reflections in peer research - part 1



Welcome to our blogs page! Here you can find reflections written primarily by the Migration Yorkshire peer and community researchers, about working as part of the team doing research for Refugee Integration Yorkshire and Humber (RIYH).

These blogs will be published regularly, and form part of a toolkit Migration Yorkshire is developing, aimed at research organisations interested in doing co-research alongside people with lived experience of migration.

Here is part one of the first blog in a series which will reflect on the experience of peer and community migration research. Read Tesfalem and Vanja's reflections on aspects of the peer research experience, including issues relating to methodology, identity and language.

Many thanks to Hani Michael, an Eritrean refugee who lives in Ethiopia, for drawing this sketch for us. It shows colleagues under the shade of a tree and engaging in conversation. In using this, we drew our inspiration from the drawing of one of our research participants in the previous RIYH research. In it, the participant drew a tree and explained that it symbolised an important social space where people gather to discuss/decide on community affairs. In our context, we wanted it to represent teamwork and horizontal relationships in our research.

When 'lived experience' and professional capacity meet: initial reflections in peer research - part 1

by Tesfalem Yemane and Vanja Čelebičić

In June 2021, we were invited by colleagues at the University of Sheffield involved in the @MIMY_Project (Empowerment through liquid Integration of Migrant Youth in vulnerable conditions) to share our experience of working on a peer research project. This blog is part 1 of an annotated version of the conversation between Vanja (lead researcher) and Tesfalem (peer researcher) for that presentation.

For context: in 2019 Migration Yorkshire was involved with @SalfordUni in research that was part of a broader project called Refugee Integration Yorkshire and Humber (RIYH) and was funded by the Asylum Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF). One of the aims of the research project was to understand how people with personal experience of being granted refugee status in the UK adjust and settle into everyday life in the Yorkshire and Humber region. A key aspect of this research project was the involvement of peer researchers (at times also known as community researchers). The idea behind peer research is that people with personal experience of the researched topic get involved in the research process.

Vanja: Tesfalem, we talked a lot in the past about the idea behind ‘peer research’. You were involved in this research project as peer researcher in great part because of your lived experience of having had refugee status at some point of your life in the UK. However, it became evident very quickly that your experiences, skills and knowledge around migration derived also from your academic background and interests, and through your professional engagements, such as your work with RETAS Leeds (Refugee Education, Training and Advice Service). Considering this, could you reflect a little bit about your involvement as peer researcher in the project we worked on? How useful was it? What were some benefits and challenges around it?

Tesfalem: Thank you Vanja. For me, it was a great learning experience, especially in doing collaborative research. Firstly, I learnt a lot from the richly diverse experiences and perspectives the peer and lead researchers brought into the process. As a novice researcher, working with the lead researcher in conducting the same interview was an important learning process for me. We were complementing each other, especially in the follow-up questions. As we come from different backgrounds, I thought co-interviewing was an enriching experience that also contributed to deepening the conversations.

Secondly, methodologically the involvement of peer researchers was crucial to the project. Based on their experiences of migration, work, linguistic skills, and nuanced socio-cultural cues, peer researchers brought diverse perspectives into the

research process. Involvement of peer researchers also helped greatly in identifying and recruiting research participants. Peer researchers coming from the communities was crucial in building trust and confidence with research participants.

Thirdly, the dynamics and atmosphere of the conversations when we co-interviewed were also very interesting in reflexive terms. It helped me reflect about my multiple ‘selves’ and corresponding positions in the research process. I was a ‘peer researcher’, a refugee, a member of one of the communities under study and a postgrad student of migration studies, and it was interesting to reflect on how these intersect. I also remember when I was asking you about your observations of sitting with us when we did interviews in different languages. Sometimes, we would pause interviews to summarise to you what was being said, and it makes me wonder how this shapes the flow, naturalness, and dynamics of the interviews. Does it disrupt the flow of the interviews? Does it add to the richness and depth of the interviews (as you also used to ask follow-up questions)? More importantly, how do these multiple social locations relate to my epistemological location? As the sociologist Ramon Grosfoguel (2008) teaches us, it is important to distinguish between the ‘social location’ and ‘epistemic location’. As Grosfoguel cogently puts it:

> ‘The fact that one is socially located in the oppressed side of power relations does not automatically mean that he/she is epistemically thinking from the subaltern

epistemic location.’

For me, being a peer researcher involves constant reflexivity, questioning and mediating the potential tensions between ‘co-production’ in research and epistemic inclusion.

My final observation was on the label ‘peer researchers’. What does the label indicate about our positions in the wider context of the organisation we were working for? The peer researchers came with qualifications and extensive work experiences, both in the UK and abroad. And I was reflecting whether the roles were commensurate with their qualifications and experiences. Was this a case of peer researchers being ‘native data gatherers’ and interpreters/translators merely because of their social locations in the communities? What form of recognition, apart from the monetary payments, is in place that acknowledges their contributions in the production of the knowledge?

And I wonder if the label creates a sense of ‘temporariness’ and ‘otherness’ in terms of being part of a bigger picture and process in the organisation. This is by no means a criticism of the research process I was privileged to be part of but a general reflection on similar projects that aim to involve peer researchers.

If you’d like to read more reflections on this theme, look out for part 2 of this blog which will be published in a couple of weeks.

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