Research corner: initial reflections in peer research - part 2

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: reflections on peer research – part 2

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 2 of an annotated version of the conversation between Vanja (lead researcher) and Tesfalem (peer researcher) for that presentation.

Tesfalem: As you know, the peer researchers joined the project at an early stage. We were part of the conversations in designing the research methodology, preparing interview questions, and taking part in the data analysis. From your experience of leading other peer research projects, could you reflect on the process of peer research projects? At what stage of the research process do peer researchers get involved, and where does the involvement stop? What constitutes the 'peer' in peer research? As a lead researcher also, it would be good if you could share your reflections on co-interviewing with peer researchers. I shared mine from the perspective of a peer researcher.

Vanja: Thank you Tesfalem for sharing your very thought-provoking ideas (see part one) and thank you for your questions. I will make three points that will hopefully address your questions.

The first point I want to make is to do with peer researchers' involvement. Each research project is designed differently and there is no one correct answer about when peer researchers begin, or stop being involved. While ideally we would perhaps like to see peer researchers involved in the whole process, in practice that can be challenging, and for various reasons. So, for me the question has a lot to do with how we generate and represent knowledge in collaborative projects and how we do it ethically and responsibly. I think one thing that could be useful for us to consider is what the end aim of the peer research project is. And what form the outcomes are going to have. Are

we going to represent the research findings in a report, an article or a book? If so, then in many peer research projects this is where the participation could potentially end, because it is less accessible, or less interesting. So, we need to think about other forms through which we could generate and represent knowledge, so for example through arts, music, blogs, poetry, toolkits, and so on.

The question of what constitutes the ‘peer’ in the peer research project is an important one. I previously worked on a project with peer researchers and what made them ‘peers’ was that they were all young people coming of age in one city, in a post-war and post-socialist context. So, I guess it was that experience and their positioning in the life course that made them peers. The project that you were involved in was different in that sense as the common experience, which turned everyone into ‘peers’ was that everyone moved to live in the UK from elsewhere, and at some point of their residence here they have also held refugee status.

As a group, however, it was a very mixed group, in terms of where people were positioned in the life course (as you recall we had people in their early 20s and people in their 50s), in terms of their skills and experiences in general and more specifically in terms of their knowledge relating to research. Furthermore, everyone came from a very different geo-political contexts, and very different personal socio-economic circumstances, and everyone’s routes to refugee status were different. Finally, everyone lived in different parts of Leeds, in fact some outside

Leeds. This diversity, as you said, was wonderful – everyone brought so much to the project in terms of skills, knowledge and world views deriving from being positioned differently. This was also how we hoped to ‘capture’ variety of experience, especially of people who are often tagged under a homogenising umbrella of the ‘refugee’ label. However, what constituted ‘peer’ on that project had to do with a certain – in fact unenviable – legal migratory status.

In addition to posing some conceptual challenges, this also brought up some practical ones. For example, how to design research training for people who had such different experience and knowledge of research? So for me the question is how to do collaborative research in a way that transforms how we generate and communicate knowledge, while at the same time we avoid reinforcing pre-existing ideas associated with certain categories that label and group people that are otherwise really quite unrelated.

Finally, I share your view that co-interviewing very much shaped the whole process from what and how we asked the questions to what research participants decided to share with us. For example, since peer research partially relies on already established contacts of a peer researcher, their prior knowledge of research participants enables them to ask also questions that are relating to a specific experience. While this has proven to be quite enriching, it could pose some challenges too and needed to be dealt with sensitively. Speaking more personally, I needed to get used to being a co-interviewer in languages I did not speak. This is a relatively new way of working for me, and I guess it

posed some challenges, but also opportunities to observe, see and notice that which goes beyond a spoken word, but comes through the body language, the emotion, the facial expression, and so on.

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