

Submitted version

April 2020 Volume: 17, No: 2, pp. 249 – 256 ISSN: 1741-8984 e-ISSN: 1741-8992 www.migrationletters.com

Vulnerable Spaces of Coproduction: Confronting Predefined Categories through Arts Interventions

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Abstract

Collaboration between researchers and artists is often held as particularly promising to enhance cross-cultural understanding. In this article, two researchers and an artist reflect on the potentials, as well as the pitfalls, of art-based interventions in integration of migrants. Through the performing arts youth project *Here I Am*, we discuss coproduction methodologies. We emphasize the discomfort in confronting the stereotypes inherent in our perspectives and categories. Exploring how various encounters among the researchers, artist, and participants in the performing arts project challenge the prevailing perspectives, we argue that art interventions have the potential to bring knowledge production beyond predefined categories and explanations. This requires moving beyond our comfort zones and entering vulnerable spaces of improvisation, where new understanding and “grammars” can be coproduced. This article shows how the reflections of such spaces alter the research project and the aims of the art intervention, including our understanding of integration.

Keywords: arts interventions, coproduction, discomfort, encounters, youth integration

Vignette

In the first meeting with the migrant youths in *Here I am (Hær e æ)*, I find that I am unable to reset myself and leave them to be who they want and become what they want. I forget to try. I don't see youths engaged in fashion, music, friends, family, drawing, film and dance. I forget to see those who enjoy talking loud about their whereabouts, who are insecure, happy, hyper or calm. I see them coming—crawling directly from the TV news, from a boat crossing the Mediterranean: *It is 2015 and Europe is facing the biggest refugee crisis since the Second World War. 300,000 people travel the deadly route across the Mediterranean to Europe.*

I am an artist working in Tromsø, and I want to engage with the youths who have crossed the Mediterranean and arrived in Tromsø. The youths carry stories; they carry all the pain. I have been so sad reading about and watching the crisis on TV. Meeting the youths, I

become even sadder. It also feels good, good to be embraced, allowed to contribute, and comfort. I want to make theater based on their stories. But this is not what the youths want. I ask a boy to tell me, I ask, and I ask. He wonders where he might get a job. He doesn't return to *Here I am*. I have to try again. How can I meet the youths on their own terms?

Rebekka Brox Liabø, artist and partner in *Cit-egration*

Introduction

The vignette raises an important question in research and art-based interventions, in the field of migration and integration: how can we move beyond our preconceptions? In this article, we, two researchers and an artist, discuss coproduction methodologies through our collaborative work with the performing arts youth project *Here I Am*. Exploring and problematizing our own preconceived categories, including our good intentions, we emphasize the role of discomfort in knowledge production.

Here I Am is a low-threshold meeting place for youths in Tromsø, Northern Norway. Once a week, about 15 youths from all over the world aged 14–20 gather at the municipal youth house together with three theater instructors—and often one or two researchers. Participants are mainly recruited through introductory classes for nonnative Norwegian youths in school. Most of them are migrants, some of them refugees. In *Here I Am*, the youths attend writing, film, dance, and theater workshops, learning how to use art to address the themes of their concern. Every semester is rounded off by a performance where the youths perform their own texts, films, dance choreography, and plays on the stage. *Here I Am* is run by Rebekka Brox Liabø and her art company in collaboration with the Tromsø City Council and the research project *Sustainable Diverse Cities: Innovation in Integration (Cit-egration)*.¹ The researchers Marit Aure and Anniken Førde have engaged in the *Here I Am* activities, conducting participatory observations and what Wilson (2013) calls observant participation combined with qualitative interviews with partners, instructors, and migrant participants. The approach is based on mutual collaboration, where artists and young migrant participants contribute in the research and researchers contribute in the art interventions. This implies that the youths in *Here I Am*, rather than being “objects” of research, are active actors in knowledge production. However, they are not part of the author collective of this article, which focuses on the collaboration between the artist and the researchers and our efforts at developing methodologies of coproduction.

Cit-egration addresses creative integration initiatives, especially art interventions, as sources for new knowledge on how to live with differences. We are concerned with the conditions for cross-cultural interaction and how these can contribute to the participation and the development of just cities (Harvey, 2008; Fainstein, 2010). The work enters into the growing interest in participatory research, arguing in favor of the possibility, the significance, and the usefulness of involving research partners in knowledge production (Bergold & Thomas, 2012) and in participatory *action* research, aiming to change social realities (Kemmis & McTaggard, 2005). Coproduction of knowledge has become a mantra in social sciences (Kindon et al., 2007), and participatory action research has gained new interest, particularly in migration studies, in which researchers and partners engage to change the world, often together with migrants. The wish to contribute to more inclusive communities is an important driving force of many research projects and art interventions, also of Cit-egration and *Here I Am*. However, the ambition of “doing good” carries a risk of normative fixations and reproduction of dominant understandings, which might make our interventions unfit.

Arts-based interventions are seen to offer a potential for cross-cultural exchange and understanding (Askins & Pain, 2011; Nunn, 2010; Tolia-Kelly, 2007). This mirrors the “social turn” in arts practices, which engage socially involved art and build on collaboration and participation (Hickey-Moody, 2017), and is core to art-based research (Leavy, 2015) and

¹ Funded by the Norwegian Research Council (270649) and approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data.

its ambitions to “disrupt dominant narratives and challenge biases” (p. 17) and create critical awareness.

In this article, we examine the possibilities and challenges related to interventions, improvisation, and coproduction. Through common reflections and confrontations, we explore the possibilities of bringing knowledge production beyond predefined concepts, understandings, and thus our own interventions. We emphasize the discomfort in confronting the stereotypes often inherent in the perspectives and categories with which each of us enters the field. We argue that knowledge coproduction requires that researchers and artists alike dare to challenge their comfort zones and be willing and able to create the necessary vulnerable spaces, where planned activities may fall apart. This involves, as the vignette shows, destabilizing our images, expectations, and theories. It necessitates a shift from product to process and inspires a model of expectation where activities are not seen as successful or unsuccessful but as meeting places where anything may happen.

Transformative collaborative art interventions

Together, we study *encounters* to explore the conditions for turning meeting places into interactions that promote integration, well aware that encounters may both increase and decrease contact and strengthen stereotypes, understandings, and misunderstanding alike (Amin, 2002; Phillips et al., 2014; Simonsen, 2008; Valentine & MacDonald, 2004). We agree with Askins and Pain (2011) who emphasize the “complex interplay across and between actors, materials, and space that frames encounters as emergent, transitory, fragile, and yet hopeful” (p. 803). This parallels participatory action research that make the people affected by and engaged in the issue under scrutiny become producers of knowledge (Chambers, 1998). Encounters and participation are hence linked, and while the idea of participatory action research is criticized for being a modernist and instrumentalist project, guilty of entrenching rather than destabilizing traditional hierarchical relations (Askins & Pain, 2011), spaces of discomfort and tensions may be seen as productive and able to develop nuanced understanding (Pratt, 2007). Bergold and Thomas (2012) focus on how participatory action research requires a safe space where a willingness to disclose and share experiences can be played out. We argue that it also requires a willingness to embrace tensions and discomfort in an effort to work through destabilizations. Askins and Pain (2011) suggest that studying practices and spaces of encounters—for instance, by using participatory arts—helps push predefined categories and reiterative understandings “toward more transformative social interaction” (p. 803).

According to Barret (1998), improvisation and the creation of something new requires preparations for the spontaneous. Throughout our collaboration, the artist Brox Liabø and researcher Aure and Førde and other instructors in *Here I Am* gather occasionally for two to three hours, sharing experiences, reflecting on interventions and methodologies. This has developed into reflecting dialogues to enhance dialogic exchanges (Nunn, 2010), crucial in practicing collaborative research. The reflection dialogues include sitting together exploring and discussing the activities in detail, the research process, the issues of integration, and the future activities in *Here I Am*. It makes up a messy social space, with differently situated people, different skills, finding ways of working together, where the methodological practices and the social realities constructed are unpredictable (Law, 2004). This is a characteristic of participatory processes (Askins & Pain 2011) and inherent in what Tolia-Kelly (2007) describes as the aim of participatory art: to make voices and perspectives tangible and make way for unexpected and “new grammars.” Working with art interventions and participatory

arts makes the research uncontrollable and unpredictable (Askins & Pain, 2011), while it also has the potential to mess with dominant social relations and create unforeseen futures.

Moments of discomfort

Working together across knowledge traditions requires making explicit the rationale of practices and the meaning of concepts we often take for granted. It requires patience and flexibility and involves not only struggles and moments of discomfort but also joy and surprise. We argue for the importance of acknowledging such moments of discomfort, which allows for confrontations. As Bergold and Thomas (2012) say, dissenting views are essential as they promise a “different take on the subject under study, and thereby enable the discovery of new aspects” (p. 196). In the moments of discomfort, we can challenge our predefined perspectives and gain new understanding.

The vignette illustrates how Brox Liabø entered this field with predefined ideas of the youth’s needs. Overwhelmed by public stories of migrants crossing the Mediterranean, she considered the participants victims to be helped. The youths, like the young boy who left the project when he was asked to tell his migration story, challenged the victim category they were ascribed. The young boy wanted a job; he rejected the refuge position he was offered. Realizing this, Brox Liabø used tools from drama pedagogy to try to “reset” herself—to be able to meet the youths on their terms. As the vignette shows, interaction becomes impossible if we fail to do so.

The researchers were also confronted with the bias of their perspective when meeting the young participants in *Here I Am* and found themselves distressed from the first encounters. Førde tells of when she first met the youths:

Meeting the kids, I started by presenting myself and the Migration project. Although having presented the project and its aims in numerous academic settings, all of a sudden, I felt speechless. In this situation, the terms we use, like “integration initiatives” and “living with difference,” felt not only irrelevant, but also offensive and degrading.

Sitting together with the youths talking about them hanging out in *Here I Am* as an “integration initiative” met no resonance—they don’t come there to be integrated. Realizing that the concepts we operate with involuntarily reduce the youths to the predefined categories they reject, Førde became speechless. Her academic vocabulary was unfit: she also needed to “reset” and find a new grammar. Likewise, Aure tells of the surrealistic feeling of talking with the youths trying to explain the project, necessary to get their consent, about how the majority society finds migration a problem. “They were not a problem, they were just a group of youths!” They have different interests and styles and a variety of migration backgrounds. Like Brox Liabø and Førde, Aure had to try again. The interventions, perspectives, aims, and language of the researchers and artist hold the risk of reinforcing “otherness.” The researchers found, regardless of preparations, skills, and intention, that they needed another entrance and vocabulary to make themselves relevant to these young people and to open their perspectives for the youths’ own ideas. To the participants, *Here I Am* is not an integration initiative. It is a place to meet, dance, perform, and have fun. They have different motivations for participating and only occasionally relate to themselves as immigrants. They make their otherness relevant only when they discuss the difficulties of making Norwegian friends at school, where social groups are already set. While the project *Here I Am* has an ambition of elude otherness, the

youths do this in their own way. In doing so, they demonstrate the inefficiency of fixed identities.

Aware that our knowledge always will be partial and biased (Haraway, 1988), we argue that we have to try to “reset ourselves” in meeting with the youths. We also believe art-based research holds a potential for developing strategies for resetting. As an experienced artist, Brox Liabø systematically works with challenging established positions and creating new characters. She tries to find “point zero,” where she can listen without assuming to know anything about the participants. She tunes down her inner voice, thoughts, and interpretations. As we all face people unknown to us, like these youths, we immediately create ideas of who they are and what stories they have to tell. However, to let them be someone, anyone, we need to create a room where they are not restricted to the positions that our predefined categories offer. Brox Liabø describes the exercise of resetting: “Hush, I say to myself, you don’t know anything about these youths. You don’t know who they are. Just stand still. Look at them. Listen to them. Anything can happen.” This is what phenomenology means by bracketing our preestablished concepts to suspend judgments and categorizations about the world, to be able to focus on the analysis of the experience. Although knowledgeable qualitative fieldworkers, Aure and Førde felt they were lacking tools to perform this bracketing and “reset” themselves when their concepts failed to create meaningful encounters with the youths. What “saved” them was when they were invited to participate in theater exercises. Joining sessions of clapping, drawing, and other forms of arts and bodily expressions enabled them to enter more open and curious dialogues with the youths, exploring one another’s interests. These activities initiated by the artists offer a language more fit to interact across preestablished categories. This overcomes linguistic barriers (Jeffery et al., 2019) and offers an embodied language of art that may foster connections.

Dialogic exchange

The encounters between the *Here I Am* participants and the artist, instructors, and researchers created moments of discomfort, transforming *Here I Am* and the research approach. The reflections across differently situated and skilled artist and researchers provoked thought and inspired new learning. As the artist and the researchers started the *research*, we all met to plan our collaboration. The researchers presented Harvey’s (2008) concept of *just cities*, which immediately resonated with the artist’s thinking: *Here I Am* is a democratization project. This directed us toward seeing that the youths need to feel that they are part of the city. They need to be able to say “Here I am!” To take part in a democracy, you have to be someone, said Brox Liabø. Taking up a space and being somebody requires being acknowledged, building on the premise that “the constitution of human integrity is dependent on the experience of inter-subjective recognition” (Honneth, 1992, p. 188). The first and most fundamental type of personal disrespect is often physical—not being seen and recognized in a new place (Aure, 2013). The aim of *Here I Am* became to offer these youths tools to develop place-related identities, express themselves, give them courage to claim a space of their own, to say “Here I am, and I want to be included!” The arts interventions address the youths’ identity and belonging, while the organizers also guide and facilitate their way into new activities. These processes also altered the research. Inspired by Brox Liabø’s claim that there is no difference other than language skills, network, and issues of local and youth references, the researchers were pushed to constantly work with the theoretical and methodological implications of this insight: What kind of network is useful? How are differences produced and at the cost of whom (Spivak, 1988)? What kind of local youth references are at play? The concept of *just cities* develops, pointing toward new approaches.

The researchers have to redefine their concepts of migrants, integration, and encounters and ask even more open-mindedly how to approach the youths and how integration and encounters might be understood. Writing this article is part of this collaborative process and expands the analysis further. The dialogic reflections prove useful when the artists challenge the researchers: concepts collide, and understandings increase. The ambience turns tense when Aure gets impatient over the artists' vague plans and lacking descriptions of what they are actually doing. It is, however, these emotions that make her feel how being open-minded also involves the embodied feeling of lack of control and uneasiness of finding that even if you want to bracket your preconceptions, you may not be able to. This vagueness also points toward the skills of improvisation in the artists' work. While instructors become frustrated and ask the researchers for specifications—"I don't understand what you are saying. What do you mean?". The dialogue serves as safe spaces, open for airing embarrassing feelings of disappointment when the youths don't show up for activities or performances, threatening to permeate both the researchers' and artists' thinking.

Conclusion

Here I Am presents itself as a project with cool kids (not highlighting their background). In texts, videos, and theater performances, the participants articulate themselves in diverse ways and develop their language skills and other abilities. They create new networks, make friends, or just have fun together. As Nunn (2010) demonstrates in a study of art-based initiatives with youths, their immigrant background is only occasionally made relevant. *Here I Am* encourages the youths to explore and express multiple identities of who they are and who they want to be that do not reduce them to fixed identity categories. By participating in these activities, we learned to question our stereotypes and ask openly what integration is all about. In the same way as artists work with overcoming fixed identities, the researchers must strive to be sensitive to the constantly emerging reconfigurations (Førde, 2019).

By presenting their open performances, the youths also give the general public an insight into their existence and ideas. Through "transformative looks" (Pereira et al., 2016), these youths are made visible. *Here I Am* offers them a voice in the city—their voice. This makes them feel as inhabitants and civic citizens. Voicing experiences rarely heard and communicating their diverse realities, the performances have the potential to mess with the often problem-based dominant narratives that frequently permeate public debates about young immigrants. As Nunn (2010) argues, immigrants tend to remain "the story to be told" rather than the storytellers. Accordingly, this art-based research projects create an opportunity for young immigrants to voice their ideas without reducing them to their immigrant identity.

For many youths, participating in *Here I Am* has facilitated broader participation in the city; some have started guitar courses and joined a permanent dance group, and many participate in a new low-threshold youth club. As we have seen also in other theater activities (Førde, 2019), participation in such encounters might make it easier for immigrants to interact with Norwegians in other arenas. Experiences from a street art workshop show that by getting to know and physically engage in the place they live in, and becoming visible through activities, youths connect themselves to the place (Olsen et al., 2019) and create belongings.

We further argue that the participatory arts interventions constitute vulnerable spaces of improvisation in our knowledge coproduction. In the multiple encounters among artists, researchers, and participants, our perspectives and categories are constantly challenged. Creating meaningful contact requires effort to "reset" ourselves, to embrace the unexpected.

Performing arts provide a toolkit that helps create these necessary spaces, destabilizing our expectations and theories. It also implies a messy space (Law, 2004), which challenges artists and researchers. The dialogic exchange helps us handle this as vulnerable spaces also require some safe spaces where experiences can be shared (Bergold & Thomas, 2012). We believe that participatory action research and arts have much to offer to understand and foster intercultural encounter and abilities to contain the messiness and insecurity involved. Through dialogic exchange, acknowledging the moments of discomfort, we might fine-tune our frames of reference to develop what Tolia-Kelly (2007) terms a new grammar, allowing us to escape predefined categories and develop a vocabulary that values that anything may happen and do not evaluate activities as successful or unsuccessful.

While *Here I Am* started with the objective of facilitating meetings and hopefully friendship between youths with migrant minority and ethnic Norwegian majority background, encounters were as important. The aim became to enable the youths to develop a voice, to get to know the city and see themselves as part of it. The focus moved toward strengthening the youths' presence in the urban space in ways relevant to them. As fixed categories of identity and belonging constantly change in and through encounters (Førde, 2019; Wilson, 2015), researchers and artists will have to continue to reformulate our concepts and theories of belonging, integration, and encounter.

Our experience in meeting the youths is that everyone wants to be part of a community and to make a difference. We all wish for our participation to achieve something good, that through participating, we contribute to saving the world—a little bit? Maybe that is why the youths, after every performance in front of a packed theater hall, literally dance with joy and pride as they enter the city's main street.

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