Reflection Labs: A Space for Researcher Reflexivity in Participatory Collaborations

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Abstract

This paper introduces reflection labs as a tool for researcher reflexivity in participatory collaborations. Participatory methodologies intend to achieve equal partnerships, co-production of knowledge and empowerment processes. In this agenda, reflexivity is key, not only for analytical reasons but also to address power inequalities, challenges in the partnerships and other ethical questions. In this paper, we describe the methodological underpinnings and empirical use of a tool we call a 'reflection lab'. In a 3-year participatory study with refugees (EMPOW), funded by the German Research Foundation, various online and offline spaces were created for reflexivity among community and academic partners. Reflection labs were developed for the academic partners. The term 'lab' points to the somewhat experimental nature of this space. Combining different approaches to reflexivity in creative ways, reflection labs offer a space to explore researcher subjectivities. Using field notes, minutes and analytical notes ('memos') as a starting point, in-depth discussions foster critical self-reflexivity and provide peer feedback and support about academic researchers' roles in participatory collaborations. The paper includes an example of a reflection lab that was organized virtually for more than 2 years due to Corona restrictions. By combining aspects of 'strong reflexivity' (analyzing researcher subjectivities for epistemic purposes) and 'ethical reflexivity' (addressing power inequalities and socio-political implications) reflection labs provide an innovative tool for an engaged, analytical research practice that pursues participatory goals and strives for ethical conduct and accountability.

Background

In spite of its widespread use reflexivity remains an "elusive and slippery" concept (Doyle, 2013, p. 253). In the methodological literature, reflexivity has been described as an analytical practice whereby researchers systematically take the context of the research situation into account, including the influence they have as researchers on the study and its results (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). For Linda Finlay, reflection and reflexivity constitute two ends of a continuum with both ends being important across the stages of a project: "At one end of the scale, reflection can be understood as 'thinking about.' As a subject, I reflect on an object. The process is a distanced one – the thinking is about something else and it takes place after the event. At the other end of the scale, reflexivity taps into a more immediate, continuing, dynamic, and subjective self-aware-ness" (Finlay, 2002, pp. 532–533). Reflexivity may thus be understood as an awareness of context and self in the process of knowledge construction. While reflexivity takes place in research interactions and fieldwork, it is also practiced system-atically during analysis. In these phases following and preceding fieldwork encounters, researchers scrutinize their positionality vis-à-vis the topic, the field of study and the data. Taking researcher positionality into account means considering the social locations (e.g., intersections of socio-economic status, gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, dis/ability etc.), academic training, and life experiences that are

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relevant in the specific study context (Cayir et al., 2022). Examples show how insider/outsider positionalities affect the perspective of the researcher, their access to the field and interpretative capacities (Berger, 2015). Following constructivist and feminist epistemological principles, reflexivity is a required component of all empirical research. However, there are various approaches to practicing reflexivity. Of particular interest here is the approach of "strong reflexivity" which places a focus on researcher subjectivities (Kühner et al., 2016). If analyzed critically and systematically, reflecting on subjectivities can serve as a "productive epistemic window" (Breuer et al., 2002, par. 4).

Researcher reflexivity serves not only analytical, but also important ethical purposes (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). "Ethical reflexivity" thus constitutes a second important pillar (von Unger, 2021). The emergent, dynamic and interactional nature of engaging in qualitative research involves complex ethical responsibilities ((Iphofen & Tolich, 2018), p. 1). To identify and live up to these responsibilities, one needs to go beyond the limited debate of "procedural ethics" (i.e., ethics regulations and reviews) and focus on "ethics in practice" including the "ethically important moments" that evolve in the process and cannot be foreseen (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, p. 263–264). Ethical conduct thus involves a critical, dialogical and ongoing process of reflecting on the social, political and moral dimensions of empirical research, including the values that govern the research process (Canella & Lincoln, 2011). This perspective highlights the social relationships and possible impact of a study while taking into account participants' rights and well-being, possible benefits and harms as well as power relationships. From a critical feminist and postcolonial perspective, research is neither innocent nor untouched by the ideologies, material inequalities and epistemic injustices (Fricker, 2007) that are at work in the fields under study. Practicing ethical reflexivity therefore also entails questions on more fundamental issues concerning the larger role of social science research in society (von Unger, 2021, p. 199).

Participatory methodologies engender specific possibilities and challenges in this respect. Emancipatory and participatory approaches have established reciprocity and empowerment as key ethical principles (Oliver, 1997). Social justice approaches align "the ethics of research with a politics of the oppressed, with a politics of resistance, hope and freedom" (Denzin & Giardina, 2007, p. 35). However, an inherent tension is built into these approaches – to rephrase a dilemma described in social work (Weinberg & Banks, 2019): How can we act ethically in an unethical world? How can emancipatory research be conducted in oppressive social and material conditions of knowledge production (Oliver, 1997)? While there are no easy answers to these questions, reflexivity is needed to raise and tackle them.

Participatory research aims to achieve an equal collaboration of academic and community partners to pursue knowledge for change. By sharing the epistemic power to define the issue, collect and analyze data, knowledge is co-created among partners in the communities of the fields of study and academia. Co-creation must be accompanied by empowerment processes to ensure that the participation of community members is more than a strategic (or at worst a manipulative) tool (Wallerstein, 2006). Participatory research is thus a highly ambitious endeavor that comes with a distinct set of opportunities and challenges including a) struggles in coming together as academic and community partners, b) dangers of perpetuating power structures related to post/colonial inequities, and c) the challenges of navigating complex layers of power relations within the community (Anang et al., 2021). Reflexivity thus becomes key – for analytical reasons as well as to address power inequalities and other ethical issues that arise during the collaboration. Academic researchers have to unlearn the classic academic role they were trained for, as the co-production of knowledge differs in fundamental ways from scientific business as usual in most academic disciplines. However, because structural differences persist between academic and community partners (in terms of privileges and status), research partners may unwillingly reproduce existing inequalities. It is thus of particular importance in community-based participatory research to reflect on power dynamics in critical ways (Israel et al., 2018; Wallerstein, 1999). This includes asking how existing power inequalities may be reproduced, for instance through racism (Muhammad et al., 2018).

Reflection labs offer a tool for researcher reflexivity in participatory collaborations, combining ethical and analytical reflexivity to achieve both, ethical conduct and scientific insight. The development of the reflection lab as a novel tool was not the result of a theoretical exercise, it was born out of necessity – as an answer to specific challenges in research practice. In the following we will first describe the context in which reflection labs were established – due to an increased need for reflexivity (and action) in the research project. We then detail the aims, methods and benefits of reflection labs as a space for group reflexivity. An example will be provided for illustration purposes. The article places a focus on methodological aspects. Substantial results of the research study on refugee vulnerability and health will be published elsewhere.

The EMPOW Project as a Scene of Reflexivity

The project entitled "Vulnerability and Empowerment: Participatory Approaches to Health Promotion with Refugees (EMPOW)" is a 3-year participatory study funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG). Refugees, healthcare and social service providers, community organizers and advocates for migrant health are involved as community partners collaborating with academic partners at Ludwig-Maximilians University (LMU) in Munich, Germany. Approximately 40 persons participate as project partners altogether – they are organized in four teams: three community-based teams (local working groups) and one university-based team. The project aims to explore the lifeworlds of selected refugee groups, develop health promotion initiatives for and with refugee communities and gain a better understanding of vulnerability and empowerment from their

respective standpoints. Empowerment is understood not as something done to refugees, but as something "that people do for themselves collectively" (Oliver, 1997, p. 20). Research fulfills a facilitative function, involving peer researchers and cycles of action and reflection in the collaborative production of knowledge for change.

The EMPOW project is a multi-sited study with participatory projects in three German cities: Berlin, Hanover and Munich. At each site, a local working group decides on the focus, aims and methods of the local project. Funds are put at their disposal and community participation in the cross-site research activities is supported as well. Individual and collective routines of reflexive practice were established and online and offline spaces were created for this purpose. Some of these spaces were shared by academic and community partners from all study sites, others were for specific sites and/or subgroups only.

Reflection labs were established for the academic team. In this paper, we describe the methodological underpinnings of how and why they were created within the project context as a space for academic partners to engage in a peer-based form of group reflexivity. Challenges encountered in the research played a key role. Engaging in participatory collaboration as an academic entails specific tensions. For example, how can you achieve equality and work in participatory ways (both in the academic team and with the community partners) when you are situated in a hierarchical academic organization, when the funding infrastructure reproduces asymmetrical power relations, and when you are pursuing a career in a professional field that favors academic forms of knowledge generation over participatory ones? In the EMPOW project, further challenges resulted from structural barriers to participation in the field of study (forced migration) and the coronavirus pandemic. To address and manage these challenges, reflexivity was practiced and spaces for dialogue and support were established.

Documenting Subjectivities, Practicing Reflexivity

The members of the LMU team (AH, DO, HU) documented and reflected their research experiences, observations and subjective responses in field notes, minutes and memos. At the three sites, the community partners decided how to work together. The local teams met regularly and reflected on their experience and subjectivities verbally, i.e., in discussions. They took notes and minutes which remained in their possession unless they decided to share them as data in the joint participatory analysis with the academic partners. When the academic partners were present at these meetings, they took notes and prepared minutes that were shared with the group.

Early on community partners noted high demands, work pressures and ethical questions that required attention (e.g., how to involve refugees as peer researchers and provide appropriate support concerning the additional strains this might cause them?). A reflexive space called an 'ethics working group' was created, dedicated to raising and discussing such ethical issues

faced by community partners from the three study sites. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, which started a few months after the project commenced, this working group met online to reflect on the challenges experienced by community partners during the collaboration. The working group was thus a digital space for ethical reflexivity across sites in a dialogue involving academic and community partners. Community partners took turns, shared their experiences and received support. They also had the option to receive additional finances for professional supervision at their locality.

While the community partners encouraged the academic partners to also share their experiences and problems in this group, in realiter, time was too limited. The community partners reported great difficulties finding time all at for these meetings. In their everyday lives, the community partners were engaged in refugee support and community building in what can be understood as a crisis context (i.e., chronically underfunded support for refugees in highly precarious life circumstances in Germany). They described multiple demands and limited time as they participated in the EMPOW project 'on top' of everything else, i.e. in addition to other professional and care work (e.g., in their communities and families), community activism and the work they did for a living. The allowances paid out of project funds only covered a few hours per month. At the same time, they were under a lot of strain as they experienced the uncertainties, pressures, losses, trauma and deprivations related to the restricted rights following forced migration in the German asylum system first hand - either as refugees themselves and/or as persons providing hands-on services and support to refugees on the ground. In contrast, the academic partners were employed at a university and engaged in the EMPOW project as part of their research tasks. They had more time at their hands. Thus, the community concerns were prioritized in the available time together (in the ethics working group und subsequent workshops). However, the academic team, too, had a need for peer support and research supervision. We (AH, DO, HU) required a 'safe space' to explore the challenges and grey areas related to our specific positionality (as academics involved in participatory research) and to openly address our shortcomings and emotions in process. While the need for a separate group may be critically viewed as re-inscribing the power differentials between academic and community partners (with academic partners providing support to, but not accepting support from community partners), the decision was due to two main reasons: a) community partners severe restrictions of time, and b) the need of the academic partners to be able to address the problems, emotions and conflicts they experienced openly in order to be able to re-engage with the partnership constructively. And while the community partners had separate spaces, too, (e.g. working on the local level amongst themselves), we decided to create a space for the LMU team as academic peers with additional support. We asked two academic members of the project advisory board (AK and HR) to support us and developed the 'reflection labs' described in the following.

Reflection Labs

Purpose and Composition

Reflection labs are spaces for researchers to reflect on their roles and subjectivities and address the challenges they face in the process of doing research in collaborative, participatory ways. With its epistemological assumptions, its critical normative edge and applied focus on intervention and social change, participatory research has distinct advantages but goes against the grain of much established academic research practice. Engaging in such research thus involves substantial challenges for the academic partners. Reflection labs provide a space to address those challenges.

The term 'lab' (short for laboratory) points to the somewhat experimental nature of this space for collaborative co-learning – with academic researchers (as opposed to lay participants or community partners) being the subject of an 'experiment' in reflexivity. Combining different approaches to reflexivity in creative ways (e.g., strong reflexivity and ethical reflexivity), reflection labs offer a safe space to explore researcher subjectivities and moments of discomfort and difficulty. A protected environment is necessary to open up about one's vulnerability. Reflection labs thus involve a small, stable group and constitute a more closed learning space compared to the idea of a 'studio' in collaborative ethnography, which has a more open and fluid membership (Franken et al., 2019). Using field notes, minutes and analytical notes (memos) as a starting point, in-depth discussions foster critical self-reflexivity and provide peer feedback and support about academic researchers' roles in participatory collaboration.

The reflection lab for the LMU team met for 3 hours at a time and was repeated every 4–8 weeks. The lab involved 5 regular members: three researchers from the academic team at LMU: a doctoral student/researcher (AH), a postdoctoral researcher (DO), and the principal investigator (HU). They were supported by two external researchers (AK, HR) who were members of the project advisory board and had substantial experience with qualitative and participatory research. One (AK) was also a psychologist and trauma expert, which proved particularly helpful when considering the vulnerabilities of working with persons who have experienced traumatic events (Pichon et al., 2022).

Routines and procedures: How does a Reflection Lab work?

Prior to the meetings, material is distributed, to be read in preparation. Peer-based interpretive groups have a long tradition in qualitative methodologies, including grounded theory (Lessor, 2000; Wiener, 2007), ethnopsychoanalysis (Bonz, 2016), collaborative ethnography (Franken et al., 2019) and many more (Dausien, 2007; Reichertz, 2013). Similarly to other reflexive group formats, the material submitted in reflection labs may be data of any kind. Given reflection labs' explicit focus on

researcher subjectivities and challenges, in this case the material most often included field notes and memos documenting aspects of the research process that were experienced as particularly demanding by the researchers. Examples include an excerpt from the minutes of a meeting, or field notes written in the aftermath of an interaction that was experienced as challenging or unsettling in some respect – or a memo (i.e., an analytical note) in which the researcher reflected on a specific issue in more depth, drawing on more than one interaction. To protect the privacy of the community partners and other third parties involved, the material was anonymized (except for the names of the academic team members) and treated as strictly confidential, using only the secure IT infrastructure of the university for communication and data management.

A reflection lab meeting starts informally with a round of informal conversation (e.g., "How are you today?") by those present to create a communicative space characterized by personal trust and openness. Checking in like this also allows the group to respond to new developments and current issues (good or bad) in the lives of the group members – making space for the small talk and informality that needs to be consciously factored in when a group only meets online (via a video call). One person (i.e. a member of the LMU team) had usually submitted material in advance. On some occasions, submissions on the same topic were made by more than one member of the LMU team. Whoever has submitted the material starts the discussion by explaining why they have done so – briefly summarizing the context of the problem at hand. Afterwards, the other members of the group respond to the material – first by asking questions for clarification, then by responding on a more general level ("What was my general impression when reading it?") and as a form of free association ("What did the material remind me of or do to me?"). This is followed by more detailed interpretations of selected parts of the material in subsequent rounds. The discussion develops freely, with members of the group sharing any association they might have (had), describing and revising their interpretations in light of the current discussion and thus responding to each other and also to the member(s) who submitted the material. While other group formats (e.g., interpretation groups in the ethnopsychoanalytic tradition), start with a defined time slot in which the submitting member is told to "listen only" (Bonz, 2016, p. 35), in the reflection lab they are free to choose whether they would like to participate more actively in the discussion from the beginning, or if they prefer to listen and take notes instead– letting the information sink in and responding to what was said at the end of the session. The "listen only" tradition of other group formats aims to counteract the tendency of submitting members to immediately defend themselves. In the reflection lab, we did not need this precautionary rule. It was possible to question and reinterpret the material (including the observations, emotions and actions described) with the submitting member joining the process more or less actively.

During the group discussion, members of the group respond to any feelings mentioned or implied in the material with the intention of trying to understand what was going on – both on

an explicit level and more implicitly. The interactions and feelings described in the material are interpreted in light of the specific materiality of the field of study, i.e., the legal restrictions and precarious social conditions in the context of forced migration and the migration regime – and/or the challenges and pressures of the academic system. While the reflexive discussion can develop in any direction, in general, the interpretation is aimed not at the personal level or psychological aspects relating to the participating individuals, but at understanding the challenges as a datum about the field of study and the approach chosen. Critical readings (e.g., of a researcher's actions and responses) are voiced in respectful ways. Towards the end, the discussion explores possible ways of responding to the problem at hand – developing alternative perspectives and modes of action to support the collaboration in the participatory project. Selected sessions were recorded and transcribed, for example if one of the members was unable to participate or when the group decided to document the process in more detail. However, most sessions were documented in notes only; and they were complemented with memos by the person who had submitted material. After the reflection labs, the academic team re-engaged with the partnership and strove to translate fruitful insights and suggestions from the reflection lab into action through dialogue with the community partners.

Topics of Discussion

How was the space provided by the reflection labs used? What kind of problems and challenges were discussed? The main topics in the first 2 years of the project included "building trust in the research relationships," "identifying one's roles and responsibilities as academic partners" and "tackling power inequalities." Trust building, we realized, is a challenge not only for community partners (who may distrust scientists), but also for scientists, who have to learn to trust the community partners with whom they share the responsibilities and the control of the research process and resources. In the frame of a participatory research collaboration, academics are no longer the ones setting the agenda or deciding on the issues, and they are not the main producers or final interpreters of the data. Yet, as members of the academic field, they do have to produce text (as output) and interpret data. The question is: How can this be done in a participatory way? And how can we meet community needs as well as expectations of the academic field?

One challenge that came up in many discussions was balancing the needs and self-determination of the community partners and the tenet of equity during collaboration, on one hand, with the pressures from the academic system, on the other – in particular the pressure to publish and conduct research in certain ways in a limited time frame. These issues gained more urgency towards the end of the project. The EMPOW project receives third-party funding from the German Research Foundation (DFG), the main funder of basic academic research in Germany. High ranking peer-reviewed journal articles and other academic publications are expected outputs of this kind of funding. Practical outcomes such as gains for the communities and/or impact on health systems, which are key in participatory health research, do not count as much.

Other topics included methodological aspects of participatory research, i.e., how to generate knowledge collaboratively, and the reasons for choosing a certain method. Also communicative strategies were a topic of discussion, e.g. how to address sensitive topics such as gender-based violence, racism or project finances in the digital formats of communication that the coronavirus pandemic forced on us. Most of the topics were clearly related to the positionality as academic researchers struggling to find their role and contribute to a meaningful collaboration while generating knowledge that is also valued in the academic field (see Figure 1 for a selection of key topics dealt with in the reflection lab over a 3-year period).

Empirical Example: Addressing Fears of Failure

To get a better idea of the reflexive processes taking place in the reflection lab, an example might serve as illustration:

In March 2021, in the midst of the second wave of the coronavirus pandemic in Germany, all three members of the LMU team submitted material documenting their perceptions of and responses to a cross-site workshop which had taken place online. The planning of the workshop had been discussed in prior reflection lab meetings (and with community partners in the ethics working group). The topic of the workshop – racism in the everyday lives of refugees, in healthcare and in our research collaboration – was particularly sensitive and complex. The topic of racism was raised and deemed important by community partners in two out of three local working groups. It coincided with the time when the Black Lives Matter movement had placed police violence and racism on the agenda of public debates as never before in Germany. The academic partners proposed that a cross-site workshop should be dedicated to the topic – partly in light of voices in the methodological literature asking for more reflexivity on unintended forms of racism that can be found in participatory research projects, too (Muhammad et al., 2018). The ethics working group prepared the workshop, the steering group of the EMPOW project (consisting of 3 academic and 6 community partners) agreed and we went ahead.

After the workshop all three members of the LMU team submitted material to the reflection lab. The field notes documented how they individually experienced the workshop. They reported a high level of attendance from all three sites (more than 30 people participated). There was a lively debate, but also difficulties conducting the workshop online with so many participants within the limited time frame of 3 hours. Problems with the translators were mentioned in all three sets of field notes, as were challenging group dynamics. The community partners from the different sites had never met in person before due to the Covid-19 pandemic. In the workshop,

- *Building trust in the collaboration and research relationships*
- *Roles and responsibilities as academic partners*
- *Pressures of the academic system*
- *Focusing on process vs. outcomes*
- *Emotions, puzzles and challenges in field work (including digital communication about sensitive topics)*
- *Power relations and structural inequalities (within the academic team, in the collaboration and the communities involved)*
- *Particular challenges for participatory researchers during the PhD phase*
- *Challenges in the field of forced migration research*
- *Conditions hindering participation (incl. situated vulnerabilities and racism)*
- *Methodological aspects of participatory research*

Figure 1. Key topics of the Reflection Lab.

they voiced contrary positions on the topic and some questioned whether or not they wanted to discuss the topic at all while others emphasized that they did. The workshop ended somewhat in disarray. In the reflection lab, we discussed these and other aspects of the three sets of field notes and we interpreted the following passage more in-depth:

"The workshop is still on my mind in the days that follow. I think a lot about where we are right now in EMPOW and what is happening. (…) What role can we play in such a discussion as academic partners? Provide space for those directly affected [who experience racism] and for activists to exchange ideas. Make sure that the discussion about offensive behaviors, injustice and discrimination is not hurtful again and does not open up old wounds or add new ones. (…) But I also think about what is not happening. Research is not happening (yet) – we are still miles away from that. [I am wondering:] Is it even possible, in the short project time and on top of that with Covid, to enter into a dialogue that also produces 'data' and can result in research? I have doubts. Partly because focusing on refugees means focusing on people who are in a particularly precarious and vulnerable situation. Can we even expect refugees to do research with us in this situation? Isn't it more important to support them in practical ways, individually (e.g., the prospect of being granted residence, work, etc.) and collectively (activism, political advocacy)?

I think we may fail with EMPOW as a participatory research project." (note 3 for RL 24/3/21, own translation from German)

This field note addresses an issue that has been raised in reflection labs again and again: What is the role of academic partners in the process? The note suggests that their role in the context of addressing racism may consist in providing a safe space for discussion. This was recognized as a highly relevant issue. Yet, the field note also includes a notion of fear of not being able to do 'proper' research and work with 'data'. In the

reflection lab, ideas were explored on how to possibly use parts of the discussion in the workshop as data. But it was also questioned whether this was legitimate at all. Prior to the workshop, some community partners had voiced a need for "safe spaces" implying spaces for discussion exempt from research purposes. What clearly was an appropriate format for sharing personal experience, seemed to prohibit anyone from using what was said during any of these 'safe discussions' as data. In setting up the collaboration between research and community partners, a rule had been established that nothing would be quoted without explicit permission of the speaker. But this idea of a 'safe space' seemed to go further: it seemed to protect the entire discussion from being used as data. For us as academic partners this raises a fundamental question: where do we stand – as researchers – without data?

The concern articulated in the field notes about the possible failure of the project came into play and caused a lively debate in the reflection lab. One member remarked that the explicit statement, i.e., the open acknowledgement of the possibility of failure, was somewhat "liberating." In the debate that followed, questions were asked about how this potentially failing project differed from other participatory projects that might be considered a success. The discussion highlighted structural factors such as obstacles to participation that were particularly high in the case of refugees, and also a lack of equality among the project partners concerning academic funding. What stood out above all as undermining and hindering communication, collaboration and trust building, however, was the impact of the corona pandemic on the overall process of the research.

The discussion in the reflection lab also explored the possibility that the problems surfacing in this workshop might indicate a more general, latent problem: could it be that some community partners might actually be opposed to research? Previous remarks by some community partners pointed to the exploitative nature of scientific European

research from a postcolonial perspective. This point was duly noted. However, the general impression was not that community partners were generally opposed to research. Instead, racism was identified as a topic that is simply not suitable for an online dialogue among 'strangers' who neither knew nor trusted each other and who had very different personal experiences with and political agendas concerning the topic. Ideas were developed on how to best approach both the topic and the need to conduct research together in a way that would respect community needs (including the need for safe spaces) and build trust, working with and around Covid as best as possible.

After the discussion, the members of the LMU team felt a sense of relief. Having had the space and the opportunity to address their worries, to acknowledge their feelings and to be open about how they each assessed the current situation created an opportunity to ask whether the concern expressed in the field note was shared by the others and if so, how to face the problem. The discussion helped sort out different aspects that coalesced: frustration with our apparent lack of progress while trying to work collaboratively during the coronavirus pandemic; a lack of trust among community partners and between community partners and academic partners; and pressures from the academic system (e.g., the need to conduct research and produce scientific forms of 'data'). In the aftermath of the reflection lab, the academic partners turned to the literature – reading up on the role of failure, what can be learned from it, and why we need to "fail better" in research (e.g., Clark & Sousa, 2020; Held, 2020). They also turned to the community partners for discussion and advice. The reflection lab helped the academic researchers to acknowledge their feelings and move forward by seeking dialogue with community partners about how the coronavirus pandemic was affecting the research collaboration. As a result, we decided to conduct focus groups (with all community and academic partners) and use our own experience in the project as research data. Prior to the focus groups, issues of confidentiality and ownership of the data were clarified once again. Participation was voluntary and those consenting to be part of the research maintained the right to withdraw their consent at anytime, i.e. they could object to their quotes being used in the analysis and publications. Also, the analysis would be conducted in a participatory manner.

In the focus groups, we documented and analyzed how the coronavirus pandemic was affecting our research collaboration in fundamental ways (Huber et al., 2022) and more generally how Covid-19 was affecting refugees in Germany (Odukoya et al., fc). At the same time, the academic partners also realized that, despite these obstacles, the collaboration had managed to build project structures in the three sites, and that the community partners at these sites had started to engage in valuable peer-based discussions and community work (including a photovoice project, creating videos and networks through social media and planning a peer-based online survey on the experience of the pandemic in refugee shelters) (Mohammadi et al., 2021; Namutebi et al., 2021).Thus, while the one workshop might have failed, the project had not. The reflection lab provided a space for questioning and for reassurance that the difficulties encountered are not solely problematic, but can be part of a productive learning process. In fact, the ambitiousness of participatory research on the one hand and the persisting structural forces that generate inequalities as well as the inertia of social reality on the other are responsible for the fact that problems related to power inequalities will necessarily be part of the process and cannot be resolved by mere will or through reflexive practice. Yet, the reflection lab helps come to terms with it and continue the work despite the structural dilemma and related difficulties.

Benefits of the Reflection Lab

This example shows how the reflection lab helped the academic researchers address, reflect on and deal with the challenges involved in participatory research work. The group process generated different readings and interpretations of the material submitted for discussion. This helped reveal new aspects of the data and to consider different perspectives beyond one's subjective point of view. This is the general benefit shared by many types of group-based interpretation described in the literature (Bonz, 2016; Dausien, 2007; Reichertz, 2013; Wiener, 2007). Similarly to other collective forms of reflexivity focusing on researcher subjectivity, it helped us articulate and understand our emotions – and interpret them as data. Doing participatory research with refugees in the context of the German asylum regime – as well as in the context of Covid restrictions – triggers many emotions including feelings of helplessness and frustration with the situation, the migration regime and the shelter system. The effect of providing a space for emotions is similar to other types of supervision and underlines the general importance of providing supervision options also in demanding field research (Reiter, 2021). In addition, through the presence and interventions of the two external colleagues participating in the reflection lab, it helped us clarify the roles, responsibilities and expectations within the academic team. Sometimes the two external, independent partners were able to address issues that neither member of the LMU team was able or willing to voice. Hierarchies within the academic team could be addressed more easily; and expectations could be clarified and revised. Last but not least, through these discussions we got valuable advice and ideas on how to respond and deal with the challenges we faced in our participatory practice.

Discussion

Unique Features of Reflection Labs

It has been noted that reflexivity is a key component of research practice. How are reflection labs unique as a tool of

reflexivity? Reflection labs build on established routines in qualitative research and supervision, blending them in a particular fashion with the peer-based model of participatory research and putting it to use for multiple purposes (e.g., analytical, teamwork, ethics, stress release, support and supervision). Their uniqueness lies in the combination of the following characteristics in terms of their methods, group composition and purpose.

Methods

- Working with empirical material, and going beyond it;
- Applying a broad understanding of 'material,' e.g., using the process level as data;
- Being able to read the material in advance, being able to think about it – not 'just' ad hoc responses;
- Involving the member who submitted material in the discussion;
- Working with subjectivities and emotions;

Composition and Membership

- Small, stable group working over longer periods of time;
- Members with experience in qualitative and participatory research;
- Combination of members of a project team and external members;
- The members are 'peers' (in this case academic peers with knowledge of the academic field and participatory and qualitative research);
- The members care about the people and the topic (e.g., in the case of the EMPOW project: refugees, forced migration and social justice); they are not just interested in the academic side of things;
- The members are intellectually generous (and not in a situation of competition)
- They are able to voice criticism and alternative views respectfully (i.e. work with multiple truths) and respond in kind.

Purpose

- Reflections labs offer a space for open discussions of problems and difficulties (addressing researcher subjectivities and ethical challenges);
- Developing new strategies and alternative modes of action (e.g., responding differently to challenges in the field, finding solutions);
- Analytical gains (e.g., what can we learn from the problems about the research question and the topic at hand?);
- Support for the academic aspects and processes involved in participatory research collaboration.

Common Problems in Participatory Research

Some of the problems that were addressed in the reflection lab of the EMPOW project resemble the barriers and challenges of Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) more generally (Israel et al., 2010, 2018). For example, Sarah Flicker et al. (2007) stress the additional time required to work collaboratively across sectors and disciplines. CBPR partnerships need to invest substantially in capacity building with marginalized groups and need to budget significantly longer timelines. Moreover, "finding the right balance between capacity building, process, outcome and not distracting community members from their ongoing advocacy efforts remains an ongoing challenge" (Flicker et al., 2007, p. 11). The clash between focusing on the process (ensuring that it evolves in participatory ways) and academic pressures to achieve an outcome (ensuring that the research contributes to the scientific discourse) requires particular balancing skills. The structural difference in power and status between academic and community partners and explicit demands by community partners not to be intellectually exploited point to the colonial legacy of scientific research and to an ongoing problem of distrust and fear despite every effort to build trust. Similar problems have been reported in other contexts of researching forced migration (Pittaway et al., 2010). Refugees were hesitant to engage in research due to negative experiences in the past including "exploitation by previous researchers and journalists, including unauthorized publication of names and photos, leading at times to situations of danger for those participating in the research (…); lack of feedback from research, including promised reports and photos, after giving time for interviews and disclosing personal stories; fear of backlash from government authorities and military leaders within camps" and "distrust of research done by researchers who 'fly in and fly out' of camps and conflict zones without considering the local social, economic and political consequences" (Pittaway et al., 2010, p. 236). This vividly shows how community distrust of 'helicopter' research is justified, simultaneously highlighting the increased vulnerabilities in the field of forced migration. However, issues of distrust and fears of exploitation due to power differences between academic researchers and community partners are not limited to the field of forced migration but are also prevalent in other contexts of participatory research. Flicker et al. (2007) note that "power imbalances rarely disappear in partnerships – all too often they come to the fore. One way of challenging these pervasive hierarchies is to explicitly name them, address them head-on and ensure that the benefits of the partnership are equitably distributed" (p. 249).

Conclusion

Reflection labs benefit engaged, critical research practice, especially when researchers pursue participatory goals and strive for ethical conduct and accountability in collaborative research.

During participatory collaboration, not all partners have to participate in all activities all the time. In fact, working in subgroups and different constellations can be beneficial. In the EMPOW project, community members explicitly asked for safe spaces and peer discussion among themselves. The reflection labs show that peer groups also work for academic partners in terms of providing support for dealing with challenges at a certain crossing (e.g., participatory research and academia). How reflection labs may be useful at another crossings (e.g., participatory research and communities; or participatory research and professional practice of service provision) remains to be seen. The ethics working group of the EMPOW project, for example, worked in a more verbal fashion (without the prior submission of material) and without external third parties. This shows that spaces and modes of reflexivity need not follow a certain 'one-size-fits-all' approach, but must be tailored to the people involved and the specific collaborative context.

The idea of a reflection lab gives researcher subjectivities an explicit, legitimate space in research: a space for critical reflexivity that seeks to learn from the challenges encountered and minimize possible harm while providing ideas on how to move forward. It is a safe space to learn from the difficulties, areas of discomfort and the failures that accompany any learning process and that deserve much greater attention in the research process (Anang et al., 2021; Clark & Sousa, 2020; Fraser et al., 2022; Held, 2020).

However, it is important to acknowledge the limits of reflection labs, too. Reflexivity helps, but it does not solve all problems. It cannot erase structural differences between academic and community partners in terms of their access to power and privilege. Yet, it can help mediate the effects during research collaboration. It is important, however, not to over-emphasize reflexivity or even treat it as an end in itself, as this could deflect from the real issues of inequality and injustice that the research is dealing with (Dean, 2021). Nevertheless, reflecting on power issues is an essential element of working with marginalized populations such as forced migrants, who are particularly vulnerable to human rights abuses (Pittaway et al., 2010). Spaces for reflexivity and peer support as well as the option of professional supervision should thus be a regular component of any participatory study with marginalized communities.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Ethical Approval

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