Using Photovoice with Migrant and Non-Migrant Youth to Explore Integration in Local Communities

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Abstract

Photovoice is a participatory action research method that allows participants to express their stories, ideas, and emotions through photographs and discuss them in a group to reflect upon their community. The study aims at investigating the emotional and cognitive representations of the young participants (migrant and non-migrant) on integration in the living context in which they spend most of their time. The participants were 4 psychology students, 2 peer researchers, and 6 migrants. Results show how participants from different backgrounds conceptualize integration according to different themes: 1. A universal language (of music, art, food) to convey integration; 2. Travel as a metaphor for encounter; 3. Solidarity as a universal gesture; 4. Nostalgia as an obstacle to integration; and 5. Loneliness and poverty as factors of non-integration. Implications of the results are discussed.

Introduction

Migration studies are fundamental to understanding the growth and change of populations, the resulting social problems, and above all, the effects on society and individuals who embark on this journey (Clark, 2020). Migration represents both a major challenge for many societies and a debated topic involving legal, economic, demographic, educational, social and psychological aspects.

Geisen (2010) argues that modern societies can be described as societies of migration. The challenges appear in being able to respond to the problems that arise for migrant peoples and their movements, both internal and international, as well as the problems for nations, societies and communities, arising from the fact that migration challenges and changes the social relations established for groups in each of these contexts.

In the strand of migration studies, numerous theories have described the individual and social changes resulting from migration paths. Some authors (Benet Martinez et al., 2002; Mok & Morris, 2009), have proposed the Bicultural Identity Integration (BII) model for people raised in more than one cultural meaning system. In assessing BII, the relationship

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between the dominant or host culture and the ethnic culture is examined in terms of compatibility versus conflict within an individual's cultural identity. More recently, other authors (West et al., 2017) have developed a new transformative theory of biculturalism by also considering the crucial processes that individuals use to negotiate their cultures in contemporary multicultural societies. In theory they considered three dynamic negotiation processes: the functional frame change process (Benet-Martinez et al., 2002; Hong et al., 2000), the hybridisation process and the integration process. The frame switching process is recognised as the activation of culturally related cognitive systems in response to situational cues, resulting in an experience unique to each bicultural individual. Hybridisation is described by the authors as more than just an additive process, but as a matter of fact, a combination of different raw cultural materials resulting in a new cultural product (Schwartz et al., 2019). Integration, on the other hand, refers to a reconciliation of differences between a person's cultural identities by resolving divergences and thus forming a coherent entity (West et al., 2017).

Starting from Brubaker's (2004) reflections, one could say that there are three different meanings of integration in the cultural debate on the subject. The first meaning refers to integration as 'complete absorption' (to become identical) (Brubaker, 2004: 119), the second refers to the process necessary to 'become similar' (but not identical) (Brubaker, 2004: 119), the third meaning assumes that integration is an open and contingent process (Skrobanek et al., 2021; Skrobanek & Jobst, 2019). The notion of integration as a 'liquid' process that changes over time stems from the concept of 'liquid modernity' (Bauman, 2000) and 'liquid society' (Bauman, 2007) whereby habits, routines, acts, and practices are under constant adjustment in the context of institutional and structural change and they produce or further stimulate (unpredicted) change at the individual, institutional and structural level (Sawyer, 2001).

In the light of these theoretical reflections on the concept of integration, Participatory Action Research (PAR) seems to be the most appropriate approach to promote enquiry for the community, in the community and with the community, fostering the presence of transcultural, transgenerational and evaluating multiple stakeholders' points of view during the process. Participatory research is a people-centered approach to research that promotes the concept of community involvement, as in the case of migrants, throughout the research process (Israel et al., 2005). PAR allows presenting the direct experiences of migrants themselves and the use of art-based research and peer researchers help to create active engagement and creative participation in the co-construction of meaning about integration experiences (Mata-Codesal et al., 2020). For these reasons we decided to use photovoice, that is a PAR method that helps to explore people's stories and living context by means of photographic language (Wang, 2003). Participants take pictures that are representative of their stories, needs, ideas, and emotions related to a theme or context and subsequently engage in group discussions to reflect upon their community.

This technique works at multiple levels. Firstly, people are individually activated to reflect on their contexts and are protagonists in the research themselves. Secondly, engaging in groups, participants identify limitations and resources of a context and what are the determinants of and the drivers behind the issues at hand. Third, the group is prompted to reflect on what changes can be implemented to improve their context, sharing results and proposals with the broader community. Overall, the photovoice technique advances community exploration, critical discussions, and social change by directly involving people who experience the problem or context investigated. People can identify barriers and resources and then improve the contexts in which they are inserted using photographic language, becoming active participants in the process (Wang, & Burris, 1997).

Furthermore, photovoice appears to be conducive to deepening the understanding of resources and needs for different issues and contexts (Catalani & Minkler, 2010), and a recent study has illustrated the advantages of using photovoice in qualitative research across nations in a European project (Gaboardi et al., 2022). Indeed, photographs have the

potential to help people express deeper and hidden emotions, stories, or ideas about complex issues beyond language and cultural barriers. The photographic language represents an efficient way to communicate, especially among young people with different cultures and backgrounds (Migliorini, & Rania, 2017). Visual and participatory methodologies may overcome issues of language, power, and vulnerability, especially among refugee youth (Vecchio et al., 2017). In Europe, several studies have involved young people in photovoice projects concerning intercultural integration (Rania et al., 2014), young migrants' conditions for health (Lögdberg et al., 2020), and how culturally and ethnically diverse youth reimagine urban and rural spaces (see Greene et al., 2018 for a review).

Participation of young people using visual methodologies is crucial to learn about their experience and stories, allowing them to have a safe and empowering space for group discussion (Rania et al., 2015). Considering the aforementioned advantages of photovoice, in the present article we propose the adoption of this methodology for research involving young people from different backgrounds (migrants and non-migrants) with the aim of investigating the emotional and cognitive representations on integration in the living context in which they spend most of their time (neighborhood, city).

Procedure

The participants of the study were 12 young people aged between 19 and 29 living in Milan, Italy. The group was composed of 2 peer researchers involved in the MIMY project, 4 young psychology students from the Catholic University of Milan, and 6 young migrants. The psychology students were female and came from the north of Italy, while the young migrants were male and came from Senegal, Gambia and Mali. Peer researchers were young people with migration experiences who were involved with the project as important collaborators within the research team. The peer researchers who participated in photovoice were an Iranian man who is an expert in photography and an Albanian woman working in cultural mediation.

The photovoice was held in two meetings, the first one lasting two hours and the second one four hours. In the first meeting, the facilitator (a research psychologist) met with the participants to present the photovoice process, and the photographic task was assigned. Practical guidance on how to proceed with the photographs was also given, e.g., ethics and privacy issues were discussed. This first meeting was followed by a week in which the young participants were invited to go around their neighborhood to take photos responding to the task: In your community (meaning the place where you live or where you spend most of your time) what facilitates and what hinders integration (or positive experiences) between migrants and the local population (especially young people)?

Participants were asked to take 6 photos: 3 representing hindering factors for integration and 3 representing facilitating factors for integration. Overall, the participants took 72 photos. The photos were sent to the photovoice facilitator who collected and organized them in a file so that they could be shared. During the second meeting, participants shared and had a discussion on the photos. Individually and within groups, meanings were attributed to the photos and a reflection was initiated based on what was stimulated by the photo. There was then a joint reflection on the themes evoked by the photos (process of consciousness-raising) and finally the choice of the most representative photos to be included in the final exhibition (group choice) as well as the elaboration of captions for each chosen photo.

The young people involved in the project participated in all phases of the photovoice with interest and determination. The two group meetings were audio-recorded and edited to have adequate written material for the analysis of the content that was discussed.

Initially, all the photos produced were presented and commented on, after which the group chose only those that they considered to be the most significant and representative of the themes discussed, arriving at a final number of 20 photos.

The themes were generated based on participants' thoughtful exchange. The facilitator captured the elements of the discussion by trying to connect them around themes that were then proposed to the group to continue their discussion and definition. Then, an inductive qualitative thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of the narratives that accompanied the sharing of the photos taken by the participants was conducted, which made it possible to identify certain themes around which the discussion was focused.

Results

Results showed how participants from different backgrounds conceptualize integration. Five main themes were identified, three themes of integration and two themes of non-integration: 1. A universal language (of music, art, food) to convey integration; 2. Travel as a metaphor for encounter; 3. Solidarity as a universal gesture; 4. Nostalgia as an obstacle to integration; and 5. Loneliness and poverty as factors of non-integration.

The first theme regards artistic languages as a vehicle for integration. The participants made explicit reference through their photos to music and art. One of the participants declared: "Cultural and artistic exchange activities help us grow together. Whatever our differences there is one language that unites us and that is music, we are different but music unites us all and we all understand each other with the language of music" (B., peer researcher, Iranian). Example of this first theme is Figure 1.

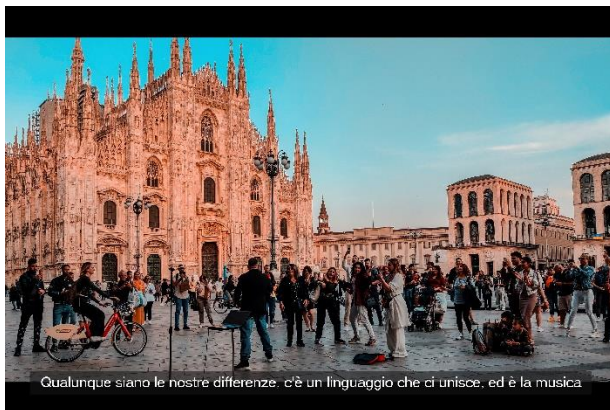Qualunque siano le nostre differenze, c'è un linguaggio che ci unisce, ed è la musica

Figure 1: A group of musicians playing in Piazza Duomo in Milan (B., Iran): "Whatever our differences there is one language that unites us and that is music".

The second theme brings together different photos depicting places and moments of travel. The railway stations from which one arrives and departs, the multicultural dinner of a group of young people brought together by an Erasmus Project, as a participant explained and as Figure 2 shows: "Projects such as Erasmus are a travel opportunity to bring people from different countries together and get to know each other's cultures better, without discrimination" (J., Senegal). As shown in Figure 3, the underground and the train station with passengers of different nationalities, as meeting places where cultures can "hybridise".

Figure 2: Erasmus Project dinner (J. Senegal)

Figure 3: Central Station of Milan (F., Italy)

The third theme identified by the participants is "solidarity as a universal gesture" that can unite different cultures. Collaboration and solidarity are the ingredients for building fairer, multicultural societies. Migrants and Italians together commit to helping those in most need, providing clothes, food or working together to make places more livable. A participant said: "I think everyone can do their part, we are not all in the same situation but everyone can get active and help" (A., Senegal). Figures 4 and 5 depict moments of collaboration and solidarity for people in need carried out by migrants and Italians.

Figure 4: Distribution of basic goods by volunteers at the Central Station of Milan (A., Senegal)

Figure 5: Collaboration (E., Italy)

The fourth theme identified from the participants' photos and comments has to do with nostalgia as a dominant feeling in migrants' lives. The lack of certain affections left behind in the country of origin, the cultural and environmental differences encountered in the new context can lead to the emergence of feelings of sadness and melancholy. A participant, arriving from an African village, recounts having found a tree in a park in Milan that resembles those found in his village and photographs it as an emblem of nostalgia for his country, as Figure 6 shows: "The tree in the park in Milan, that resembles the mango in the Jorren village" (S., Gambia).

Figure 6: Jorren tree (S., Gambia).

A final theme related to non-integration is the economic poverty in which many migrants find themselves. Their poverty is relational and affective and implies the lack of stable ties. Isolation and loneliness are in fact, the other side of the coin of poverty.

An example is Figure 6, which shows a rider sitting alone on a bench with a decidedly sad countenance.

Figure 7: Life as a rider (A., Senegal)

In general, all the themes were derived by the group from the photos brought by both the Italian students and the young migrants; with the exception of the fourth theme which emerged only from the young migrants. It is in fact a theme that speaks of a migration experience lived in one's own skin, made up of new possibilities but also inevitable losses.

At the end of the process, the group of participants organized a photographic exhibition displaying the 20 photos selected and commented on by the group. The exhibition was set up in the atrium in one of the premises of the Catholic University of Milan at the end of a workshop involving other young students and young migrants. Figure 7 shows the photovoice participants who took part in the exhibition with the role of "guides", explaining to visitors the path taken and the meaning of the photos on display.

Figure 7: The photovoice participants who took part in the final photographic exhibition with the role of "guides".

Discussion

In the present article, we proposed the use of photovoice as a participatory action-research method with the aim of investigating emotional and cognitive representations about integration in the living context where participants spend most of their time (neighborhood, city). The participants involved were young people from diverse backgrounds (migrants and non-migrants). Participants used photographs to tell their stories and emotions about integration. They identified art, food, culture and solidarity as the main facilitators and poverty, loneliness and nostalgia as the main obstacles.

Interestingly, the facilitators are all connected to relationships and places of sharing, emphasizing the importance of contextual and relational dimensions. Obstacles, on the other hand, are related to individual dimensions, namely feelings of lack of relationships or longings for relationships that are distant. The central element is relationships with other people. For participants, building relationships with other people and local context seems to be more important than "adjusting" to a different culture (with different language, food, traditions).

The photovoice allowed participants to get into the full cognitive and emotional dimensions of the integration process. Regarding the results of the process, we can highlight how all participants described integration as a two-way, reciprocal process between migrants and the local population (Maldonado & Licona, 2007). As Jobst and Skrobaneck (2020) stated, integration should be conceptualized as a never-ending, contingent process of change–stability dynamics, marked by individual and institutional processes (Skrobaneck & Jobst, 2019).

Integration is described as a relational and psychological issue, very much linked to states of mind and the possibility of having meaningful people around. Culture, art, and food are recognized as key factors for the dissemination of a multicultural mindset and the promotion of welcoming societies. A special attention that deserves solidarity and

cooperation that are identified as effective tools for building integration and fostering dialogue and growth: even for migrants, participating in one's own community can be a vehicle for greater integration.

Considering the pictures taken, it is interesting to note the difference between those captured by young migrants and those captured by students. Migrant participants took photos with more personal and intimate meanings. Students, on the other hand, mostly photographed city life contexts (bookstores, stations, bars) portraying a more impersonal and distant idea of integration or non-integration.

Challenges and rewards

The present study had some major challenges. First, the linguistic dimension has sometimes been a barrier to expression. The part of discussing the photos and elaborating on the meanings attached to the pictures presupposes a certain linguistic competence that not all of the young migrants possessed. Despite this, the visual language had stimulated reflections using a symbolic language that goes beyond verbalizations (Migliorini, & Rania, 2017). Second, it was difficult to engage young people (migrants and non-migrants) and invite them to actively participate. Future projects could use incentives for participation (e.g., academic credits for students). Finally, it was difficult to stimulate the group to promote actions for social change. The photovoice aims to go beyond the denunciation of limitations of a community to promote social change but it was difficult to reach this further level of action. Nevertheless, the photographic exhibition allowed an active involvement of the participants in telling their stories to the student community. Indeed, the photovoice as an art-based methodology allowed new ways of disseminating scientific results in academia, showing a more personal, intimate, sensory experience where the participants are the real protagonists of the dissemination.

Overall, we have identified two important facilitators of the process: the role of peer researchers in the data analysis and in stimulating discussions between migrants and non-migrants; and the use of photographs that allowed the use of a symbolic language to understand deep aspects of the participants' stories.

These different target groups of young people allowed us to sketch a composite and unprecedented view of the territorial contexts to highlight how these can act as facilitating and/or hindering factors in integration processes. The presence of Italian natives and African migrants enabled reciprocity on the concept of integration in line with the definition of integration as a dynamic and interactive process between host society and newcomers (Madero et al., 2016). The discussion was facilitated by the presence of the peer researchers who stimulated the exchange among participants. Migrants collaboratively participated in the construction of narratives and knowledge that closely concerned their migratory and integration experiences.

The use of photographs that allowed the use of a symbolic language to uncover deep aspects of the stories of the participants. Photographic language made explicit the similarities between migrants and non-migrants. For example, Figures 4 and 5 were taken by different people at different times but both represent a moment of solidarity and collaboration as a facilitator of culture. The images offer an explicit view of what the group has in common and what representations are shared by the participants. Sometimes symbolic language allows participants to bring out deep feelings that are difficult to express in words. For example, Figure 6 represents a place that activates feelings of nostalgia in the participant who took it. A seemingly "anonymous" place can be a source of nostalgia and activate memories that "feel like home."

In conclusion, the photovoice meetings were safe spaces where the use of creativity and active discussion worked as a powerful tool to explore and create context-specific issues, emotions, and challenges associated with integration. The use of photography, the presence

of participants from different cultures, and the photo exhibition brought to light new perspectives on integration and social inclusion and enabled an authentic exchange between young migrants and young people from the host country by fostering a culture of solidarity and respect (Rania et al., 2014; Vecchio et al., 2017).

Data Availability Statement: The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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