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Adrift in a Borderland: Experimenting with Participatory and Embodied Methodologies as a Collective of Asylum seekers, Refugees, Civic Activists and Academic Scholars

Tiina Sotkasiira[1], Sanna Ryynänen[2], Anni Rannikko[3] and Päivikki Rapo[4]

Abstract

This article examines our on-going attempts to operationalise a critical qualitative research approach – drifting, which we have adopted from the feminist collective Precarias a la deriva, – in order to conduct research with people who have arrived in Finland as asylum seekers and refugees, as well as with the civic activists who work by their side. Our research focuses on the everyday bordering practices that exclude asylum seekers and refugees, and the activities of de-bordering. The article claims that drifting combines the advantages of mobile research methods with the critical and collective praxis of activist research, which allows the upsurge of non-hegemonic knowledge. Drifting holds great promise for exploring everyday borders and their consequences, which usually remain hidden to the majority of native residents. In drifting, the injustices that occur at borders within countries in Europe are not only exposed for research and the wider public, but they are also challenged with research-based interventions.

Keywords: *borders; drift; drifting; migrants; participatory mobile methods.*

Introduction

An article entitled 'Adrift through the circuits of feminized precarious work' (2004a) was written by the feminist collective Precarias a la deriva in order to detail their experiences as women living, working and doing research in precarious conditions. Their article begins with a synopsis based on the invitation the members of the collective wrote, calling other women to participate in their 'expedition' or deriva, which literally translates into English as drift[5]. The synopsis outlines the difficulties the authors experienced when trying to position themselves in relation to a collective and shared identity of precarious women. From Precarias a la deriva (2004b) we have adopted the critical methodological approach of drifting, which we use to engage with people who have arrived in Finland as asylum seekers or refugees, as well as with civic activists working alongside them.

[1] Tiina Sotkasiira, Department of Social Sciences, University of Eastern Finland, Joensuu, P.O. Box 111, 80101 Joensuu, Finland. Email: tiina.sotkasiira@uef.fi.
[2] Sanna Ryynänen, Department of Social Sciences, University of Eastern Finland, Kuopio, P.O. Box 1627, 70211 Kuopio, Finland. Email: sanna.ryynanen@uef.fi.
[3] Anni Rannikko, Department of Social Sciences, University of Eastern Finland, Joensuu, P.O. Box 111, 80101 Joensuu, Finland. Email: anni.rannikko@uef.fi.
[4] Päivikki Rapo, Independent Researcher, Finland. Email: paivikki.rapo@gmail.com.

[5] It should be noted that the translation of the concepts dérive (French) and deriva (Spanish) into drift is not without problems. This is why the term derives is also used by other scholars 'in order to preserve a common heritage with and reference to the theory and practice of the dérive used by the Situationist International' (Precarias a la deriva, 2005, Translators' Introduction). We have opted to use the already rather established concept of drift but ask the reader to remember its specific epistemological connotations in different languages and contexts.

The aim of our research is to make visible the borders that exclude and marginalise asylum seekers and refugees in Finnish society, as well as the activities of de-bordering in order to challenge and remove such borders. The following synopsis addresses a number of methodological concerns we have had as researchers working in this project:

> We live in a borderland. As critical border scholars argue, borders are not only found at the edges of nation-states, they are dispersed in society. Borders can be hit upon, for example, at street corners, health centres, local register offices, police stations and reception centres for asylum seekers. At such borders, not everyone is treated in the same way. We are aware that, much like many other white Finnish nationals with a middle-class background, we move through everyday spaces in Finland with relatively few boundaries limiting our access to services or support. For the asylum seekers and refugees with whom we conduct research, everyday borders are much more present and much more difficult to cross. They may not be able to open a bank account, they are not entitled to the health care or medicines they may need, or they may not feel safe when moving in public spaces. The fear of deportation limits everyday activities for many. From the outset, our situations appear so different that it is difficult to think of common ground upon which to build our research. What kind of research practices could bring these seemingly very different worlds into discussion with each other? What methods should be used in locating borders that are largely invisible to us in our everyday lives? How can we construct the research process so that it does not burden the participants who are already struggling for survival? What are the means for collectively constructing 'other life possibilities' through shared and creative struggle, as our inspirators, the Precarias a la deriva collective (2004a, 157), invite us to do?

For Precarias a la deriva – and for us – drifting presents an opportunity to collectively explore, through trial and error, new ways to understand and conceptualise our everyday surroundings as a borderland where dwellers are subject to bordering practices to different degrees (Brambilla, 2015). It also provides us with the means to look for avenues to share among people to whom Finnish society appears as something completely different because of the variety of borders being constructed, ranging from state policies to everyday interactions (see Könönen, 2018; Tervonen et al., 2018).

This article sets out to investigate our efforts to operationalise the qualitative research approach of drifting. It draws on methodological literature on participatory mobile methods and activist research, and on our experiences as researchers who utilise and develop creative, participatory and action-oriented methods in the fields of sociology, social pedagogy and political studies (Ryynänen et al., 2017; Sotkasiira, 2019; Suoranta & Ryynänen, 2014). We begin the article by discussing drifting in relation to mobile methods in social sciences and outline the specific features of our own approach. We then review certain practical and ethical questions we have encountered on our collaborative journey with asylum seekers, refugees and civic activists, and finish with tentative findings on how drifting can be utilised in exploring (de-)bordering in the field of migration research.

Social scientific research on the move

There is a relatively long and varied tradition of using mobile research methods in ethnographic research as well as in other qualitative research (e.g. Büscher & Urry, 2006; Evans & Jones, 2011; Sheller & Urry, 2006). As of today, there are research projects conducted, for example, while commuting by car (Lehtola & Tedre, 2014), touring by coach (Tiaynen, 2013) and walking in the city or rural spaces (O'Neill & Hubbard, 2010; Truman & Shannon, 2018). Drifts can be classified as one of the participatory mobile methods, together with go-along interviews (Kusenbach, 2003),

shared walks (Lee & Ingold, 2006), commented walks (Winkler, 2002), walking interviews (Evans & Jones, 2011; Jones et al., 2008) and mobile ethnographies (Porter et al., 2010). All these methods have distinct characteristics, but they share a common ground: they can be broadly defined by researchers and participants moving together through socio-spatial environments while engaging in discussions inspired by the participants' experiences and places they visit (Carpiano, 2009; Hein, Evans & Jones, 2008). Furthermore, mobile research methods often involve encounters in less controlled conditions than in traditional, sitting face-to-face interviews. They are also more dynamic than stationary interviews as they actively engage participants in interaction with their lived environments and their movement in them (Castrodale, 2018: 46–47). As such, they allow researchers to better understand and perceive participants' daily interactions in local and everyday contexts (Kusenbach, 2003).

There is also critical discussion evolving about the risks of being involved in mobile research and the ways of knowing that this kind of research enables and subjugates (Castrodale, 2018; Macpherson, 2016; Warren, 2017). The unpredictability of participatory mobile methods can be stimulating, but it also places participants in situations that may not be or feel safe. In our case, racialisation and racism demand particular attention. As Cadogan (2016) has illustrated, for a black man, being able to walk without interruption might require a survival strategy with rules, such as no running, no hoodies or no going close to people who might consider you a threat. Thus, for asylum seekers and refugees, many of whom are male and racialised in Finland, participation in research that includes walking in public spaces might become an oppressive negotiation wherein the streets do not feel safe, steps are risky and monotonous walking appears luxurious (Cadogan, 2016). When working with migrants whose lives are endangered, one needs to be mindful of not exposing participants to borders which may subject them to risk of emotional or physical harm. It is quintessential to avoid exclusionary research designs that may disempower or even harm those involved.

Our work relies on a feminist adaptation of the situationist method of drifting, which shares many common features with participatory mobile methods dealing with the socio-spatial, embodied, multisensory and emotional aspects of human life as well as it brings to the fore the multiple ways of knowing and opening possibilities for exploring sensory embodied experiences (Pink, 2007). It is, nevertheless, distinct by its objectives, as well as by its epistemological underpinnings. It has its roots in early urban sociology – for instance, in the theories of Walter Benjamin (see Espinosa, 2014: 29) – and the concept itself comes from the leading figure of the Situationist International movement, Guy Debord. For Debord and the situationists, *dérive* meant aimless wandering in the city by people who let themselves 'be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there' (Debord, 1956/58). Instead of using the original situationist idea of the *dérive*, we have adopted our approach from Precarias a la deriva. They have developed their own specific drifting methodology as an approach for activist research, transforming the initial idea of *dérive* from a 'psychogeographical articulation of a modern city' (Debord, 1956/58) into a context- and theme-specific collective inquiry aimed at not only gathering insight but also at gathering material for a collective struggle. In this regard, it differs from such applications of the *dérive* as when it is used as a research method that primarily takes the *dérive* as a form of (postmodern) urban ethnography (see, e.g. Espinosa, 2014).

Accordingly, we define *drift* as a method of data production which consists of moving in a space with a small group of people, visiting places that are significant to the research, observing and being affected by the social and immediate environment, collecting experiences, making notes

and debating the research topic. During drifts, the participants invited to be part of the research have the special role of acting as guides who suggest places to visit and who share their views, knowledge and memories related to the places. A distinguishing feature of drifts is that they are always also autoethnographic (Espinosa, 2014: 31). Regardless of whether the participants share the same experiences or not, the places visited, as well as the discussions they engage in, evoke personal experiences and reflections on their relationship to the research topic. When carefully registered, these become part of the research material.

To distinguish the feminist approach of Precarias a la deriva from single drifts, we use the concept of *drifting* to describe our research activities with asylum seekers, refugees and civic activists, which are based on a specific worldview that stresses the values of equality and social justice (Precarias a la deriva, 2004b). Drifting may consist of one or numerous drifts in combination with other encounters and activities. In our understanding, the essence of drifting is in the collective and processual intervention in the everyday reality that combines data production and joint processing of the data with seeking possibilities for transformative actions or collective ways of struggle. Understood in this manner, the roots of drifting are in research experiments initiated by social movements (Casas-Cortés & Cobarrubias, 2007: 114). Drifting can be classified as one of the activist research approaches among, for instance, institutional ethnography and critical participatory action research. Such an understanding of drifting as a specific research approach with roots in activist research has implications for both the process of data production and the way in which we approach the research process as a whole.

From drifts to drifting

> We, activists and researchers, have agreed to meet at the central railway station, as we all arrive from different directions. We stand in the throng and try to decide where to go first. One of us has not had a morning coffee yet, so we decide to start with a cup of coffee. The activists tell us that there is a café close by which – unlike the neighbouring ones – offered them a place to gather and warm up during an outdoor protest held on the square nearby. During the protest, asylum seekers and their allies demanded that Finland stopped deportations and guaranteed the quality of the asylum process. They also demanded that Finland establishes an independent outside review of the asylum process in order to secure the legal rights of asylum seekers. The protest lasted for several months and happened partially during winter. This particular coffee shop, where we decide to go now, welcomed the protesters even if they did not buy anything, and it also offered them small snacks. Other cafés close to the square did not allow protesters to stay in the cafés if they did not buy something often enough, although this rule did not apply to other customers. We talk about injustice and borders and sketch out a route based on which places the activists find worth visiting. We then finish our coffee and start walking towards the first stop off. (Extract from the researcher's field notes, third drift, 2019)

We have so far conducted five drifts. All the drifting groups consisted of different participants and not all of the authors participated in each drift. The first two preparatory drifts helped us to adjust our research approach as well as to prepare ourselves for the 'real' drifts and reflect on our role during drifts. The first actual drift took place in the predominantly rural area of North Karelia in a small town with a reception centre nearby. At that time two of our guides had an asylum-seeker background and one of them worked in an organisation dealing with issues linked to refugees. Our second and third drifts were held with activists who work alongside refugees and asylum seekers in Helsinki. Borders were the central theme of the drifts as the migrants and activists reflected on their surroundings through their everyday or work-related experiences.

When planning a drift, the first step after agreeing on the preliminary research question is the invitation of possible guides to participate in the research. Among the issues needing to be addressed are questions about the kind of knowledge required to answer the research question(s) and the question of who could construct this knowledge with us. We stressed voluntary participation and included in the invitations to the guides an overview of the drifting approach, the general research question, the reasons why we were inviting them to drift and some guidelines for the tasks ahead, as well as an explanation of a participants' right to withdraw at any point of the process. The question of commitment is particularly pressing when cooperating with asylum seekers whose situations are temporary and who have no certainty about their future in the locality, in Finland or in Europe (Kymäläinen & Nordström, 2010). We can expect their experiences of drifting to be also affected by this uncertainty. This said, we find it important to outline that, although we first gathered for a single drift, we hope this to be a start for a longer process together.

A drift starts with a meeting to jointly plan the forthcoming drift. One of the researchers introduces why the participants are present and what are the ideas of drifting and of this particular drift. At this stage, it is essential to ensure that all participants have space to bring in their contribution and express their possible concerns. This is also the time when we agree on confidentiality and a schedule, as well as on who will record, take photos or shoot video, if applicable. Although the route and schedule most probably change on the move, it is important to jointly discuss the first stops as at least some draft of the route makes starting easier.

Drifts take place in everyday environments, which may expose drifters to challenges. According to our experiences, some of the challenges are very practical. For instance, if the discussions during drifts are recorded – as is advisable to do – the settings of the recorder and the capacity of its microphone should be tested beforehand in order to avoid a situation where the sounds of wind, steps and crunching sand or snow are prominent instead of the voices of drifters themselves. If the drift is conducted in a larger group or if the group is multilingual, several recorders may be needed to capture the parallel conversations. Other challenges are linked to ethical considerations and the power relations of the group. As an example, it must be ensured that each willing drifter has a chance to act as a guide. How to guarantee that the situation remains safe and pleasant for everyone also needs to be considered beforehand. Last but not least, drifts extend into longer processes or at least include a debrief afterwards (that is, a joint discussion on what was experienced and learnt). Such debrief is also a moment for shared feedback, to discuss methodological and practical considerations and to agree on possible next steps. No one should be negatively affected by the experience. In cases where negative incidents have occurred, these must be dealt with collectively.

When explained in this simple, chronological manner, a drift may appear as a relatively clear-cut process of data production. However, as the field note excerpt illustrates, in practice a drift involves a range of choices and decisions that participants make. As was outlined in the excerpt, the knowledge relevant to the topic started to pour out as soon as we gathered together, and already the first decision about the meeting place brought out information that altered our view of the centre of Helsinki. The processing of the impressions from drifts also continued afterwards via social media and face-to-face, which all goes to show the importance of connecting individual drifts with the continuous process of drifting, during which new knowledge and understanding bring forward new questions and attempts to answer them, as well as collective action beyond the drifts. As Precarias a la deriva (2004b) emphasised, the material that is constructed during drifts may be de/re-constructed for example, in action-oriented workshops, as well as in meetings, during which the

analysis of the identified problems and one's relationship towards them are deepened and made more specific.

Drifting as a collective intervention into everyday reality

> We, the researchers, have agreed to a drift with activists, refugees and asylum seekers who live in a small municipality with scarce public transport. One of the participants, a young woman with a small child, lives in a reception centre where asylum seekers are housed while they wait for a decision on their claim for asylum. The reception centre is located some ten kilometres from the town centre[6]. We arrive in the agreed meeting spot a little early and find ourselves in the middle of a phone conversation between an activist, a participant and a staff member of the reception centre about how to arrange getting the participant 'from the woods' to the town centre to meet us. Eventually, the issue is settled by us offering to pick her up in our rental car. In the car, the participant explains how the lack of transport is affecting her life, especially during the winter, and how hard it is for her to, for example, take part in a Finnish language course organised far away from the reception centre. Sometimes local volunteers or staff offer her a lift, but these opportunities are rare. During our drift, the participant's phone rings several times and we learn that she is talking with her friend who is also in town and who does not know how to return to the reception centre. On the way back, we stop at the car park and pick him up too. This incident reminded me of an interview I had conducted with the mayor of another rural municipality. He claimed that the decision to house asylum seekers further away from population centres was a success because 'they are hardly visible in the town' and this lack of contact 'pacifies the situation'. (Extract from the researcher's field notes, first drift, North Karelia, 2019)

This field note crystallises the idea that participatory mobile methods with critical insights entail the potential for capturing specific socio-spatial experiences and help in understanding the institutional and everyday borders of oppression that are inscribed in space (see Castrodale, 2018: 53). As an example, the outlined negotiations about travel arrangements concretise the effects on asylum seekers' everyday lives of the policy of housing asylum seekers far away from residential areas and in places with scarce public transport. The constant negotiations also signify experiences of isolation and the difficulties of participation, as well as the informal networks of assistance required to overcome the physical borders and other borders put before them.

We find drifting to be a promising avenue for gaining common ground between research participants from different backgrounds. During drifts, we do not 'just walk' together but engage in collective efforts to, for example, ensure that all those who want to take part in the research are able to do so. In fact, we argue that the partnerships that emerge in the process of conducting the research are a key element of drifting as a research approach. By *partnerships* we refer to the collective aspect of experiencing drifting together as a group, co-producing (new) knowledge through mutual communication and critical exploration of the factors that enable (and restrict) border crossing (see also Askins, 2009: 11). Drifting presents us with an opportunity to form partnerships that go beyond single drifts and the accompanying debriefings and grow into long-term collaborations where the roles of researchers and research participants start to dissolve even more, developing towards a process of co-research (see Malo, 2004).

Up until now, we have taken steps in this direction with a group of activists with whom we have so far drifted twice. These drifts proved mutually rewarding and the common ground was found easily, which encouraged us to plan the next steps together. We have not only made plans for

[6] This is quite common in Finland where reception facilities are customarily established in rural areas and in buildings that were previously used, for example, as schools or hospitals and then vacated due to depopulation and the centralisation of public services.

new drifts but have also contemplated different types of texts and interventions based on the jointly produced material that could give more visibility to the borders that asylum seekers and refugees face in Finnish society. We have recently started an experimental book writing process together. As a collective, we hope to reflect upon the role and the transformative potential of art (photos, visual cartography and video photography) in our future drifts (O'Neill, 2008).

We find the role of civic activists to be of particular importance when we attempt to further our relationships with asylum seekers and refugees. Activists often have a long-term working relationship with migrants through which they have gained their trust and valuable insights into the everyday border struggles and the negotiations to overcome them. This said, researchers should be mindful of romanticising the relationships between migrants and their support organisations as migrants and their 'helpers' may be embroiled in a relationship of mutual dependency. Rainbird (2012), for one, warned of support organisations which emphasise the vulnerability of asylum seekers, hence presenting them as being in need of a particular form of intervention and support which the service providers then promote as being their area of expertise, leading to the commodification of people in need. Similar caution must be exercised when conducting research in our context.

We believe that drifting, which combines the advantages of mobile research methods with the critical and collective praxis of activist research, can offer guidance on how to avoid such traps. The key lesson so far is that if we succeed in building a research collective, the issue no longer is how we, the researchers, take research participants' security into consideration, address the impacts of drifting, pursue research ethics and develop our relations with co-researchers. Instead, we can do this together, collectively, relying on knowledge that is multi-vocal and produced as part of drifting. As an example, instead of the researchers choosing the meeting place, such a choice must be made collectively to ensure that everyone gets a say in the process. This is not an easy task: the relationships of symmetrical reciprocity are extremely difficult to achieve due to significant power hierarchies (Huschke, 2015). Collectives cannot be built in haste and without proper resources. However, by putting in long-term effort, by engaging in a number of drifts and by collectively de-constructing the materials collected and using them to formulate new questions, we are working towards building together a collective assemblage of voices in order to identify and tackle these concerns.

Conclusions

We turned to drifting (Casas-Cortés & Cobarrubias, 2007; Precarias a la deriva, 2004b) in order to analyse Finnish society as a borderland and make visible the borders that exclude asylum seekers from the society, as well as making visible the attempts to cross and remove such borders. However, as was outlined above, we have approached our research from a slightly different starting point than that of our initial inspirators (see Casas-Cortés & Cobarrubias, 2007: 115–118). Even though Precarias a la deriva also struggled with the idea of constructing the collective identity of precarious women, all the drifters who took part in their experiments shared the experience of working in precarious conditions. While acknowledging the intersectionality of our lived experiences, we, the researchers, are aware that our encounters with borders are very different from those of migrants who are facing an extremely hostile social and political climate. We have also recognised that working long hours in a harsh anti-immigrant context takes its toll on civic activists. At the same time, there is an urgent need for new types of knowledge of the situations that asylum seekers and refugees face in our societies, knowledge that is produced by them and not only knowledge about

them produced by others. However, as their life situations are already very demanding, we cannot risk burdening them with research activities that have no real connection with their lives or the tangible results that arise from the collaboration. Accordingly, there is a need for more creative, participatory and action-oriented means of knowledge production.

Drifting, when understood as continuous and open-ended process of co-research, can provide means for both more collaborative knowledge production and producing a framework for transformative research activism. It allows us to explore how we – researchers, activists and migrants, who all inhabit the same social and political space yet face different kinds of borders as part of our everyday lives – can jointly reflect on what it tells us about our society and social reality. In drifting, we do not try to 'step into someone else's shoes' as we feel this would not be possible in our case. Instead, our aim is to develop methods of participation and co-research that allow participants to speak for themselves. Through our collective work, we have so far learned that in our so-called Nordic welfare society, due to political decisions and developments, there has emerged a parallel society that is typical of the most unequal countries in the world wherein the rights and opportunities of 'official society' do not apply. As our examples above illustrate, the rules of everyday encounters are not the same for everyone. We cannot even expect that participation in a drift is equally easy for all participants. Instead, taking part in a drift may require lengthy negotiations about the everyday practicalities of being present and being able to access places. Particularly for asylum seekers, the opportunities to participate in society on equal terms are limited.

At the same time, we have witnessed the signs of resistance and networks of support being formed. This is important as the previous research has demonstrated how the discourse, which presents asylum seekers and refugees as isolated victims and largely vulnerable dependents, is highly problematic (Rainbird, 2012). Furthermore, research has pointed out that refugees and asylum seekers may take an active role in advocating their rights and as political activists who expose the bordering practices of the Finnish state, for example, during public demonstrations (Sotkasiira & Haverinen, 2016; Pellander & Horsti, 2018). Drifting, on the other hand, has made visible various mundane decisions to 'do things differently', for example, engaging in carpooling when no public transport services are available or allowing people to sit in a bar without paid drinks in their hands. These acts do not remove the borders that asylum seekers, refugees and activists struggle with, but they make their concrete life circumstances more bearable. Drifting holds great promise for not only exposing invisible everyday borders but also challenging the observed injustices with research-based interventions.

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