

Understanding and Fostering Agency in Displaced People - A Participatory Research Project with Refugees in Spain

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Abstract : This paper explores the concept of agency from the viewpoint of refugees and their perspective on how to foster it. The study employs Participatory Action Research (PAR). Research often fails to involve and benefit the groups that are researched, which provides good reason to call for rethinking traditional research methods. PAR aims for the active involvement and participation of people with lived experiences of the topic, especially marginalized and disempowered groups, in this case, refugees and displaced people coming to Spain. PAR questions and breaks down the classic hierarchy of observer-respondent relationships. This study aims to understand the concept of refugee agency from the perspective of refugees themselves, what constrains them from exerting agency in their host society, and the collective development of an action proposal on how to foster and improve agency for refugees coming to Spain. Therefore, the research question guiding this study is threefold: 1) How do refugees view their agency?; 2) What constrains them from exerting agency in everyday life in Spain?; 3) What improvements do they envision to help them exert more agency? While there has been an abundance of research about refugee agency from the lenses of resilience, human agency and structure theory, intersectionality, and gender studies, PAR was rarely utilized to understand agency and how it can be fostered from the very viewpoint of refugees themselves. This constitutes a paradox because emphasizing agency in refugees and their capabilities to act seems to suggest that their agency should also be accredited during the research process. By treating refugees as co-researchers, the objective of this participatory research project is to collectively produce practical knowledge that will contribute to taking action and improving agency for refugees living in a new society. Therefore, this research project truly exceeds the scope of a classic investigation: it places action in the foreground and overtly criticizes the traditional research custom of talking about people, not with them. While the research is still in process, it already has been recognized among the participating refugees that they face various structural constraints, such as legal frameworks, economic systems, institutional barriers, and social constraints that affect their feeling of agency when trying to integrate into Spanish society. Factors such as uncertainty, sentiments of dependency, a lack of social support, and practical issues such as language barriers lead them to become passive, disempowered, isolated, and dependent. On the other hand, ideas arose among the participants on how their agency can be potentially enhanced and fostered within such structures, which will be refined and brought forward as opportunities for action, for example, through support programs, inclusive policies, and community resources. While PAR and the topic of agency are inseparably intertwined, the meaningfulness of this research project in terms of both, its subject and its methodology becomes especially visible when discussing refugee protection and how to include affected populations in policy-making processes to foster a more inclusive Europe.

Keywords : agency, participatory action research, refugees, Spain

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