

Researchers' reflections on focus groups with unaccompanied migrant youths

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“INTERCULTURAL AND
INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE TO
PROMOTE A CULTURE OF
PEACE AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE
AND UNACCOMPANIED
MINORS IN BARCELONA AND
MELILLA”

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INTRODUCTION

- This article presents some results of research project “INTERCULTURAL AND INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE TO PROMOTE A CULTURE OF PEACE AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE AND UNACCOMPANIED MINORS IN BARCELONA AND MELILLA” (RTI2018-095259-B-I00, MCIU/AEI/FEDER, EU) whose principal overall objective in the first stage, is to make the situation and experiences of migrant minors in Barcelona and Melilla visible.
- This article is centred on researchers’ impressions and other factors identified while carrying out the focus groups in Barcelona; factors which, in particular, are relevant to the dialogical practice of interviews and/or focus groups in complex contexts.
- Acknowledging the constructed nature of knowledge involves critically examining how we as researchers actively affect our interactions with participants and the study as a whole.

METHOD. Qualitative descriptive-comprehensive study

PARTICIPANTS

- Minors who had migrated unaccompanied to Barcelona.
- 42 participants, from Morocco and other African places.

TECHNIQUES

- 7 focus groups: 5 in centres belonging DGAIA and 2 with youth who were not catered for by the DGAIA

ANALYSIS

- Analytical categories comprised 5 general dimensions:
- Migration process, needs, resources, competencies, perceptions and expectations, researchers' impressions (emerging category).

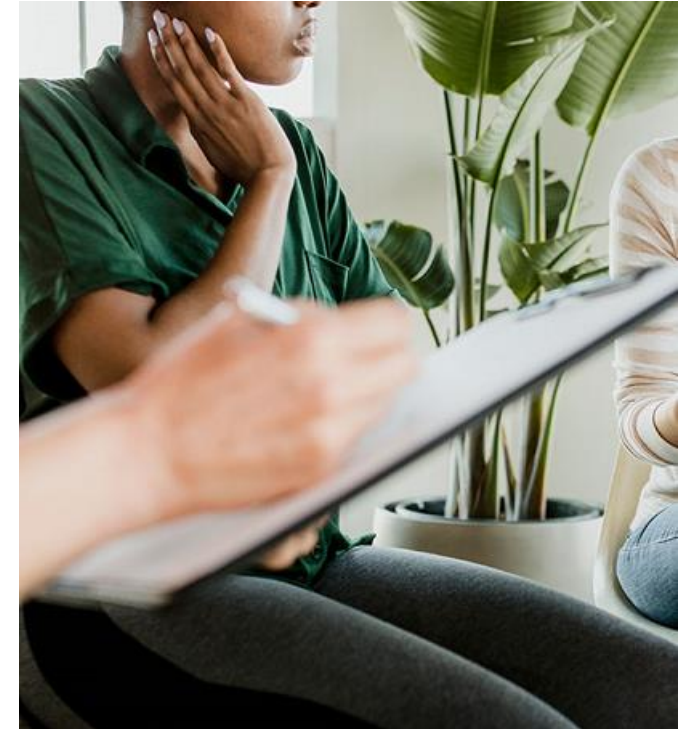
CATEGORIES. Dimension: Researchers' impressions and other factors

Ref.	Category
E1	Migration processes and private feelings. Harshness and silence
E2	Meaning and significance of the educator's presence: authority, focus group conditions
E2.1	Settings
E2.2	Relationships among the youth and prior knowledge of each other
E3	Emotions during the interview. Atmosphere
E4	Ease/difficulty in conducting the interviews
E4.1	Communication issues

1. Migration and private feelings. Harshness and silence

- Hard and difficult migration process:
 - Nonverbal communication, expressions, silences and briefness of their responses.
 - Difficulty in asking and going further in certain questions.

“I feel that I’m intruding on a private, painful, really vulnerable area. I see this in the scarceness of their words and their grim looks. The first questions are the most delicate and personal: the migration process. Their eyes speak volumes and show how hard these processes have been, still undigested, their gazes meet, they all understand, open wounds. We don’t have the courage go any further into questions that might give words to these looks that conceal experiences we feel were really hard and still unhealed. We don’t go any further” (e.1, bcn1, ref1).



2. Authority and the conditions of the focus group. The meaning and sense of the educator's presence.



- Two overall situations were identifiable:
 - the young people seemed to be comfortable in the centre.
 - The young people were noticeably ill and it was much more difficult to develop dialogue among them.
- Presence of an educator or of a staff member during the group discussion influence participation and hindered discussion of topics relating to the centre itself.

“At the beginning they had difficulty letting go and speaking, but as the interview went on and particularly after the guy in charge and the other person who received us left, they started to say and explain more things, especially to do with the characteristics of the centre, its rules, what they were and weren't allowed to do, and how they felt about that” (e.2, bcn1, ref3).
- In two cases, a closer, more trusting relationship was observed between participants and educator.

Settings

- Physical space where the interviews took place.
- Groups carried out during the pandemic: social distance and use of facemasks.

“And then when I went into the centre, it seemed to me it was an environment that was a little more hostile. It seemed a colder environment than the one we were in yesterday. The centre [yesterday] was like being at home [...]” (e.2.1, bcn3, ref1).

“Something else that might have had an influence was that the acoustics weren’t very good. There was background noise (like some kind of heating) that made it difficult to hear properly, and on top of that we were all wearing masks” (e2.1, bcn5, ref1).



Relationships and prior knowledge among the young people



➤ Different situations were encountered:

- A close relationship among the participants, with interviewees helping and supporting each other. There were affectionate, familiar ties between group members.

- Comradely relationship was much less in evidence.

“It was clear they had good relationships among them, but at the same time it didn’t seem like a really close relationship. They helped each other, but they never once referred to each other as brothers, more as friends or as people they lived with and respected” (e.2.2, bcn5, ref1).

3. Emotions during the interviews

➤ Differences in terms of participation:

“There were four kids who participated more than the others. One of them practically didn’t speak, since he was new in the centre and didn’t speak much Spanish [...] (e.3, bcn1, ref1)

➤ Anger, feeling of impotence and uncertainty:

“Some questions gave rise to more feelings of unease and anger, particularly relating to documentation and the rules for getting papers” (e.3, bcn1, ref2).

➤ Emotions of satisfaction and positive evaluations:

“In general the feedback was good [...] In fact they came up with really positive evaluations” (e.3, bcn2, ref1).



4. Ease and/or difficulty of the interview



- Some questions facilitated participation and were better understood.
“Talking about their education, what they like to do, what they do well and what they hoped for the future was easier for them, as they seemed to be clearer about those topics” (e.4, bcn1, ref1).
- Content of some questions caused more difficulty: Ex. the migration process.
- Difficulty due to the way they questions were formulated or how the dimensions were conceived.
“On several occasions they didn’t understand the question very well, not so much because of the language, but because of the way it was framed or what we were asking about” (e.4, bcn5, ref1).
- Linguistic, cultural and generational differences:
“[...] as for impressions, well, there’s a phrase one of the kids said that’s stayed with me. He said, “What weird questions you’re asking,” which made me rethink the technique even [...]. (e.4, bcn4, ref1)

Communication issues

- Two related factors: participation and linguistic comprehension, in this case of Spanish:

“As the interview went on, some started participating more, but it was hard for those who spoke less Spanish to participate. Even when we directly addressed them, they were reticent and unsure of themselves” (e.4.1, bcn5, ref1).

- Communication issues were also visible in body language

“And maybe on a physical level [...], they were all sitting on chairs, but there were some with their arms crossed, their legs crossed, who practically wouldn’t participate. They had quite a lot of problems with the language, specially compared to those from the CRAE that they were with in the reception centre. [...]” (e.4.1, bcn4, ref1).



Conclusions

- The researchers' reflections complemented and influenced the analytical process.
- Impressions regarding the harshness and emotional impact of the young people's experiences were a constant theme in all groups and have affected participants emotionally. The strength of this impact can be perceived not so much in their speech, but mainly through non-verbal language.
- The conditions and characteristics of the setting in which the groups were held were, in some cases, more appropriate and the interview unfolded with greater ease, while in others there were factors hindering the interview.
- Communication issues were also a common factor and were salient in researchers' reflections. Researchers perceived and identified more or less obvious communication issues in the interviews carried out in all the different services and reception centres.

Conclusions

- The emotional impact of the histories of the youth in the researchers is issue that we want to investigate more.
- We are identifying a circle the mutual interdependence between the agent and the subject of the research in cases as the present, plenty of pain and trauma. In this cases, the emotional dimension affects the communicative and process of awareness and interpretation of the facts and experiences.