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Discussing the use of participatory methods with young people on the move

Glenda Santana de Andrade*, Isabel Morrell and Jane Freedman

Université Paris 8, CRESPPA-GTM, Paris, France

Introduction: At the end of 2023, 117.3 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide. Despite the scale of this phenomenon, young migrants aged 15-25 remain largely invisible in both research and policy, as illustrated by the absence of age-disaggregated data. There is therefore an urgent need for research that centers the multifaceted experiences of young people growing up across borders. Research with populations in a condition of vulnerability and with limited rights also raises critical methodological and ethical questions.

Methods: This paper draws on an ongoing comparative research project with young people on the move, employing participatory research approaches both offline and online. The study combines more traditional qualitative participatory methods with innovative digital and creative tools. Particular attention is paid to the practical and ethical challenges of conducting participatory research with young migrants, including issues of consent, power relations, representation, and safeguarding.

Results: The findings highlight both the potential and the limits of participatory methods in research with young people in forced migration contexts. Participatory approaches can foster agency, enable more nuanced accounts of lived experiences, and challenge extractive research practices. However, they also reveal significant obstacles, including uneven participation, ethical dilemmas, and institutional constraints that shape what participation can realistically achieve.

Discussion: The paper discusses how participatory research with young people on the move requires constant ethical reflexivity and methodological adaptation. It argues that participatory methods can meaningfully contribute to more ethical and inclusive knowledge production when their limits are explicitly acknowledged. The article contributes to ongoing theoretical and methodological debates on participatory research with young people growing up in a situation of forced migration.

KEYWORDS

asylum, forced migration, migration, participatory methods, research ethics, youth

Introduction

At the end of 2023, 117.3 million people were forcibly displaced globally (UNHCR, 2024). Whilst there is no comprehensive age-disaggregated data available in relation to young people (aged 15 to 25) in forced migration - which can be seen as evidence of the invisibilization of this group both in research and policy-making - many of those forcibly displaced are young. Timely new research focusing on the multifaceted experiences of young people growing up in a situation of forced migration is of utmost need. This is even more important in a context of increasingly restrictive and violent border controls (Freedman and de Andrade, 2024). And also increasing restrictions on rights of people on the move after arrival in a host country, in what has been called a politics of "deliberate abandonment" (Davies et al., 2017). All of this contributes to the creation of conditions of increasing vulnerability imposed on young people on the move (Freedman et al., 2023).

In these circumstances, it is useful to consider the methods researchers can use to work with these young people. In the past few decades, participatory approaches have been widely used in research with populations in conditions of vulnerability, including young people and migrants (Pittaway et al., 2010; Müller-Funk, 2021; Moralli, 2024). But what are the specific challenges and practices of participatory research, both online and offline? What does doing participatory research with young people on the move entail? What are the ethical dilemmas at play?

In this paper, based on an ongoing comparative research project with young people on the move, we discuss the obstacles involved in doing participatory research, envisage good practices, and understand the limits of participatory methods. We consider both traditional qualitative participatory approaches and more innovative digital methods, and aim to contribute to the theoretical and methodological debates around participatory research with young migrants growing up across borders.

Context and reflexivity

GRABS is a five year project (2024–2029) that explores the experiences of young people growing up in a situation of forced migration. Particularly, it aims to understand how these experiences impact the pathways from youth to adulthood whilst at the same time young people are traveling across borders, here understood as external and internal, physical and virtual borders (Freedman et al., 2023). We aim to integrate age into an intersectional research framework to understand both the challenges that young people face at this crucial time in their lifecourse, but also their strategies and agency in resisting violent border regimes. Through a feminist intersectional approach, informed by decolonial theories, the project aims to produce new knowledge about experiences of youth and migration/mobility, contributing both to research on lifecourse and on migration. Within this framework, we believe that research on migration requires a critical lens on the gendered, racialised, class based and colonial lineages of today's migration and border policies, including their enduring structures of inequality, even within academia itself (Samaddar, 2020; Çaglar, 2022). To try and work toward a more decolonial and less extractivist approach we have thus focused on using participatory and creative methods to co-produce research with young people, so that they can "narrate" their own experiences of migration and mobility across borders, on their own terms. The research is carried out in three countries in Europe (France, Greece, United Kingdom) and in South Africa and Canada. These countries are all countries of destination for forced migrants, but with varying asylum and refugee regimes, different health and social welfare structures for asylum seekers and refugees, and contrasting economic and political contexts. Our research and analysis require, therefore, not only a nuanced contextualization that respects each country's particularities, but a critical stance on knowledge production and power structures within and between different locations.

As this is an ongoing project, continually evolving, this paper is based on the first year and a half of the research, with initial field research being carried out in four countries (France, Greece, South Africa and UK). With the ambition of co-producing knowledge based on young people's lives in multiple contexts, our interactions with them—as well as with our partners—require careful reflection. In this sense, it is necessary to consider the different positionalities of the research team members and how these impact both the data collection and possibilities of knowledge production. As Freedman et al. (2024) highlight, "it is imperative to break the silence around the constitutive inequalities and power asymmetries during any fieldwork" while reflecting on knowledge production, including among researchers themselves, and most importantly between researchers and participants.

Our core research team includes five members affiliated with the Université Paris 8 in France—four of whom identify as women and one as a man. We are all in a privileged position with regard to nationality, legal residence status, and socio-economic position. We also collaborate with academic partners and multiple partners in civil society organizations and NGOs in each of the different countries. In the first part of this paper, we focus on the authors' positionalities, as it is their biases that are acknowledged in the analyses presented here. This approach also reflects a commitment to avoiding speaking on behalf of others.

All of the authors have legal residence status in the country where they live, and hold passports which allow them privileged mobility to most countries in the world. In this respect we are aware of the enormous differences between us and the young people with whom we are working. One of the authors, Jane Freedman, is the Principal Investigator of the project and is permanently employed as a university professor. The other two authors, Glenda Santana de Andrade and Isabel Morrell, are postdoctoral researchers within the project. They each hold a PhD but do not occupy permanent academic positions.

Glenda

I am responsible for conducting research in France and South Africa alongside the principal investigator and project partners. I am a 39-year-old French-Brazilian woman. Born and raised in Brazil, I acquired French citizenship in 2021 after living in France for over seven years as a privileged migrant—first as a student, and later on a research work visa. Although of mixed heritage as a Brazilian, I pass[1] as white. This perception has often conferred me racial privileges, allowing me access to territories and situations where others might have been denied entry or even faced threats to their safety. At the same time, this identity serves as a reminder that, in spite of my efforts to minimize the power imbalances, some people might feel uncomfortable engaging with me, particularly within the historical context of South Africa, and its racial divisions (Addae and Quan-Baffour, 2022).

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1 The concept of passing was first evoked in English-language texts studying the complexities and contradictions of racial categories in the United States from the 19th century onwards (Rottenberg, 2003). This term should also be analyzed in connection with that of colorism, particularly developed on studies on African descendents and Latinx communities. As Hunter notes, drawing on Dixon and Telles, "light-skin preference and white supremacy have become increasingly unified, globalized, and commodified" (Hunter, 2023; citing Dixon and Telles 2017, p. 406).

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As a white British cis woman born into a middle-class family, I occupy a position of privilege that shapes my mobility and encounters during research. My British citizenship provides me with ease of movement which is emphasized when engaging with people whose mobility is severely restricted and criminalized. Through my whiteness and Britishness, I am visibly aligned with the dominant racial and cultural norms in Britain. I navigate public institutions as an insider with rights, benefiting from familiarity, linguistic fluency, and institutional recognition. This privilege facilitates smoother navigation than that which is available to the people with whom we work. In some instances, my positionality as white British may hinder rapport. During my doctoral research some people with refugee status were reluctant to express criticism of my country and instead expressed only gratitude. As anti-immigration hostility increases in Britain, it is possible that my Britishness may make others more cautious or guarded in our interactions.

Jane

I am the Principal Investigator of the project and thus responsible for the overall implementation and direction of the research, managing the team, as well as carrying out field work. As a white woman with French and British nationality employed as a full professor at the Université Paris 8 for over 15 years, I recognize that I am in a privileged position not only with respect to the young people on the move with whom we are working but also in relation to my younger colleagues who have only temporary employment positions.

Thinking about our positionality helps to situate our work within existing debates around the ethics of doing research from within Global North institutions, particularly when working with populations on the move. As researchers based in Global North institutions, receiving funding and salaries from these institutions, we need to acknowledge the long shadow of coloniality in academic research. This includes the history—and persistence—of white scholars extracting data from communities in the Global South or from displaced populations, often for career advancement or to serve institutional agendas. This is what is often referred to as epistemic violence (Ndlovu and Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2024)—when the knowledge, voices, or experiences of Global South communities are erased, marginalized, or reshaped to fit Western frameworks. One key critique here is the imposition of Western ways of knowing—framing, categorizing, and interpreting lives and experiences through a Global North academic lens. And this is entangled with unequal power relations: between researchers and participants, universities and communities, institutions from the Global North and those from the Global South - in the case of partnerships - funders and knowledge producers. So, although we bring varied backgrounds to the research, we are all situated within the structural and symbolic privileges that come with this institutional affiliation. This means we must reckon with coloniality, the historical and ongoing marginalization of Global South knowledge systems, and the inequalities embedded in global research infrastructures. When we are working with people on the move who are in the vast majority from the Global South, we

need to continually think about our positions and our assumptions. We have to ensure that we do not try to impose our ways of thinking or knowing in our exchanges and work with them. This requires ongoing reflexivity and adjustments to the way we think and engage.

Recognizing and trying to address these dilemmas are crucial if we want to move beyond these extractivist and (neo)colonial practices. It is also about actively resisting the ways academic research has historically reproduced harm. These different positionalities within multiple structures of power and domination (gender, race, class, nationality, administrative status, age, etc.) impact all stages of the research process: entering/leaving the field, how to engage with co-production while living and being employed in Global North countries, relations of trust/mistrust with participants, etc. These biases and their impacts in the research will be discussed further in the following sections.

Using participatory research with people on the move

The experience of transnational displacement among young people is gaining attention in social sciences (Ní Laoire et al., 2012), although there is still relatively little research which takes an intersectional approach to migration which includes age as a social category (Clark-Kazak, 2013). Youth migration "can be studied as a social condition of the passage from one age status, adolescence, to another, adulthood, and thus characterize the fact of growing up in exile" (Long, 2021).

Within this context, a growing body of literature has explored the use of participatory methods in migration studies, including in research with youth. Participatory research has been discussed as a way of carrying out more ethical research with people on the move (Pincock and Bakunzi, 2021), avoiding the extractivism which has been a feature of so much previous research (Gorman, 2024; Huizinga et al., 2025). Participatory research can be seen as a way of "giving something back" to the people and communities with whom researchers engage and reducing power differentials (Haile et al., 2019) and knowledge divides between researchers and people on the move (Zwi et al., 2006). Torres (2024), for example, discusses how participatory methods can create a safe space for undocumented migrants to materialize their belongingness and visibility on their own terms. However, participatory research is not necessarily more ethical and the participatory label may be used in a tokenistic way (Larruina and Ghorashi, 2020), or to mask ongoing power imbalances and unethical conduct of research (Cooke and Kothari, 2001).

Considering both the advantages but also the potential pitfalls of participatory research, our aim is to involve participants in nearly all stages[2] of the research process. From the development of methods to data collection, analysis, and dissemination, each phase has been—and will continue to be—collectively designed and critically reflected upon to the extent that we have found this possible. And whilst acknowledging that the overall management and design of the research process is driven by our research team.

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2   Only the PI participated in the construction of the research project itself, as this is a requirement for an ERC grant.

Finally, acknowledging both the limits of participatory methods and the ethical challenges of working with groups in vulnerable conditions entails not only collaborating with participants, but also engaging in forms of restitution. This may include skills development, co-produced outputs, or final products that go beyond the initial aims of the research (i.e. photo albums, podcasts, exhibition, etc.). Again we have explored many possible forms of restitution and discuss these later on in this article.

Development of multiple methods

Within our project, the level and type of participation has varied across sites, groups, and the interests and availability of the young people in each place. These are shaped by restrictive border and migration policies, which may discourage participation among individuals with limited mobility, varying survival needs, unavailability due to employment, and other contextual factors. But this can also be true of civil society and NGO partners who might be lacking staff due to funding cuts (especially those provoked by the recent cuts in US and other foreign development funding)[3] and overburdened. In this sense, our participatory research requires the use of multiple methods and a commitment to constant adaptation to ensure that it aligns with the interests and availability of participants and partners. Rather than imposing a rigid research framework, the aim is to create space for agency to emerge, allowing participants to engage in ways that are meaningful and useful to them. Some groups may be interested in developing methodological tools or reflecting on the relevance of questions in an interview guide. Others—particularly those struggling to survive—may prefer to have a safe space in which to share their daily challenges. Some participants may prioritize acquiring measurable skills that can support their access to the job market or education, while others may simply participate because they lack space or voice elsewhere. Within this framework, we can speak of a spectrum of participation (Hart, 1997) in involving young people in this research and a multitude of methods. Because of this we have sought to co-design varied research tools that will allow the young people involved to express themselves not only in relation to our research themes, but most importantly, in relation to their own interests, as we will describe further below.

In addition to being responsive to the needs and interests of the people we work with, our research practice needs to be flexible, adapting to contextual challenges to mitigate harms from the research. One cannot forget that global dynamics might also affect people's experience and their ability to participate in the research. For instance, when we planned to visit Greece, we intended to meet with organizations on the Greek islands, supporting people on the move. Our planned trip coincided with the aftermath of cuts to USAID. As a result, many organizations faced significant financial and operational challenges impacting their service provision and forward planning. We thus decided that it would not in fact be a good idea to travel to the islands as many organizations

simply did not have time to devote to meeting us. Following a decolonial methodology that seeks to mitigate harm requires us to avoid imposing ourselves on contexts where organizations are operating under significant strain. Otherwise, this may impede the services they provide to people on the move or the speed at which they plan future operations. Whilst at times this hindered our research scoping and planning objectives, it is important not to center ourselves and our research goals - especially, if our presence risked disrupting ongoing or future service provision for people on the move. In sum, to meaningfully implement decolonial methodologies means to prioritize the needs and autonomy of local communities over our research agendas in order to mitigate potential harms and resist extractivist practices.

Our methodology thus comprises multiple components including: a pre-research survey to gather information about what young people are interested in doing; research workshops with young people where we develop the research tools such as interview guides; creative methods and collaborative analysis. Based on the pre-research survey, we aim to deliver activities that speak to people's needs and interests. In addition to creative methods we use traditional methods including focus groups discussion and semi structured interviews, both with young people who have an experience of forced migration, but also with key informants. The final aspect of the project is a smartphone app which we are currently working on with specialized app developers to facilitate engagement with the project for people who are perhaps more mobile or have less time to commit, or who would prefer to engage in this way. All of these methods have been used to a various extent and with varying degrees of success. We have found that trying to make research as participatory and non-extractivist as possible involves some trial and error, as some of the ideas we have about the research when we are planning in our university do not work out as we imagine they would when we engage with the young people.

In the following section we discuss the various methods we have been developing, and the challenges involved.

Pre-research survey

We began by developing an online survey to gather young people's preferences and interests before designing any participatory workshops. The aim was for the survey responses to inform the types of activities we would facilitate as part of the research based on what young people said they would like to do. The survey included a range of suggestions of activities grouped into six categories—social activities, creative activities, physical/sporting activities, educational activities, handicrafts, and walking tours—as well as open-ended questions for additional ideas. Initially, we shared the survey online through social media groups including all those we found which shared information and news for young people on the move. This method of disseminating the survey meant that we did not know how many people it would reach, and that we were reliant on a snowball effect and social media popularity to reach as large a number as possible. We hoped that many young people on the move would find out about our research in this way, and tell us about how they might like to participate in a research project. However, this approach was largely unsuccessful. We found that participants were generally

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uninterested in filling out the form online and we received very few responses (only 9 at the time of writing). Talking to organizations which work with young people in situations of migration, we were told that it was unlikely that young people would complete this survey online, and that it would be better to distribute it in a printed version. We therefore distributed a printed version of the survey through partner organizations in Greece and received around 40 responses. In South Africa, our local partners reminded us that such formal tools would likely not appeal to participants. As a result, we adapted our approach: instead of administering the survey (either online or in a printed version), we gathered input informally at the end of focus group discussions when we asked participants what they enjoyed doing and what kind of activities they would like us to organize with them. We compiled a list of their preferences mentioned in these group conversations and from this basis we developed a plan for participatory research workshops. As photography and podcasting emerged as favorite activities in most of the countries we are working in, we developed a first round of workshops based on these activities, with the idea of developing other types of creative workshops such as drawing, painting, filmmaking or poetry in the future. Young people also expressed a desire to take part in sporting activities - such as playing football or doing archery. We decided that although it might be difficult to envisage these as research activities per se, we would also try and organize sports and recreational activities with the young people for them to have space to enjoy themselves whether or not this led to any knowledge production.

Our survey remains open online, and we intend to continue integrating the expressed interests and preferences of young people into the development of our research methods, continually asking those we engage with what they would like to do as part of the research. At the same time, we are mindful of the challenges involved in translating these diverse inputs into workshops that are both meaningful to participants and methodologically rigorous from a research perspective. For example, in some cases, where this link is less evident (for example organizing football matches with the young people), we thought about proposing post-activity debriefs, where we could discuss various issues related to their experiences. Yet one question remains: is this always necessary? If, as Ansell et al. (2012) argue, researchers studying young people's lives must carefully consider the relationship between epistemology and methodology in selecting methods suited to specific research questions, it is equally important—particularly when working with individuals in vulnerable situations—to raise questions about the legitimacy of the process and the fairness of its outcomes. At times, we must acknowledge that at the heart of participatory techniques lie contradictions that might not be easily solved: research techniques may not align with young people's interests—or conversely, their interests may not neatly correspond to our research questions. In some cases we may find ourselves organizing activities which do not contribute to producing or collecting data and we should accept that this is part of trying to do really participatory research. And in fact, some of these moments, such as an organized cinema outing or beach picnic with participants in South Africa, or a meal in a restaurant in Athens, have provided some very fulfilling and enjoyable shared moments, and we have valued these as part of our project even if they are not producing any "data" which we will use for analysis. As Darling (2014) notes,

it is important to see fieldwork about more than producing "data," but about producing sensibilities and dispositions, both for the researchers and those they encounter during the research.

Research workshops with young people

Beyond selecting activities, we aim to collaborate with young people in the development of our research tools, such as interview guides. Drawing on relationships with organizations that support young people on the move, we organized workshops for young people to engage with them on research methods. These workshops were organized to reflect young people's research interests and their perspectives on research tools. We feel that this approach is important to ensure appropriate questions are included in any interviews or focus groups, and that the topics explored reflect the priorities and comfort levels of the young people themselves. Following advice from partner organizations, in our workshops and other group sessions, we separated school-aged young people from the older cohort and brought together groups to discuss our research tools with them.

We began delivering these research workshops in Greece in collaboration with an organization that supports women on the move. We held two workshops - one with young women still in school and another with slightly older out of school young women (each group had 8 participants). We asked them what they may like to find out about other young people in situations of forced displacement, and discussed ethical issues, including mitigating harms through sensitive questioning. Working in groups, they developed interview questions. Then, we asked them to review an interview guide that we had previously developed. This was insightful and important, not least for exposing inaccessible academic language and jargon in our research tools. More than this, the questions and ideas raised by the young people reflected aspects of their experiences, highlighted possible question framings and language usage. Their discussions of our draft interview guide provided valuable insights into the types of questions and topics they felt comfortable discussing. We felt that these research workshops are an opportunity to incorporate young people's knowledge into the development of the research. This is an important step toward recognizing and valuing their knowledge and making space for different ways of knowing. This means not simply including young people's knowledge and perspectives but treating it as authoritative.

Working together with young people in this workshop enabled us to explore ways to mitigate the researcher-participant power differential, changing the dynamic of research interviews from an extractive process to a more collaborative encounter. For instance, we discussed possible ground rules for interviews to establish an environment where participants would feel less pressure to respond to particular questions. By prioritizing the emotional safety of participants through trauma-informed and feminist research principles, this approach aims to mitigate potential harms associated with research practices (such as the risk of retraumatisation). Additionally, it creates an interview experience that is directed less by the researcher by providing conditions that facilitate participants' control. In turn, whilst this does not fully facilitate self-expression (since it is still an interview), conditions

are established that prioritize participant agency, facilitating greater control over the direction and content of the interview and in turn, facilitating the personal construction of their narrative.

For this particular trip, our team consisted of four women, which proved to be valuable given the women-only nature of the organization. Whilst this was not deliberate, being a team of women in this instance seemed to facilitate smoother engagement with the organization and the people the organization supports. Indeed, gendered dynamics shape access, participation, relationships and the conditions under which knowledge is produced. Being women researchers in this space facilitated the connections we were able to make with the young people who access this organization. This leaves some unanswered questions about the connections we will establish with organizations that mainly support men and boys. Moreover, the organization advised us that advertising activities and workshops as non-gendered would mean that predominantly men would attend, and, in instances where women did attend, their ability to participate would be reduced and their contribution would be marginalized. For these workshops, recognizing and respecting the women-only space reflected the ethics of care that the organization upholds.

Creative methods and collaborative analysis

Following on from the workshops and survey, we have started to organize participatory and creative workshops with young people. As well as helping to challenge the extractivist nature of much research we hope that such participatory methodologies might bring to light data that traditional methods such as observations and interviews alone would not provide: including experiences that might at first sight seem more ordinary, such as habits, dreams, friendships. By using creative research methods such as photography, photovoice, podcasts, among others to be decided by participants, we aim to capture diverse forms of knowledge and expression, including emotional experiences and tacit knowledge (Haile et al., 2019).

Drawing from six focus group discussions conducted in eThekwini/Durban, South Africa, in May 2025 with a total of 41 young people in situations of forced migration—including six young women (16–23) from the DRC, Burundi, and Uganda; five young men (18–22) from the DRC; seven young mothers (19–25) from Burundi and the DRC; eight school-aged boys (15–19) from the DRC and Somalia; seven young women (18–21) from the DRC and Burundi; and eight school-aged girls (16–19) from the DRC and Somalia— we explored questions of identity and belonging as well as the challenges they face in the country, as this might impact their participations but also influence what kind of participatory tool they might be interested in. These conversations were followed by discussions about their interests, during which they expressed a strong desire to participate in podcast and photography workshops. As they explained, these activities would allow them to develop communication skills and become their own spokespersons in a constrained environment where migrants increasingly face backlash, including racist, Afrophobic, and xenophobic attacks (Mpofu, 2020). Regarding photography, they shared their interest mostly as "liking to explore" (Conversation with one participant justifying her choice for photography rather than podcast, June 2025). Based on these conversations, we designed a four-week

programme. In the photography workshop, participants acquired basic technical skills—such as framing and composition—and were then invited to take photographs around a common theme of "belonging and difference". The images were discussed collectively as part of a participatory and mutual research analysis. Finally the participants categorized and selected photos and organized them for a potential exhibition or book publication. Our goal is to support the creation of an exhibition or a book at the end of the project in order to enable participants to showcase their work to a wider public and to gain recognition for their artistic creation. For the podcast component, we received training at the audiovisual department of Université Paris 8. There, we learned how to handle a Zoom recorder, develop a podcast (from writing a script and interview questions to editing using Reaper - a digital audio production software), and select royalty-free soundtracks. During the workshop, we shared this knowledge with the participants and we mentored them as they produced several podcasts on various themes including xenophobia, discrimination, access to rights, the experiences of young refugees in South Africa. As well as scripting, recording and editing their podcasts they were excited to be able to carry out interviews with members of the public who they engaged with in the local area. These participatory workshops in photography and podcasting were carried out with the same young people across the city over four weeks and included five groups: photography with out-of-school youth ($N = 8$), podcast with out-of-school youth ($N = 8$), photography with young mothers ($N = 6$), photography with school-age youth ($N = 3$), and podcast with school-age youth ($N = 7$).

In France, we have been participating in voluntary activities with an association supporting migrant youth in Paris. Due to the extremely precarious living conditions many of them face—most are living on the streets and are constantly subject to eviction (Santana de Andrade, 2025)—we have, so far for ethical reasons, limited our engagement to general forms of support. What does it mean to do research when one is struggling to meet the most basic needs on a daily basis? In such a context, research—as traditionally conceived—feels neither appropriate nor feasible, at least not in the most conventional ways. Instead, we have focused on practical support: for instance, helping them improve their French skills. When requested, we have accompanied some of them to juvenile court as they appeal for the recognition of their status as an unaccompanied minor. We have deliberately avoided asking about their migration trajectories, in order to prevent retraumatization. They tell us when they want to, and what they want to share. This approach allows us not to invisibilize those in the most precarious situations, while also refusing to engage in extractive research practices that may (re)produce violence.

In a second organization in Paris, where the youth are in more stable situations—either as accommodated asylum seekers or as recognized refugees—we have been able to develop a partnership with creative workshops. A focus group discussion ($N = 8$ young persons from countries including Mauritania, Guinea, Bangladesh, Mali, Congo and Afghanistan) was held in June 2025, during which participants expressed interest in podcasting, photography, filmmaking, and fashion. The first podcast workshops ($N = 2$) in September/October and Photography workshops ($N = 3$) in October/November 2025 were very much appreciated by the participants. With another partner organization, we also organized

photography workshops in October/November 2025 with young participants (15-25 years old) originally from DRC and Mali ($N = 7$).

Finally, in Athens, Greece, we organized photography workshops with one group of young women and one group of young men (each with 8 participants) in two different partner organizations. The activities organized with young women was challenging in that they came with their young babies and children and we spent part of the workshops trying to amuse the children so that the mothers could fully engage. With two young Afghan men from one of the partner organizations we also organized a walking tour where they showed us some of their preferred places in Athens and talked about what these places in the city meant to them. This provided interesting insights into how they as people on the move, engaged with the city, its historical sites, and the presence of multiple tourists who were also mobile, but in a very different way. We recorded a "soundscape" during the walking tour, which we then edited into a podcast with these young men.

So far we have found that these approaches offer participants an opportunity to engage with the research process in a more relaxed and accessible way compared to traditional research methods. By inviting participants to take photos of what "belonging" means to them, for instance, or to create podcasts about their experiences of discrimination, access to rights, xenophobia … participants are able to share aspects of their lives and migration experiences that they feel comfortable revealing. These methods enable participants to take control of the narrative they wish to share, and show us the things and the places that have meaning for them in different ways. They are also more inclusive and less formal than traditional research, facilitating the inclusion of people with trauma or less formal education: taking photographs, for example, is an activity which is inclusive even of those who have difficulties reading or writing. An unplanned but positive outcome has been the way in which the young people participating have created bonds and developed friendships which last beyond the workshops, in some cases creating Whatsapp groups and arranging to meet up and see each other once the workshops have ended.

Using an app as a tool for research

These participatory workshops are not always accessible for people in highly vulnerable situations or constantly on the move. Being aware of this, we also decided to develop a mobile phone application to be used across the five different countries and all sites. The use of this app will help us, we hope, to ensure that the voices and experiences of young people who are unable to participate in the workshops for any reason, to be taken into account in our research. The decision to design this app is also linked to the importance of social media and mobile phone communication in the lives of young people on the move, and at the same time a relative lack of research in this area (Horst, 2006; Godin and Doná, 2016; Ní Laoire et al., 2012). The application has three main objectives: (1) To provide relevant information to young people on the move regarding essential services they may need or be interested in—such as healthcare, education, legal assistance, accommodation, food distribution, and social or cultural activities. (2) To collect material for the research project, which may include

photos, videos, audio recordings, drawings, and other creative outputs uploaded by young people on the move when and how they wish. (3) To prevent invisibilisation of some of the young people in highly precarious situations e.g. those at militarized border sites. Access to the app will be restricted to users invited by the research team. For security reasons, all data will be encrypted on both ends, and we will ensure that the young people cannot be geo-localized through the app. To ensure anonymity, each user will be assigned a pseudonym. The app will be available in multiple languages and will include the possibility of uploading content offline, acknowledging that internet access may be limited or unstable for some users. The intention is that the app will be open-source with a Creative Commons license, to respect people's ownership of the content they create.

Having begun to work with young people using creative and participatory methods, we have come across some different ethical challenges and questions which we discuss now in the second part of the article.

Discussing ethical challenges

In this section we reflect on our research approach— partnership, reciprocity, reflexivity, and ethics as a process—and share some of the opportunities and challenges we have been encountering so far while developing these. Then we explore how working in a team, our focus on accessibility, and our approach to outputs and impact shape the project dynamics—and how we are working to move beyond tokenism.

Partnership

An important part of our methodology is built around partnerships with organizations that support young people on the move. These partnerships are vital, not only because of ethical considerations, but because these organizations are embedded in the communities within which we work. As such, these organizations have a deeper understanding of the young people they support, with spaces that are familiar and trusted by these communities. Importantly, such organizations have established infrastructures for engagement, safeguarding and ongoing care. We recognized that we are not best positioned to address issues—such as psychological distress or administrative difficulties—that may emerge in this context, so partnering with these organizations is crucial to the development of a methodology that mitigates harm. Many organizations have existing programmes and activities for young people as such we do not wish to displace nor replicate local expertise and ways of working.

Although collaboration with organizations is vital for ethical and contextually grounded research, it presents two key challenges. First, such partnerships could lead to an implicit association between the research and the organization. This may influence perceptions of the research, particularly for those who rely on the organization's services, which may lead to some feeling obliged to participate out of gratitude or to maintain access to support, even if we reassure them that this is not the case.

Second, partnerships can place additional demands on already stretched organizational resources. For example, in South Africa, our partner organizations assisted not only with contacting participants and supporting the logistical coordination during the FGD phase, but also with hosting the subsequent participatory workshops. Since the FGDs, we have liaised directly with participants, but the workshops themselves—five in total, held over four weeks—take place on the premises of our partner organization, where we rent a room for photography and podcast sessions. These tasks require time, knowledge, coordination and work beyond their core responsibilities. In recognition of this, and in line with the principle of reciprocity, we provided financial compensation for their time and contributions. Whilst an imperfect solution, this approach seeks to acknowledge the value of their work and mitigate extractive dynamics.

We also sought to provide reciprocity to partners in any other way we could. For example, one of our team who is skilled at website design, helped to redesign one of our partners' websites. We have also co-authored blogs and articles with partners to give them visibility and recognize their multiple forms of knowledge.

Reciprocity

As mentioned above, one important component of our research approach is the principle of reciprocity. Linked to partnerships, reciprocity can be understood as the attempt "to replace an 'extractive', imperial model of social research with one in which the benefits of research accrue more directly to the communities involved" (Kindon et al., 2007; p.1). For us, reciprocity presents an opportunity to push back against extractive models of research and to ensure that communities involved benefit through their involvement.

Reciprocity takes different forms across the different countries in which we work. One consistent practice is compensation for participants' time and travel. This presents some challenges, including navigating legal contexts such as the UK, where people with asylum seeker status are prohibited from working. Accordingly, we are navigating complex legal and ethical terrain around what constitutes "reasonable" compensation. Our approach to compensation differs across different country contexts as the value of money and the cost of living vary significantly. Also the institutional context influences how we can recompense participants. In South Africa, working through a partner organization we have been able to pay cash compensation to participants, whilst in France we are constrained by legal and institutional practices, and we have found that the only solution is to pay participants with vouchers. Although this solution is not ideal, as it means that participants have a more limited ability to spend the money, we have found that it is the only compromise possible. These examples show how institutional barriers reproduce forms of coloniality and unequal power relations even as we seek to engage in reciprocity. The way we practice reciprocity necessitates adaptation, sensitive to the differences across national contexts, while attempting not to create inequalities between our different research sites.

Beyond financial compensation, our team also seeks to provide restitution through non-monetary forms of support. This includes volunteering with community groups, and providing ad hoc support to individuals (such as accompanying them to legal or administrative meetings; helping them to write their CVs) and contributing to service provision of our partner organizations. These are important acts that demonstrate our commitment to the communities with which we work. As the project develops, we plan to continue these forms of restitution and expand them as far as possible.

In addition, we use creative methods not only as a research tool, but also as a means of providing restitution to those participating in the research. These activities are designed to support skill development and creative expression, and provide a space to practice and explore new hobbies, offering something tangible and enjoyable in return for participation. Young people receive participation certificates at the end of each workshop, testifying to their successful participation and completion of the activity. We hope that this might help some of them in obtaining education, training or job opportunities.

We also aim to create tangible outputs from our creative workshops which could be a form of restitution for the participants, such as a photography exhibition in an art gallery, a book or a public podcast listening. So far we have found that participants are very proud and happy to share their creative productions in this way.

Our contributions to reciprocity are limited and cannot fully address structural inequalities and the conditions of precarity which many people with whom we work experience. For instance, many people we work with in Paris live on the streets and participating in a workshop cannot change this situation. Nevertheless, our commitment to reciprocity reflects an ongoing effort to challenge extractive research practices, to work in more reciprocal and care-oriented ways.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity is fundamental to all aspects of the research. On a practical level, it helps us build trust, navigate access, and think critically about how our own positions shape what we are able to see and hear. It is about being transparent about our privileges—be it citizenship, race, education, class, or language,—understanding how these affect our interactions and the knowledge we produce, and trying to mitigate them when possible.

However, acknowledging our positionalities is not sufficient to ensure our research is ethical. Reflexive praxis necessitates ongoing questioning and adapting plans. It may be easier to center ethical comfort over the realities and needs of participants. That is, reflecting yet continuing as normal and avoiding addressing uncomfortable realities. For instance, after conducting a few workshops with young people on developing research tools, we realized that we, as researchers, found the workshops more valuable than the people participating in them. For those who are not interested in research, aside from the certificates and financial compensation, people participating in the workshops did not gain much from it.

As researchers committed to collaborating with young people to develop appropriate research tools, this was an uncomfortable reality. We were pursuing what seemed to be collaborative and coproductive work, but mainly for our own ethical comfort and in reality, those participating were not getting much from the experience. Moving forward, we decided to deliver these workshops only for those who are interested in doing research. We recognize that this is an imperfect solution as it means that we are integrating the voices of a small group. However, we felt this was a less imposing way of committing to the workshops and coproduction without forcing engagement.

Simply reflecting becomes more about our own ethical comfort than about the realities and needs of participants. It is a constant exercise of how to turn reflexivity into practice, and this varies across sites.

Ethics as process

As with the need for ongoing reflexivity, we approach ethics as an ongoing process rather than a singular assessment or a set of fixed rules. We have attempted to build in constant discussion and reflection—not just within the team, but with partners and participants too. But we're also cautious. As with the previous example, it is easy to talk loudly about ethical research—especially in academic settings—and to mask more uncomfortable realities behind well-meaning language. So we are trying to stay alert to that, and to keep interrogating our practices as the project evolves. This involves constantly re-engaging in discussions around consent, naming practices, ownership of research produced and so on.

While the development of enjoyable activities aims to center young people's preferences and foster meaningful engagement, we remain critically aware that these activities still function as research tools. Despite their participatory framing, they involve the extraction of data, and thus cannot be fully disentangled from the extractive logics that underpin research. Participatory research methods risk blurring the boundaries between engagement and data collection due to the relaxed, less formal and long-term nature. This may lead to moments where participants forget that research is taking place. In this context, ongoing, iterative consent becomes not only ethically necessary but central to maintaining transparency.

Accessibility

We have attempted to build accessibility into our methods. That means offering a range of activities and levels of engagement, using creative methods, and working with translators or facilitators where needed. Working across languages and across generations we need to ensure that we find the right vocabularies to communicate with the young people and to avoid linguistic violence (Feldmeyer et al., 2016; Nordberg and Merikoski, 2025) e.g., through reproducing administrative language which widens the gap between participants and researchers. But it also introduces challenges. Translation can shift meaning as Krause (2017) argues "all translations contain a certain level of interpretation of what was said and the content can be lost (consciously or deliberately)." It also adds logistical and ethical complexity. For example, in Greece, language teachers from

one association were involved as translators for our workshop, and whilst the relationships with the young participants seemed to be excellent, we were unsure of the real power dynamics at play. Whilst using translation and interpreters means that we do not exclude groups or individuals who would not be represented without this translation, we do need to recognize the limits and possible pitfalls of having a "third party" present during our activities. And when you are working across multiple languages, modes, and levels of engagement, bringing all that data into dialogue can be difficult.

Beyond tokenism

Finally, we are working to move beyond tokenism. This means collaborative analysis where possible, designing activities that reflect people's real interests and needs, and remaining committed to community engagement that is ongoing—not just one-off or symbolic. These are not always smooth processes—but we hope that by naming the tensions as well as the possibilities, we can remain accountable to the people and principles our research is grounded in.

One of the huge challenges here is that what would really benefit the young people we work with is policy change. It is clear that what is most needed to improve their life situations is a major shift in migration law and policy, but our research is highly unlikely to achieve this. Is it ethical to produce research that does not have a policy impact in such constraining social contexts, and how do we talk to the young people we are working with about the near impossibility of any real policy change coming out of the project? (Atak and Simeon, 2018; Natter and Welfens, 2024). We have remained transparent about the unlikeliness of any policy impact, but we have to ask if this is enough?

Ways forward

As Senovilla-Hernández argues, young people "are not a homogenous category. So it is not enough to apply a pre-constructed methodology, but to adapt it in the light of a number of factors, including the context, the framework and logic of the research (resources, timeframe), the social characteristics of the children in question" (Senovilla-Hern'andez, 2021). We have tried to take this into account as far as possible in our research, adapting our methods to the varied situations of young people in different locations, and with different needs, priorities and interests. Seeking to do research which is relevant and interesting for these young people has meant in some cases deciding, for example, not to do interviews or focus groups at all, because the young people had no interest in participating in these, but rather to move forward straight away with participatory activities and workshops. But although this methodology is perhaps less standardized and may not allow us to do comparative research in a more "classic" way, it has, we feel, allowed us to enter into dialogues with the young people where we all benefit and produce different forms of knowledge together.

Developing this research in a participatory way is only possible because it is a long term project that has substantial funding. Within this framework, we can take the time and count on the

necessary resources available for co-producing knowledge from the very beginning, but also co-imagining forms of restitution that are relevant to them. The structures of research production however remain as a major constraining force, particularly in relation to the project development, the need for a principal investigator, but also in terms of deliverables, such as academic articles. This remains a structural reality that we are unable to entirely transcend. As our project is financed by the European Research Council and carried out through the Université Paris 8, we must fulfill certain academic demands namely, disseminating the research through academic outputs including publishing articles in academic journals, presenting in conferences. This is a heightened demand for those of us who are early career researchers on fixed-term contracts for whom academic outputs are essential for future employability. Even if these are co-authored with the young people, the power discrepancies still favor the academic researchers, and it is clear that they are more valuable for the CVs of the academic researchers than they will be for the young people. Multiple questions remain unanswered, and as an ongoing project, hopefully we will be able to develop our answers to some of them in the coming years. Others, such as the ethical challenges related to doing research that is unlikely to produce major shifts in law and policy in relation to restrictive conditions imposed on migrant persons most probably will remain unanswered.

We cannot be fully disentangled from our own positionalities or from the harmful dynamics underpinning academic research, such as whiteness, coloniality and institutional privilege. Yet we strive to align our work to our commitments to the communities with which we engage and our respective individual voluntary or activist work. These principles and commitments inform our practice and accountability beyond academia.

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because the data that support the findings of this study are based on qualitative research. Due to the sensitive nature of the material and ethical commitments to participants, transcripts and notes are not publicly available. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to grabs@univ-paris8.fr.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Comité d'éthique - Université Paris 8. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent for participation in this study was provided by the participants' legal guardians/next of kin.

Author contributions

GSA: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. IM: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. JF: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared that this work was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

The author(s) JF and GA declared that they were an editorial board member of Frontiers, at the time of submission. This had no impact on the peer review process and the final decision.

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