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To cite this article: Khawla Badwan, Caitlin Nunn & Kate Pahl (08 Jul 2024): Working with/beyond 'language': insights from a listening walk with young men from asylum-seeking backgrounds in a rural treescape, Language and Intercultural Communication, DOI: [10.1080/14708477.2024.2373156](https://doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2024.2373156)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2024.2373156>



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Published online: 08 Jul 2024.



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Working with/beyond 'language': insights from a listening walk with young men from asylum-seeking backgrounds in a rural treescape

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ABSTRACT

This article articulates the affordances and challenges of researching with and beyond language on a listening walk with young men from asylum-seeking backgrounds in a rural treescape. Offering methodological and conceptual provocations for creative multilingual research, the article does not (re)present a traditional research encounter with fixed methodologies and confident findings. Rather, it stories a research encounter, anchored in participatory practice and developed conceptually through post-research puzzlement that critically unpacks and embraces vulnerabilities associated with the roles of language, feelings and understanding in social research.

توضح هذه المقالة إمكانيات وتحديات البحث باستخدام اللغة وما وراءها في جولة مشي و استماع مع شباب من خلفيات طالبي اللجوء في مشهد أشجار ريفي. من خلال تقديم استقرايات منهجية ومفاهيمية للبحث الإبداعي ومتعدد اللغات، هذه المقالة لا تعرض تجربة بحثية تقليدية ذات منهجيات ثابتة ونتائج موثوقة وبدلاً من ذلك، فهي تروي تجربة بحثية، تركز على الممارسة التشاركية، ويتم تطويرها من الناحية المفاهيمية من خلال ارتباطك ما بعد البحث الذي يفكك ويحتضن بشكل نقدي نقاط الضعف المرتبطة بأدوار اللغة والمشاعر والفهم في البحث الاجتماعي.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 3 November 2023


Accepted 18 June 2024

KEYWORDS

Beyond language;
multilingualism;
participatory research; youth;
natural environment;
understanding

Introduction

This article takes readers on a journey that narrates research reflections from a listening walk in a forest with a group of young men who migrated to the UK as unaccompanied asylum seekers. This listening walk is framed as a generative and disruptive research encounter through which we explore how our linguistic and cultural differences 'encounter each other, adjust to each other, oppose each other, agree with each other and produce the unpredictable' (Glissant, 1996, p. 98). While we do this, we invite readers to think with us about the affordances and challenges associated with navigating this listening walk with/beyond language, feelings and understanding. We ask questions such as: How do we listen together as we walk together or walk apart in a forest? What do we make of languages and sounds we do not understand? What roles do feelings play in holding people together in space in spite of, or perhaps because of, the absence of shared language? Through stirring up these questions, we offer a range of epistemological and methodological contributions and provocations that are meant to unsettle notions around 'language', 'feeling' and 'understanding' in social research.

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Why a listening walk? Our research with young people from asylum-seeking backgrounds has focused on the role of senses during engagements with treescapes in the UK. While senses cannot be separated for research purposes, we planned our research encounters in ways that allow focusing on one sense at a time while attending to the inevitable emergence of other senses. This article is about listening to/in nature, to/with one another in curiosity, puzzlement and in a vulnerable quest for understanding. This encounter is located within a work package from a larger interdisciplinary project, *Voices of the Future*, funded by the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC). The overall project explores the ways in which we can learn from and with children and young people in the pursuit of future treescapes that are both socially and environmentally just. Central to this learning is the commitment to attending to minoritised voices which are often overlooked in conversations around treescapes, as part of the carving of the white environmental subjectivity (Hickcox, 2018). The notion of voice in our work is refigured in ways that challenge erasures and silences (Ambreen et al., *forthcoming*; Nunn, 2017) through expanding what voice might entail while also going beyond voice. This refiguring is researched in the context of 'treescapes' which explore trees across a range of landscapes: urban, rural and semi-rural and in different localities: urban streets, playground trees, hedges and forests.

During this research encounter, we are positioned as academic researchers who are feeling their way(s) literally, metaphorically, relationally, conceptually and methodologically. This feeling is experienced differently and differentially and is perceived in diffractive ways shaped by our inter-disciplinary backgrounds that braid together applied linguistics, sociology, and literacy studies in creative and unexpected ways. It is produced in relation to a complex web of inter-relationships that include (among many other things) our relations to one another, the youth participants, the project artist, the new places we visited, and the new objects and non-human actants that moved us and moved in us memories, emotions, and vulnerabilities. This feeling is more than just a feeling. Rather, 'it is as a form of cultural politics or world making' that allows us to explore subjectivities, positions, and how individuals exist within certain structures (Ahmed, 2014, p. 12).

As we sit with this practice of feeling – experienced as affective, sensorial, exploratory, fleeting, and vulnerable – we attend to the affordances and challenges of conducting research multilingually, with/without language and in research spaces that take research into the forest and transform research practices into disturbing encounters (Kubanyiova, 2019; Morrison, 2017) that enable learnings about the Self, the Other and Each Other. Such affordances allow exploring the happen-stance associated with enacting 'linguistic hospitality' and 'voicing solidarity' (Phipps, 2012) through multilingual arrangements that reshape the relationship between researchers and participants. Such affordances are not without challenges. As we narrate them in this article, we document a narrative that sees us amid the ruins, the messiness, and the unintelligible recordings. As we navigate this, we are troubled by the notion of 'understanding': to be able to understand what is shared and why; to be able to confirm understanding through imposing a shared language; to be able to accept that understanding is not always possible. The article demonstrates our entanglement in an 'understanding trap' that spans across different realms: conceptual, epistemological, ethical and methodological. In particular, Section 4 presents arguments for and against understanding which we develop based on the reflective work presented throughout this article.

Exploring what understanding might mean in the context of this listening walk, we engage with an emerging post-qualitative paradigm: the 'new new' (Spivak, 1999), the 'dashes and the slashes' (Harvey et al., 2022, p. 108), and the 'evanescence of data' (Rifesser & Ros i Solé, 2022, p. 223). In doing so, we aim to carve a path for 'a visionary laboratory for future forms of interculturality' (Busch & Franco, 2023, p. 25). And as we situate ourselves within this paradigm, we find ourselves at the very centre of 'third space'. Both Bhabha (1994) and Soja (1996) see third space as a challenge to the status quo (e.g. colonial inheritance, dominant worldviews, Western ideologies, methodological legacies, disciplinary anchoring). Against all of this comes this third space as a radical social space where we question structures, seek to reposition people in new power relations, work against hegemony, and produce arrangements for agential participation that is not conditioned on conformity to certain expectations including the

expectation to accept the imposition of English on multilingual, racialised individuals. We hope that this process qualifies us to call ourselves what Holliday (2022) refers to as ‘traveller researchers’, in pursuit of re-thinking and un-thinking what might count as ‘understanding’, ‘voice’, ‘data’ and ‘masterfully designed methods’ in social research.

As we write as travellers, we find ourselves compelled to turn the conventional structure of academic journal articles on its head. This structure is commonly underpinned by the hierarchy of ‘thinking’ (literature review, conceptual frames) over ‘doing’ (sensing, experiencing, practicing). Nelson (2013) argues that practice should not be seen as starting from theory, highlighting the need for what he refers to as ‘doing-thinking’ (2013, p. 29); a move that starts with practice before moving to critically reflecting on theories and findings. That said, it is important to acknowledge that while our work re-centres practice, it also sits uncomfortably, discursively and vulnerably between ‘doing-thinking’ and ‘thinking-doing’ and does not treat these as binary opposites or two separate paradigms. In fact, this research encounter offers a meeting point for doing and thinking whose threads continued to peek in and out of sight as we walked, talked, thought and reflected with one another. Through re-centring the doing, we created in our collaborative, arts-based work a generative thinking space that attends to processes, affordances, and relations. This space opens the door for attuning to a lived perceptual view of the world (Pink, 2015) while challenging us to reconsider the role and position of theory in relation to practice. As we grapple with these relations, we bring snippets of practice followed by theoretical reflections in a move that deviates from the traditional journal article structure.

Listening in/to nature

Over the course of a year, a team of young people from asylum-seeking backgrounds, an artist and a team of researchers, including the three authors, visited and explored a range of treescapes across Manchester and the North West of England. Each encounter – its location and activities – was designed to open up opportunities for creative sharing with each other and the environment, from cooking Sudanese *asida* with honey and apples from a community orchard, to exploring trees in an urban park through undertaking tree surveys alongside bark and leaf rubbings. We collectively explored our sensory experiences of the treescapes we encountered, and how these, in turn, connected to memories of the past and hopes for the future. As academic researchers, we also attended to how this sensory approach shaped our relations with youth participants, and how all of us negotiated relations with the treescapes themselves. The name of this part of the project – *Feeling our Way* – captures both the tentative, iterative nature of our inquiry, as well as the affective, embodied, sensuous quality of our approach as social researchers.

The listening walk was our second treescape ‘encounter’. Broadly conceived, a listening walk is simply a walk-in which participants focus on listening. Yet this belies the range of interrelated affordances it offers for fostering knowledge and understanding:

[Listening walks] can simultaneously function as an aesthetic performance and a method of enquiry, a form of intensified human sensory perception and a way of connecting to the more-than-human world, a meditative experience-in-the-moment and a participatory pedagogy. (Gallagher & Prior, 2017, p. 165)

In conducting research across intersectional difference – including life stage, language, migration status, and ethnicity – the listening walk helps unsettle conventional hierarchies of knowledge and power (Andrews et al., 2019), placing researchers and participants alongside each other in a relationship that is sensory, inter-subjective, and inter-corporeal (O’Neill, 2018). The research space is co-created through the shared endeavour of selecting paths, encountering objects and sounds, and negotiating rhythm and pace, as we move together. At the same time, it remains open to the different knowledges, and ways of knowing, imbued in practices of moving and listening, producing ‘unexpected encounters, feelings, thoughts and analyses’ (Gallagher & Prior, 2017, p. 165; see also O’Neill, 2018; Western, 2020).

The location for the listening walk was selected following an earlier planning session in which the youth participants were presented with a series of images of different treescapes and their locations on a map. It was an image of the River Calder that attracted them to Hebden Bridge. And the river in turn encouraged our focus on listening and sound as an approach to experiencing place (Bandt et al., 2007). The encounter was guided by three questions: What can we hear in this treescape? What feelings, memories and intra-actions do these sounds evoke? How can we express/communicate the sonic landscape and our relationship to it? The encounter was co-devised by David Cường Nguyễn, a multilingual artist-in-residence on the project. In the research reflections section, we present some of David's reflections on art practice with marginalised young people.

Eighteen young men joined us in this listening walk. Some had lived in the UK for several years, while others were very newly arrived. All had arrived in the UK as unaccompanied or separated asylum-seeking children, having originally migrated from countries including Sudan, Ethiopia, and Afghanistan, and in some cases, having spent time in countries across Europe. Most youth participants spoke multiple languages, including ethnic and national languages from countries of origin, European languages learned in transit, and varying levels of English. While some had been granted leave to remain in the UK, many were still in the midst of asylum claims: a process through which the mobility, agency and hope that fuelled young people's journeys is tested by an uncertain period of precarity, immobility, and wait-hood (Chase et al., 2020; Kohli & Kaukko, 2018). Participants were recruited to the project by workers from the New Arrivals and Leaving Care teams in the Local Authority, who provide care and support for separated asylum seekers, as well as through housing providers. This process began with the recruitment of an initial group of youth leaders, with whom the approach to promoting and delivering the project was dialogically developed.

This research encounter was loosely structured by four activities. The first one focused on attending to the sonic landscape of the treescape. For three minutes, we sat with the different human and non-human sounds that dominated the soundscape: distant cars, whistling wind, walking feet on crispy leaves, different bird sounds, barking dogs, and moving branches. The loudest of all, one might argue, was the burbling river.

At the conclusion of the three minutes and after being immersed in this natural landscape and soundscape as depicted in [Figure 1](#), David encouraged everyone to share their reflections on what they heard and how they felt. It was at this point that the first author encouraged everyone to share their reflections multilingually, reminding everyone that the different sounds of the forest is a powerful reminder that the natural world does not have one dominant language and that the more diverse a natural soundscape is the healthier its ecosystem is expected to be. We started with this as a lesson we learned from our hosting forest. As we did this, we were mindful of the three important areas for a researching multilingually praxis from Andrews et al. (2019): researcher intentionality, use of research space, and attention to research relationships. In what follows we present examples of how these areas were developed in this encounter.

The intentionality was centered around creating a space for linguistic hospitality (Phipps, 2012) inspired by the acoustic diversity of the forest. However, we noted the hesitation to share reflections in other languages. The first author started by sharing her reflections in Arabic, which then encouraged other Arabic-speaking participants to share their reflections in their different Arabic dialects. Other participants reciprocated with sharing reflections from other languages while a couple insisted on using English and one questioned the point of sharing his reflections in his language when on one else could understand his language. In spite of being encouraged to contribute to the emerging multilingual soundscape, this participant preferred to use English. Reflecting the collective and reciprocal nature of listening walk, academic and artist researchers participated alongside the youth team, sharing own reflections.

This part of the encounter placed us in the 'understanding trap', leaving us vulnerable (Badwan, 2022) in different ways such as: what happens when researchers do not understand the languages spoken during research encounters? Should they understand? What happens when individuals refuse to engage in multilingual activities on the grounds that they will not be understood? How



Figure 1. Making sounds with the river.

can we exist for one another when we do not share the same language and when understanding is not fully established? We return to these questions and vulnerabilities in Section 4.

This was followed by another activity that entailed focused listening; a creative method that encouraged the young men to audio-record sounds they were interested in capturing from the treescape. These recordings included singing, conversations in various languages, bird songs, river sounds and discussions with the research team. We noted that our walk brought back childhood memories for some young men, while for others it made them wonder about future paths and aspirations. These observations are aligned with research on walking affordances during research with people with refugee – backgrounds and how such walks produce shifting temporalities (Badwan & Hall, 2020; O'Neill & Hubberd, 2010; Rishbeth & Finney, 2006). The following examples from our fieldnotes demonstrate this:

From the third author's fieldnotes:

I walked in front with two young men from Sudan and Ethiopia and one talked a bit haltingly about planting trees in Ethiopia – a mango and another tree – and also about tree species. I asked who he planted it with and he said his mother, but then it seemed his mother was still in Ethiopia ... The movement created its own way of working and thinking as we sometimes fell silent and sometimes talked.

From the first author's fieldnotes:

We walked. We talked about different things related to the young men's future. They asked me about university. They told me how many years they still need to study before they can go to university. Many said they didn't know if they would go to university. One young man wanted to study business. Another wanted to study immigration law so that he can help others. A third young man wanted to be an industrial electrician and the fourth wanted to be an IT programmer.

As seen in the fieldnote extracts, the walk created discursive timelines that stitched memories from the past, feelings triggered by the present as well as thoughts about the future. Most of that was negotiated with the bits of English and Arabic we shared. Yet, there were lots of hand movements, eye contact, facial expressions, finger pointing at things, and numerous pauses and instances of ‘I mean ...’. The *embodiment* of these communicative instances continued to remind us of the narrow linguistic tale. It is to do with favouring the purely verbal and cognitive (Finnegan, 2015, p. 19) and restricting individuals’ expansive embodied languaging (Badwan, 2021). This tale reproduced what Pennycook (2018) terms the ‘talking heads’ model; a Saussurean model which exclusively views communication as exchanging messages back and forth between speakers who simultaneously encode and decode ideas (Saussure, 1922/1983). Walking together, we experienced the meaning of how encountering one another and existing for each other is much more than encounters between talking heads.

The third activity entailed creating and recording diverse creative soundscapes that go beyond human languages and the different prejudices associated with them. David modelled an example of striking two rocks together and moving a branch while having bird songs in the background. The youth participants turned the things around them (pebbles, rocks, leaves, sticks, branches, the river itself) into sound-producing actants and produced creative soundscapes. Also, through embodied signals of dis/connection we sought to ‘speak’ to each other through and about our sounds: heads inclined or eyes met to guide our collaboration, voices laughing at the silliness of our undertaking, smiles and nods bringing about shy threads of alignments between us. Interestingly, the ‘understanding trap’ did not matter as much here – possibly due to the absence of linguistic codes. A point to which we return to in Section 4.

For the last activity we sat in a circle, touching the sand and being drawn down to earth. The sand, the sitting, the circle, the shared history of the past few hours, and the continuous bird singing that had become a familiar sound to our ears, the snacks that we passed to one another, the nods and the smiles are among many other components in this complex research assemblage. We all reflected on the walk and this time more people were willing to speak in different languages. Around half of youth participants chose to respond in English. While we must be mindful not to assume that their sentiments are shared by those who spoke in other languages, there was a collective expression of gratitude in English language reflections: for the opportunity to be in nature, and to be together. A range of positive emotions were expressed, including feeling relaxation, enjoyment, happiness, comfort, and peace. We did not understand was all that was said, but we certainly felt what was heard. Then, we headed back to the train station, marking the end of a listening walk that was more than just a walk.

Reflecting on the research encounter

Having described the research encounter, we now reflect on the walk and the creative practice that carved a path for our together-ness in the treescape. The reflections come from two sources: (1) a reflective interview conducted by the third author with the project artist, David almost exactly a year after the walk and (2) reflective notes from the third author. To start with, we turn the attention to David’s reflections, sharing below snippets from the interview:

Third Author: I found it interesting that I hadn’t heard the sound of the water – until the sound was amplified by our silence.

David: The sound got louder – nature got louder. I think – it was like as we all stopped and listened, we could hear more and more. For some of those young people, those participants, they took a moment to come back out of it. The ones that were really touched by it were like – they took their own time to come out of it. That was the source. The listening was the source, the stimulus of what you do so ... where does that take us? The ability of walking and using that as a stimulus led to a whole lot of other conversations: memories of home, comparisons between memories. The walk was great – because of the path and the way it was laid out gave us the ability to move about and have small

- conversations. Everyone moved at their own pace, with a friend – and this allowed them more solitary time, more reflection time.
- David: That creative part of them trying to make a soundscape was really interesting – it allows them to break down individual sounds ... in a way if I wanted to use drama as a comparison – when you think of lines and who interacts with what and how someone moves. It's creating a dialogue. And creating a soundscape, it is creating a dialogue with the landscape. They have to find rhythms in it – they have to find different sounds.

David's reflections describes the art practice that informed the design of this research encounter. We learned with and from David that the three-minute silence activity was a 'source', a 'stimulus' that made other conversations possible. This is a powerful example of 'making people happen' (Kell, 2015), a reminder of the role of spatial affordances and what they can allow or inhibit during research-creations. Affordances, Stockwell (2023) explains, entail not only physical/spatial characteristics but also bring to the fore the need to consider our skills, experiences, imaginations and creativity. We also learned that to start with thinking in disciplinary ways is to restrict the possibilities of what can happen in research. While the doing of art in this encounter challenged our thinking and demanded at times uncomfortable professional and personal risk-taking, it productively expanded our thinking about some of the problematics associated with the role(s) of language, feeling and understanding in social research as we demonstrate in the next section.

The second source of reflection comes from the third author's fieldnotes which include references to audio-recordings during the walk. In the following example, the third author (TA) was walking with a young person (YP) down the path and recorded this conversation:

- TA: So you now say a word in your own language about how that made you feel?
 YP: just at the moment? Alright? Yeah, I want to say something in my own language ... (The young person speaks)

In the next example the third author talks about the place of the walk which then produced a message of gratitude for bringing the participants to this place:

- TA: this is where I go all the time and when it is really hot. I go swimming here.
 YP: I appreciate you – we really enjoyed – we can appreciate.
 TA: Oh good!
 YP: I finish it up with thank you so much
 YP: what is the word?
 YP: I say thank you so much. [for] The adventure
 TA: Big adventure!

For the third author, the location of the sound walk was a familiar space as she describes in her fieldnotes:

When I listen to the audio recordings from the sensory encounter with the woods and river near my home I bring my own emplaced sense of knowing. I have swum in the river and walked the paths so many times they have become part of me. The young people that I worked with on that day have also grown in acquaintance and trusting.

As Ingold (2014) writes,

To practice participant observation, then, is to join in correspondence with those with whom we learn or among whom we study, in a movement that goes forward rather than back in time. (p. 390)

As we walked with the young people we walked in anticipation; we moved forward and as we moved forward the world changed. The third author's fieldnotes reflect on this:

When we arrived at the [train] station everyone seemed amazed, including me, as to how we went from the far reaches of the walk to this urban space. One of the young people asked me when we were out on the walk where the way back was, but others knew instinctively and turned corners. I thought about getting lost and how important that is in the work. The final walk was compressed but it showed how we had turned into

a group – as we moved across the landscape we didn't get lost but had turned into a unit, one that moved together. (25.6.2023)

This section has provided rich reflections on the walk which need to be taken together with the previous storying section as we try to stitch pieces of recollections that go well beyond language and beyond understanding.

Surviving the 'understanding trap'

As explained above, we do not aim to (re)present a traditional research encounter with fixed methodologies and confident findings. Rather, we narrate a tentative, tentacular process that draws together our diverse practices of arts-based, participatory, and multilingual inquiry (Badwan, 2021; Nunn, 2022; O'Neill & Hubbard, 2010) in the pursuit of ethical, inclusive research. Availing ourselves of and opening ourselves to the often-undisciplined, always-imperfect pursuit of creative, collaborative, diverse ways of doing and thinking embedded in these approaches, we seek to make sense of this research encounter and the possibilities and limits it offers for 'understanding'. Here, we explain how this listening walk has produced the following four provocations associated with understanding:

- (1) Understanding can be both colonial and Eurocentric
- (2) Understanding can be tyrannised by certain perceptions of the world
- (3) Understanding is at best partial
- (4) Understanding goes beyond a shared language

To 'understand' is assumed to be the target for our communicative worlds. It is seen as 'normal' or 'natural' (Bailey, 2004). We always aspire to understand for the fear that '[i]f you don't understand, we might feel alienated from each other' (Scheff, 1994 in Ahmed, 2014, pp. 8–9). It is also assumed that for understanding to be established, it needs to be mediated through a shared language that acts as a channel for conveying ideas and confirming understanding. It is common to frame understanding as a key objective for social research. While we do not argue against the need for understanding as we are, ourselves, grappling with the 'understanding trap', we would like to provocatively shake the confidence associated with understanding in social research.

Drawing on Levinas' (1969/1991) ethics of responsibility towards the other, Pennycook (2018, p. 101) asks: 'how can one coexist with the other while still leaving their being, their otherness, intact?' This question poses a slap in the face of Western philosophy that has consistently insisted on imposing epistemic similarities and frameworks of universality, leading to a significant failure to engage with epistemic differences (Fabian, 2007). Even when differences are accounted for, there is always the risk of 'squeez[ing] human difference into categories of sameness' (Pennycook, 2018, p. 101), in the quest for coherent and convergent narratives. In addition to the challenge of categorising differences, it is important to note the power dynamics in research encounters and how such dynamics shape understanding in certain directions. Commenting on this Mignolo (2009, p. 162) explains:

The knower is always implicated ... in the known, although modern epistemology ... managed to conceal both and created the figure of the detached observer, a neutral seeker of truth and objectivity who at the same time controls the disciplinary rules and puts himself or herself in a privileged position to evaluate and dictate.

Understanding in this sense becomes a site of struggle whose practices are rooted in Eurocentric philosophical traditions that seek to impose certain worldviews and position them as neutral or objective. This argument means that in this research assemblage with multilingual young men, we acknowledge our vulnerabilities as researchers who could not claim that we had fully understood all of our interactions, not just those produced in languages we do not speak but also those presented to us in repertoires we shared. This brings up a question about the potential role of an

interpreter in establishing understanding. Reflecting on this, we maintain the view that even in the presence of an interpreter, understanding will always be partial and biased.

The second argument is linked to the first. It is to do with what Barker (2015, xviii) refers to as ‘tyrannies of understanding’ that stem from confidently relying on the masterful ideologies of being specialised in disciplinary fashions. Commenting on this, he argues, ‘We need to stand back from our specialisms and explore the connections between things, their synthesis, symbiosis and interdependence’ (p. xix). He further warns, ‘[w]e think we see a pattern and suddenly we impose it on our understanding which is tyrannised by a false perception of reality’ (p. xix). Such tyrannised understanding can become tyrannising, with the power to confidently describe, misrecognise and over-theorise. These ‘tyrannies of understanding’ need resisting but also, need telling.

The third argument highlights the inherent partiality of understanding. In her discussion of embodied and disembodied notions of voice, Cooper (2023) argues that understanding is not just about interpreting words and behaviours. Rather, it is imbricated in complex social, cultural and relational contexts and links. While the former is often the focus of research interpretation, the latter is harder to story and unpack during research encounters and hence researchers often resort to their own understandings of relevant contexts and links. This, coupled with the realisation that people tell different things about themselves as they engage with different acts of positioning (Holliday, 2022), renders understanding to be always partial and developed relationally.

The fourth argument is concerned with the limits of language, arguing that understanding goes beyond having a shared language. Working in a space that could be described as ‘beyond language’ re-imagines what interaction could be. Harvey et al. (2022) acknowledge that arts-practice as a mode of doing and thinking, is a space that often works beyond language. In our case, the beyond-ness lay in the listening; to the river, and then to the sounds of the walk, as well as recognising that some of the languages spoken were not shared by all of us. Sound became important as part of this process. In this practice, we could acknowledge, ‘the power of the collective, and the mutual constitution of the individual and the collective in entanglements among persons, places, spaces, things’ (Harvey et al., 2022, p. 104). We acknowledge the importance of listening to the ‘less heard’ (ibid, p. 104) and developing an attuned listening practice while also not understanding everything. In this work, concepts of ‘voice’ and ‘language’ dissolve into a space of listening that itself is radically co-constructed within the space.

What this turn has done is offering a more hopeful practice in which multilingual, multimodal and fragmented, messy experiences is acknowledged, even when it is not necessarily understood. Researching multilingually (Phipps, 2019) affords this space, while opening up a form of listening that expands beyond the human. This might create a much-needed exploratory space for posthuman inquiry that involves a different mode of listening such as the one described by Robin Kimmerer (2020, p. 48):

I come here to listen, to nestle in the curve of the roots in a soft hollow of pine needles, to lean my bones against the column of white pine, to turn off the voice in my head until I can hear the voices outside it: the shhhh of wind in needles, water trickling over rock, nuthatch tapping, chipmunks digging, beechnut falling, mosquito in my ear, and something more – something that is not me, for which we have no language, the wordless being of others in which we are never alone. After the drumbeat of my mother’s heart, this was my first language.

Thinking with Kimmerer (2020) attunes us to an additional set of actants in the process of listening, the river, the trees, the birds, the feeling of being in the river, listening to a bird, a voice as part of something broader and something for which we have no language and thus falls beyond understanding.

Having presented these four arguments that problematise the notion of understanding in research, we return to the title of this section to offer some clarifications. We have carefully chosen the phrase ‘surviving the understanding trap’. The verb ‘survive’ denotes that we are likely to be always imbricated in acts of understanding that are tyrannised and tyrannising. Paradoxically,

we will continue to aspire to ‘understand’ but we have learned to do this differently, vulnerably and un-masterfully while being aware of the ethics and politics of understanding, for the Self and for the Other. We believe that this has important implications not only for the intercultural but also for research practice more broadly. As we feel troubled by understanding, we need to clarify that our problematisation of understanding is not to say that we need to stop understanding. Rather, it is about highlighting the problematics of understanding in research and intercultural communication more broadly. We move on, next, with the argument making a case that we still need to understand, albeit in different ways. Here, we outline why understanding is still important in this research encounter:

(1) To understand entails a quest for connection.

The academics, artist, and youth participants on this project come from different migrant backgrounds with complex lived experiences that involve grappling with unfamiliar places, conflicting linguistic expectations, different cultural norms, and many unknown ways of living. Given this, striving for understanding – however partial – is an everyday practice for many. For how can those of us often perceived as ‘non-integrable with ‘un-grievable’ (Butler, 2009) lives respond back if we do not try to understand and to be understood? The research project – and particularly participatory arts-based research, as a relational approach that aspires to unsettle hierarchies of knowledge and power – provides exceptional conditions for negotiating understanding as a resource for fostering belonging and claiming recognition in and beyond the project (Nunn, 2022).

(2) To (strive to) understand is an ethical commitment to socially just research

What is at stake for people from minoritised backgrounds when they participate in our research? How might we – or should we – honour their time, their ideas, their experiences, in the context of lives often already strained, ignored, or exploited? In the context of refugee research, Jacobsen and Landau (2003) emphasise the dual imperative of research to be not only academically rigorous but also to improve the lives of refugees. This challenge is echoed in the increasing consensus that research should be impactful beyond academia. How then do we grapple with the inevitable partiality of our understanding while also seeking to communicate and act on the experiences, ideas and needs of those we work with? Collaborative and decolonial methodologies offer some promise in this space, as outlined below.

(3) To understand is a collaborative process

Co-productive, arts-based, and multilingual approaches hold the potential to ‘loosen the knowledge/power axis involved in knowledge production and “expertness”’ (O’Neill & Hubbard, 2010, p. 48). Various through practices of participatory or co-created research design, delivery, interpretation, and dissemination, the privileging of sensuous, embodied, and affective ways of knowing, and challenging the centrality of English such approaches create possibilities for more ethical, diverse, and inclusive modes of understanding. Yet even within these approaches that actively seek to name and challenge epistemic exclusivism and hierarchies of knowledge and power, we must remain alert to their continued dominance, not only in our own knowledge and practice, but also, as we recounted above, in the imaginaries of young men seeking to belong in new contexts.

(4) To understand requires commitment to go beyond language

The article joins previous sensory and creative research in challenging the limits of language and highlighting its colonising and homogenising powers (e.g. Kubanyiova, 2019; Nelson, 2013; O’Neill, 2018). The in/tangible artifacts and entanglements it presents exemplify the ‘research ruins’ that are

pushed aside if we insist on traditional social sciences approaches. To this end, we echo the words of Conquergood (2002, p. 146) in relation to language-based texts: ‘What gets squeezed out by this epistemic violence is the whole realm of complex, finely nuanced meaning that is embodied, tacit, intoned, gestured, improvised, co-experienced, covert – and all the more deeply meaningful because of its refusal to be spelled out’. We do not claim that this approach is a cure for all epistemic ills and contend that even this research approach can indeed be plagued by, and reduced to, the tyranny of instrumentality and categorisable understandings. Further, we recognise the impossibility of rendering such embodied, creative, and affective understanding legible in conventional academic texts. That said, we hope that this work offers a hopeful yet messy third space, joining the dashes and the slashes of research in the post qualitative and participatory realm through creative practice.

Conclusion

This exploration has brought us to the edges of our disciplines and practices. This process of becoming and learning together might feel complex to describe and learn from. Perhaps the best way of describing this work is in terms of an intercultural encounter. Riferer and Ros i Solé (2022) describe the potential of ethnographic film making in intercultural encounters here:

The movement inherent in intercultural processes is only ever temporarily fixed, and multilingual encounters may be defined as events whose meanings are ephemeral and intransit and, as a result, there is an inherent difficulty to capture these by observing languages and cultures at rest. (Ros i Solé et al., 2020, p. 221)

In their article they argue for the importance of the embodied encounter, which uses a phenomenological approach. They argue that theory can be implicated in practice, in the doing and feeling comes the ideas, drawing from ideas from practice-as-research (Barrett & Bolt, 2010). They draw on the idea of ‘vibrancy’ to describe the intercultural encounter. However, here, listening to the sound of the water and the birds and the sounds of the valley, we would suggest the encounter includes the non-human encounters that shaped our day. Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter* (2010) introduces the idea of matter and animacy to these encounters.

This, Riferer & Ros i Solé continue,

... has paved the way for seeing the intercultural encounter and identity as a work-in-progress, a force and ‘vibrant identity’ (Ros i Solé et al., 2020)

While our listening walk was not framed as an ‘intercultural encounter’ – since most, if not all, everyday encounters are intercultural– we would argue that the interculturality in this encounter widened to include the river, the birds, the branches, the falling leaves and the trees around us.

Writing about this methodology, as it emerged, in an encounter with young people on a walk down a valley, the framing and conceptual understanding of the encounter *paradoxically* needs further understanding. The practice of co-creating the research event was wrapped up with many other conversations and modes of knowing and doing. At the end, we ended up with a collective yet individual walking experience that is attuned to rhythm, pace, water, and not knowing. We attempted to reflect all of this in the way the article was written: with some joined dots, loose ends, reflections, snippets, and arguments for and against understanding. We hope that researchers will enjoy our journeying as we travelled in pursuit of a radical third space and we look forward to seeing how this work and the arguments we present can be diffractively read and used in future intercultural research projects and provocations.

Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge our youth participants for their generous sharing throughout this project. Thanks are due to David Cường Nguyễn, artist and co-researcher on the project. In addition, we would like to extend our thanks and gratitude to the wider Voices of the Future research team.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the National Environment Research Council [grant number NE/V021370/1]. The funders also included the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC).

Data availability statement

Data not available due to ethical restrictions.

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