Maastricht University

'You can't limit yourself to one country'

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Impact paragraph

Ethnographic fieldwork inevitably involves becoming woven into the fabric of research subjects' lives in the pursuit of knowledge (Lücking 2019). Such immersion is usually beneficial to the study as it allows for in-depth insights. In the context of my research, the data that I have gathered allow me to add nuances to politicized debates about migration and mobility. Migration to the country of residence is often portrayed as the end of mobility. Continued engagement with the origin country, 'return' visits more particularly, tends to be seen as a transgression from the 'responsibility' to integrate (Vathi 2015a). My findings, however, show that young people with a migration background, including those belonging to the 'first' and 'second' generation, continue to engage in mobility to the origin country and that this forms an integral part of how they navigate the process of becoming an adult.

In light of critiques of ethnography, and research more generally, as the 'extraction' of knowledge and as being of little direct benefit to participants (Davis & Craven 2016; 143: Lücking 2019; Gupta & Kelly 2014), I felt compelled to reciprocate the generosity of those encountered in the field. This is deemed particularly important in research contexts whereby the researcher has more privilege than the majority of participants and should not be confused with 'charity' (Gupta & Kelly 2014). 'Giving back' is rather about 'resource sharing, reciprocity, exchange, and social interactions mediated by power, privilege and lines of difference' (ibid.: 3).

In the context of my study, it was not possible to occupy a disinterested role in the world of my research participants and other community members. This was not only due to the fact that I brought resources to the local environment as researcher but also related to my position as a 'semi-member' of the Dutch-Ghanaian population (see Section 4.8 on reflexivity and positionality). Although I had not grown up in this community, I faced the expectation of having to 'give back' as someone with Ghanaian roots who had reached a high educational level in the Netherlands. As mentioned in the Background chapter, young people of migrant background are generally over-represented in lower educational tracks, which is why I was often presented as a sort of 'role model' by community leaders and perceived as one by some participants. Based on the sense of responsibility I felt as a researcher and as an individual who

is committed to social justice more generally, I attempted to create impact in ways that were meaningful to the target group (Davis & Craven 2016: 140-141). This sometimes meant that the reciprocity or service I provided was largely disconnected from the focus of my research. Though everyday acts of reciprocity are usually not considered in debates about research valorisation (Gupta & Kelly 2014; Van Geel 2019b), they can have direct impacts on research subjects and the communities in which research was conducted.

Hence, in this chapter, I not only focus on the research outcomes as is commonly done, but also on the research process itself. Here, I move beyond assessments of impact that are measurable in quantitative terms. In the first two sections, I focus on 'impact' as facilitated by the research *process,* with a particular focus on participants and the community, respectively. In the final section, I describe the impacts on the public in terms of the research *outcomes.* Although these groups benefitted from my research in overlapping ways, I have distinguished them to provide a broader understanding of valorisation.

Participant impact

By providing practical and emotional support as main acts of reciprocity, I have attempted to make my research beneficial to the young people who participated, which can be seen in various ways. First, practical support ranged from helping participants with homework to reviewing job and internship applications and joining them to school open days (see Figure 1). Here, my experiences as a 'first generation' student and knowledge about Dutch society in general proved to be particularly relevant. For example, during a concentric circle interview with a participant (Meredith) about her sources of support, both locally and transnationally, she listed my name when being asked about who provided educational support. Our regular meetings to discuss her homework at the local library had paid-off; Meredith, who had struggled in class for different reasons, expressed that it had given her the confidence to graduate from vocational education.

Figure 1: Joining Meredith to an open day at the University of Applied Sciences.

Source: Fieldwork, 2018-2019.

Second, emotional support often involved emphatic listening and providing an avenue for expression. My experience in interviews for example reflected the notion that the act of sharing stories can have a healing component (Gupta & Kelly 2014). It was common for young people to share some of the challenges they faced, ranging from racism and depression to parental pressure, which could last for hours. Although I was often not able to offer a solution to their issues, many participants appeared to simply appreciate the opportunity to have their experiences acknowledged and reflect on their life trajectories more broadly amid their busy lives.

The experiences highlighted above often enhanced emotional closeness in my relationships with participants, which lasted beyond the fieldwork period. Exiting the field is therefore an incomplete process as I continue to remain involved in many participants' lives and provide resources to them as they work towards their goals. In doing so, I contributed to the creation of a podcast hosted by one of my participants (Nancy) for example. She uses this medium to discuss diasporic youth's experiences of growing up between different countries.

Community impact

Beyond individual relationships with participants, I have participated as a volunteer in several initiatives and organizations that served the wider community, some of which are described in

Chapter 3. I assisted in the build-up to and during events, wrote reports and conducted scoping studies. Aside from my more assisting role, I had set up activities myself in collaboration with young volunteers, including a visual storytelling project. This consisted of a series of movie and discussion nights with invited speakers and visual storytelling workshops. The latter were co-organized with a small group of research participants and YouTubers. They had expressed interest in learning more about editing and presenting videos about their lived experiences from a video-maker who shared a similar background, as they did not frequently see people like 'them' in positions they aspire to. The project ended with a presentation of participants' creations for family and friends (see Figure 2), followed by praise and feedback from two external filmmakers. This activity allowed young people to exhibit their talents and skills, and extend their networks by introducing them to professionals in their field of interest. Moreover, towards the end of fieldwork, one of the workshop participants expressed how much fun she has had over the course of the year, which can be considered a form of reciprocity in itself. 'I'm just very happy to have had you among us this year. It was really nice talking to you, to hear things from your side and share my story'.

Figure 2: The audience at the final session of the visual storytelling project.

Source: Fieldwork, 2018-2019.

As part of fieldwork, I also took the opportunity to inform the wider community about my research and discuss more general topics that were relevant to them, including development and education. As such, I participated in a panel discussion organized by a charity foundation in June 2018 and in two radio shows hosted by a The Hague-based Ghanaian radio station.

Public impact

Finally, I have been striving to make social impact, both as a member of the MO-TRAYL project as well as an individual researcher by engaging in valorisation activities in the public arena. Within the academic context, I have published several peer-reviewed articles, presented at multiple international conferences and given invited lectures discussing the often-neglected role of physical mobility in young people's lives.

Beyond academia, together with the MO-TRAYL team, I have won the Valorisation Prize of Maastricht University's Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences for our design and implementation of a creative writing workshop for research participants and a resulting book (available in three languages and as an E-book) and website[8], called *Finding Your Voice*. It centers young people's stories of growing up between Ghana and Europe, in their own voices. As migrant-background youth's perspectives and experiences are often missing from the debate (see Chapter 1), the *Finding Your Voice* outputs fill an important gap. Building on this, we are currently launching a podcast featuring interviews with participants about their mobile lives. These outputs are relevant to and accessible for anyone working with young people, be they teachers, social workers or researchers, and have been widely distributed. Despite the lack of research, trips that migrant-background youth make to their or their parents' countries of origin are often assumed to be bad for their educational development (Mazzucato & Haagsman 2022), which can have implications for their encounters with teachers and other societal actors. *The Finding Your Voice* outputs offer a more nuanced picture by shedding light on the resources, relationships, and learning experiences that young people have acquired as a result of cross-border linkages. Moreover, I have shared my knowledge about arts-research methodologies together with other MO-TRAYL team members at academic conferences, enabling us to further enhance our research impact.

[8] https://www.motrayl.com/stories/youth-workshop

As an individual researcher, I have also participated in various activities to make my research available to a larger, non-scientific audience. First, I was nominated to the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences' (KNAW) and Young Academy's *Faces of Sciences* (FOS) program in 2018, which focuses on making research accessible to young people in the Netherlands. To this end, I have written several blog posts[9] (in Dutch), some in collaboration with research participants, and presented my research in social engagement classes. Second, I have given public lectures/presentations to diverse audiences. Through my involvement in FOS, I was for example approached by the National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden to give a public lecture about my research in the context of Black Achievement Month 2021, an annual festival that celebrates the achievements of people of African descent in the Netherlands. Following the lecture, I led a panel discussion around the main themes of my research with young people of diverse migrant backgrounds. Furthermore, I engaged young people in my research in December 2020 by presenting my project and broader educational journey at the IMC Weekendschool, a program for pupils from underprivileged neighborhoods in the Netherlands. Third, I have consulted for several people working with Ghanaian-background youth and the Dutch-Ghanaian population in general. I gave advice to journalist Marnel Breure in the context of her research for a two-part documentary ('Hoe God verscheen in Ghana') on Christianity in Ghana and the Netherlands, which was shown on national television (EO) on 11 July 2021. The second part of this film focuses on the role that Christianity plays in the lives of second-generation Dutch-Ghanaian youth. Finally, I participated in a roundtable discussion in November 2020 about the Dutch-Ghanaian community, organized by the *Black Archives,* a cultural centre that documents black history in the Netherlands. This activity was part of the organization's research project about racism faced by Dutch people of African descent.

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While the emphasis on the *outputs* of research in discussions on valorisation has enabled insight into researchers' attempts to advance knowledge to society, it has resulted in the neglect of 'smaller' acts of reciprocity that fall outside this realm but are nevertheless meaningful (Gupta & Kelly 2014). This raises the question of what avenues of societal contribution are considered

[9] https://www.nemokennislink.nl/facesofscience/wetenschappers/gladys-akom-ankobrey/

legitimate and what not (ibid.: 7). By providing examples of the various ways in which I have striven to create impact, I sought to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of valorisation.