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Young migrants on the move: Ethics and methods of conducting qualitative research 'in the moment'

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Abstract

Qualitative forms of enquiry offer valuable opportunities to generate rich data that deepens our understandings of contemporary social issues, such as migration. Qualitative methods are often championed for enabling the engagement of so-called hard-to-reach or vulnerable groups in research and through using techniques that support the building of research relationships and rapport with participants. However, possibilities for building rapport can be problematic in contexts of flux and precarity. In this paper, we reflect on (and problematise) our decision-making in relation to the ethics and methods of a qualitative study exploring the livelihoods of young African migrants in Ghana. Our reflections highlight the challenges of investigating youth mobilities, including how frequent movements influence the generation of in-depth data with young people occupying precarious circumstances. Capturing data 'in the moment' challenged us to rethink our approaches, offering alternative ways to conduct a qualitative enquiry with young people frequently on the move.

Keywords

rapport, group discussions, interviews, migrants, young people, ethics, qualitative methods, trust

Introduction

Building trust and rapport with participants is an essential, yet seldom questioned, part of undertaking qualitative research. Possibilities for building rapport can be problematic in contexts of flux and precarity. In this paper, we reflect on (and problematise) our decision-making in relation to the ethics and methods of a qualitative study exploring the everyday lives and livelihoods of young African migrants in Ghana, a group of young people who are frequently on the move and who typically live and work in contexts of vulnerability, often in the absence of parental figures or other forms of support. Our reflections highlight the challenges of investigating youth mobilities, including how frequent movements influence the generation of in-depth data and the building rapport with young people occupying precarious circumstances.

Drawing on examples from an in-depth study utilising a range of qualitative methods (group discussions, interviews, and photo-elicitation), with 59 young African migrants in Ghana, we share our experiences of involving this group of young people in a research project that sought to generate a deeper understanding of their lives and livelihood strategies. In line with calls for reflexivity in qualitative research (Hammersley, 2009, Swauger, 2011), we critically reflect on our pre-conceived assumptions about how to 'best' conduct research with these young people (who often have no permanent location). We pay particular attention to the tricky ethics and methods deliberations that emerged 'in the moment'– sometimes referred to as 'situated ethics' (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004) and draw on the notion of the 'sociologist as voyeur' (Schuster, 2015) to question our efforts to better understand the lives of these young people. The latter prompts us to question how our positionalities, as academic researchers located in the UK and Ghana, triggered ethics questions about our overall research intentions and the particular sensitivities tied to asking young people to narrate the hardships and vulnerabilities they experience. This is particularly notable when the difficulties experienced by these young people were clearly apparent via our observations and documentation of the study context, which was

marked by significant socio-economic disadvantage and poverty. Our reflections challenge us to rethink our assumptions and consider how our positionalities shaped our chosen approach. In doing so, we aim to offer some ways to advance decision-making about ethics and methods in this field of enquiry and broader international development contexts – guiding approaches for qualitative researchers working with mobile or so-called 'hard to reach' individuals and groups.

We commence with an overview of some of the literature detailing qualitative approaches to research with young migrants, along with the documented complexities of researching African childhoods and migration experiences, before exposing some of the reported complexities and challenges of the ethics and methods when conducting research in this space. We are mindful of the different terms used in the literature to describe different categories of migrant but also research that refers to street children and youth who reflect a large body of young people that have migrated in search of work, particularly in the African context (see van Blerk et al., 2023; Mizen, 2018). We have drawn on this diverse literature, but for the purposes of our study and this paper, refer to 'young migrants' throughout to reflect young people who have moved (temporarily or permanently) from their location of origin or homeland and for whatever reason (e.g., economic, education, forced). We proceed with details about our study and the methods used to provide the context for the paper and the reflections and discussion that follow. Our reflections focus on three key areas. First, the difficulties of accessing and recruiting young migrants who are frequently on the move. Second, the relative successes and limitations of our chosen methods, and finally, the sensitive nature of the questions we asked based on academic interest in the field. These reflections contribute to, and take forward, debates on the ethics of representation and the complex ways in which dominant power relations can be reproduced in and through research – despite best intentions.

Migration research with young people – Ethics and methods

Increases in global migration have prompted concerns about the socio-economic, health and environmental implications of mobility, and migration is often framed as a contemporary social challenge – despite evidence of the opportunities it affords individuals, communities and countries (Di Cosmo et al. 2011; Prado et al. 2009). Such increases have triggered an expansion of research *on* migrants (and of differing categories, e.g., economic, forced, refugee, unaccompanied) and their experiences. An established range of approaches and techniques are described in the literature about how to (and not) undertake migration research with varying and 'vulnerable' categories of migrants (see Robertson et al., 2018; Zapata-Barrero and Yalaz, 2018). Research conducted directly with young migrants, however, has been rather limited (some exceptions include Spencer et al. 2022; van Blerk et al., 2023; Chase and Allsop, 2021), with much of the available research taking adult perspectives (e.g., the views of parents or professionals) as a proxy measure for understanding children and young people's migration experiences (Spencer et al. 2020).

Within health disciplines, for example, research has typically assessed children's migration and health experiences by interviewing parents about their children's health and well-being, or by using standardised measures that quantify young people's experiences and health status (see Quach et al. 2015; Zwi et al. 2017). Whilst these studies offer

important insights into children's health status and/or parents' views of their children's health, these approaches arguably sidestep young people's own frames of reference for understanding their lives and migration experiences. Much of this body of research also has a tendency to problematise young migrants and their lives by taking a focus on negative outcomes and practices and by foregrounding their assumed 'vulnerabilities', rather than demonstrating evidence of their agency (some exceptions are discussed below). By locating vulnerability within the individual, such approaches neglect a full-fledged examination of the complex social conditions and contexts of vulnerability that many young migrants navigate and occupy (Hart, 2023) – prompting important questions about the ethics of representation (Denzin, 2003) and how the production of knowledge can generate particular (negative) understandings and representations of these young people.

The positioning and representation of young migrants as being especially vulnerable often shapes approaches to research and related procedural research ethics processes. For example, institutional ethics processes are often concerned about safeguarding concerns and the need to 'protect' young people in research – often mandating that researchers provide clear steps for accessing, recruiting and engaging young people into research to avoid additional harms (Spencer et al. 2021). Processes of informed consent can become highly bureaucratised, with lengthy information sheets and written consent forms that are not well suited to the study context or participants or written in a language less familiar to participants. Translating research ethics terms can become lost or the meaning altered during the process of translation. These ethical 'safeguards' can sometimes limit the possibilities for young people, especially migrants wary of authority, to participate in research about their own lives (Castillo-Goncalves, 2020; Hauber-Özer and Call-Cummings, 2020; Moskal, 2019).

Some exceptions do exist, and an increasing body of work emphasises the importance of tapping into children and young people's perspectives and experiences directly. These exceptions bring to the fore the everyday lives and experiences of young migrants, offering insights into the complexities of conducting in-depth research with young people frequently on the move, and who occupy positions of precarity and vulnerability (e.g., see Spencer et al. 2022; Dankyi et al. 2022; Castle and Diarra, 2003; Chase and Allsop, 2021; Hashim and Thorsen, 2011; Punch, 2002). Informed by perspectives from the sociology of childhood (Mayall, 2002), children's geographies and children's rights to participation, as enshrined in the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN 1989), this area of research typically makes use of a range of qualitative and participatory approaches of enquiry in a variety of formats. This area of research positions young migrants as agents who actively seek out opportunities to pursue a better life, despite facing significant disadvantage and vulnerabilities – often migrating independently from adults and/or family members (Dankyi et al. 2022; van Blerk et al., 2023; Mizen, 2018).

For example, Robertson et al. (2016) used Photovoice (a method that uses participants' images and narratives to reflect issues of importance to them) to capture the acculturation experiences of young refugees in Australia. Photographs were reported as being especially valuable for capturing these young people's migration journeys and for 'pushing back' against dominant stereotypes of refugees as inherently vulnerable and devoid of agency. Such methods have been further championed for the ability to diffuse power

relations between adult researcher and younger participant and those tied to socio-cultural norms that can be otherwise exacerbated via other methods that privilege the status of the researcher, as well as accommodating language barriers (Harper, 2017; Robertson et al., 2016). However, critiques of these approaches highlight how Photovoice can also inadvertently reinforce power and authoritarian approaches – particularly when due care is not given to the rationale for using such an approach and how images are interpreted by (adult) researchers (van Blerk et al., 2023; Higgins, 2016).

Other research shares important insights about the specific ethics questions raised by young migrants' participation in research (Spencer et al. 2021; Block et al., 2012; Castillo-Goncalves, 2020; Hauber-Özer and Call-Cummings, 2020; Moskal, 2019). As noted, institutional ethics processes that have a tendency to operate from a protectionist stance and often insist on the rigid application of ethical safeguarding – often without due acknowledgement of their socio-cultural relevance. For example, the use of standardised written information sheets and consent forms is the norm for many university-based Research Ethics Committees, which can inadvertently exclude young people who are wary of official documents or have low literacy levels, meaning that 'information' documents can be rendered redundant (Spencer et al. 2021; Chase and Allsop, 2021). In migration research, issues of language, culture and power imbalances may exacerbate distrust (Düvell et al., 2010, Hauber-Özer and Call-Cummings, 2020) and call for greater transparency and critical reflection on the processes and practices that effectively serve to marginalise young migrants in research on their own lives.

Attending to power relations in childhood and youth studies research, along with the importance of building trust and rapport with younger participants, is thus a crucial aspect of reflexivity (Spencer and Doull 2015; Spencer et al., 2020; Block et al., 2012). Careful engagement with the effects of intergenerational power relationships helps to guard against adult assumptions about young lives and identify the best ways to develop knowledge with young people and build trust. In migration research (and within Global South contexts), careful attention to post-colonial power relations is also needed and how the impacts of colonialism and Global North perspectives continue to shape research aims and intentions. Drawing on Cooke and Kothari (2001), Porter (2016) describes the importance of exposing 'the landscapes of power, politics and vested interests in which research is located' (p.302) and in order to build trust and local knowledges that (re)shape dominant (Global North) systems of knowledge embedded within global relations of power. Whilst our study aimed to rebalance such 'landscapes of power', and through enhancing knowledge of the lives of young migrants in Africa, questions about whose interests the research serves emerge – a point we return to in our final discussion.

Although newly emergent research offers promise for the development of qualitative enquiry with young migrants, many extant studies take a focus on resettlement and acculturation processes and thus, often take place in 'fixed' localities and in post-migration contexts. Much less work captures the experiences of frequently mobile youth who engage in ongoing mobilities in search of work and a 'better life' (see Chase and Allsop, 2021 for an exception). Investigating ongoing youth mobilities is gaining attention as young people continuously navigate global uncertainty and contexts of precarity – triggering frequent shifts in and across geographical contexts and boundaries (Robertson et al., 2018). We thus aim to add new insights into the complexities of conducting research in this space to trigger ethics and methods reflection and open new debates

for the advancement of qualitative enquiry in this field. Drawing on field notes and the direct accounts provided by our research assistants, the paper exposes the difficulties of capturing in-depth data on young migrants' lives and livelihoods.

A qualitative study investigating the livelihoods of young African migrants

Study context

The study was undertaken in Ghana in West Africa, which has seen significant increases in youth migration (internal and international) in recent times (Ghana Statistical Service, 2021). Ghana's population is currently made up of 35.3% of children aged 0–14 years. The population of ages 15–64 years increased from 57.0% in 2010 to 60.4% in 2021. Ghana's population, therefore, is more youthful with the population within age 15–35 years (classified as youth per the National Youth Policy) forming 38.2% in the 2021 Population and Housing Census (Ghana Statistical Service, 2021).

Much of the migration research undertaken in Ghana has focused on the movement of young girls from the relatively deprived north of the country to larger southern cities such as Kumasi and the capital, Accra (Wrigley-Asante 2014). These girls typically migrate in search of work as head porters (known locally as Kayayei) – carrying load with head pans for people at marketplaces and lorry stations for cash and others selling their wears on the streets to make money before returning to their homelands. Such studies on kayayei have exposed some of the recruitment and sampling challenges of working with this group of young people (Awumbila and Ardayfio, 2008, Wrigley-Asante 2014). This area of research, however, tells us little about other young migrants that come to Ghana from neighbouring Western Africa to find employment – some returning to their countries of origin, with others moving within and across different places in Ghana in search of work. Many of these young people migrate independently of adults – displaying their independence and autonomy as they self-navigate new contexts and experiences and thereby 'blur' dominant constructions of childhood/adulthood (Dankyi et al. 2022) and typically reflect youth labour migration trends across Western Africa (Howard 2014, van Blerk et al., 2023). There are few studies that report on the ethics challenges of this 'blurring', particularly when young people take-up 'adult' roles in pursuit of a better life, but who remain 'children' in the eyes of institutional ethics boards.

Study aims and participants

The main aim of the study was to advance the theorisation of 'empowerment' from young people's frames of reference and by unpacking the everyday lives and livelihoods of young African migrants in Ghana. The term empowerment has been differentially defined across various disciplines. In the context of this study, empowerment was understood as a 'bottom up' process and outcome that prompts social change based on the needs and priorities of the individuals and groups involved (Laverack, 2005). We thus sought to capture young migrants' own understandings of empowerment and the pathways for (and limits of) achieving social change as defined by them.

We recruited 59 young people aged 15–24 years who had migrated from rural and regional areas of Ghana to the capital city and from neighbouring Western African countries such as Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon, Togo and Burkina Faso and in line with our theoretically informed sampling frame based on age, gender and migration status. Recruitment was aided by our collaborations with community organisations that support young migrants and street-involved youth. Thirty-one young men and 28 young women took part, the majority of whom had migrated independently from family members and other adults.

Methods

Our data collection methods were carefully selected to ensure congruency with the study's main aims and crucially, with reference to the specific complexities of conducting research with young people (Christensen and James, 2017). Because of this, our original intention was to utilise a range of ethnographic and participatory fieldwork techniques including group discussions and in-depth interviews about young migrants' lives and livelihoods, and naturalistic observations with photo-elicitation (we reflect on the relative successes of these approaches in the section that follows). Such methods have been reported as being especially effective for generating in-depth accounts of migration experiences and reducing power differences (Hauber-Özer and Call-Cummings, 2020; Zapata-Barrero and Yalaz, 2018), but are also well suited to research with young people by enabling them to participate in a range of different ways with (or without) their peers being present. Group discussions were selected to enable an opportunity to examine group interaction and the ways in which participants' responses are expressed in relation to the perspectives of others (Krueger and Casey, 2008). In the context of this research, this method was also chosen for its potential to promote participants' level of comfort in the supportive environment of peers and as one-step towards diffusing power relations between adult researchers and younger participants. Group discussions are thus often championed as being well suited for research with young people (Bagnoli and Clark, 2010).

However, in order to elicit more in-depth individual perspectives and (in part) to guard against possible limitations of group methods, such as negative group dynamics and influence, we also conducted interviews (individual, dyads and triads) with participants, and in line with their preferences. All group discussions and interviews were audio-recorded and translated verbatim, sometimes with the use of translators. Our methods and questions were developed and piloted in collaboration with our study's Young Person Advisory Group (YPAG). Our YPAG comprised of five young Ghanaians aged between 19 and 32 years with experience of youth advocacy work and migration. Questions and discussion topics included decisions and experiences of migration, young migrants' working lives and livelihoods, and their understandings of the terms 'power' and 'empowerment'. The latter included discussions about decision-making, choice and control. We also asked about times when they felt powerless or powerful and the things in their life that they wanted support with or would like to change (see Table 1, e.g., questions). Group discussions and interviews were conducted by (Dankyi) and our four research assistants based in Ghana. Our RAs were post-graduate researchers (two women, two men) with professional experience of working with

Table 1. Selected Examples of Discussion Questions.

1. When and why did you decide to come to [name of location]
   - Probes: Why [name of location]? What appealed about these places? What had you heard? What did you hope you would find here?
   - How and when did you make the journey to Ghana or the city? What can you share about the journey? What was it like?
   - What made you decide to leave your locality of origin to come here?
2. What is it like to be a young migrant in Ghana/city?
   - What do you like/dislike about Ghana or city of current residence?
   - Is it different/similar to [country/place of origin] and in what ways?
   - Does it meet your expectations/hopes and why?
3. Decision-making, influence and choice
   - Did you make the choice to come to Ghana/City by yourself? What prompted the choice?
   - Do you feel able to make decisions about your life and circumstances and why do you think so?
   - Can you give me an example of how you influence things in your life?
   - What are your hopes for your future?
     - Do you feel that you are able to make choices to realise your hopes?
   - Are there things that stop you from making decisions?
     - What would you like to have greater influence, choice or control over and why?
4. Empowerment and power
   - What does the term 'empowerment' mean to you?
   - Government has often spoken about their plans to empower young people. If you have heard about this before, what do you think the term means to other young people?
   - *Probe: Where do your ideas about empowerment come from?*
     - Where have you heard the term used?
     - What do you think about the term?
     - What other things do you think are important for understanding empowerment for young people?
   - What does the word power mean to you?
   - Can you tell me about a time when you felt powerful?
     - What happened? What did you do? How did you feel?
   - Are there times when you feel powerless?
     - Can you give an example? What does that feel like? What could you not do when you felt powerless?
   - What would help you to feel or be more powerful?
     - Are there things that stop you from feeling powerful?

street-involved youth and social work. The discussion that follows draws on insights and reflections captured by our RAs during the course of the study and when collecting data with participants via the aforementioned methods.

In order to understand better the importance of social context on young migrants' lives and livelihoods, we also undertook observations of the places and spaces young people occupied. We asked young people to capture images, as part of the photo-elicitation method, to explore their reflections of place and the importance of their immediate contexts to their everyday lives. Naturalistic observation, combined with photo-elicitation, offers a valuable method to capture and unpack differences between reported and observed experiences – offering rich data to be generated in real time. Opportunities for observation, however,

were limited by the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on social distancing and free movement. The photo-elicitation method presented us with additional unforeseen challenges, as we discuss below.

Ethical considerations

A University Research Ethics Panel in the UK and in Ghana approved the study. In addition to following standard procedural ethics frameworks, we also used international ethics guidelines and frameworks on conducting research with children and young people in vulnerable contexts (e.g., Crivello and Morrow, 2021). We appointed an ethics advisor with significant expertise and experience of research ethics with children and in contexts of poverty for the duration of the project. Our advisor provided ethical oversight and guidance for the duration of the project. All participants were fully informed, in written and verbal formats, of the study and what their involvement would mean. Participants were asked to provide their written consent prior to any data collection (a requirement of both institutional ethics committees). For those under the age of 16 years and, in the absence of any parent or legal guardian, consent was provided (in *loco parentis*) by the designated safeguarding lead from the local Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO). Indeed, we worked closely with local NGOs and community organisations supporting street-involved youth and young migrants to ensure access to relevant local support was available as needed during the course of the study. All data were stored securely in line with data protection legislation and transcripts were fully anonymised, removing names and any contextual identifiers.

In the sections that follow, we critically reflect on our chosen methods and approach, focusing on three key areas. First, we share some of the difficulties we encountered with accessing and recruiting young migrants who were frequently on the move and in the absence of parents or family members. We then proceed with a focus on our chosen study methods; namely, group discussions, interviews and photo-elicitation and consider their relative strengths and limitations for accessing young migrants' perspectives on their lives and livelihoods. The complexities of conducting research 'on the spot' or 'in the moment' come to the fore in these reflections and remind us of the challenges of building trust and rapport with participants. Finally, we offer a critique of our interview questions that focused on highly sensitive and complex topic areas including migration, work, empowerment and young lives. Breaking down tricky theoretical concepts into relevant interview questions for young migrants proved challenging as we sought to avoid inadvertently shaping participants' responses; for example, by asking leading questions about the meaning of 'empowerment'. These final reflections point to the importance of attending to cultural nuances and the complexities of imposition of dominant (Western) frames of reference that may be less appropriate in other contexts, such as the Global South – highlighting questions about whose interests the research serves.

Accessing and recruiting young migrants on the move

Our intended purposive sampling criteria comprised a diverse range of young migrants. However, our intention to recruit via existing contacts with local NGOs proved somewhat successful in reaching out to our target sample and we were able to connect with young

people attending particular training and apprenticeship programmes supporting street-involved youth. However, more often, it was difficult to find and locate participants as they had no fixed places of abode or regular place of work and frequently moved around the city in search of work and a secure place to sleep. At times, young people agreed to participate but then would pull out at the time of interview – often because of work or other commitments. Indeed, the former prompted important reflections about the implications of taking participants away from work and thus, a loss of income. Whilst our institutional ethics approval permitted a modest honorarium to acknowledge participants' time and contribution to the study, such financial compensation did little to satisfy some participants' concerns about taking time out from earning money or searching for work.

> These migrants are very hard to come by. The majority of them migrated alone to have their own lives in the country, meaning they have to work to cater for themselves and sometimes their family back at home. Hence, these migrants will be working during the daytime, which makes it difficult to get them for interview or participate in any research activity (Field notes, research assistant).

Whilst many participants undertook casual and highly unstable work, some participants were involved with apprenticeships and training programmes. However, for these young people, taking time away from their place of work, triggered worries about 'upsetting' their employer (referred to as their Madam or Master) and seemed to deter some young people from taking part in the study. For example, participants seemed somewhat hesitant to ask for permission from their Madam/Master to take time off work to participate. Indeed, any attempt to encourage participation may have inadvertently compromised these 'employment' relationships and participants' working lives and conditions – thereby potentially exacerbating existing vulnerabilities within these contexts, and as reflected in the field notes written by one of our research assistants:

> During data collection, a young migrant refused to be interviewed because of his boss. He mentioned that the boss will not allow him to be part of the study. Going forward, since these young migrants are dependent on their boss, it might be appropriate to contact the boss for their support (Field note, research assistant).

Our intention to follow-up participants for more in-depth interviews and use photo-elicitation thus proved especially difficult because of the additional time burden these methods would place on participants. We needed to identify alternative ways to conduct in-depth data collection 'in the moment' as we became increasingly aware that a follow-up opportunity would be unlikely (there were some exceptions). Follow-up interviews and photo-elicitation were also difficult to arrange because the majority of our participants had no contact details or a mobile phone and often relied on their friends to relay messages. The use of friends to convey messages prompted further ethics questions about anonymity and concerns about unwittingly revealing participants' identities to others.

Whilst a snowball sampling approach opened up new possibilities for identifying potential participants, difficulties remained. For example, many young migrants

entered the city via different routes and were thus, differentially located across the city. These mobilities proved challenging for locating young people – even when other participants had suggested that they might be able to participate. Considerable time was thus spent in market areas and on the streets 'looking for' potential participants and we became dependent on participants to act as 'key informants' to aid recruitment and help us to identify and access potential participants. Furthermore, even when 'successfully' approaching young migrants, many were highly sceptical and wary of the researchers – appearing 'nervous' and largely mistrusting of people in perceived positions of authority (such as an adult research assistant). These encounters triggered questions about how to best promote comfort and ease without downplaying their fears about participation, and as echoed in the notes captured by our fieldworkers:

> Most of the migrants contacted felt they would be exposed as illegal immigrants. Hence, some of them decided not to open up or were not allowed to be interviewed [by their employer] (Field note, research assistant).

> Relationships with young migrants should be established for a certain period before interviews are done. The establishment of the relationship will build the trust of the migrant and the interviewer. This would enhance the ability of the migrant to open up to the interviewer and probably, link the study group to other potential participants (Field notes, research assistant).

The notion of trust, which is often championed in qualitative enquiry as a prerequisite for building rapport with 'vulnerable' participants (Batlle and Carr, 2021), proved fundamental in our efforts to recruit young migrants. However, the building of trusting relationships was also compromised by the time available to build such rapport and 'get to know' participants – a key ethics aspect in research with children and young people (Alderson and Morrow, 2020). Time to build relationships with participants was often determined by their working conditions, as well as restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic when the study was conducted. Furthermore, young people's ongoing mobilities made it difficult to execute our original intention to spend time alongside participants to ensure they felt at ease and able to contribute to the study without fear of their migration status being exposed to authorities – a frequent concern reported in the migration literature (see Chase and Allsop, 2021).

Conducting research 'in the moment': Group discussions, interviews and photo-elicitation

The frequent movement of participants also presented challenges even after we had successfully recruited young people. This was largely because of participants' lack of familiarity with the researchers and/or other participants – once again highlighting the importance of building rapport, but which was difficult to achieve because of the temporal nature of data collection. Although the majority of our participants were recruited via a snowball sampling approach, the use of group discussions proved problematic at times when young people were relatively unknown to each other. Because of this, participants often appeared hesitant to talk in front of others – a well-documented 'problem'

with heterogeneous groups (Krueger and Casey, 2008). This hesitancy was exacerbated by our need to undertake 'on the spot' data collection as participants indicated immediate availability but would otherwise soon 'disappear'. Although some literature highlights the value of heterogeneous focus groups to avoid 'group think' (Janis 1982), in this context, conducting data collection with a diverse group (and in that very moment) ultimately hindered the building of rapport within the group.

Concerns about 'encouraging' participants to speak in front of others and to researchers unknown to them once again triggered critical reflections about participants' discomfort and worries about privacy – despite our efforts to reassure participants about the parameters of confidentiality as part of the research. Originally, we had thought that a group-based method would be more comfortable for participants than an individual method and because of the greater potential of this method to diffuse power differentials between an adult researcher and younger participant (Bagnoli and Clark, 2010). However, concerns about who participants could (and could not) trust extended to other young people and thus, group discussions were less effective at eliciting young people's perspectives in a comfortable format. Perhaps because of this, individual interviews, triads and dyads (with someone known to them) tended to work better – enabling participants to open up and speak more freely about their experiences, although some expressed difficulties with understanding our questions, as we discuss below. The use of triads and dyads seemed particularly effective for promoting comfort and enabling young people to narrate their experiences in the company of someone they know and whom they trusted – offering opportunity to capture shared experiences, along with individual biographies. For example, these methods seemed to enable peer support, including opportunities for peers to confirm interview questions and their meanings, in a 'safe' context.

Our intention to use photo-elicitation techniques, using either disposable or digital cameras or cameras on mobile phones, was informed by evidence that demonstrates the value of this method for capturing participants' meanings and experiences in alternative and participatory ways (Harper, 2017; Hauber-Özer and Call-Cummings, 2020; Robertson et al., 2016). However, in practice, we experienced considerable difficulties with this method. First, as expected, many participants did not have their own mobile phones to capture images. We explored the possibility of using both digital cameras/iPads and disposable cameras to get around this issue. The former prompted concerns about how we might ensure digital cameras would be returned to us given the aforementioned difficulties of following-up with participants. However, in Ghana, the use of disposable cameras is not widespread and thus, we would have been unable to print images locally to discuss with participants as part of the photo-elicitation interview.

We did undertake a few photo-elicitation interviews with a small number of participants who had access to a mobile phone, but we found that, despite our explanations, participants did not seem to understand why they were being asked to take photos and the method seemed 'alien' to them. Before commencing the photo-elicitation, we gave some examples of the activity and what was expected. For example, we asked participants about the meaning of the word 'safety' to them and how they might take images of things around them that signalled (or not) safety, such as capturing an image of a busy road congested with traffic, people and pollution and thus, things that might reflect a lack of safety. However, these explanations and examples effectively primed participants to capture

images that we had suggested as part of our examples – rather than the things that mattered to them. For example, we asked participants to capture images that reflected their work, livelihoods and things they would like to change in their lives. More often, participants were unable to explain why they had taken particular images and would refer back to the examples we had provided them; for example, by discussing an image of a busy road as being unsafe (although in some ways these images did depict their current realities and environments in which they worked). In part, these difficulties may reflect the limited opportunities these young people have had to express their views, along with their desire to do the 'right thing' and comply with the directions of people in perceived authority.

Unpacking sensitising concepts and sensitive questions

As described, the main aim of the study was to examine concepts of empowerment in relation to the everyday lives and livelihoods of young migrants. The concept of empowerment has been differentially defined across different disciplines and, by definition, is largely understood as being a 'bottom-up' term that reflects individuals' own interpretations (Laverack, 2005). Such a nebulous concept thus becomes tricky to operationalise without reflecting our own sensitising concept(s). The team debated at length about how to frame interview questions that tap into young people's own understandings of the term without presupposing or imposing a particular meaning of the term or leading responses to a particular aspect of the concept. This procedural concern was even trickier when cultural and language differences triggered translation issues, particularly when no direct equivalent of the word existed.

To tap into participants' understandings of empowerment we asked a series of questions that might open up different meanings and uses of the term (see Table 1). However, it was clear during the discussions that some participants struggled with understanding what they were being asked. Our questions triggered us to question our original research goals and raised questions about the ways in which we may have inadvertently imposed dominant (Western) terms that do not translate well into different socio-cultural contexts and languages. We have written elsewhere about young migrants' concepts of empowerment and power and how these advance (or not) understandings of their lives and, in doing so, question the everyday relevance and utility of terms that come from (socio-cultural) contexts different to the ones they occupy (Spencer et al., 2024). Because of this, at times, participants' responses seemed heavily guided by the interviewer as they probed around ideas linked to empowerment (e.g., we asked questions about control, influence, decision-making) with varying degrees of success.

Another challenge with our interview questions was the potentially sensitive nature of the topic areas, including asking participants about their migration experiences, lives and livelihoods as well as well-being. Perhaps unsurprisingly, many participants appeared reluctant to share openly their experiences and seemed to be sceptical of perceived authority. Concerns about their migration status and how any information shared might be used (against them) were evident, despite our best efforts to reassure participants about our commitment to confidentiality and anonymity. As noted, migration research with young people has reported some of the difficulties of alleviating concerns about their status and to enable young people to speak freely and openly without fears about

their status (Chase and Allsop, 2021) – once again signalling the critical importance of building trusting relationships with young people.

> I realised with the international migrants that they were afraid that the information would be used against them since many did not use appropriate avenues or routes to enter the country or have proper documentation. Again, with the internal migrants, some were not confident to share their experiences (Field notes, research assistant).

> The movements of migrants, across countries or within a country, are informed by many factors and based on that the risk averse ones tend to be reluctant opening up to strangers asking them questions concerning their lives and about how they became migrants. This makes first of all recruiting these migrants for a particular study very difficult since they do not want to reveal themselves, particularly the foreign migrants, and even when they make themselves available, they prefer not to fully open up to questions that are being asked […]. Language barrier is another element that played out working with the young migrants. Especially with the foreign migrants. During interviews or focus group discussions, some young migrants had difficulties understanding the questions asked no matter how well the question was explained (even in their preferred language) (Field notes, research assistant).

Even during times when participants 'opened up' and reflected on their lives and migration experiences, we became increasingly aware of some of the ethical sensitivities our questions raised (despite carefully debating and developing these in advance with our YPAG and research assistants). For example, in order to understand better the prerequisites for social change in this context, we directly asked participants what support they needed to help them pursue their aspirations; what they would like to change in their lives; or times when they felt powerless, and the reasons for this. Yet, all the while observing the harsh socio-economic and disadvantaged contexts in which they lived and worked. Such questions seemed perverse as we interviewed participants on waste ground or in overcrowded buildings with no electricity or water. Asking participants to narrate their hardships and what support they needed could be seen to be making a mockery of them and their circumstances – disregarding the extreme poverty in which they lived and the locations in which the research took place. Perhaps because of this and unsurprisingly, there were times when participants thought the research team was there to provide (financial) assistance – only to be disappointed when we conveyed the parameters of the research and the differences with aid programmes (Crivello and Morrow, 2021: Krause, 2017).

Such sensitivities triggered further reflections about whose interests the research ultimately serves – particularly when there were limited opportunities to feedback our findings to participants and because they had since moved on after our analysis and writing-up stages. Such reflections challenged us to think about different ways to disseminate our findings (e.g., to local organisations and via training programmes for young people), but questions remained about what difference this would make (if any) to the lives of young migrants in this particular context. Given the sensitivity of the data, and the importance of understanding this in the context it was generated, the team debated the ethics of publicly sharing data in open-access repositories, which is increasingly required by funders. The ethics of secondary analysis is garnering more interest,

particularly in relation to qualitative research when situational and contextual information can be vital for understanding how data was (co)produced (Morrow et al., 2014; Tripathy, 2013) and we were highly aware of the 'dangers' of participants' accounts being read and reanalysed out of context.

Conclusion

Our reflections on conducting in-depth research with young people occupying precarious and ever-changing contexts raise important questions about how best to conduct research 'in the moment' all the while upholding ethics and expected research standards for qualitative enquiry. Our assumptions about the relative strengths of particular qualitative methods such as group discussions, interviews and photo-elicitation (which were supported by the literature) for building trust and rapport with young people were often challenged by the context in which the research was conducted. Furthermore, our goals to investigate ideas around power, empowerment and agency triggered ethical reflections and questions about whose interests the research serves, particularly when such terms seemed to hold little relevance or different meanings to the everyday lives of our participants. Whilst aiming to advance such concepts by drawing directly on young people's own perspectives, our fieldwork experiences triggered us to think more carefully and critically about the original aims and intentions of the research – especially when asking participants to engage in discussions that expose the everyday difficulties they navigate.

Krause (2017) cautions researchers about exposing participants to questions that may exacerbate the disadvantages and vulnerabilities they experience. Talking about sensitive topics and asking young people to narrate the hardships they experience (as well as identifying their own solutions to such challenges) might subject participants to difficult conversations and unnecessary harms – or create false hope about possible (financial) support that might be offered to them. However, not involving young people in 'difficult' research can contribute to protectionist approaches that deny young people opportunity to share their views on their lives and effectively silences their perspectives and ways of knowing. Such reflections call upon researchers to be mindful of the (unintended) impacts the research may have on participants' lives and avoid possibilities for contributing to the reproduction of disenfranchising and vulnerability discourses of 'marginalised' groups, which enhance normative assumptions about migrants and young people (Hauber-Özer and Call-Cummings, 2020; Hart, 2023).

Issues of representation are thus critical in this context and point to debates about how Global North perspectives can perpetuate colonial and post-colonial perspectives and power relations (Krause, 2017). The difficulties of attempting to tap into social constructs that may have little meaning or relevance to young people in differing cultural contexts – or may not even exist in some cultures (Block et al., 2012) challenges researchers to consider how to operationalise such concepts and question whether such constructs reflect the imposition of dominant (Western) ways of knowing. Likewise, notions of informed consent and self-determination are premised on Western-centric notions of autonomy, which may not translate well into other contexts (Krause, 2017). The need for consent to be an ongoing process is well documented in the childhood and youth literature (Alderson and Morrow, 2020) but also calls for the building of relationships with

younger participants. As we have highlighted, such relationships can be compromised by the context in which the research takes place, but also when participants may have little familiarity with (or interest in) research and who may have different language backgrounds and literacy levels and/or different cultural and linguistic styles and preferences (Block et al., 2012).

Our approach aimed to enable our participants to choose which parts of their lives they wished to share (or not) with the research team (see Oh, 2012), but questions remain about whose interests the research ultimately serves. Rousseau (1993, p.13) highlights how the 'ambiguity of the position of voyeur, a position which instrumentalises the suffering of another person, by making it and [them] an object of study' can prompt ethics questions about the overall intentions of research and its impacts on participants' lives. Such concerns can be heightened when the frequent movement of migrant groups limits the opportunities available for feedback to participants. In our work, we were mindful of not overstating such opportunities to engage young people in dissemination activities, or indeed that the research would directly benefit young migrants participating in the study – particularly given the complexity of the socio-political and economic actions required to enhance these young lives.

The team, however, were committed to the importance of a 'dual imperative' and the notion of reciprocity to maximise mutual benefits gained by the research (Krause, 2017) and indeed, this was part of our original research intentions with the focus on youth empowerment in development contexts. Zapata-Barrero and Yalaz (2020) highlight that research focusing on suffering should be aimed at alleviating that suffering. Such commitments again called on us to reflect on our positions of power and the responsibilities these positions produce – particularly when such privileged positions can expose the 'dangers' of research being misunderstood as part of aid programmes or other forms of support that enhance participants' living and working lives and conditions (Krause, 2017). Arguably, offering an honorarium may serve to add to such confusion. However, in this context, not offering some form of financial compensation (albeit very small) can be problematic too, especially when participants take time away from the earning money they need to survive just to participate in the research.

These reflections again remind us of the importance of reciprocity and establishing (and maintaining) trust throughout the research process. However, although building trust is advocated (often uncritically) as an important starting point for engaging young people and other so-called 'marginalised' groups in qualitative research (Düvell et al., 2010), the context in which research takes place can limit significantly the possibilities for these relationships to develop. In this study, the ongoing mobilities of participants limited opportunities to build rapport and relationships and data were often collected 'in the moment'. The time available to hear participants' stories (in full) prompts questions about which qualitative methods may enable 'in-depth' accounts to be elicited in the absence of such prerequisites for rapport building or when research methods can inadvertently reproduce dominant asymmetries in power as participants engage in unfamiliar, potentially uncomfortable, data collection processes (e.g., photo-elicitation). Identifying alternative ways to 'best' conduct research with young people occupying contexts and positions of vulnerability and enable them to share their perspectives requires flexibility to be built into the research – offering opportunities for participants to choose how and when they would like to participate.

Investigating ongoing youth mobilities can prompt unforeseen ethics and methods challenges. In this paper, we have sought to expose and critically reflect on some of our assumptions and approaches to conducting qualitative research with young migrants who are frequently on the move. Our work highlights some of the challenges of building trusting relationships in this context and how this shaped our approach, and the data generated. We encourage researchers not to overstate their claims for impact and to think carefully and critically about how whose interests the research ultimately serves.

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