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# Research as care: positionality and reflexivity in qualitative migration research

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## Abstract

This paper analyses the implications of qualitative research on migration in terms of reflexivity and positionality. In particular, it presents research as care, revolved around three main critical nodes of reflection: the epistemological importance of emotions, intersectional positionality and the ethics of care. Drawing upon the insights concerning a qualitative research on migration in Italian shrinking areas, the contribution underlines the importance of conceiving research as a process of negotiation. Moreover, it shows how positionality in qualitative migration research is not static but flexible, and is conditioned by different emotionalities emerging during the fieldwork. In this sense, the continuous negotiation that exists between researchers and participants can imply affectivities and kinship that valorises the relationships created during the research.

**Keywords:** qualitative research, migration, care, positionality, reflexivity, intersectionality, ethics.

## 1. Introduction

The road up to Camini meanders through age-old olive groves and abandoned fields, sometimes decorated with the ruins of houses that once belonged to someone. On the other side of the road, which gradually climbs towards the hills, you can see the beautiful and wild beaches of Locride, touched by the Ionian Sea. This is the road my colleague and I were driving with a rented car from Lamezia Terme airport to reach the first stop of field research that lasted from June until September 2021 in different Italian regions to study the relationship between migration and the development of shrinking areas<sup>1</sup>. Although this is a theme that, at least from the point of view of research, is increasingly explored by national and international research groups (e.g., Welcoming Spaces, Whole-Comm and MATILDE projects), development programmes (e.g., the Welcoming Cities project in Australia)<sup>2</sup>, and faintly appears in the political debate, even before starting the research I felt the necessity to consider some critical issues. First of all, an epistemological issue, namely the willingness as a researcher to set up the research project avoiding a functionalist frame describing migration as a lever for territorial development. I was aware that migration and development have long been interlinked (Bakewell, 2007). Yet, both migration and development are configured in stereotyped and pre-set ways so that particular forms of migration and certain kinds of development come to be invisible and underinvestigated (Raghuram, 2009). A narrative of development as merely economic growth, in fact, fosters a vision of migration as a “factor” useful for the flourishing of the economic system. This perspective, then, represents a form of “subordinate inclusion” (Cotesta, 2009), which is inspired by principles such as moral indifference and pragmatic opportunism. Migration is depicted in a simplified way, to the point of becoming a mere resource or an opportunity to be seized, with an irrelevant weight from the point of view of citizenship, rights and equality. Therefore, the first challenge I encountered was the intention to study the relationship between migration, development and shrinking areas by enhancing their relational complexity, multidimensionality and mutual influences. This meant analysing the reciprocal relations between migration and development, focusing both on cultural and structural significances (Portes, 2010: 1544).

Second, there was a methodological issue, which basically revolved around doing qualitative research in contexts of vulnerability. Although the concept of vulnerability has been recently criticised because of its scarce path-dependency, and particularly because it often neglects contextual factors that can influence

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<sup>1</sup> Since there is not a common measurement of territorial “shrinkage”, the study refers to the definition of shrinking areas given by the Italian Inner Areas Strategy that classifies fragile areas in relation to their proximity/distance from a pole characterised by the presence of main services (e.g., health, education, administrative services, etc.).

<sup>2</sup> For further information, please visit the projects’ websites: <https://www.welcomingspaces.eu/>; <https://whole-comm.eu/>; <https://matilde-migration.eu/>; <https://welcomingcities.org.au/> (accessed on 10/11/2022).

people's conditions (Lenette, 2019), before starting the fieldwork, I had already begun to reflect on the situations I could have faced. In particular, I was imagining three types of vulnerability that I might have encountered. First, that of non-EU migrants, who although through different dynamics from urban ones, often find themselves in conditions of social exclusion and marginalisation in shrinking regions. A clear example is the exploitation of migrants in the agricultural sector, which takes different forms in various areas of Italy: from illegal to grey work, from the gangmaster system to undignified housing conditions (Fanizza and Omizzolo, 2019). On the basis of a critical theorisation of vulnerability, which takes into account its various dimensions - social, cultural, corporal and liminal - it is therefore also necessary to analyse its structurality, namely how the more or less extensive conditions of vulnerability are affected by the context in which the person finds herself/himself (Göttsche, 2021). The second type of vulnerability concerned inhabitants who had been living in these areas for longer periods. In Italy, such areas cover a total of 60% of the entire national surface, comprising 52% of Italian municipalities and 22% of their population. The inhabitants of these areas experience different degrees of marginality, depending mainly on depopulation, the reduction of municipal budgets and public services, and the lack of job opportunities. This type of vulnerability is directly connected to a third type concerning the territories themselves. This is because, as critical geography and recent paradigms such as the new mobilities approach indicate, space should be considered an active subject, constantly reproduced within complex relations of culture, power and difference (Hetherington, 1999). Starting from this perspective, the territory itself is a vulnerable subject, given the scant attention it has received from Italian policies at all levels, which has turned rural territories into veritable marginal areas. If we were to carry out a visualisation exercise right now, closing our eyes for a second, we would see empty shop windows with "for sale" signs, disconnected roads, post offices with rusty signs, closed schools and numerous abandoned houses. What I did not realise, however, was that this triple vulnerability would be compounded during the fieldwork by another one: mine as a researcher. This vulnerability, which I became aware of sometimes gradually, other times in a much more sudden and disruptive way, stemmed from the fact of conducting research in often difficult contexts (as in the case of field visits to the Gioia Tauro Plain, characterised by widespread labour exploitation), but also and above all from an emotional vulnerability related to carrying out medium-term qualitative research (5 full-time weeks in total), often dealing with sensitive issues. It was, therefore, during the research itself that I realised I also had to take care of the well-being of all the participants in the research, myself included (Kumar and Cavallaro, 2018).

*"Today I feel not very well and I decided to make a break. Yesterday we went to visit the Gioia Tauro Plain with some activists from a local trade union" (Saturday 19 July 2021, Villa san Giovanni)<sup>3</sup>*

Furthermore, my reflections on this triple vulnerability, which in fact turned out to be a four-dimensional vulnerability, were further complicated when they became interwoven with those related to my positionality as a researcher. These considerations led to the creation of a diary full of ethnographic notes that contained not only reflections on what I observed in the field, on the people I met along the way, but also on my direct relationship with the field, my positionality and the emotionalities that gradually took shape according to the episodes I experienced. This article, therefore, seeks to present some of the reflections that emerged before, during and after the fieldwork throughout which I explored the relationship between migration and the development of shrinking areas. Drawing upon the theoretical background on positionality and reflexivity in migration studies, I then introduce the framework of research as care. The main critical nodes around which these reflections gradually took shape are three: the epistemology of emotions, intersectional positionality and the ethics of care. After presenting the theoretical frame, I introduce the empirical research and, in a second moment, some methodological reflections that emerged. In the conclusions, I suggest how in qualitative migration research positionality is not something static but flexible, which is conditioned not only by the research participants but also by the researcher himself/herself and by different emotionalities emerging during the fieldwork.

## **2. Positionality and reflexivity in qualitative migration studies**

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<sup>3</sup> The field notes were translated into English by the author.

Migration refers to many different forms of human mobilities, encounters, and negotiations. It is connected to millions of bodies of women and men in motion, as well as to intentional or imposed settling practices resulting from an unequal distribution of the freedom of movement (Pase et al., 2021). When people are not free to migrate, they face forms of motility (Flamm and Kaufmann, 2006). While money, goods and a limited number of people with relatively powerful passports can circulate freely, forms of motility create new liminalities, new zones of inequality that intertwine the global and the local dimension. Limited patterns of mobility often combine with limited access individual and collective resources and can turn into forms of social injustice and insecurity (Musarò and Parmiggiani, 2017). As Smets and colleagues (2020: xlv) state, “these inequalities are in turn shaped by intersectional power hierarchies co-constructed along the axes of race, nationality, gender, sexuality, class and religion, among others”.

Doing research on migration means first of all considering these premises, which make it one of the most conflicting topics of the international political debate in recent years. It means considering that research on migration deals in most cases with conditions of marginality, discrimination, vulnerability, and violence, either during the migratory or the emplacement process (Weiner-Levy and Queder, 2012; Siegel and Wildt, 2016; Zapata-Barrero and Yalaz, 2018; Shinozaki, 2021). For these reasons, qualitative research occupies an important position within the methodologies used to investigate migration issues, especially when dealing with people’s perceptions, aspirations, opinions, expectations and behaviours. Working in such contexts, the reflexivity of migration scholars is an even more crucial matter, as it implies a detailed and transparent report of the researchers’ decisions and their rationale (Berger, 2015). Indeed, considering reflexivity means taking into account one’s embedded subjectivity (Longhurst, 2009), as well as assessing during each stage of the research the implications of the methods and approaches that are used and the type of knowledge that is generated. This new way of looking at the scientific construction process derives mainly from the post-structuralist approach, which questions the researcher’s principle of objectivity to valorise the existence of a plurality of standpoints. According to post-structuralism, “any reality can only be decoded through partial and subjective narratives, whether those of the participants or those of the researchers (...), emphasising the influence of social relations and power hierarchies that exist in determining the coordinates of such narratives” (Giorgi, Pizzolati and Vacchelli, 2021: 31). Similarly, feminist and post-colonial studies have addressed the inequalities that can arise during the processes of scientific construction, seeking to lay the foundations for a more transparent and equitable approach to research. Standpoint theories, for example, suggest that social position is among the main factors that influence people’s vision of the world and, therefore, the way they act in it (Harding, 1996). These new research epistemologies have thus given greater weight to power relations arising from different ways of doing science, and to issues such as social relations, body/embodiment and vulnerabilities. Van Liempt and Bielger (2018), for example, talk about methodological and ethical dilemmas emerging when doing research among smuggled migrants. In their study, they highlight how trust relations and flexible ethical approaches are key issues in researching vulnerable individuals’ perspectives and experiences. Another major theme for qualitative migration research is that of positionality (Bockert et al., 2006; Köttig et al., 2009; Andreassen and Myong, 2017; Van Ramshorst, 2020) and the implications that arise when the researcher is considered an insider for the research subjects (Carling, Erdal and Ezzati, 2014). The concept of positionality complements standpoint theories by suggesting not only that all kinds of knowledge are situated, but also that there is no objective knowledge but only partial points of view (Haraway, 1988). In migration studies, these new epistemologies have represented a turning point in understanding the process of knowledge construction, as well as in the valorisation of different subjectivities against hegemonic and ideological visions (Hesse-Biber, 2013). Ganga and Scott (2006), for example, reflect upon the influence that class and generation can have on qualitative migration research, claiming that the role of being “insiders” is much more complex and multi-faceted than usually recognised. Reflecting on this complexity, Irgil (2021) introduces the category of “assigned insider” referring to those researchers who share the same origins and sociocultural characteristics as the research participants. Moreover, Mason-Bish (2019) suggests that in qualitative research, issues of positionality and power relations between the researcher and the participants are related not only to their features but also to the subject matter of the research itself. Due to this complexity, the lens which will be adopted in this paper is that of “intersectional positionality”. Drawing upon feminist and decolonial studies, this concept refers to the connections between different categories of signification

conceived as a constructive process which underlines the irreducibility of social groupings. In other words, intersectional positionality refers to a type of positionality which underlines the intersections between dimensions such as gender, ethnicity and class (conceived not as structural and fixed categories but as processual elements), and where the “relationships between positionings, identities and political values are all central and not reducible to the same ontological level” (Phoenix and Pattynama, 2006). As we will see in the next section, intersectional positionality, referred both to the researcher and the participants, is particularly important in migration research, as the risks of categorisation are higher (Anthias, 2008). Considering the multiple possibilities of relations between the researcher and the research participants and the processual nature of positionality, in the next sections I will present my reflections as a researcher within a project aimed at investigating the interconnections between migration and the development of shrinking areas.

### **3. A brick in the wall? Research as care**

*Earlier, in the "piazza" (small square) I had spoken with Kevin. He said the people in the village were welcoming but he wanted to move somewhere else. Then he asked me a question that struck me: "what do you do for us"? (Wednesday 16 July 2021, Camini).*

“What do you do for us?”. A short, clear, direct question with no easy answers. This is the question Kevin asked us on a warm June afternoon in the square of the Camini’s church. My first answer was: “Sorry, can you repeat the question?”. “You are doing research, right? And then, what do you do for us?”. Even though I had wondered from the beginning of the research to whom the research on migration and shrinking areas might benefit, and I was already planning a second phase of participatory action research, Kevin’s question seemed to almost catch me off guard. More specifically, since I was trying to reflect on my positionality and reflexivity as a researcher, that question allowed me to reflect on the possibility that the moment of research could become a moment of mutual care. In fact, as Boydell and colleagues argue (2016: 7), the need to understand the benefits of the research is “more pronounced in research with migrants, who often occupy precarious positions in their host societies and live at the edge of political, social or economic discrimination. When human suffering in any form is at the core of what is being studied, academic sophistication is necessary but not a sufficient condition that justifies the research”. In this sense, the research process should also be conceived as a means to reduce vulnerabilities, as a dynamic producing social change.

At that moment, the objectives of the research were quite clear. First of all, to give more visibility in the political debate both to the issue of the need for sustainable and inclusive development of the Italian shrinking areas, which is very often forgotten by national and regional policies, and to talk about the new communities that were emerging in these areas. Another aim of the project was to create a so-called “community of practice”, able to unite researchers, societal partners, inhabitants, policymakers, journalists, and other subjects in a debate on migration and shrinking areas at the national and international level. What was not clear to me from the outset, however, was that there would be another benefit that I had not foreseen: that of considering research in the field as a practice of mutual care. By care I mean a concept very close to that of “promiscuous care” proposed by the Care Collective (Chatzidakis et al., 2020), referring to the type of care that moves beyond market logic and family network to include different relationships within a “community of care”. The approach of research as care is not new: already in the 1980s, Douglas (1985) suggested seeing qualitative research as an intimate relationship between the researcher and the participants. In the same period, feminist (Oakley and Cracknell, 1981; Madge et al., 1997; Olesen, 2011) and postcolonial studies (Spivak, 1988; hooks, 1992) began to suggest that research should not be seen as an extractive process, but as a transformative process capable of countering hegemonic discourses and reconfiguring social relations in a more equitable and just way. Here, I intend research as care referring to the need to develop the perspectives on reflexivity in qualitative research on migration, moving along three dimensions: the epistemological importance of emotions, intersectional positionality and the ethics of care.

The first dimension entails considering the fundamental role played by emotions in the knowledge production process. The epistemological importance of emotions was already raised a few decades ago by feminist studies. In the 1980s, for example, Jaggar (1989) highlighted how considering emotions is epistemologically subversive, since the Western tradition has tended to obscure their vital role in the construction of knowledge.

From this point of view, emotions influence and are influenced in all phases of the research (Holland, 2007), placing at the centre of the knowledge construction process both the empathy that can emerge between the researcher and participants, and between the participants themselves, while allowing their implicit assumptions to be brought to light (Giorgi, Pizzolati and Vacchelli, 2021). Hence, “just as observation directs, shapes, and partially defines emotion, so too emotion directs, shapes, and even partially defines observation. (...) what is selected and how it is interpreted are influenced by emotional attitudes” (Jaggar, 1989: 160). Emotions and affectivity play today an increasingly fundamental role in qualitative research, as they unveil new possibilities of connections between power, relations and politics by displaying in a more comprehensive way people’s attachments, their multiple identities and forms of discontent (Smith, Wetherell and Campbell 2018). As a consequence, they shape the research and its results. During the research on migration and inner areas, for example, it happened to me several times to develop an empathic relationship with the people I was interviewing, especially when we perceived our willingness to share some very intimate personal information. Of course, some of this information was omitted during the presentation of the results, in order to respect the privacy and the emotionalities of the participants. This aspect has been highlighted by Ezzy (2010) in reference to qualitative research, who describes interviews as embodied emotional performances.

The second dimension concerns the acknowledgement of intersectionality, both regarding the participants and the researcher. As Vacchelli argues (2018: 3), “Recognising the specificity and situatedness of these interactions provides conceptual avenues for breaking with identity politics as we know it and moving forward from it”. Intersectional positionality, therefore, contrasts with a methodological nationalism which assumes a “supposedly natural congruence between national, territorial, political, cultural and social boundaries” (Dahinden, 2016: 3). This is particularly important in migration research: fighting against the normalisation and naturalisation of migration-related differences, intersectional positionality proposes to move beyond what can be defined as categorical fetishism, which refers to the politics of bounding through which groups such as migrants are classified (Crawley and Skleparis, 2018). A classification that depicts migration as an invasion, as a crisis, as a major problem to be solved, without considering individual aspirations and stories. In terms of research, an intersectional positionality proposes that migrant participants should no longer “be put in a box” (Fanshawe and Sriskandarajah, 2010). To do this, as I proceeded with the research, I tried to put the focus back on relationships rather than on categories, on the quality of the connections rather than on achieving the exact quantity of interviews we had set before starting.

Assuming that differences are always relational, the third dimension concerns the ethics of care (Larrabee, 2016). This concept is rooted theoretically in the reflections advanced by feminist scholars such as Carol Gilligan, Sara Ruddick and Nel Noddings who, in the 80s, challenged moral theory and its implicit public/private divide as traditionally conceived, in particular for those aspects associated with human dependency and reproduction (Keller and Kittay, 2017). Some years later, Tronto and Fisher (1990) defined care in a broader way, relating it to all the ways in which we “maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible” (Fisher and Tronto 1990: 40). This conceptualisation of care is composed of four moments: caring about, taking care of, caregiving and care receiving. Drawing upon these philosophical bases, feminist studies have introduced a new perspective of ethics of care in social research. This approach advocates that throughout the research process it is necessary to critically reflect on the well-being of participants and the researcher, realising that well-being is situational (Bell, 2014). Such a perspective looks at the emotional sphere of people, their relationships, interdependencies and affectivities, respect and mutual recognition. An ethics of care avoids a unique way to deal with ethical dilemmas and proposes a plural and processual approach to the research. As Zapata-Barrero and Yalaz (2020, p.3) suggest “this allows us to emphasize that when applied to migration research ethical thinking is a ‘moment-to-moment’ decision-making process (Kaukko et al., 2017), always dependent on the specific contextual circumstances, personal perspectives of the participants and the typology of migration we are collecting”. Moreover, an ethics of care implies that every vulnerability is taken into account, both that of the researcher and that of the participants. In this way, an attempt is made to create a “safe space” for all, capable of challenging the power relations and hegemonic dynamics that underpin the research process (Flensner and Von der Lippe, 2019). From the ethical point of view, conceiving the research as a safe space means not only preserving participants’ anonymity and

privacy, but also creating an inclusive space where the participants feel comfortable (not only in physical terms but also in social, psychological and cultural ones) (Hartal, 2018). However, as the Roestone Collective (2014) underlines, the concept itself of safe space should be reframed because of two reasons. First, although the aim of creating a safe place in research is the negotiation of differences and the reduction of power imbalances, such places are never completely safe. Second, a safe space is the outcome of continuous relational work, which is porous and processual by nature. Once again, therefore, it is necessary to consider that ethical aspects are situational and can change during the research.

In the following sections, after presenting the general context and the specificities of the research undertaken in Italy, I will therefore present some of the insights and reflections that emerged concerning emotionalities and intersectionality (section “Emotions and positionality in different spatialities and temporalities”) and the ethics of care (section “Drawing ethical lines”).

### **3. Researching welcoming initiatives in Italian shrinking areas**

What are the connections between migration and shrinking areas in Europe? Which role do migrants and refugees play in relation to the local and sustainable development of shrinking areas? These are the questions I had to try to answer within the Welcoming Spaces project, a Horizon2020 project lasting until 2024 involving a partnership of universities, research centres and societal partners located in Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, and Germany. The project is divided into two main phases. The first aims to assess shrinking regions within the country involved, producing country reports which contain the analyses of three dimensions of local development in the selected regions: economic, social and political. This phase employed qualitative methods and lasted the two first years of the project (2020-2022). The second phase of the research refers to the comparative assessment of the contextual factors related to geography and positionality, governance, discourses, and citizen-migrant engagements, in order to evaluate to what extent these processes have affected the level of revitalization of the communities and the successful integration of non-EU migrants.

The methodological reflections contained in this article refer to the first phase of the research, namely the one related to the mutual influences between migration and the development of shrinking areas conceived according to its social, economic and political aspects. Despite being a European project, this phase of the research was carried out rather independently by the researchers from the five countries involved, precisely because the intention was to understand the dynamics of welcoming and development in relation to territorial specificities.

In Italy, the collection of the data consisted of three different phases. The first phase consisted of a desk research and some phone interviews for realising the context analysis and a quickscan of the welcoming initiatives. Such initiatives were led by third-sector actors and have been selected as they were directly or indirectly connected to the Italian reception system, ensuring the right to housing and integration services for non-EU migrants (e.g., language courses, job training, sociality, etc.). For example, some initiatives were managed directly by a local reception centre, others were helping local stakeholders in managing the reception, while others were related to the presence of migrants and supported integration paths in different ways. Although some of the initiatives were more dependent on governmental funds, all of them were developing self-sustainable activities or were planning to do so. This wide range of activities counted organic and short-chain agriculture, tourism, handicraft, and territorial valorisation, and aimed at influencing territorial development processes. The second phase of the research consisted of further desk research to update the information about the localities that have been selected as case studies. In this phase, the initiatives’ websites, newspaper articles, local policy documents, statistics, social media discourses and other material on the selected initiatives and localities were collected.

The third phase was the fieldwork, which lasted from June 2021 to September 2021. The research was based on a qualitative methodology, consisting mainly of in-depth semi-structured interviews, participant observations and some focus groups where possible (due to the availability of the participants, Covid-19 related issues and the time spent in the localities). In total, we spent five weeks on the field, starting from Camini, in the province of Reggio Calabria, and ending in Brunate, on Lake Como. The other localities included were

Villa San Giovanni, on the Messina's strait, near Reggio Calabria, Pietrelcina, in the Province of Benevento, Atina, in the Comino Valley, located in the centre of Italy, Breno, located in the Camonica Valley, in the Italian Alps. In total, 73 interviews, 5 weeks of participant observations and five focus groups have been effectuated. The people involved in the data collection were non-Eu migrants (asylum seekers, refugees, foreign residents), local and regional administrators, older residents (from non-Eu countries, migrants from Eu countries, autochthones); third sector subjects, religious and cultural groups, local entrepreneurs, civil society organisations, local experts. During the fieldwork, the role of the welcoming initiative, mostly a local cooperative, a political collective or a social enterprise, was crucial as a gatekeeper to access the fieldwork.

#### **4. Emotions and positionality in different spatialities and temporalities**

After taking two buses and a panoramic train, in mid-July 2021 I arrived with my suitcase in front of the Hotel Giardino in Breno, in the province of Brescia. Breno is a village in the middle of the Camonica Valley, one of Italy's longest valleys, stretching from the northern plains to the majestic Alpine peaks of Ponte di Legno, the last ski village in the valley. As proof of the valley's mountain culture, an unexpected party organised for the Alpine corps awaits me upon my arrival at the hotel, with several moments of collective singing. In this valley, the K-Pax cooperative manages a project of spread reception ("microaccoglienza") which combines micro hospitality (small flats in the place of big reception centres), with labour inclusion, favoured by the long tradition of local craftsmanship. Staying in the same place where the cooperative has its operational headquarters, I often happened to meet or eat together with the operators working there. Due to work and time constraints, the moments of exchange with non-EU migrants were rarer, although some were particularly significant.

Even though the majority of the non-Eu migrants interviewed had repeatedly pointed out that these territories were not particularly welcoming at first glance, I was amazed by Lamine's story. Lamine is a Gambian boy who works in a local restaurant. During the interview, he told me that last year his boss made him a surprise and went with him to the Gambia to meet his family. This part of the story was particularly intense in terms of emotions shared, not only because it differed from the stories of the other participants, but because it showed a deep and intimate bond between Lamine and his employer, which is very rare in this valley where signs of cultural closure towards migration prevail. In this sense, as Smith, Wetherell and Campbell (2018) suggest, the attention to emotion and affect allowed to deepen the understanding of how people develop attachments and commitments to things and beliefs, as well as a sense of social and physical places, and feelings of wellbeing and discomfort. The sense of affectivity shown by Lamine during his story unveiled an attachment that goes beyond the three main simplifications regarding the migrant-host society relationship (paternalism, repulsion or economic functionalism). Sharing such a story showed the naturalness of the relationships that can exist between two human beings, overcoming the categorical fetishism to which migration is often reduced. These affective aspects of the interview then further expanded to directly involve my emotionality when I discovered that Lamine's recipe for a local dish was exactly the same as the old recipe my grandmother used. In fact, coming my grandmother from this valley, I knew some very local recipes. Talking about common recipes helped to develop further the interview, but also engaged my own emotionalities bringing me back to another temporality.

*"For a moment I felt the smell of 'casonsei' (typical dish from Camonica valley) and we spent twenty minutes talking about food. I feel as the whole interview revolved around these two moments (the trip of Lamine's boss to Gambia and the typical food in the valley)" (5 August 2021, Breno)*

With Lamine and other interviewees, I also shared a reflection that arose from the desire to adopt a different outlook from the often privileged one of the researcher. On this occasion, participation was played out on the level of mobility, and in particular in the challenge of not using the car in a marginal context but only using public transport. In this way, I wanted to understand what it meant to move to a rural area if you are a migrant - but this condition often refers also to young teenagers living in an inner area or elderly people who do not have a car. In other words, I wanted to better understand the potential structural aspects (Göttsche, 2021) of vulnerability related to daily life in shrinking areas. This decision was made from the beginning of this part of the fieldwork, but I felt it even more radical during the walk from the hotel, located in the town centre, to the



supermarket to buy some food. During this route I found myself many times having to cross a road without a zebra crossing, dodging cars and making paths that were obviously not organised for pedestrians. I was also struck by the look on the faces of passers-by in the car as if seeing someone walking along that road was something exceptional. I then shared this experience with the interviewees, and they said some very interesting things to me in terms of the use of space and infrastructures (e.g., “Yes, yes, there are only foreign guys here who walk. Also, we take the train and the bus. Everyone has a car here, except us. So, if you take the train, you’re for sure going to meet someone you know”). The feeling was as if there were two different spatialities and temporalities at the same time. A space dominated by the use of private means and shorter time frames, with more freedom in decision-making regarding how and for how long to move, and a space dominated by public transport and walking routes with longer time frames and marked by bus and train timetables.

This is an exemplifying case of how constantly negotiating my insider/outsider status and adopting a reflexive approach to research also opened up new perspectives on the data I was collecting. In this sense, I intend reflexivity not only as a personal self-supervision but also and most importantly as a process where to reflect on my own biases and ways to put them under question, finding different ways to negotiate the proximity and the distance with the participants. In the example reported above, this was the case of sharing the same temporalities and spatialities together with the participants who did not have a car in a rural area, mostly migrants but also other vulnerable groups. Once again, therefore, sharing such a condition (in this case, the limited freedom of movement in a rural area), had a double meaning. On the one hand, it allowed me to negotiate my positionality as processual and flexible with respect to the research field; on the other, it helped me to reflect on the very concept of vulnerability as an interpretative category. From this point of view, it is necessary, as Fromm, Jünemann and Safouane (2021) point out, to consider vulnerability as a relative situational category, which can change according to different contexts and temporalities, and which does not imply the annihilation of the agency of those experiencing a situation of vulnerability.

Moreover, in the case of the research I was carrying on, my role as an insider/outsider played a fundamental part in this consideration. Indeed, if I could be considered an outsider with regard to the theme of international migration, the same could not be maintained about the aspect of living in an area on the margins. Until I was 18 years old, in fact, I lived in a small town of a few thousand inhabitants on the west coast of Lake Como, which is included in the national classification of inner shrinking areas, namely those territories that are fragile due to their distance from the main centres providing essential services. Living in such an area meant having to cross the lake by boat in the event of a landslide on what was the only artery connecting my village with the closest town, but also seeing the local shops slowly transformed from businesses into showcases where the cultural heritage was put on display for summer tourists. But this also meant being pushed to leave the village because I wanted to study at university, which led me to move to Milan when I was 17. Having experienced first-hand the difficulties of living in an area characterised by numerous hydrogeological and mobility problems, I felt like an insider researcher about these issues. Therefore, I already started the fieldwork from a position that I defined as flexible; that is, outsider and insider with respect to the main themes of the research (international migration, mobility, aspirations and shrinking areas). This meant continuously negotiating the boundaries between my private and public self, according to when conducting research as an outsider or as an insider (Ganga and Scott, 2006: 2). Referring to what Carling, Erdal and Ezzati (2014) call a “third position” with the aim to expand the insider/outsider categorisation, I, therefore, experienced various in-between positionalities during the entire fieldwork. As time was passing by, I assumed that my positionality as a researcher could not fit into this binary opposition but changed according to the different contexts where I was doing research and the people I was encountering. In other terms, I was realising that to better understand my role as a researcher I should have adopted an intersectional positionality approach. For example, although I could be considered an insider researcher because I come from a village located in an inner area, this did not mean that I shared the same life paths with all the people who live or have lived in such areas. According to the intersectional approach, therefore, it is necessary to consider how this last aspect is linked to the issue of gender, age, origin, etc. In the same way, some of my characteristics (woman, young, and from a low-middle class family) brought me together with some of the interviewees beyond my origin and allowed me to develop more dialogical and open research. Moreover, after a certain amount of time spent with the community, I was

almost treated as an “adopted insider”, letting me participate in their private life beyond the relation framed in the research. In Camini, for example, a Syrian family invited me to dinner, and then I invited them to come to my city so they had the opportunity to visit it for some days.

Another way through which I constantly negotiated my reflexivity was by keeping a diary helping me to deal with my own vulnerabilities, where I wrote all my impressions on the fieldwork but also my emotional reactions (Fonow and Cook, 2005; Stronach et al., 2007). These reactions and perceptions were then triangulated with my colleague, often during informal moments (e.g., after dinner, before an interview, in the car)<sup>4</sup>, as a way to check on one another’s reactions (Russel and Kelly, 2002). For example, one of the most difficult aspects to deal with in the field was the variability of the contexts investigated during the research: from one week to the next, it often happened that we travelled from a positive reception initiative to a context of labour exploitation. The fact that the study was so concentrated in time, therefore, certainly affected my emotional sphere throughout the research. This aspect sometimes also influenced the possibility to frame the research as care. In fact, on many occasions, the time spent in a specific location was not enough to establish a bond of mutual trust at the basis of this dialogic research process, while in other cases it was not possible because we were in unwelcoming contexts. Despite these limitations, on all the remaining occasions I tried to keep in touch with many of the research participants, both migrants and older residents. Moreover, in some cases, I engaged in what I later defined as “micro-activism” practices, helping to improve the conditions of vulnerability of some participants (e.g., exchange of useful contacts to apply for citizenship, relations between activists working in different parts of Italy, help in accessing decent housing, etc.). This allowed me to get closer to the field and the participants, opening up spaces for participation and potential – although partial – transformation of the research context (Pink, 2015).

## 5. Drawing ethical lines

The desire to frame the research as care finally led me to reflect deeply on the question of ethics. Such an approach, indeed, entails very particular methodological and ethical considerations and demands specific sensitivity and accuracy. In an interesting paper, Düvell, Triandafyllidou and Vollmer (2010) pose a crucial question: when doing qualitative research on issues related to migration or otherwise vulnerable situations, where can I draw the line? In other words, how to deal with sensitive issues involved in the relationship between researchers and participants in migration research? These aspects are even more important when conducting research in Eu-funded projects, as they can be policy-oriented or policy-driven or, more importantly, they can unveil some personal and sometimes hidden strategies and stories (Stierl, 2020).

Taking into account these aspects, we decided to conduct the fieldwork avoiding presenting in public any extracts that might cause harm to the participants. This decision also led us to constantly negotiate certain research procedures. For example, a doubt that my colleague and I had during the fieldwork but also during the data analysis and dissemination concerned the question of the interviewees’ willingness to participate in the research and to share their personal information. Although we were always present and available to explain the purpose of the research, what concerned us were the language and cultural barriers that could influence the participation in the research. In other words, we were not sure whether the research objectives were fully understood before, during and after the interviews and the focus groups. In addition to language barriers, the informed consent forms we had to use were also not easy to understand, creating information asymmetries between participants and relying on purely Eurocentric models (Jsselmuiden and Faden, 1992). We were therefore faced with a trade-off. On the one hand, we wanted to respect one of the main principles of research ethics, namely that of avoidance of harm (Wang and Redwood-Jones, 2001) and the construction of a “safe

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<sup>4</sup> In Italy, the research was conducted by myself and a colleague, in some cases separately (in this case, the reflection and the event are presented in the individual form). For this reason, the content of this article concerns my insights of a methodological nature with respect to the research conducted. Such reflections took the form of field notes, but were also partly discussed with my colleague (to whom I am grateful for these moments of exchange) in order to activate a critical process of analysis of my insights. However, due to different disciplinary interests, I decided to develop further the methodological aspects related to the research, while my colleague preferred to further investigate its territorial/spatial aspects.

place” capable of intertwining the differences and the vulnerabilities of the participants and reducing the power imbalances embedded in the research process itself (Hartal, 2018). We did not want to risk exposing to danger respondents who had signed the informed consent without fully understanding it. On the other hand, we wanted to respect another of the fundamental principles of ethics, that of respect for autonomy, avoiding a paternalistic attitude towards the participants. We were therefore at a crossroads, and the decision we took alternated different points of view during the analysis and dissemination of the results. In the end, given the complexity of the issue and the possibility of exposing participants, both migrants and older residents, to some risks, we decided to publish only the names and information of participants who held a public role. As suggested by Giorgi, Pizzolati and Vacchelli (2021), we opted to use a procedural form of consent, assessing at different stages of the research the voluntariness of participants’ involvement and exposure. In this sense, we looked at research as a creative, complex, and dynamic process, rather than one that is passive or linear (Parsons and Boydell, 2012; Boydell et al., 2016). We, therefore, employed an approach to research from the data collection stage to dissemination based on what Mackenzie and colleagues (2007) call “relational autonomy”. An idea of autonomy that is no longer based on liberal and individualistic elements, but as a socially acquired capacity, which requires a continuous negotiation between the participants and the researcher, and also considers how participation in research can be conditioned by participants’ previous experiences. Indeed, “traumatic experiences of vulnerable migrants and/or their non-Western background do not take away their competencies to understand the principle of giving and withdrawing consent. Yet, the stark power differentials and the extreme conditions that these migrants are living may force them to consent to the research” (Boydell et al., 2016). In the field, it is important to be aware of the imbalances in the relationship between the researcher and the participants: even if the relationship can be trustful and close, it is not equal and is clearly influenced by inequalities of rights, legal, economic and psychological position, etc. (van Liempt and Bilger, 2018). At the end of one of the focus groups in Pietrelcina, for example, one of the participants, an asylum seeker from Tunisia, came to me and asked if he had responded well to our solicitations. I then realised that being in a condition of uncertainty and vulnerability, he had felt compelled to participate in the focus group, even thinking that his availability would influence the outcome of his asylum application. At this point, I spoke with him again about the research, trying to understand his real intention and interest in participating and clarifying the circumstances of the research. From that moment, I took more time in presenting myself and the research and put much more attention to the willingness and reasons for people’s participation.

*I felt confused. Maybe I had not explained myself well or maybe I should have spent more time on the presentation, but I felt helpless in front of that question (Pietrelcina, 30 July 2021).*

What I wanted to avoid was indeed to create similar circumstances as those occurring within an interview for the asylum application. As Giorgi, Pizzolati and Vacchelli (2021: 51) point out, in fact, “working with refugees who are fleeing from experiences of torture in their country of origin or have experienced trauma in the course of their migration trajectory, for example, highlights how asylum applications proceed through a question-and-answer interview”. This experience, therefore, was of great value in helping me to “draw the ethical line” in favour of a relational autonomy approach. In other words, the participant’s direct question based on his previous experiences and future aspirations made me understand that I should have spent in the future more time introducing the research and engaging in dialogue with participants before interviews and focus groups.

## **6. To be continued...**

In this contribution, I have reflected on my positionality and reflexivity during research carried out through Italian shrinking regions on the theme of migration and development of territories at the margin. For five weeks, I travelled around Italy working in close contact with welcoming initiatives working at the level of the reception system and integration activities. Facing closely different types of vulnerability, including my own, I questioned my role as a researcher, the perspective I was adopting in the field, but also some ethical dilemmas and what benefits I was producing by doing research on this topic. These reflections led me to conceptualise research as a continuous process of negotiation, in which positionality is continually questioned (Clark et al., 2021). Following these premises, in the first part of the article I presented the concepts of positionality and reflexivity in qualitative migration research. I then introduced the conceptual framework of research as care as

composed of three dimensions: the epistemological importance of emotions, intersectional positionality and the ethics of care. These three categories were adopted as analytical lenses through which to observe some reflections and insights derived from a field research conducted in 2021 on the connections between welcoming initiatives and the local development of shrinking areas. At the level of emotions, for example, the attention to the participants' emotions and affective practices opened new perspectives on how to intend the sense attachments, relations and feelings. Moreover, considering my emotions during the research let me develop my reflexivity around my own vulnerability as a researcher. Second, the reflections contained in this paper showed how my positionality changed both according to the people I related to, in terms of "participant-related positionality" (Ganga and Scotto, 2006), and according to the characteristics I shared or did not share with them, in terms of "intersectional positionality". Finally, I explored the importance of adopting an "ethics of care" in migration research, namely a processual perspective of ethics intended as a socially acquired capacity, which requires a continuous negotiation between the participants and the researchers. Seeing the research as a process of continuous negotiation also allows to answer an ethical dilemma that is particularly important when doing qualitative research on migration: that of the willingness to participate in the research. In this sense, it was important to add some more layers to how reflexivity can change during and after the fieldwork. These reflections led to elaborate the idea of research as care. Considering the variety of "imageries of care" (Farris and Marchetti, 2017), that meant specifically to take charge of the emotions that emerged during the fieldwork, bearing in mind the continuous negotiation that exists between researcher and participants, but also and above all, a care that valorises the relationships that are created during the research itself. Research as care indicates that knowledge construction needs to be self-reflexive, meaning critically considering our actions as researchers, our values, our perceptions, and the emotions that develop during the fieldwork.

Yet, research as care also implies an ethics of care, which not only covers the main principles of ethics when doing qualitative research with vulnerable groups but also what Pickering and Kara (2017) call an "ethics of representation". The ethics of representation means to consider "the social and political impact of the research, about the influence our research may have on social change and on the impact it may have in modifying particular migrant circumstances." (Zapata-Barrero and Yalaz, 2020: 4). This aspect is particularly important when researching the topic of migration, as it is one of the most distorted topics in terms of narratives and depictions (Moralli et al., 2021). In the specific case of welcoming spaces located in shrinking areas, for example, I often reflected on the case of Riace, a small village not far from Camini that has hosted many non-Eu migrants since the 90s as a combination of a tradition of open hospitality and socially sustainable development processes. In the case of Riace, the media hypervisibility that has affected the small village, studied and acclaimed by researchers and journalists all over the world as a good practice of welcoming and local development (the "Riace model"), has contributed to its political and mediatic destruction. In 2018, in fact, the village reception system was dismantled and in 2021 its former mayor was persecuted with 7 years of prison.<sup>5</sup> Although the end of the "Riace model" was not dependent on the research that has been conducted on this initiative, but in part to its mediatic overexposure, this recent episode was related to the issues I was investigating. Therefore, I drew on the principles of the ethics of care and the ethics of representation to reflect with the participants on the potential risks of overexposure for these kinds of welcoming spaces. Hence, as Zapata-Barrero and Yalaz remind (2020: 8): "Researchers working on politicized topics such as migration have further ethical duties which demand that their representations would not cause harm to the lives of participants. Migration researchers need to evaluate their findings critically and be aware that the way they represent their findings can fuel anti-migrant rhetoric or even reinforce security or reactive policies".

Drawing upon this last reflection, we decided to continue the research on the theme of cultural deconstruction of distorted narratives about the presence of migrants in shrinking areas and the collective reconstruction of alternative imaginaries about these welcoming spaces. This second part of the research will adopt the method of photovoice (Wang and Redwood-Jones, 2001) to visualise the narratives of small communities located in shrinking regions. In particular, it aims to focus on the dynamics between long-term residents and migrants

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<sup>5</sup> To discover more about the "Riace model" read Driel (2020), while for the dismantlement of the reception system read: <https://www.welcomingspaces.eu/the-battles-of-riace-a-town-torn-between-immigration-and-emigration/> (accessed on 15/12/2022).

and to amplify their voice on non-urban welcoming initiatives through the co-creation of visual content (Nikielska-Sekula and Desille, 2021). Based on the principle of the ethics of representation and the conceptualisation of research as care, this second phase of the research will support knowledge co-construction as an opportunity to understand that revitalisation can also be conceived through the discursive dimension. The method of photovoice will be employed to better understand spatial power relations (e.g., in the use of public transport/public space), people's aspirations and daily-life practices of local participation. Thus, it will integrate the insights contained in this contribution, strengthening the perspective of research as care and aiming at becoming a process of "collective learning", based on the collaboration between researchers, societal local actors and (older and new) inhabitants.

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