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More Than a Course, More Than a Method: Study Circles as a Pedagogical and Research Method Working With Asylum Seekers Across Language Barriers and Differences

Zinaïda Sluijs

Department of Human Geography, Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden

Correspondence: Zinaïda Sluijs (zinaida.sluijs@kultgeog.uu.se)

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ABSTRACT

Participatory research with people in the asylum process faces limits and challenges. Building on ethnographic research on study circles for and with asylum seekers in Sweden, I discuss two methods (collage workshops and card-based discussions) which were introduced to deal with the challenges of conducting participatory research and to foster the inclusion of participants in the asylum process. While collage workshops allowed for conversations on emotional and embodied experiences across language barriers, card-based discussions created space for dialogue and discussion on different experiences of participating in study circles. I argue that these methods were both inspired by the study circle method and participatory methodologies and, therefore, are an example of how research' epistemology and methodology can be aligned to participating organisations' knowledge and practices. Consequently, the contribution of the paper is two-fold: Collage workshops and card-based discussions not only allowed for new participants and perspectives to be included but also enabled the research to intervene in and contribute to the study circle practice.

1 | Introduction

Following the increase of asylum applications in 2015, the Swedish government commissioned study associations to organise study circles introducing asylum seekers to Swedish language and society during the increasingly lengthy asylum process. Study associations are part of *folkbildning*, the Swedish tradition of non-formal popular education which emerged from nineteenth-century popular movements. Today, it is a nationwide phenomenon consisting of study associations and folk high schools. Central to *folkbildning*'s pedagogy are study circles in which a small group learns dialogically about a topic of choice without teachers or curricula. Instead, a circle leader facilitates discussions without authority or superior knowledge. Although study circles can be about anything—from crafting to politics—study circles for asylum seekers focus, as commissioned, mainly on language and civic education, including discussions about Swedish culture and traditions. Previous studies on study circles for asylum seekers have, therefore, considered study circles as spaces of inclusion and spaces of instrumental integration and neoliberal governmentality (Fejes and Dahlstedt 2017; Osman 2013).

Between 2022 and 2025, I conducted ethnographic research on study circles for asylum seekers, grappling with how to examine solidarity practices while avoiding asymmetrical and potentially exploitative research dynamics with marginalised groups (Askins 2018; Caretta and Riaño 2016). I chose a research approach in line with Participatory Action Research (PAR) that encourages active collaboration with research participants

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throughout the research process, recognises and values multiple knowledge and aims for research to contribute to social change and justice (Askins 2018; Caretta and Riaño 2016; Kindon et al. 2007). However, PAR comes with challenges, including time and resource constraints and institutional or ethical requirements, which limit the inclusion of participants in research planning, decision-making and dissemination (Caretta and Riaño 2016; Kindon et al. 2007). Additionally, scholars have highlighted that participatory methodologies are embedded in socio-political power relations, which can be reproduced in and through research encounters (Askins 2018; Caretta and Riaño 2016; Frazier 2019). Consequently, researchers have called for transparency on the failures of participatory research (Frazier 2019), highlighted varying degrees of participation, or shifted to 'co-productive' (Clayton and Vickers 2019) or 'community-engaged' research (London et al. 2020).

During fieldwork, I experienced similar challenges. My recent immigration to Sweden meant that I was unfamiliar with the socio-political and linguistic context, which complicated participant involvement from the beginning. Additionally, high participant turnovers, language barriers, time constraints and ethical considerations such as confidentiality limited the inclusion of participants in the asylum process throughout the research. Similarly, despite the interest of the respective organisations to participate in the research, many were hesitant to give shape to the research project itself.

In line with Frazier (2019), such fieldwork 'failures' should not be considered dead-ends but can lead to the rethinking of research methods and approaches. Inspired by feminist epistemologies that centre lived experiences, value different knowledge, encourage participation, demystify and counter asymmetrical power relations (McDowell 1992; Moss 2005; Rose 1997), I continued exploring how to foster inclusion and participation and experimented with creative and participatory methods. Concretely, embracing my in-between position as a researcher, neither inside nor outside the study associations (Dwyer and Buckle 2009), I introduced two participatory methods—collage workshops and card-based discussions—which were inspired by feminist methodologies *and* the study circle method. These methods are not new and build on previous research on collage making with asylum seekers, refugees and migrants (Pizzolati 2025; Soğancı 2022; Vacchelli 2018) and on techniques for eliciting discussion during group interviews (Peterson 2022; Sutton 2011).

This paper responds to calls within community-based research to not only maximise participation but also enhance the 'alignment between the collaborators' interests, capacities and socio-political contexts' (London et al. 2020, 3). I argue that by aligning the research methodology with study associations' knowledge and practices, the research itself can become a resource for the involved organisations, opening possibilities for contributing to praxis and practice beyond PAR. In other words, the in-between position of the researcher as neither in- nor outsider is a creative position from which new methods, practices and relations can be developed. Concretely, collages and cards-based discussions not only allowed for new participants and perspectives to be included in the research but also enabled the research to intervene in and contribute to the study circle practice.

Before introducing and discussing each method in the following sections, I will introduce the methodology giving an insight into how the research was conducted. The final section discusses and concludes the results.

2 | Methodology

In 2021, I moved to Sweden for my doctoral research on *folkbildning* for and with people in the asylum process. The Worker's Educational Study Association (ABF), involved in my recruitment, became my entry point into the field. Through regular participation in ABF's activities, I improved my Swedish, built rapport with participants, and was invited to other activities. Gradually, I expanded my fieldwork to include other study associations, including the academically oriented Folkuniversitetet, the Christian Bilda and the Sport's Educational Association, RF-SISU. This exploratory phase fostered trust and allowed participants to inform the research design, beyond mere data collection.

In addition to continuous engagement in various study circles over the course of three years, I resided in the region for 4.5 months, conducting participatory observations and interviews with study circle leaders and participants. Leaders were often long-term residents, some with a (European) migration background. Study circle participants are a diverse group with different genders, ages, legal statuses, nationalities, religions and languages. Sometimes, study circles targeted a specific group, such as people who applied for asylum based on their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Fieldwork is a messy process (Frazier 2019), and political decisions on asylum and *folkbildning* impacted people's lives, study circle practices and, consequently, the research. In 2023, budget cuts led some study associations to suspend circles for asylum seekers. In response, I reconvened one group to discuss the sudden end of activities. Considering that participants spoke different languages and the discussions were potentially emotional, I introduced collages which enabled possibilities to address sensitive, emotional, and ambiguous experiences (Leavy 2009; Moralli 2024; Soğancı 2022; Vacchelli 2018). The workshop was guided by one open question ('How do you experience this activity?' or 'How do you experience living in [place]?'), which allowed for a thematic focus while centring embodied experiences (Butler-Kisber 2019) and allowed participants to construct their own narrative, including non-verbal or metaphorical expressions (Pizzolati 2025; Soğancı 2022). Because the method enabled new participants to be included and developed new research outcomes, I continued conducting collage workshops in addition to interviews and observations. The multi-method approach allowed me to combine different perspectives on what happens within the study circle (observations) with how people experience study circles (interviews and collages).

In total, I conducted 10 collage workshops with 60 participants. All, except two, collage workshops were conducted in groups, bringing together a study circle leader and their participants. During and after the collage making, which lasted around 2–3 h, I asked participants to explain their visual representations and metaphors (Culshaw 2019; Vacchelli 2018). I recorded most

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conversations, but when the group was too large or participants refused, I took elaborate notes.

During thematic analysis, I faced a second challenge: Articulating critical insights on power asymmetries that were central to the research' critical feminist epistemology (Askins 2018; McDowell 1992; Moss 2005). My positionality as a junior, white, non-Swedish scholar impacted my confidence to communicate critical results. Inspired by the focus group and study circle method, I introduced a series of cards during follow-up interviews to elicit discussion on how meeting places are experienced and negotiated between and among participants. The cards were used during three individual interviews and one focus group bringing together a circle leader with four of his participants in the asylum process.

As a researcher, I navigated an in-between position, neither fully inside nor outside the study associations or Sweden. This in-between position, Dwyer and Buckle (2009) argue, comes with opportunities and challenges. While my limited Swedish language skills and migration background fostered connection with participants in the asylum process, my Belgian passport, whiteness and academic role set me apart. Facilitating research activities modelled on study circles complicated my role as participating observer. Moderating these sessions, I navigated the intersecting roles of researcher, participant and perceived circle leader. Consequently, to emphasise my researcher role and independence from the organisations, I recurringly planned informed consent at the start and end of research activities.

Interviews, including collage workshops and card-based discussions, were audio-recorded, transcribed, pseudonymised and thematically coded with Nvivo. As will be discussed below, I wrote narratives based on the transcripts of conversations. These were also coded to identify recurring themes throughout the collages. Below, I present each method and examine the intersections with the study circle method and participatory research methodologies.

3 | Working With Linguistic Barriers: Collage Workshops

Previous research highlights the relevance of creative methods with migrants, refugees and asylum seekers (Moralli 2024; O'Neill et al. 2019; Soğancı 2022). In line with critical, feminist and decolonial epistemologies, participatory creative methods allow researchers to focus on lived experiences, differences, power and (everyday) resistance to injustice, exclusion and liminality (Mountz 2011; O'Neill et al. 2019). Creative methods are particularly valuable for their visual and non-verbal character that can include new participants and interrupt in spaces where new audiences can be engaged and moved towards change and action (Leavy 2009). For example, representing embodied, lived, sensuous and emotional experiences can counter xenophobic stereotypes and influence policy and practice in a hostile political climate (O'Neill et al. 2019). Collages, specifically, have been considered relevant to capture sensitive topics such as home and displacement, to discuss non-verbal and embodied experiences, to subvert power relations between researchers and participants, and to capture complex, ambiguous and multi-scalar experiences of (non-)belonging (Pizzolati 2025; Soğancı 2022; Vacchelli 2018). However, using participatory and visual methods with asylum seekers and refugees also comes with challenges, including safeguarding anonymity, time constraints and power dynamics (Askins 2018; Frazier 2019; Kindon et al. 2007). Additionally, creative methods risk aestheticising injury, reproducing invasive accounts of suffering (O'Neill et al. 2019).

In this research, I introduced collage workshops to include participants with whom I did not share a language and to discuss personal experiences of participating in study circles. During collage workshops, I handed out magazines and encouraged participants to cut, paste, write and draw, adding layers of meaning and creating new relations between images by taking them out of their original context and re-ordering them on a blank page (Vacchelli 2018). Unlike (semi-)structured interviews, collages are a non-linear and embodied method allowing participants to decide how to represent and structure their narrative through the embodied and relational process of collecting and (re)arranging images, words and drawings (Butler-Kisber 2019; Soğancı 2022; Vacchelli 2018). To protect the open-ended outcome of the collages, the workshop was guided by one open question which allowed participants to construct their own narrative, story and composition (Pizzolati 2025; Soğancı 2022).

The study circle served as the material and social infrastructure for the workshops, taking place in the usual time and space where people in the asylum process would meet to learn Swedish. Similar to study circles, I set up the tables in a circle and served coffee and sweets to create an informal atmosphere. My role resembled that of a circle leader as I limited my interference and acted as a facilitator. The method, consequently, allowed for slowness, silence and reflection while participants collected, reflected and (re)ordered images and narratives (Culshaw 2019).

This resulted in diverse outputs, ranging from descriptions of everyday life to reflections on people's values, dreams and aspirations. While some participants approached the workshop as a research encounter and did not take their collages home, others wanted to take them home or use them in their asylum application. During one workshop, after hearing about a parliamentary interpellation about the budget cuts, participants decided to send their collages to members of parliament. In another group, the idea arose to exhibit the posters to reach local residents and counter xenophobic discourses. After a disagreement between participants on where, how and why this was supposed to happen, the idea was parked.

Based on the transcripts of the conversations that took place during and after the collage making, I wrote narratives which gave an insight into the person who made the poster. Inspired by narrative analysis (Nasheeda et al. 2019; Wiles et al. 2005), I approached the interviews as narratives, told in participants' words, and which could be represented as such. After transcribing the conversations, I compiled what each person said, reordered the text thematically, removed parts that were not about the collage and shortened the narrative to fit onto one page. Writing these narratives resembled the non-linear collage-making process as I cut and pasted parts of the interviews into new narratives, moving back and forth between the audio, collage, transcript and, ideally, the participants for changes or

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confirmation. After the first workshop, I sent the narratives back for approval. Out of seven participants, one submitted their own narrative, one withdrew, and one made changes. Due to time constraints, I could not continue this feedback process, and this participatory element was discontinued. In other words, the power to produce and publish narratives remained with me and points to the limits of participatory methods as the 'power over knowledge production' remains in the hands of the researcher, and participants were not included as co-authors (Caretta and Riaño 2016, 260). Nonetheless, by staying as close as possible to participants' own narratives, I argue that the narratives create more space for participants' lived experiences in the research and knowledge production process compared to discrete and decontextualised quotes (Wiles et al. 2005). Additionally, pointing to the cyclical process of writing the narratives, I argue that these narratives highlight the co-constructive and plural nature of knowledge by moving away from the researcher as the sole interpreter of participants' narration of their own experiences, thereby creating space for difference, complexity and negotiation within a narrative and inviting audiences to reflect on similarities or differences between the narratives (Wiles et al. 2005).

Collage workshops produced not only insights on how people in the asylum process experience living in small towns but also highlighted the role of study circle participation for people's feelings of belonging. Concretely, by mapping and representing their everyday life worlds, participants literally inscribed themselves in place, claiming their presence in the local municipality and highlighting the relations that emerged from participating in study circles. Consequently, collage workshops could be a relevant method to develop 'counter-topographies' (Mountz 2011), exploring how different people in the asylum process experience and resist liminality and exclusion inscribed in place and the role that solidarity networks play in that resistance. Additionally, collage workshops, by bringing in new participants and new (non-verbal) experiences, could also be considered to become 'welcoming spaces' (Woodrow 2017), welcoming new participants with different languages and personal experiences, creating space to embrace and discussing the differences between those experiences.

By introducing an activity which went beyond language learning and where circle leaders and participants engaged side-by-side in informal conversations and collaborative collage making, the workshops became a temporary interruption with how study circles were otherwise organised. Contrary to its horizontal ideal, study circles for asylum seekers often resembled school-like settings in which leaders acted like teachers, educating on Swedish language, norms and traditions, which positions asylum seekers as 'in deficit', lacking essential knowledge to become included (Fejes and Dahlstedt 2017; Sluijs 2024). Consequently, the workshops and discussions, albeit temporarily, subverted existing hierarchies between circle leaders and participants by creating an activity in which collaboration and knowledge sharing were encouraged. While group discussions were sometimes challenging (e.g., language barriers, too many participants, people showing up late, or preferring to talk privately), the collage workshops enabled the research to intervene in and contribute to study circle practices, reintroducing horizontal, dialogic and reciprocal learning between people from different backgrounds, languages and citizenship status within the study circle infrastructure.

4 | Making Space for Dialogue and Difference: Card-Based Discussions

While collage workshops were created to address language barriers, a second fieldwork challenge led to the introduction of another method. Data analysis revealed gendered and racialised power asymmetries in study circles, which I wanted to take up in follow-up interviews. Additionally, in line with PAR and critical feminist epistemologies' commitment to action (Askins 2018), I considered it important to report back to the organisations on power asymmetries but wanted to do so in a constructive and accessible way. Expecting conversations about inequalities to be sensitive and having experienced reluctance from participants to discuss challenges during interviews, I introduced discussion techniques suited for sensitive subjects. Inspired by Gast et al.'s (2022) discussion on centring racialised power dynamics in interviews, I initially wrote vignettes based on interview quotes and fieldnotes but struggled to do so without being leading or breaching participants' confidentiality. Eventually, drawing on studies that recommend using objects (Peterson 2022) and concept cards (Sutton 2011), I developed cards to elicit discussion on what makes meeting places. In total, I developed 17 cards including, among others, gender, age, nationality, ethnicity, religion, language, literacy, citizenship and personal interests. These categories were selected based on how study associations defined meeting places in organisational documents and were complemented with categories which emerged from interviews and observations. Participants were also given the option to remove, change or add cards.

I began the interview with an open question on how people defined meeting places and how they related it to study circles for asylum seekers. Then, the cards were introduced and participants were asked to rank the cards considering their importance for the creation of meeting places. In a second round, participants were asked to re-order the cards based on how much these categories were effectively considered in the activities. The cards were introduced during individual and group interviews with participants who had already participated in other research encounters. The group interview was conducted with an existing study circle group. While individual interviews allowed for more confidential conversations, group discussions generated richer data as participants not only defined and related different cards to each other but also complemented and challenged each other's views, similar to focus group discussions (Peterson 2022).

Contrary to collages, card-based discussions remain language-based and require participants to read and discuss collaboratively. Yet, ranking and ordering cards also allows for non-verbal communication and for less intimidating or formal discussions compared to (semi-)structured interviews (Peterson 2022; Sutton 2011). By offering bi-lingual cards (in Swedish and English) and encouraging translation between participants, I also aimed to enable discussion across linguistic differences.

Similar to collage workshops, the research activity resembled the study circle method, bringing a diverse group of participants together to reflect on their experiences and expectations. No one was an expert and disagreement arose on where to place cards, what meeting places should look like, and who feels in- or excluded from study circles. I restricted my role to moderating,

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asking for clarifications, reactions and follow-up questions. Like a focus group, the aim was not to reach consensus on where to place the cards but to elicit discussion on how people experience study circles differently. Instead of emphasising similarity, the activity focused on dialogue and negotiation between participants. Consequently, the focus group not only resembled but also contributed to study circle practices by introducing a new method into the study circle infrastructure. Similar to collages, card-based discussions became a temporary intervention that explored alternative ways to organise study circles beyond language and civic education. Concretely, the method allowed different participants, including people in the asylum process, to voice what is overlooked, who feels left out and why. Rather than presenting results in a paper or report, this was communicated by the study circle leader and participants themselves. This led to new conversations which were previously not held in the study circle format where language and civic education otherwise were main activities.

A particularly meaningful moment emerged during a group interview about what constitutes safe spaces for LGBTQIA+ asylum seekers. Tensions surfaced between a leader (a white, heterosexual, cisgender man) and participants who advocated for separate activities based on shared experiences of discrimination. The leader countered their arguments, arguing that such concerns were not relevant in Sweden (e.g., claiming homophobia was absent) or within the study circle (e.g., believing prejudice would dissolve through interaction). Additionally, he considered the recognition of differences as irrelevant to his main goal (teaching Swedish) and he wanted to avoid conflict between participants, especially those with differing religious or political views. By focusing on learning Swedish and keeping differences 'outside', differential needs, interests or skills were not considered, despite this being a fundamental principle of study circles. This risks reducing diverse participants to a homogeneous group positioned as 'becoming', or not yet 'integrated', as was also discussed by Fejes and Dahlstedt (2017). Study circle leaders, for example, often stressed the need to learn Swedish or 'how Sweden works' as a first step to integration or belonging. While many participants in the asylum process also emphasised learning Swedish as their goal, many also expressed interest in participating in other activities, such as computer classes, arts or social activities. These activities are organised by study associations but remain inaccessible to people without a residence permit. The limited access to study circles beyond learning Swedish reflects a diversion from *folkbildning*'s participant-based and horizontal pedagogy, driven not only by how individual circle leaders structure their activities but also by study associations' constrained human and financial resources.

In conclusion, the card-based discussions created the time and space to discuss and learn *from* each other rather than teaching *about* Swedish and Sweden, offering a practical tool which could be used to rethink the study circle practice in alignment with *folkbildning*'s pedagogy. Inviting all participants to reflect on the cards temporarily disrupted the hierarchy between leaders and participants, creating space for different opinions and disagreement. Following the discussion, the circle leader, for example, admitted that he had not considered some of the participants' concerns before. In other words, by aligning the participatory methodology and the study circle method, the research methods became a practical exploration of how study circles with, for and by asylum seekers can be organised differently.

5 | Discussion and Conclusion

This article has argued that researching practices of solidarity through *folkbildning* can itself become a participatory and relational practice, offering methods and reflections that build on and contribute to both study circle practices and participatory research methods with asylum seekers.

Participatory methods developed in response to the limits of 'traditional' research methods, including the risk to reproduce asymmetrical or exploitative research relations or how to deal with language barriers and sensitive topics (Kindon et al. 2007; Mountz 2011; Sutton 2011). This research contributes to these discussions by arguing that participatory research should align the research methodology with participating organisations' knowledge, pedagogy and practices. Building on my doctoral research on study circles for asylum seekers, I exemplified how I attempted to align feminist participatory methodologies with *folkbildning*'s pedagogy by introducing two methods: collage workshops and card-based discussions. Consequently, the paper's contribution is two-fold, considering how to foster the inclusion of people in the asylum process in participatory research *and* study associations. Concretely, while collages fostered participation across linguistic differences, cards enabled reflections on contested issues like safe spaces, inclusion and exclusion.

A researcher navigating participatory research inevitably occupies an in-between position (Dwyer and Buckle 2009), neither insider nor outsider to the respective organisations and negotiating varying degrees of participation (Kindon et al. 2007). My positionality highlighted multiple layers of in-betweenness as I navigated my personal migration to Sweden, my relation to the associations and my multiple roles as participant, observer and moderator. I argue that this in-betweenness is a constructive and creative position. By experimenting with how research and pedagogical methods can be adapted to the research context and participants, I not only introduced new research methods which were inspired by the study circle but also intervened in the study circle infrastructure and experimented with new ways of presenting research output.

Despite the possibilities, participatory methods face limitations and challenges (Caretta and Riaño 2016; Frazier 2019). For example, language barriers limited participation in card-based discussions and follow-up discussions during collage workshops. Additionally, as Rose (1997) argues, power relations cannot simply be fully understood or removed, and asymmetrical relations between researchers and participants may persist and demand ongoing reflexivity. For example, the process of writing narratives remained centred on the researcher's control over editing, analysing and disseminating collages and narratives. Additionally, throughout the paper, I have also stressed that the subversion of power relations between leaders and participants was temporary. Nonetheless, the temporariness does not make the research intervention fleeting or irrelevant. Concretely, the research encounters were practical explorations with and alongside study associations and their participants of

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how study circles for, with and by asylum seekers can be organised differently. By intervening in study circles, organising a different activity beyond classroom-like language learning, the workshops and group discussions temporarily created what Woodrow (2017) calls 'welcoming spaces' where new and different perspectives were included and valued. Consequently, collages and card-based discussions contributed to re-introducing *folkbildning*'s dialogic pedagogy to the study circle practice and reimagine study circles as meeting places where emotional, complex and sometimes conflicting conversations could take place rather than erasing difference for the sake of language learning or conviviality. Consequently, in line with studies highlighting the transformative potential of creative participatory methods (Leavy 2009; Moralli 2024), the research encounter can itself become a welcoming space where new participants are included, different experiences valued, new audiences reached and new relations and practices arise.

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Data Availability Statement

The data are not publicly available due to privacy and ethical restrictions. The data that support the findings of this study are available upon request from the corresponding author or via registrator@uu.se according to the Swedish Freedom of the Press Act and Public Access to Information and Secrecy Act. Public records that are established and do not contain sensitive personal data can be transferred. Established is commonly understood as the status after the treatment of the data is finished within the project. Transferal of data upon public requests will occur electronically after establishment and confidentiality assessment of the data.

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