

‘Hard to reach’ or ‘easy to ignore’. Strategies and reflections on including co-researchers

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In this paper we reflect on how to do research with co-researchers who are perceived as ‘hard to reach’. We critically debate this expression and recommend the usage of the term ‘easy to ignore’, which rather fosters self-reflection instead of creating a double deficit. We elaborate on important aspects about getting into contact, ensuring continuity, choosing methods and enhancing participation. We consider it very important to integrate these co-researchers in every step of the research process — from formulating research questions to disseminating results. Furthermore, the research design and methods shall be chosen together with the co-researchers, matching their interests and capacities. Last but not least, we recommend to continuously reflect on inclusion and exclusion of target groups as well as power relations and hierarchies within the team of researchers and co-researchers.

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1. Introduction

The ÖCSK workshop “Reaching the ‘hard to reach’” focused on exchanging practical experiences from working with so-called ‘hard to reach’ target groups. It dealt with questions of how and when to establish contact, how to ensure continuity, who is “left out” or deliberately not included in the research process, how to deal with diversity within the target group, and what methods are suitable to work with co-researchers.

As researchers in the fields of social sciences, education, linguistics and environmental studies we - the participants of this workshop - start from the conviction that social change and improvement of social conditions need to be based on a robust understanding and collective reflection of the world around us. Our approach to citizen science is influenced by approaches of participatory action research [13], in which citizen scientists are involved as co-researchers in as many phases of a research process as possible. This means that they work on the formulation of the research question and design, the data collection, the data analysis and the dissemination of the research results on an equal footing with academic scientists.

Within the participatory paradigm, access to co-researchers is one of the major challenges and vividly debated for a long time, putting the question of how to best reach social minorities in citizen science front and centre [5]. Moreover, we need to ask how an informed, ethical and active research collaboration with people considered to be among ‘hard-to-reach’ target groups can be organised. In participatory social research we often deal with individuals and groups who are considered as ‘difficult to reach’ in traditional research concepts, such as children and adolescents from disadvantaged backgrounds, groups that are less educated, people in precarious living and housing situations, people with precarious legal status, or chronically ill people. To actively integrate them in research requires careful considerations of *how* to do this and why they are marginalized and considered as ‘hard to reach’: from the identification of relevant groups of people, the establishment of contact, the social, ethical and legal modalities of involvement, the participation in scientific knowledge production, to the design and communication of the results.

2. Reassessing the Label ‘Hard to Reach’

It is important to consider why some people are designated ‘hard to reach’ when designing strategies for their inclusion. Research from community engagement and scientific literacy has been questioning the notion of ‘hard to reach’, sensing a consolidation of dominant practices that might actually contribute to further exclusion [3]. By disregarding the structural inequalities in society that lead to marginalisation, we risk attributing fault to those already marginalised. Denoting non-participants with the label ‘hard to reach’ creates a double deficit: denoting them behaviourally and attitudinally deficient, when in fact they face structural social inequalities [4, 9]. People affected by such (multiple) inequalities are thus ‘*easy to ignore*,’ as they are commonly ascribed as lacking resources to engage in and understand scientific processes. We therefore want to step back from using ‘hard to reach’ as an attribution, and show how participation of disenfranchised target groups can be achieved with established methodologies.

3. Establishing Contact, Ensuring Continuity and Choosing Methods

The question of when to establish contact with target groups that can be 'easily ignored' involves both ethical and methodological considerations. As has been discussed extensively since at least the 1960s [1, 11], the involvement of publics in research can take many different forms with varying grades of participation. Most notably, hierarchical designs and the deployment of publics purely as data collectors with no say in the overall research design have been heavily criticized. In order to avoid this practice of 'participation-washing', citizen target groups should be involved as soon as possible in a research process in their role as co-researchers who develop research questions, research design and goals, collect and analyse data and take part in the evaluation and impact assessment during and after a project. Even the involvement in writing grant proposals and publishing in academic journals has been championed in the context of approaches such as 'extreme citizen science' [7]. However, we believe that especially in projects that involve persons that are easy to ignore both the 'when' and the 'how' of establishing contact is vital for the collaboration. The research design and practice must be adjusted not only to the goals, scope and limitations of the research, but also to the specificities of the target group. At all times, academic researchers must take care to engage co-researchers ethically and without exploitation.

Finding ways to foster continuous engagement makes it indispensable to reflect repeatedly about the co-researchers' interests, expectations, skills and motivation throughout the project phases [10, 12]. This can help to establish and cultivate communication, rapport, and trust – the basis for fruitful cooperation [12]. By making co-researchers a valuable and valued part of the team, their intrinsic motivation can be increased. Additional extrinsic motivation can be provided by offering adequate compensation, information, or answering the question 'How can I support the co-researcher (. . .) by loading weight of their tasks on my own shoulders?' [6].

In general, methods used in citizen science should fit the research interest(s), specifics of the field(s), target group(s) and the diversity (in terms of abilities and objectives) of the research team. In our experience, early communication with co-researchers and integration of their ideas, concerns, and expert knowledge are vital. Cooperation must be considered as a continuous process of negotiation. In this process, two orientations are possible: (1) focus on techniques and methods like interviews, questionnaires, observation etc. and/or (2) focus on social aspects of the cooperation process. We consider these as two sides of the same coin. After sharing knowledge about potential threads of investigation, a joint development of approaches, tools and methods follows. These range from conventional methods (e.g. interviews) to more uncommon methods that involve data other than mere verbal expressions, such as images, photos, maps, sketches or spatial assemblages that are designed or collected by the co-researchers [2, 8, 14]. Providing opportunities to communicate knowledge that evolves in the course of a participatory project also serves to heighten its (social) impact.

4. Enhancing Participation - an (Idealistic?) Outlook

The challenge for inclusive Citizen Science is not only reaching those easily ignored, but also acknowledging the multiple barriers co-researchers might face. It requires a willingness to address dominant practices and forms of knowledge and an openness to adapt the research process

accordingly. Moreover, addressing issues of diversity, inequalities and group-dynamics is key to providing inclusive spaces for co-research. In the case of devaluation or insults, it is the obligation of academic researchers to initiate and guide discussions on the situation at hand as well as underlying societal structures such as gender differences, influences of ethnicity or diverging capacities. Such reflections improve not only the research process, but enable all participants to learn more about the research field and to initiate change or even solutions to the problems addressed. If - and only if - we are persistently conscious about the risks to reproduce prior experiences of marginalization and exclusion, participatory research can provide spaces where participants who might easily be ignored can experience agency and success as well as opportunities for being heard and seen.

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