Ethical notes

Ethical issues related to collaborating with different communities must be carefully understood and critically approached by anyone involved in collaborative work. Specificities, such as social and legal vulnerability and unbalanced power structures within this context, make the development of ethical commitments extremely important. Here, we focus on the ethics of working with vulnerable communities and children; however, these reflections must be taken into consideration for any type of interactive and collaborative work.

Ethics of collaborating with vulnerable communities

Most of the work of this book was developed while working with vulnerable and marginalised communities in different contexts, such as favela, refugee and poor communities. Discussing ethical issues with these communities can form the basis for a broader discussion on ethical commitment for all types of collaborative work involving non-academics or non-experts. In the following sections, we consider four crucial aspects, but the ethical discussion of the co-production of urban spaces does not end there. In particular, further reflections and systematisation of ethical issues must be developed.

Power asymmetries

Collaborating with vulnerable communities must be understood in the context of asymmetrical power relations. The idea of voluntary consent and willingness to participate must also be understood in the context of power imbalances (Clark-Kazak 2021; Gaete Cruz et al. 2022).

Acknowledging that architects, urbanists and academics are privileged – even when they try to avoid it – is a basis for overcoming this position of priv-

ilege. It is important to provide the participant group with as much open and clear information as possible regarding the goals of the activities, envisioned outcomes, potential uses and intended methods. If possible, this information should be provided in different languages and be as visual as possible to ensure that all actors understand what is at stake. In this context, translators and local mediators can play crucial roles.

This issue also relates to the principle of free and informed participation. To ensure that participants are fully informed and willingly collaborating, we should consider the power imbalances from stakeholders, community leaders or academics that can create pressure for people to participate. To avoid these power imbalances, one strategy is to allow people to opt out of the activity at any moment (Kelly 2019).

In terms of informed participation, we should be aware that design practices are not universally known. As Kelly (2019: 339) observes,

> for the participation to be informed, it means making sure people are fully aware of what they are agreeing to and what the potential implications of the project could be, as well as how likely outcomes are to be implemented.

Therefore, the issues of how to represent, communicate and discuss ideas are crucial to ensuring that all collaborators fully understand the process. Dedicating sufficient time for questions and clarifications is also important.

Parasitic relationships

In a debate about research focusing on forcibly displaced populations, Clark-Kazak (2021) highlights the risk of the 'parasitic relationship' between the researcher and research subjects. This parasitic relationship, where researchers enter the field and extract a large amount of information from the local context to use in their research without providing long-term effective outcomes for those seen as 'research objects', is well known and criticised by different authors and practitioners (Sukarieh and Tannock 2013; Clark-Kazak 2021; Bilotta 2020).

This risk is present not only when collaborating with vulnerable communities, such as forced displaced populations, but also in any type of work with civil society. Of course, when dealing with already marginalised groups, the effects of a parasitic relationship have an even bigger impact on how each group perceives and interacts with external actors in the field. It is very common to

encounter populations that are not willing to engage or participate with researchers because they have already been over-researched and have not seen any concrete outcomes from the research findings in their lives.

Therefore, one of the main points of consideration when planning collaborative activities is the concrete short- and long-term outcomes for all involved actors. What kinds of learning and real uses are relevant for the vulnerable community or other involved stakeholders? Answering these questions should also be part of the collaborative process. We will talk more about this concept when discussing examples of methodological tools, but it is important to consider it as an ethical principle.

When dealing with participatory or collaborative processes of planning and design, on the one hand, producing meaningful outcomes can be easy; on the other hand, participants may be misled into thinking that a certain project will be implemented. In some cases, the project may be an academic exercise, or there may be a lack of or change in funding. Therefore, managing expectations is a crucial ethical point in any collaboration with communities. Full and transparent communications – possibly in different languages, depending on the research group – is also a key point of ethical consideration.

The production of knowledge or the learning processes involved in these interactions should also avoid hegemonic and hierarchical knowledge structures and be open to incorporating and promoting the equal exchange of knowledge among all actors or 'embracing other ways of knowing' (Taha 2022 cited in Clark-Kazak 2021: 128).

Privacy and data protection

The issue of privacy and data protection is also extremely relevant in the context of vulnerable communities. For example, due to the legal precarity and potential risks connected to certain political issues that may affect individuals participating in collaborative projects, the need to protect their privacy and anonymise personally identifiable data must be taken seriously:

> Confidentiality and privacy are particularly important, where the immigration status, liberty, or safety of participants and their friends, families, and associates can be jeopardized by findings generated from programmatic, research, and media outputs (Metzler et al. 2023: 28).

In this sense, personally identifiable data should only be collected when relevant to the project. It is important to critically examine whether having individuals' names, ages, genders or nationalities is necessary for the success of the collaborative activity. For pictures, videos and recordings, the participants' consent should be explicitly obtained in writing. When pictures are taken, avoiding showing individuals' faces is recommended. Visual documentation can occur without revealing individuals' identities. For example, software can be used to blur faces in pictures, faces can be obscured by drawing over them and pictures that show only peoples' hands or their backs can be taken.

Psychological effects and expectations

The final relevant point to mention is the psychological effect that research might have on individuals. The extent to which participants perceive the proposed collaborative dynamic tools should involve various sensitive aspects of research, such as triggering memories of traumatic situations. This concern is particularly important when, for example, dealing with refugees and relevant aspects of their lives before fleeing their countries of origin.

> Although the possibility of physical harm may not be a significant factor in most PD (Participatory Design) projects, in many cases there may be a risk of emotional, psychological, or social harm to participants, usually due to the nature of participation as a social activity (Kelly 2019: 339).

The issue of psychological harm should also be considered after the project concludes. That is, some of the research impacts that might be noticed or present during research interactions can continue to affect the participants after the researchers depart.

Sensitivity and awareness to the research context, as well as full respect for the participants' imposed boundaries, must be part of the research process at all times. The use of open questions and methods, the creation of safe environments, the use of nonverbal tools and the understanding of collaboration as an ongoing process rather than as a one-time event are important to ensure that the possible psychological impacts on the targeted communities are minimised or overcome before the conclusion of the research project.

Ethics of working with minors

Working with children and teenagers through action-based collaboration can make huge contributions to our field when we include children and young minors as active actors in city planning and design. However, at the same time, working with this group comes with specific ethical challenges, especially when considering marginalised children or those with disabilities (Spiel et al. 2018, 2020; Valentine 1999). In this section, we will outline two key ethical considerations when collaborating with minors.

Consent

Informed consent means that individuals who are participating in activities fully understand the implications of their participation, the use of their data, the materials collected and produced and the research goals of the activity. This is a primary ethical issue in any research or interaction with society. In the case of minors whose guardians are legally responsible for them, however, this issue is particularly complex and nuanced (Valentine 1999).

The debate on whether children and young people are able to consent or assent to participating in research or other activities is based on the logic of understanding and responsibility from an adult perspective. Valentine (1999: 143) highlights

> [t]he notion that children cannot or should not consent, but only assent until the age of 18, is derived at least in part from Piaget's (1952) conception of children as passing through a series of age related stages of development. It assumes a qualitative difference between the competence of children and adults to consent, rather than placing the emphasis on what knowledge they have and how they use this knowledge.

Both consent and assent should be subject to the best interests of the involved child or teenager and should not generate any potential harm. However, this may be subjective, especially in our field of study, and efforts to avoid any negative impacts on the participating minors should be related to the context in which these participants belong, as well as their individualities. Valentine (1999: 145) also calls attention to the fact that

> [w]hile parents can block researchers' access to children, they can also hamper attempts to gain 'informed consent' by the opposite process of coercing their children to participate.

Working with what Valentine (1999) calls structures of compliance, such as schools, might create a safeguard for working with children, especially in the following ethical aspects. However, it can also present institutional pressures and barriers that may affect the outcomes of research or collaborative activity.

One way of avoiding cohesion and the 'false' consent suggested by Valentine (1999) is to offer children the opportunity to take part in the activity rather than asking them to decide not to take part. This small difference in approach may be especially beneficial for children who are not used to saying no or are confident in their refusal. In any case, adults conducting collaborative activities with children should always pay attention to their behaviour and offer them the option of stopping the activity at any point in time.

Another potential strategy, which we will explore later when discussing specific methods for working with children, is to offer multiple simultaneous activities. This sense of choice allows the children to engage in what they feel more comfortable with, whether it is a more action-based activity, a more introspective one, a dynamic group project or an individual exercise.

Power imbalances

The uneven relationships between adults and children can manifest in multiple ways. When children are considered in relation to authority figures, such as their parents or teachers, or in sometimes uncomfortable interactions with unfamiliar adults, these power imbalances can affect their engagement and must be considered carefully. Marginalised children, such as those from migrant or refugee backgrounds, as well as children with disabilities, require specific ethical considerations (Spiel et al. 2018).

Children may be intimidated by tools designed for adults; therefore, it is crucial to reflect on specific methods for interacting with children. For example, games or arts-based activities may be tools that challenge hegemonic power structures and can offer children the opportunity to express themselves in various ways (Valentine 1999).

The power dynamics within a group of children also play a key role; in groups in which the children are already familiar with each other, their internal hierarchies are clearly impacted by individuals who usually take leadership.

Therefore, thinking about ways of engaging children who are not in a position of power is important to ensure certain equity in their participation.

Inviting children to formulate relevant questions and issues can help researchers to avoid assuming that the problems reported or faced by adults are perceived in the same way by minors.

The location of children and adults involved in these power dynamics are also important. Planning activities in environments and with adults that the children are used to and feel comfortable with can change the way they engage and participate with the researchers.

These power imbalances are also present in the researchers' interpretations of their findings (Valentine 1999). A thorough debate on how to use collected data is crucial to avoid the false participation and adultification of children. The possibility of discussing the outcomes, findings and further uses with the involved children offers a great opportunity to overcome this problem and has the potential to challenge our understanding of the proposed research from different perspectives.