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RESEARCHING AND COMMUNICATING
MIGRATION AND DISABILITY
ON DISABLED MIGRANTS AND THE IMPORTANCE
OF DOING RESEARCH ABOUT, FOR AND WITH THEM*

INTRODUCTION

This article was inspired by conversations at the Centre for Interdisciplinary Research into Health and Illness, at the University of Wrocław, on the varied engagements with “vulnerable individuals.” I wanted to reflect on the challenges, rewards, and lessons that arise from the growing adoption of research methods and approaches that involve various communities in research that work with academic researchers and utilize a variety of methods including participatory methods, co-production, and peer research particularly in relation to those deemed “vulnerable.” Through this article I share my own experiences, the lessons I have learnt, and recommendations arising from own practice.

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* This paper is based on two of my recent research projects (one funded by the Sociological Review Foundation in the UK and the other by the National Science Centre in Poland — “Intersekcjonalność migracji i niepełnosprawności we współczesnej Polsce” [The Intersectionality of Migration and Disability in Contemporary Poland], ref no 2022/47/D/HS6/00519) which explored matters related to migration and disability (see more on these here: Duda-Mikulin, Scullion, Currie 2020; Duda-Mikulin, Głowacka 2023; Duda-Mikulin 2024).

The social construction and intersectionality of migrancy and disability is the primary focus of one of the mentioned above project which is currently being undertaken in Poland. This project aims to bring together three distinctive interests within Social Sciences in order to identify links between disability, migration and gender (though the latter is not the primary focus of this paper) and to explore the experiences of disabled migrants as some of the most vulnerable individuals in societies. Through this project, I wish to gather new knowledge and gain a deeper understanding in relation to disabled migrants and their experiences in Poland as their host country. Although, in here I focus on the two concepts of migration and disability and on engaging vulnerable persons. I also wish to build on my previous research undertaken in the UK which focused on the intersections between migration and disability in the British country context (cf. Duda-Mikulin 2024; Duda-Mikulin, Głowacka 2023). In this paper, I would like to explore the state of knowledge and experiences of researching vulnerable persons, specifically disabled migrants. It is generally an uncharted territory due to a gap in research around migration and disability (Duda-Mikulin 2024; Nowicka et al. 2024; Duda-Mikulin, Scullion, Currie 2020; Stojkow 2020; Burns 2019; Hughes 2017; Pisani, Grech 2015; Soldatic et al. 2015). These two constructs, disability and migration, have rarely been considered together. Existing research on similar topics has been done predominantly in the Global North (understood here as Western highly developed countries which are in opposition to the Global South which comprises developing countries and Central and Eastern Europe) (UK: Yeo 2021; Burns 2017; Roberts 2000; Canada: Newbold, Simone 2015; Australia: Soldatic et al. 2015). However, new studies are emerging in the context of Poland too (e.g. Nowicka et al. 2024, 2025) and there are ongoing efforts to adopt an inclusive approach towards migrants and refugees with disabilities by the European Disability Forum (EDF, n.d.). From the existing literature we learn that disabled migrants are among the most invisible, socially isolated and disadvantaged individuals worldwide (Duda-Mikulin 2024; Goodley et al. 2021; Duda-Mikulin, Scullion, Currie 2020; Andrejuk 2018; Mosler Vidal 2022).

This paper is based around the assumption that migrant status and disability are labels of sorts or categories of difference which intersect in a nuanced way in the lives of some people. Hence, Crenshaw's (1989) "intersectionality" is relevant here. I recognize that social isolation experienced by some disabled migrants is rooted in the social construction of "axes of difference" such as migrant and disabled. Those categories are

not static and permanent as they are socially constructed under specific circumstances that are present at any given time (cf. Głodkowska 2021). Highlighting these themes and issues that come with them will contribute towards greater inclusivity of disabled migrants in literature and scholarly debate as they are currently misrepresented and underrepresented.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review is focused around literature relevant to migration and disability. Thus, current and relevant publications within Migration Studies and Disability Studies available internationally were reviewed and inform the debate which follows. The existing scholarship around migration and disability was considered particularly in relation to the country context of Poland.

Additionally, a reflexive note is needed here to offer an important context. I, as the author and a researcher, am an ally of the migration and disability movements. I have been a migrant since 2005 and have voluntarily moved between countries within and beyond Europe several times during this time. I also have experience of long-term chronic illness. For these reasons, I am positioned close to both concepts — migration and disability.

Disabled migrants as vulnerable persons

People with disabilities are considered as vulnerable persons due to a potentially higher risk of marginalisation and social isolation (Andrejuk 2018; Podgórska-Jachnik 2016); and thus, the same can be said about disabled migrants (Duda-Mikulin, Scullion, Currie 2020). Historically, Disability Studies have ignored the experiences of people who migrate, while Migration Studies frequently excluded disabled people (Hughes 2017). This is a surprising omission from both fields of study given that many disabled people are migrants, and many migrants are disabled people (Pisani, Grech 2015). Although this landscape has been changing, there is still a lack of knowledge about disabled people among migrant populations in Poland and worldwide (Duda-Mikulin 2024). Disabled people and migrants represent significant minorities worldwide (Mosler Vidal 2022) and are among the most vulnerable and prone to exploitation (Soldatic et al. 2015; Duda-Mikulin, Scullion, Currie 2020). Despite this, disability and migration have rarely been considered concurrently (Burns 2019; Hughes 2017; Pisani, Grech 2015). The complex needs of disabled

migrants are not known and thus largely unmet and unnoticed with a lack of reliable and consistent data on their number and profile (Mosler Vidal 2022). In 2020, the average disability rates for migrants stood at 15% which translates into 12 million forced migrants who were disabled people. However, in some contexts these rates may be higher as these are estimates and there are no official global records on disability among migrants whilst data is very limited in relation to other than forced migrants (Mosler Vidal 2022).

Arguably, migration policies still exclude disabled people, and disabled migrants remain a hidden population (Trotter 2012); though this has been changing particularly with regards to Disability Studies (cf. Nowicka et al. 2024; Burns 2019; 2017; Yeo 2015; Roberts 2000). Disabled migrants continue to be characterized by epistemological, ontological and practical invisibility (Pisani, Grech 2015; Soldatic et al. 2015). Moreover, disabled migrants are often understood as invisible populations which are hard to reach and so easily ignored while they are among the most disadvantaged and marginalized in the world today. The population of migrants and refugees overall is growing, but it is also ageing — two trends which are likely to increase the numbers of disabled people from migrant backgrounds. Therefore, given the size and expected growth of the disabled population among migrants and refugees, it is a demographic imperative that their needs are more fully understood in order to then be appropriately addressed. Which can be achieved through more research and their direct involvement in it.

In neoliberal societies, migrants and disabled people seem, too often, to have been abandoned to the category of human waste: “more correctly wasted humans (the ‘excessive’ and ‘redundant’ that is the population of those who either could not or were not wished to be recognized or allowed to stay)” (Bauman 2016: 5). The Trump presidency in America and the Brexit campaign in the UK were but two processes that normalized othering and made explicit calls to exclude and dehumanize¹. In Poland, the anti-immigrant rhetoric was propagated by the Law and Order political party which was previously in power (Rzepnikowska, Duda-Mikulin 2025). Strategically creating and using fear of the perceived other gave rise to neo-nationalism. Politicians, public figures and the media explicitly

¹ Harriet Agerholm, *Brexit: Wave of hate crime and racial abuse reported following EU referendum*, “Independent”, 03.07.2016 (<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/brexit-eu-referendum-racial-racism-abuse-hatecrime-reported-latest-leave-immigration-a7104191.html>).

state that differences have become threatening which leads to a culture of fear and suspicion. Profound social changes cause anxiety and whilst human mobility and displacement are on the rise, ethno-nationalism often leads to othering (IOM 2022). When societies undergo rapid change, they act as gatekeepers and assert who is admitted and who qualifies as a full member and thus is permitted full rights to its resources. The attributes of others differ across societies and they themselves are not the problem; however, they are amplified by the media, made salient and manipulated in a way that leads to divisions based on an assumed threat (Ruis, Vargas-Silva 2021).

It is noteworthy that although disabled migrants are often considered as vulnerable persons for reasons related to the intersecting vectors of power which act to their disadvantage, they are increasingly seen as in possession of agentic powers reinforced by self-advocacy and activism which lead to greater autonomy. We observe a change from pity onto autonomy and agency in the name of the principle “nothing about us without us.” Realizing that it is the social, physical and political environment that constitutes disability and not individual impairments. We move away from the deficit perspective onto principles of diversity and equity whereby it is believed that everyone has something valuable to offer and everyone is different (Podgórska-Jachnik 2016).

Definitions

Matters related to terminology and definitions which I utilize in this paper need to be explained and further theorized for reasons of clarity, integrity and transparency. For the purpose of this article, the following definitions will apply.

Migration refers to both voluntary movement (e.g. migrant workers) and involuntary (forced) movement (e.g. refugees) of individuals, across geographical borders internationally or internally. It is important to acknowledge that the category of “migrants” includes voluntary and forced migrants, those who chose to move and those who moved due to armed, political and/or environmental disasters or conflicts. Refugees refers to forced migrants who having a well-founded fear of armed, environmental, political or other conflict and/or disaster fled their countries of origin in search of safety and applied for asylum elsewhere (UNDP 2016).

As Dahinden (2022, abstract) writes: “Migranticization can be understood as those sets of performative practices that ascribe a migratory status to certain people and bodies — labelling them (im)migrants, second

generation migrants, people with migration background, minorities, etc. — and thus (re-)establish their a priori non-belonging, regardless of whether the people designated as ‘migrants’ are citizens of the nation-state they reside in or not, and regardless of whether they have crossed a national border or not.” Migrantization can be considered as a matter of power and governance; it places people in a distinct hierarchy which goes along with an unequal distribution of societal, symbolic and material resources while it affirms a national “we” within a system of global inequalities. Another term, “people-on-the-move,” was recently offered in opposition to migrant to bring in neutrality and overcome pejorative meanings ascribed to “migrants” (Wagner 2022).

Under the UN Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), “people with disabilities” include those with long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments. This includes wheelchair users and people with other mobility impairments, blind and deaf people, people with mental health issues — or “psychosocial disabilities” — and people with intellectual disabilities. Both EU and national legislation in the area of asylum and migration frequently refer separately to people with disabilities and people with mental health problems (also sometimes termed “mental illness” or “mental disorders”), although both are included under the umbrella term “vulnerable persons” (Podgórska-Jachnik 2016). Noteworthy is the fact that while “visible” disabilities, such as physical impairments or serious mental health problems are often the first to be identified, less obvious disabilities remain undetected which means some disabled people remain unidentified in practice (FRA, nd). Moreover, migrants, “refugees and other persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual and sensory impairments, which, in interaction with various barriers, including attitudinal and environmental barriers, may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others” (UNHCR 2010).

“Disability is often assumed to be unequivocal, and is interpreted as problematic and tragic, and as inherent in particular individuals. Further assumption is then made that the task of those positioned as normal is to counter the deficit in the disabled individuals, to repair, cure, or solve it— that is, to bring them closer to normative modes of being” (De Schauwer, Van De Putte, Davies 2018: 11).

I view disability as a social construct and not something that people “have.” A person has an impairment that becomes a disability as a result of the interaction between the individual, and the natural, built, cultural and societal environments (Goethals, De Schauwer, Van Hove 2015). This

is in line with the social model of disability (Disability Rights UK, n.d.). Thus, disability lies at the intersection of biology and society and agency and structure (see Głodkowska 2021, for more on the development of Disability Studies in Poland). It is noteworthy that there is an ongoing debate around terms which are most appropriate to refer to this group. The person first vs. identity first — using “person with a disability” or “disabled person” debate is largely within the disability community and is evenly divided and in transition. “Person first” was supposed to emphasize personhood in contrast with summing up people by their disabilities. Increasingly however, people view their disabilities not simply as inconvenient invaders but as parts of their core identity (cf. Podgórska-Jachnik 2016). Proponents of both positions include those who identify as disabled. In the Polish Disability Studies literature one seems to find more references and postulates to use “person with disability” rather than “disabled person” as this is viewed as putting the person centerstage rather than focusing on just one characteristic of that person, meaning the disability (O niepełnosprawności..., 2018). Nevertheless, some scholars deem it appropriate to say “disabled person” within their research around culture, disability and migration (Stojkow 2020). Following Lester and Nusbaum (2018), I intentionally choose to foreground “disability”, rather than use people first language (e.g. a person with a disability). While people first language is often described as serving emancipatory purposes, I take up the position that the word “with” functions to cast disability as an “add-on [identity].”

It needs to be acknowledged that the social model of disability has been pivotal in the history of disabled people’s political mobilization, the formulation of disability-related law and policy and the development of interdisciplinary Disability Studies. This is while the human rights model has gained prominence and considerable influence, particularly in law and policy contexts, since the adoption of the CRPD in 2006. Still, the two models have different subjects and different functions and, their roles are complementary and supportive in the human rights context, for instance (Lawson, Beckett 2021).

Doing research with vulnerable persons

Along with the historical “nothing about us without us” slogan, research participants should be seen as experts in their own right who possess lived experience and inside understanding and so realize what is needed by their communities. This standpoint is less paternalistic

and more democratic in contrast to “traditional” positivist research paradigms and is in line with feminist scholars who questioned the power distribution and positionality in research. It is important to position and perceive the research participants as subjects with agency instead of moral objects (Podgórska-Jachnik 2016). A “politics of presence” might work in research ethics: embracing vulnerability; considering relational presence; and honoring participants. Love and McDonnell (2024) emphasized “dual nature of vulnerability” which is not only passive ontological condition but one with agentic powers and those described by vulnerability can be “exposed and agentic at the same time.” The dual nature of vulnerability seems particularly applicable to disabled migrants.

Rees and colleagues (2024) converged on a model of engaged research that they term “community peer research,” an approach that involves actively recruiting and engaging non-academics and providing them with appropriate support and training in order to enable them to become equal research partners. They define community peer research as collaborative social research that involves non-academics and members of communities in meaningful research in ways that have practical outcomes and benefit those who are impacted by the research or the intervention under consideration. This may be one way to involve vulnerable persons.

Researcher is no longer seen as the only expert in the field who is tasked with uncovering the truth and extracting knowledge from the research participants. The researcher is co-producing with the research participants a shared understanding of the issue at hand which is meant to be to the benefit of the community in question while recognizing the value of including the expertise of service user communities and local citizens. Co-production and co-ownership of the research is particularly relevant here so that it remains relevant to the (traditionally recognised as disadvantaged) communities in question and not just undertaken for the sake of the academy but rather involves participant empowerment and increases their decision-making (especially important for those deemed vulnerable as they, due to their past experiences, may require additional agency and encouragement) which translates into the “social worth” of the research. Issues around cultural differences and language should be reflected on as there may be the need to use cultural brokers and/or interpreters where individuals are not proficient in a given language (cf. Stojkow 2020; Podgórska-Jachnik 2016).

Direct involvement of vulnerable persons who are representatives of the community being researched seems paramount. Yet, researchers need to be mindful of potential challenges linked to including peer researchers

meaningfully because of limits to their skills/confidence levels despite providing them with relevant training. In one study, peer researchers' post research evaluations evidenced enhanced interpersonal qualities, such as confidence and senses of belonging (Rees et al. 2024). Peer researchers bring a wealth of insider knowledge and access to groups often considered as difficult to engage in academic research. Though, we need to be mindful about anonymity and confidentiality. Research has shown that it is important to use pseudonyms, ideally names chosen by the participants, to allow for greater agency and balance of power in research and no further identity loss as vulnerable participants have likely experienced this already in the process of being othered while de-identifying allows for anonymity (cf. Heaton 2022).

Scholars postulate that it is critical to explore our actions, reactions and interactions through which normative subjects are constituted, and non-normative subjects are abjected — that is, cast out from, or made external to, normative selves (De Schauwer, Van De Putte, Davies 2018). It is in opposition to the normative that the different/disabled/migrant is constructed and seen. The former is considered the norm while the latter the exception and thus unwanted as not properly understood. “The process of abjection is central to the constitution of normative and non-normative subjects. Those who are categorized as different/disabled, are constituted within the discourses and practices of normativity as disturbing the right and proper order of things” (De Schauwer, Van De Putte, Davies 2018: 8). This applies to both disabled and migrant people.

Disability is a form of embodied experience, while there is a need to disrupt the notion of normalcy in research so that disabled bodies are not targeted and removed from the public domain as uneasy, different and not fitting in (Głodkowska 2021). It is easy to illustrate how power relations and normative value judgments are frequently evoked to position some individuals as more valid and worthy than others. “Much of the early research surrounding disabled people has been grounded in deficit-based perspectives aimed at ‘fixing’ individual pathology versus working to understand the being of another individual, as well as the social/cultural construct of disability more broadly” (Lester, Nusbaum 2018: 4). Which is why we as researchers ought to place them centerstage as experts.

A disability studies perspective critiques and deconstructs the binary thinking that divides abled from disabled, and normal from abnormal. Additionally, normal can only be understood in opposition to abnormal, migrant in opposition to citizen. The perception and categorization as abnormal can only be constituted in relation to what

is commonly understood as “normal.” This is amplified and driven by neoliberal intensification of the search for perfect embodiment which increasingly involves esthetic, beauty and medical interventions. “Normative understandings and practices of gender, age, social class, race, ethnicity, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, and bodily ability are accomplished through binary logics dividing us into ascendant and subordinate categories” (De Schauwer, Van De Putte, Davies 2018: 9). Those categorized as non-normative, migrant and disabled people for instance, remain at risk of social exclusion.

We ought to engage with our positionality and multiple subjectivities (insider/outsider; knowledge holder/learner) particularly when researching vulnerable individuals. We need to consider whether or how we can ask our research participants to become engaged in research while they are/may already be overburdened (cf. Żuchowska-Skiba 2016). Also, ethics of representing difficult experiences (e.g. of discrimination, violence, racism, ableism, etc.) need to be explored. How can we engage in research of vulnerable communities while maintaining a sense of objectivity while protecting our informants? Pacheco-Vega and Parizeau (2018) emphasize three key elements: positionality, engagement vs exploitation and representation. As researchers we need to constantly be self-reflective and auto-critical, after all we are responsible for the research we undertake. This requires ongoing methodological reflexivity, recognizing privileged position and challenging underlying assumptions.

IMPORTANCE OF INCLUSIVITY, ACCESSIBILITY, REFLEXIVITY AND ANTI-ESSENTIALISM

The findings of my previous research highlight that when migration and disability are considered concurrently, barriers multiply and result in a nuanced double disadvantage and experiences of social marginalization (Duda-Mikulin 2024). Both migrant and disabled people are exposed to discrimination and often experience it intensely (Duda-Mikulin, Głowacka 2023). Migrant and disability experience translates into social vulnerability and is a contributing cause of exclusion in relation to mainstream services and social expectations. The previous project concludes that disability and migration are socially constructed categories that come with struggles in a context of discrimination, and it calls for a more positive view of both minority identities (Duda-Mikulin 2024). I found that forces of marginalization applicable to migrants and to disabled people are particularly pertinent to disabled migrants. The

effect of multiple minority group membership (i.e. migrant, disabled) correlated with issues around gender can potentially result in multi-point marginalization. Disabled people and migrants are still often understood as lacking in some way. These labels are constructed as undeserving, less than human. Both migrant and disabled people are often portrayed as a burden and a threat (Stojkow 2020). My research pushes forward a view of disability and migration as socially constructed categories that come with struggles in a context of discrimination, but the material effects of legal status go beyond social construction. At the same time, it calls for a more positive view of both minority identities. Disabled migrants confessed that they are too often portrayed as incapable humans in need of support while this does not have to be or simply is not true. Indeed, emphasizing differences can divide unnecessarily while diversity should be a celebration (Duda-Mikulín 2024).

In order to mitigate the risk around recruitment and attainment of the (vulnerable) research participants, principles of inclusivity, reflexivity and anti-essentialism can prove helpful (Goethals, De Schauwer, Van Hove 2015). In this inclusive approach, the research process and its methodologies must ensure that disabled migrants — *about whom*, and *for whom* the research is designed — are involved not simply as research subjects but play a central role as researchers and research participants. In Disability Studies research, the development of inclusive research, where disabled people are active participants, is now fairly common; its impact however has been limited (Goethals, De Schauwer, Van Hove 2015; Walmsley 2001). The importance and challenge of involving disabled people and migrants in research is critical in order to keep the research relevant, honest, and representative and ensure that the analysis is grounded in the lived experiences of the participants. I see the research process as a process of mutual recognition and co-understanding. Doing research *with* rather than *on* or *for* disabled migrants and co-constructing research where people do not get alienated from the process is the goal. Encouraging the engagement of participants in an inclusive debate on issues relevant to them, creates a productive dialogue on developing theory and inclusive practice. This is also in line with intersectional theory and critical engagement with issues of power and structural inequalities. These mechanisms aim to dissolve the distance between those labelled and categorized as “them” and “us” (Goethals, De Schauwer, Van Hove 2015). As Goethals, De Schauwer, Van Hove (2015: 82) noted: “intersectional disability studies benefits from an inclusive approach in research as it gives insight in the complexities and multi-layeredness of participants’ lives and

allows for the in-depth study of individuals' personal and unique social locations and experiences with power and privilege”.

In line with reflexivity, stories of lived experience of both the participant and the researcher are co-constructed and negotiated between the people involved as a means of capturing complex, multi-layered, and nuanced understandings (cf. Grillo 1995). A key question that should be considered is how best to capture and fully include the voices of vulnerable persons and how to provide opportunities for traditionally marginalized perspectives to be heard. Engaging reflexively with positionalities and how they affect the production of knowledge can be particularly beneficial in Disability Studies and Migration Studies, aiding in the paradigmatic shift from research *about*, to research *by* and *for* these often invisible-in-research and public spaces people (cf. Kurowski 2014; Woynarowska 2019; Godlewska-Byliniak 2020). In an attempt to unpack some of the complexities and power relations of research, this reflexive approach can function as a tool for revealing positionalities and can build a more careful representation of reality, one that is not assumed to be the objective, positivistic truth.

Following the intersectional perspective, it is important not to essentialize any group or assume that all members of a single social group share similar experiences, perspectives, and needs (Hankivsky, Cormier 2009). An essentialist point of view assumes that the experience of being a member of the group under discussion is a stable one, one with a clear meaning, a meaning constant through time, space, and different historical, social, political, and personal contexts (Grillo 1995). According to an anti-essentialist perspective, social categories such as migrant status, disability, gender, age, ethnicity, class, geography, and so on are flexible and fluid and thus can and often do change, evolve and shift through time (cf. Reimann 2018). The belief that all participants have valuable knowledge to impart based on their personal perspectives and experiences leads to different co-operative methods such as collaborative research design, co-production of knowledge, participatory data analysis, research design in close collaboration with the participants, accessible research materials and reporting, but above all, the continuous dialogue and intensive and close collaborative relationships between researchers, peer researchers and participants where opinions, interpretations, and experiences are openly shared.

Taking a constructionist view (Berger, Luckmann 1966), I assume that social reality is the continual product of the social exchange of meanings, while objective reality can only be accessed by social participants through socially shared meanings (Gergen 1985; Burr 1995). By taking the “inside”

perspective, qualitative research is more “engaged.” As we live in a social world that is becoming increasingly more fluid, it is particularly the in-depth description thereof, and from the point of view of the social actor, that becomes critically significant (Woynarowska 2019). It is also through adopting the “bottom-up” perspective that we are able to actively engage with increasingly frequent calls within the Social Sciences to involve research participants, particularly those perceived as disenfranchised, in the research design, research process and dissemination of results (Davidson 2003).

To maintain anonymity and relative power balance using pseudonyms is the preferred technique precisely because it avoids de-personalizing those who have already experienced a loss of, or change in, their identity due to being assigned to disabled or migrant people, for instance (Saunders, Kitinger, Kitinger 2015; Heaton 2022). Thus, the use of pseudonyms or nicknames chosen by the research participants themselves is recommended as this reduces the power imbalance, allows for greater agency and co-production and enables choosing another identity with which the participant self-identifies in the name of self-advocacy (cf. Godlewska-Byliniak 2020).

Additionally, there is a need to challenge the perspective that disability is a form of deficit or defect and thus needs to be remedied by an intervention of medical experts (Podgórska-Jachnik 2016). It has been shown that we need to be cautious about assigning certain labels as fixed identity categories, as they have the potential to reduce a person to a situation in which they may have once found themselves (e.g. fluctuating health issues). I agree with Dhillon and Ulmer (2024) that situation-specific terms such as asylum seeker or refugee for instance should not become oppressive labels as they have the potential to stigmatize people for the rest of their lives. Moreover, a lack of context-specific definition can cause difficulty in evaluating claims. The authors caution against assigning such terms as fixed identity categories, as they have the potential to reduce a person to a past situation which may have been overcome or is no longer relevant (Dhillon, Ulmer 2024).

Language and terminology matter, for instance, not everyone who has been forcibly displaced will be able to migrate (e.g. see Belarus-Poland border “crisis”) (Wagner 2022). The term “migration failures” is used in the literature to describe people who failed to secure refugee status, for instance. Following Dhillon and Ulmer (2024) I disagree with this phrasing, as it shifts responsibility to individuals rather than to any of the multiple systems that have collectively failed and caused people to

be forcibly displaced. It is not that forcibly displaced people have failed at migration, but that systems have failed those who have been forcibly displaced. Terminology can carry stigma which can translate into othering and in consequence into experiences of discrimination and exclusion. This is while labels are easy to come by but often difficult to forgo. In agreement with the authors, I call for harmful and stigmatizing language to be avoided and replaced by kind, inclusive and humanizing terms in public, media, research and practice (Dhillon, Ulmer 2024).

As researchers we should be mindful and ethical to approach other people not as abstractions, but as people with lived experiences, similar to ourselves. This practice should allow greater sensitivity and inclusivity towards varied experiences of others. Instead of taking the perspective of personal tragedy which is often assumed when exploring matters related to difference, be it disability or migrant status, one should come with curiosity, openness to ambiguity and allowance for varied ways of being and thinking. This is based on assumptions that place limits on the lives of those who are categorized as different; those who have been categorized as somehow lesser beings insofar as they lie outside the norm. Despite all our efforts to protect and defend our boundaries, we are multiply entangled in our encounters with each other. We ought to recognize how easily we get trapped in reductionist and one-dimensional observations of people who are labeled as different. Curiosity pushes us to learn more and uncover new knowledge. Whereas a lack of knowledge leads to fear as people usually are afraid of the unknown (cf. intergroup contact theory, Allport 1954). Thus, we should encourage approaching vulnerable individuals with curiosity and open-mindedness in order to make them known and no longer feared — normalize difference for the sake of all of us.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the idea of uniqueness of individual experiences which is embedded into the constructivist standpoint is noteworthy. A reflection of the methodological implications for choosing the sample which is a key aspect of the participatory approach is needed. That, together with inclusion of people who identify as the interest group and the focus of the study and ensuring any possible barriers to their involvement are foregone are necessary. Additionally, making the research and its outputs accessible is desirable. This is while being reflexive and anti-essential are also key. When designing research that involves the so-called vulnerable individuals, a reflexive stance should be employed. With regards to

research around disabled migrants, the researchers should ponder to what extent their (perhaps often naïve) expertise is to be considered, to what extent biases could occur, and what is the best way to integrate the participatory approach into the migration/disability intersectionality.

It remains common to position non-disabled research experts and disabled individuals as the subject/object/research participant. Instead, it should be *with*, *by* and *about* disabled people as doers and individuals with agency with relevant expertise and decision-making abilities that research is undertaken. Participants should be key and central to research. This paper is a call against the hegemonic power of ableism in order to move the “nondisabled” to “the peripheral position in order to look at the world from the inside out, to expose the perspective and expertise that is silenced” (Linton 1998: 13), arguably still today.

As I argue here, vulnerable persons should be viewed as experts in their own right and meaningfully involved as research partners co-producing knowledge and taking centerstage in any research that focuses on their lives or experiences. Disabled migrants can be vulnerable and often remain invisible in the literature and practice which needs to change. Risk analysis together with principles of inclusivity, accessibility, reflexivity and anti-essentialism are a good starting point when designing research projects *with* and *about* vulnerable persons and remain pivotal in the process of involving said individuals in research that is meaningful and fair.

Additionally, more research, both qualitative and quantitative, is needed to better identify, understand and be able to respond to the needs of disabled people among migrant populations and migrants among disabled people in Poland and beyond.

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Abstract

This paper calls for greater attention to people recognized as among the most vulnerable. The author argues that disabled migrants should be treated not only as objects and subjects of research, but also as co-researchers in their own right. More research is urgently needed on those who identify as disabled migrants, due to significant gaps in knowledge — particularly in relation to theory, policy, and practice. Accordingly, the article first outlines these gaps in the literature. Second, it examines existing approaches to conducting research with vulnerable persons, and considers the specificity of those defined as “hard to reach” or “easy to ignore.” Third, it identifies inclusivity, accessibility, reflexivity, and anti-essentialism key guiding principles, while an ongoing research project is explored to illustrate key lessons learned. The article concludes with a number of recommendations.

key words: migration, disability, vulnerable persons, meaningful engagement and communication, qualitative research