


The Art of Arriving: A New Methodological Approach to Reframing “Refugee Integration”

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Abstract

The main objective of the transdisciplinary and arts-based research project “The Art of Arriving: Reframing ‘Refugee Integration’” is to explore the transformative potential of the arts for the sociology of migration and integration. By creating a real-world laboratory where sociologists accompany artists as they create, and recipients while they interpret aesthetic expressions, the project focuses on the process of refugees’ arriving. The aim is to examine if and how the meaning-making processes involved in creating and interpreting art can foster alternative views about “refugee integration” and extend or even revise the traditional sociological toolkit for understanding integration. The article discusses the methodological implications of the planned transdisciplinary multimethod approach by paying particular attention to the different logics of knowledge production in science and the arts. Additionally, it sheds light on the benefits associated with the mutual translation between sociology and various fields of art, which is mediated through the process of creating and interpreting aesthetic expressions in the context of refugee migration.

Keywords

arts-based research, multimethodology, reconstructive analysis, artistic practices, forced migration, integration

Background

Like many European countries, Austria has experienced a significant increase in the number of refugees and migrants over the past few decades. It became a place of arrival for people who involuntarily fled their homes due to persecution, torture, and war—mainly during two phases: Between 1991 and 1995, approximately 13,000 refugees from Croatia and 90,000 refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina sought shelter in Austria (Kratzmann, 2016, p. 28). More recently (between 2014 and 2016), 160,000 asylum seekers arrived, most of whom were from Afghanistan (42,500), Syria (41,000), and Iraq (17,500) (BMI 2019). Migration movements like these often are being discursively constructed as “refugee crises” in political and media discourses (Krzyżanowski et al., 2018) with a primary focus on the question of how to “integrate” these refugees, emphasizing “cultural differences” as a critical obstacle to success.

The sociology of migration and integration claims to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of processes of

migration and refugee movements, their structural conditions, trajectories, and societal benefits. However, the sociological toolkit for analyzing these processes was developed in the twentieth century and is visibly limited when applied to contemporary societies. This becomes most apparent in current debates surrounding terms and concepts like “integration,” “assimilation,” and “acculturation,” which are increasingly challenged in “postmigrant societies” (Foroutan, 2019) where super-diversity (Vertovec, 2019) and new majority–minority relations (Crul, 2016; Jiménez, 2017) have become defining characteristics of many cities in the Global North.

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“Integration” is often conceptualized in both politics and academia as adaption to or assimilation into subordinated, normative units. However, this is inadequate since it is a normatively charged understanding of integration that can even contribute to processes of othering (e.g., Saharso, 2019; Schinkel, 2018). Social research should take a strict approach to differentiating between integration as objective or guiding principle, which is defined as achievable by specific kinds of political intervention (like integration courses) and integration as an analytical concept regarding “the core sociological notion of ‘society’” (Schinkel, 2018, p. 1). Integration, in this sense, must not be perceived as the “passive internalization of given structures” but as an interplay between structure and agency, between the (arriving) individual and the surrounding society (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Soeffner & Zifonun, 2008), typically characterized by an imbalance of power.

To reach this understanding of integration, research must not only focus on questions of how the receiving countries respond to refugees and/or how they adapt to the host nations’ existing structures but also more rigorously take into account the experiences of those who are arriving.

In order to simultaneously take the refugees’ experiences seriously and avoid reproducing the normatively charged understanding of integration, Ludger Pries introduces the concept of arrival into the sociological discussion on (forced) migration (Masadeh & Pries, 2021; Pries, 2018). He conceives it as an open-ended and interactive process, which is characterized by reciprocity between those who arrive (newcomers) and those who already live there (established) (Pries, 2018, p. 150). To Masadeh and Pries, arrival is

[as] much a migrant’s mental concept, experience and feeling as it is an outcome of his or her social environment and corresponding negotiations. Arrival refers to the individual’s ability to navigate their way to socio-cultural and physical resources. Arrival also deals with cognitive frames and negotiated belongings as group constructions of ‘us’ and ‘them.’ (Masadeh & Pries, 2021; p. 4)

Hence, arrival goes beyond just landing somewhere, it is also about getting recognized and heard—in German *Anklang finden* (Pries, 2016, p. 131). This idea of *Anklang finden* is reminiscent of Hartmut Rosa’s concept of resonance, which

describes a mode of *being-in-the-world*, i.e. a specific way in which subject and world come into relation with each other [...] that two entities in relation [...] mutually affect each other in such a way that they can be understood as *responding to each other*, at the same time each is *speaking with its own voice*. (Rosa, 2019, pp. 495–496)

Anklang finden is therefore a world relation, characterized by affection, emotion, intrinsic interest, and the expectation of self-efficacy, and “constitutes the ‘other’ of alienation – its antithesis” (Rosa, 2019, p. 542):

Alienation in the sense of a mute, cold, rigid, or failed relationship to the world, is, then, the result of a damaged subjectivity, social and object configurations that are hostile to resonance, or an imbalance or lack of compatibility in the relation between a given subject and some segment of world. (Rosa, 2019; p. 66)

How refugees experience arrival and how resonance and alienation relate to each other in this process is, in our opinion, one of the most urgent issues in the sociology of migration and integration.¹

On a methodological level, there are many ways to analyze the experience of arriving. Several established methods that may be especially suitable, *inter alia*, focus on the reconstruction of knowledge structures and experiences; for example, different hermeneutical methods (Oevermann et al., 1987; Wernet, 2013),² biographical narrative interpretive approaches (Rosenthal, 1995; Wengraf, 2001),³ or the documentary method, which is a form of qualitative data analysis anchored in Karl Mannheim’s sociology of knowledge that aims to reveal collective orientations established in “conjunctive spaces of experiences” (Bohnsack et al., 2010; Reischl & Plotz, 2020).⁴ In fact, the documentary analysis will be essential within our multimethod approach; however, we believe that this research field would strongly benefit from a radical decontextualization, which not only implies thinking beyond sociology and sociological methods, but systematically integrating non-scientific and, particularly, artistic knowledge (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Leavy, 2020).

Arts—and especially migrants’ artistic practices—are considered as being capable of developing new perspectives on migration. Arts and artistic practices are seen as an important tool for challenging ethnic boundaries (Martiniello, 2018) through their ability to understand and contest stereotypes (DiMaggio & Fernández-Kelly, 2010). For example, migrants’ artistic work might contest taken-for-granted assumptions, which is often achieved by contradicting the ethnic majority’s expectations. These works provide forms of representation that go beyond ethnic ascriptions and help inspire a different imagination of the society (Petersen & Schramm, 2017). Furthermore, artistic practices offer opportunities for political agency via their capacity to transform stigmatizing discourses and narratives through their performances and also, more generally, their cultural production (Bhimji, 2016; Martiniello, 2019; Parzer, 2021). This potential for changing established discourses is why migrants’ artistic practices have been so inspiring for sociological research on migration (Berg & Nowicka, 2019; Cutcher, 2015; Guruge et al., 2015; O’Neill, 2008; O’Neill et al., 2019).

However, no efforts to date have been undertaken to systematically combine sociological and artistic knowledge to explore the transformative potential of the arts for the sociology of migration and integration. This requires a departure from conventional sociological research to provide space for bringing sociology into contact with the arts. We believe that this can be best realized by combining the transdisciplinary

and participatory approach of “real-world laboratories” (Singer-Brodowski et al., 2017; Wanner et al., 2018) with elements of arts-based research (Barone & Eisner, 2012) and the documentary method of interpretation (Bohnsack et al., 2010; Reischl & Plotz, 2020). Implementing this design, as further unpacked in the following section, will create a space for both scientific and non-scientific actors to cooperate in the joint production of knowledge by researching, experimenting, and learning from each other. In theoretical terms, we draw on the sociology of knowledge as well as on the sociology of arts. While the former helps reveal the tacit knowledge used by various actors in the processes of creating and interpreting art, the sociology of arts provides insights into art’s role in society (Bourdieu, 1984) as well as how society shapes artistic practices (Becker, 1982).

Research Methods

Research Design: Explanation and Justification of Methods

Existing “real-world laboratories” (RWLs) have been developed in the context of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research that focuses on the production of knowledge for social innovation and societal change (Singer-Brodowski et al., 2017; Wanner et al., 2018). Located between the poles of classical scientific experiments and creativity-driven “lab projects,” RWLs are embedded with societal problems in a real-world context that are solved by “combining the value of concrete action paired with scientific rigour and persuasiveness” (Wanner et al., 2018, p. 95). We consider this approach as being particularly valuable for gaining fresh insights about refugees’ arrival by creating an artificial space where sociologists, artists, and recipients work together to create and translate different forms of scientific and non-scientific knowledge. To implement these ideas in our research, we are following a three-step procedure:

- (1) The main concept involves inviting artists with and without refugee experiences to translate their experiences and knowledge of arriving—recognized as an (often long-lasting) process (Pries, 2018)—into aesthetic expressions by simultaneously, artistically engaging with sociological concepts. This process is accompanied by the sociologists who perform participant observation, including audio recording. More specifically, the sociologists will join each artistic team for 5–10 days, and their observations should cover discussions among artists about the act of translation as well as the process of producing art. The documentary method will guide the field notes and audio transcription analyses (Bohnsack et al., 2010).
- (2) To properly grasp its aesthetic dimension, it is essential to not only shed light on the artistic work itself, but also on how these works are perceived and

interpreted by both potential audiences and those who rarely come into contact with these artistic forms of expression. Therefore, the artwork will be displayed to and interpreted by different actors in group discussions. Each interpretation session will last approximately two to four hours and will be audio-recorded and transcribed. We anticipate that the meaning-making processes involved in creating and interpreting art can foster reframing “refugee integration” concepts and provide alternative views about the arriving of refugees. The transcripts from the group discussions will also be analyzed using the documentary method.

- (3) A final step feeds the findings that emerge from analyzing the art production and the reception process back to the artists for further discussion. This discussion step has two key benefits: First, it harnesses a source of knowledge, which reflects on our intention to focus on the differences between the “subjectively intended meaning” (Weber, 1978) of the artists and the different interpretations from the various participants. Second, it provides valuable knowledge and feedback to the artists. These sessions will also be audio recorded, transcribed, and comparatively included in the documentary analysis. As we will elaborate upon, the insights gained from this analysis will further contribute to the project’s validity.

Sampling and Recruitment

The Ethnography of Creating Artistic Knowledge. The artist sampling is based on the criterion of refugee experience since it is problematic to use ethnicity as the analytical basis, which implies cultures as fixed, stable, and homogenous entities (Schiller & Çağlar, 2013): Focusing on ethnic groups as taken-for-granted entities with a shared identity and similar cultural behavior is an oversimplifying and essentializing approach (Wimmer, 2013) that often fails to consider other structural categories like social class and gender, as well as their intersectionality (Dahinden, 2016).

We have recruited three artistic teams for our project, each consisting of one artist who experienced recent flight from Syria between 2010 and 2020, one artist whose refugee experience lies in the more distant past—more precisely, who fled from the former Yugoslavia between 1990 and 2000, and one artist without any refugee experience. We are focusing on music, literature, and photography, because they are omnipresent in contemporary migrants’ cultural production, internally differentiated by a highbrow–lowbrow distinction logic, and usually produce replicable artwork (which facilitates the use of the artworks for the scientists and artists involved during the whole research project and also beyond). However, while music mainly refers to auditory components, photography is (mainly) based on visual elements and literature on linguistic elements. Although we do not plan to

systematically compare these different art forms, the variation among the artistic teams ensures that we will gain valuable insights into how experiences of arrival might translate differently into aesthetic expressions depending on the social organization of the respective artistic field.

Group Discussions: Interpreting the Artwork. Twelve discussion groups, each comprising four participants, will be established to gain a broad variety of perspectives. In addition to gender, age, and social class, we will also account for whether or not the participants themselves have had refugee experiences when we assemble the groups. Focusing on these different characteristics allows us to: a) Respond to the call for demigranticizing migration research (Dahinden, 2016) by acknowledging the interplay and intersection of multiple factors that shape how art is received and b) be cognizant of sociological findings on how the reception of art as well as attitudes toward refugees are dependent on one's social position. Hence, recruiting homogenous groups according to the above-mentioned criteria meets the data analysis requirements for the documentary method, which will be used for our data. However, unlike conventional group discussions, the participants in these interpretation groups are seen as research partners rather than research subjects.

Data and Analysis

Four data sets will be generated within our RWL: Artworks created by the artists (data type A), field notes taken during the participant observation of the artwork creation process (data type B), audio recording transcripts from the creation process (data type C), audio recording transcripts from group discussions with recipients (data type D), and audio recording transcripts from the final discussion with the artists (data type E).

This data will be analyzed by adopting and adapting the documentary method, as developed by Ralf Bohnsack (Bohnsack et al., 2010; Reischl & Plotz, 2020). Theoretically anchored in Karl Mannheim's "sociology of knowledge," Harold Garfinkel's ethnomethodological elaboration on the vagueness and indexicality of language as well as Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the habitus, the documentary method's core assumption is that our shared experiences (based on a similar social position) shape our "collective orientations"—our "conjunctive knowledge"—that also serve as the basis for every individual's knowledge (Bohnsack, 2010, p. 105). According to Mannheim, conjunctive knowledge guides practical action by simultaneously remaining implicit and tacit. Reconstructing this tacit knowledge and its relation to the reflexively accessible stock of knowledge (the "communicative knowledge") is the central aim of the documentary method. Thus, the method goes beyond interpretive social research, because its primary focus is not on interpreting the subjective (or social) meaning, but rather reconstructing "latent meaning structures."

Bohnsack distinguishes between two levels of analysis regarding the practical procedure of data analysis: the "formulating interpretation" and the "reflecting interpretation." While the former is limited to summarizing what is being said, the latter gains access to conjunctive knowledge by reconstructing the "documentary meaning" of human objectifications. Rather than focusing on what is done (objective meaning) and the subjective intention (subjective meaning), it emphasizes how an action is *being done*—on its "modus operandi" (Bohnsack, 2010, p. 103). In other words, the documentary method does not primarily focus on "what's going on," but rather how practice is produced (Reischl & Plotz, 2020, p. 49). Although initially developed to analyze group discussion transcripts, the documentary method is also used to analyze narrative and biographical interviews (Nohl, 2010), pictures, and videos (Bohnsack, 2008, 2011).

While the audio recording transcripts from the creation process (data type C), group discussions with recipients (data type D), and the transcripts from the final discussion with the artists (data type E) will follow the classical approach to the documentary method, we plan to make an essential adaptation to the participatory research component for the artworks (data type A). The group discussion participants will be introduced to the central principles of interpretation and, at the same time, considered part of an interpretation group. The field notes (data type B) will be treated as external context knowledge when analyzing the conversations that were recorded during the creation process.

Research Ethics

It will be ethically important for our research to be fully aware of (1) obtaining informed consent from the participants; (2) respecting the participants' confidentiality; and (3) respecting intellectual property rights and data protection issues. All participants will receive comprehensive information about data handling and data protection, and will be able to withdraw their consent to participate in the study at any time. Since the project involves participants with refugee experiences and potentially addresses re-traumatizing topics, the research must be conducted with high sensitivity.

The fieldwork will be guided by the code of ethics from the International Sociological Association (ISA). This means that protecting participants' personal data will be taken very seriously, and information will be processed in accordance with the data protection compliance policies at our research institution, which also meet the requirements defined by the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and Austrian data protection laws (DGS). Hence, data handling will meet very high ethical standards.

Different strategies will be required to address data concerns: data generated from the group discussions will be strictly anonymized (i.e., all names, places, dates, and other information that would potentially disclose a participant's identity will be changed or removed). However, this will not

automatically be the case for data obtained through collaboration with the artists: Framing artists as collaborative researchers implicitly contests conventional data handling standards. Additionally, since the artworks will probably be closely tied to the artists' biographies and artistic orientations, full anonymity might be inherently hard to achieve (Tilley & Woodthorpe, 2011). Moreover, as previous research has revealed, artists often do not want to be anonymized and instead see published research findings as a chance to gain publicity (Parzer, 2009, p. 232). This has been confirmed in the initial, thorough discussions with the co-researcher artists, who have unambiguously expressed the desire to be mentioned by name. Therefore, we have agreed to seek permission when quoting the artists in publications and/or lectures. These agreements are included in the project's informed consent document.

Our different data sets also require multiple approaches to deal with the legal aspects of data handling. (1) The field notes from participant observation, (2) the audio recording transcripts from the creation process, and (3) the audio recording transcripts from group discussions are owned by the research team and will be handled according to standardized procedures from qualitative social research. (4) The artworks provided by the artists for the research process are, however, owned by the artists (they also hold the intellectual property rights and copyright) while the scientists have usage rights regarding publications, presentations, and dissemination activities. Therefore, the artists will receive remuneration for their artistic work. However, we have agreed with the artists that they will only use these artworks outside the research context when the project is finished to ensure that the group discussion (within which the artworks will be interpreted) remains unaffected by potential discourses.

Additionally, gender will be an integral dimension in this project due to its de-migrantizing and de-ethnicizing perspectives. By not merely focusing on ethnicity, the aim is instead to acknowledge the interplay between different categorizations (ethnicity, class, gender, etc.). With this in mind, we also considered it imperative to ensure that at least 50% of the participating artists are women.

Rigor

Rigor will be ensured by drawing on standards of reconstructive methods (Bohnsack, 2005) and by systematically monitoring the exchange between scientific and artistic knowledge (Leavy, 2020, pp. 273–301). Regarding the first point, we primarily draw on theoretically informed methods: As a typical "reconstructive method," the documentary method is characterized by a (meta-)theoretical foundation based on the previously mentioned principles from Mannheim's sociology of knowledge. This provides several analytically relevant categories such as "space of conjunctive experience" or "collective frames of orientation" that guide data interpretation and lead to empirically grounded theories at the end of the research. According to Bohnsack, this anchoring

in (meta-)theories is a necessary condition for overcoming the gap between a theory without empirical grounding and "theory-less empiricism" (Bohnsack, 2005, p. 69). Furthermore, we follow the idea of "the methodologically controlled understanding of the other," understood as the chance to shed light on the analyzed life-worlds ("Lebenswelten") in their intrinsic logic and by taking into account their specific "normality" (Bohnsack, 2005, p. 68). According to Bohnsack, this has important methodological implications: During data collection, it is necessary to create a situation wherein all participants can deploy their "system of relevance." In our research project, we try to realize this requirement by keeping our intervention at a minimum.

Regarding data analysis, the guiding principle is to be radically open toward the participants' contextualization while at the same time controlling the researchers' own presuppositions (Bohnsack, 2005, p. 68). In practical terms, we will apply several techniques for data interpretation, including (1) analyzing the material sequentially and line-by-line with the aim to explore manifold meanings, (2) analyzing the material in an interpretation team, and (3) by using the principle of "systematic doubt" and questioning as well as intentionally suppressing previous knowledge (Froschauer & Lueger, 2009, p. 201).

Regarding the science-art-nexus, we assure rigor by systematically shedding light on different perspectives through actively integrating various actors in the research process, including scientists, artists, and recipients (the participative dimension). This will be achieved by drawing on different data material (audio recordings and field notes of the creation process, the artworks, the transcripts of the group discussions) and by using various methods (participant observations, group discussions, arts-based methods). Beyond these various means of triangulation (investigator triangulation, data triangulation, methodological triangulation, and theory triangulation (Denzin, 1978)), we additionally strive for "communicative validation" (Lechler, 1982) of our findings by discussing them with the artists at the end of the project.

Discussion

The project departs from conventional sociological research on three levels: First, it challenges and transcends methodological boundaries by implementing a "real-life laboratory" as hybrid between artificially constructed laboratories with experimental set-ups and creativity-driven "lab" projects (Wanner et al., 2018). The implementation of such a research setting is achieved by using a mix of unconventional and conventional research methods. Second, our project challenges and transcends epistemological boundaries: We suggest a radical decontextualization of taken-for-granted concepts in the sociology of migration and integration by exposing them to artistic knowledge. Third, our project challenges and transcends scientific boundaries by stepping out of the sociological "comfort zone" to explore the potential

of non-scientific knowledge and to critically reflect on the limitations of conventional science production.

Overall, our research design is characterized by transdisciplinary collaboration and participatory methods on the one hand, and a mix of arts-based research and reconstructive methods on the other. We strongly assume that this specific form of artistic and sociological research provides spaces where we gain access to various processes of translation that require and enable dissecting, evaluating, and contesting terminologies, concepts, and theories and foster their rejection, modification or even a (re)invention (Leavy, 2020, p. 283).

In our project, translations are required (at least) on four different levels: (1) During the production of the artwork, translations between different languages (Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian/German/Arabic) and cultural repertoires will be necessary. Mutual understanding is based on finding a common language, both linguistically as well as regarding various cultural codes and artistic traditions, for example, different tonal scales. Within our research design, the necessity of these translations is not considered as a limiting factor, but rather as a source of knowledge. (2) Translations will be required when artists with flight experiences that differ in time and space exchange their experiences of arriving and convert them into aesthetic expressions. These translations will offer answers to the questions of to what extent the experiences differ from each other and which similarities exist. Here, we follow approaches within arts-based research that focus on the analysis of the transformation of experiences and ideas into aesthetic expressions (Leavy, 2020, p. 283; Gerber & Myers-Coffman, 2018). (3) Furthermore, translation work has to be done between newcomers (who are arriving) and established residents. The arts offer a space that suspends several norms accompanying established-newcomer interactions: While the established group typically expects clarity, controllability and invisibility of all inconsistencies in everyday life contact with newcomers, these expectations seem irrelevant in aesthetic expressions, which are per se characterized by ambiguities and therefore offer different readings and modes of appropriation. In using this polysemous space as a source of gaining knowledge, we believe we will glean valuable hints for rethinking aspects of refugees' arriving. (4) Finally, there is a necessity for translating among sociologists, artists, and recipients. The intentionally induced confrontation between different systems of knowledge—the sociological knowledge, the artistic knowledge, and the everyday knowledge—will not only shed light on the respective tacit assumptions about refugees' arriving but will also be conducive to critical reflection on these assumptions by providing places for conflict and friction. We can ask how linguistically mediated experiences are transformed into aesthetic codes and how aesthetic codes are decoded (deciphered) with regard to experiences of arriving.

We are, however, also fully aware of the risks associated with this research design: It may be the case that sociological and artistic knowledge are simply not as compatible as

expected. This could be the case if translating theoretical knowledge and the artists' experiences into artwork does not work or if making use of aesthetic codes and their interpretations to enrich sociological theory is not feasible. Difficulties could also arise from the logic and structural characteristics of the art field. The artists might not want to see their work shaped by sociologists and/or may oppose any intervention from outside the artistic field. Especially for artists who are used to working alone, it might be an additional challenge to work together with other artists (whom they probably have not met before). Furthermore, implementing a "real-life laboratory" is a risky endeavor: Although the artificial setting has several methodological advantages (see above), problems might arise concerning its unnatural character that might evoke feelings of being a "guinea pig" rather than a research partner in a social scientific study. Finally, it should not be underestimated that our project puts the involved sociologists at risk. As the planned project starts from the assumption of deficits and shortcomings in sociological theory, sociologists might be exposed to pressures of legitimization. Sociologists in the project are required to self-reflect and also to receive criticism by staying open to different views and approaches. In order to cope with these risks, it is imperative to reflect on these four issues during the entire research process, in consideration of all participants of the study.

By creating a "real-world lab," where translation on various levels is required and necessary, we aim at creating spaces where the confrontation with alternative and sometimes contradictory perspectives facilitates the willingness to give up the comfortable, the unquestionable, without losing one's own voice or depriving others of theirs. The potential released in this process could actually foster new ideas and new approaches to a phenomenon that, for a long period of time, has been viewed quite one-dimensionally in sociology. In this sense, we are convinced that the meaning-making processes involved in creating and interpreting art can foster alternative views on "refugee integration" and extend or even revise the traditional sociological toolkit for understanding integration.

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Notes

1. Marotta's (2020) reflections on how the experience of migration can be theoretically conceptualized relate highly to the theoretical approach of our research. Since the following outline is mostly dedicated to our methodological strategy, we currently only want to briefly mention Marotta.
2. The experience of migration has been objective-hermeneutically analyzed by, for example, Mijić (2020a, 2020b).
3. Migration experiences have been analyzed through narrative-biographical methods by, for example, Breckner (2009), Rosenthal et al. (2017), or Ruokonen-Engler (2009).
4. The documentary method has been used in a migration research context, by, for example, Bohnsack et al. (2001), Nohl and Ofner (2010), or Nohl et al. (2018).

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