

What Does a Humane Infrastructure for Research Look Like?

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Article abstract

In this intervention I make two main suggestions to humanize refugee research. First, the tendency to select “research hotspots” as field sites—where researchers tend to approach the same interviewees and spaces—should not only be called out and avoided, but battled against. Second, I suggest that refugee research should collaborate directly with other studies of social, political, and economic phenomena in an effort to not make displacement the sine qua non condition for doing research but, instead, only one of the many conditions a human being can inhabit within receiving societies. Pursuing this aim will be easier when studies on forced migration do not become compartmentalized and develop in isolation from other disciplines and research groups.

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What Does a Humane Infrastructure for Research Look Like?

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ABSTRACT

In this intervention, I make two main suggestions to humanize refugee research. First, the tendency to select “research hot spots” as field sites—where researchers tend to approach the same interviewees and spaces—should not only be called out and avoided but battled against. Second, I suggest that refugee research should collaborate directly with other studies of social, political, and economic phenomena not in an effort to make displacement the sine qua non for doing research but, instead, only one of the many conditions a human being can inhabit within receiving societies. Pursuing this aim will be easier when studies on forced migration do not become compartmentalized and develop in isolation from other disciplines and research groups.

KEYWORDS

refugee research; humanization; ethics; research hot spots; interdisciplinary research; migration studies

RÉSUMÉ

Dans cette intervention, je fais deux suggestions principales pour humaniser la recherche sur les réfugiés. Premièrement, la tendance à choisir des «points chauds» comme terrains de recherche - où les chercheur.es approchent souvent les mêmes répondant.es et les mêmes espaces - doit être non seulement dénoncée et évitée, mais aussi combattue. Deuxièmement, je suggère que la recherche sur les réfugiés devrait s’effectuer en collaboration directe avec d’autres champs d’études portant sur des phénomènes sociaux, politiques et économiques afin d’éviter de faire du déplacement la condition sine qua non de la recherche, mais plutôt l’une des nombreuses conditions qu’un être humain peut vivre au sein des sociétés d’accueil. La poursuite de cet objectif sera plus facile si les études sur la migration forcée ne se compartimentent pas et ne se développent pas en vase clos par rapport aux autres disciplines et groupes de recherche.

KEYWORDS

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INTRODUCTION

Humanizing research conducted by humans on humankind sounds like a paradox, yet it requires great effort. Thinking of ourselves as human researchers is certainly the first step

to take. Indeed, while the broad and vague concept of “research” is adopted in international debates with the purpose of depersonalizing the discourse (e.g., Block et al., 2013; Clark-Kazak, 2019) from my perspective, we instead need to re-individualize such

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“universal” efforts. Also, in order for these efforts to be effective, we should reframe ethical responsibility in academic research as researcher-focused. This means dwelling upon the sort of researchers we currently are. For instance, the researcher’s sensitivity and respectfulness are not necessarily associated with so-called research excellence or scientific rigor. Ethics, in fact, are not only an institutional code we need to comply with to carry out field research but, more importantly, need to be translated into an intimate process of self-inquiry. The latter, in turn, involves intellectual honesty to keep ourselves open to the critical reflections that our peers also advance. To humanize research, in other words, we need to make substantial room for a form of criticism started by peers—a form that often becomes overestimated in the broader framework of self-reflexive methods—that we start ourselves, as well as others do. For example, self-reflexivity mainly revolves around the researcher’s positionality and access to the research field (e.g., autoethnography is a perfect case in point, where the “extension of the self” serves to emphasize and understand the “other” rather than criticizing ourselves; see [Foley, 2002, p. 473](#)). In today’s global research scene, since guaranteeing research excellence and success has become paramount for both institutions and individuals to survive financially, researchers are increasingly subject to the global politics of showcasing success in their constant race for funding. This leaves little room for genuine self-criticism.

In light of these considerations, refugee and humanitarian scholars have increasingly questioned the ethics of international research conducted in areas characterized by crisis and vulnerability. For example, over the last two decades, field researchers have

increasingly dismissed the practice of speaking **on behalf of** subalterns and refugees and instead embraced first-person storytelling as a way to give them direct voice in a bid to emphasize—and, at times, even romanticize—refugee agency and empowerment. In the current academic era, the act of acknowledging and learning from refugees’ agency and resilience is surely valuable. However, with continuous invitations being advanced in the international community of scholars to humanize research and to prioritize ethics in diversely vulnerable settings, refugee agency is problematically becoming tokenistic, used to parade ethical research: valuing and empowering refugee voices but, at the same time, capitalizing on refugeehood as a fixed research category. When concepts such as **humanization** and **decolonization** become omnipresent buzzwords while we witness slow changes, it becomes difficult to believe in the materialization of genuine radical endeavors that can finally end refugeehood and refugees’ lack of rights worldwide. As a result, more effective strategies of research aimed at radical transformation—that is able to disrupt academic hegemonies of knowledge production and that does not merely let the subaltern speak, echoing Gayatri [Spivak \(1988\)](#)—need to be developed. In fact, representation has yet not withered away in academic writing, and efforts towards innovative collective forms of researching and writing are still insufficient.

It is in this context, where “human research” has dangerously become tokenized, that I would like to make my intervention. I have two main suggestions to help us, researchers, think through the humanization of refugee research. First, the tendency to select “research hot spots” as field sites—where researchers tend to approach the same interviewees and spaces—should

not only be called out and avoided but battled against. Second, I suggest that refugee research should collaborate directly with other studies of social, political, and economic phenomena not in an effort to make displacement the *sine qua non* for doing research but, instead, only one of the many conditions a human being can inhabit within receiving societies. Building on Bakewell's (2008) argument, I believe that pursuing this aim will be easier when studies on forced migration do not become compartmentalized and develop in isolation from other disciplines and research groups.

ON RESEARCH "HOT SPOTS"

Foreign—and sometimes even local—researchers who study refugees tend to address the same geographical areas, speak to the same people, and rely on the same networks and information sources to verify evidence. Embracing this definition of over-research, I am conscious that **over-research** is by no means a monolithic concept, but it can rather be linked to disparate positions and perspectives between different stakeholders in the research interaction, and, as such, it can imply different meanings (Koen et al., 2017). The tendency to rely on pre-existing research "hot spots" is the product of today's global need to guarantee rapid, safe, and smooth access to field sites where politics are particularly controversial and personal security is endangered. As some scholars have observed (e.g., Pascucci, 2017), especially in cases where refugee research is conducted in countries other than one's own, the phenomenon of over-research, which "leads to some places and people being far more researched than others", is produced by relying on identical "infrastructures" of access and, often, linguistic translation (Pascucci, 2017, p. 249). Pascucci provides the exam-

ple of the Cairo metropolitan area, on which most non-Arabic-speaking refugee scholars focus. This segment of scholars tends to rely on the same aid agencies in order to access refugees in Egypt and conduct their fieldwork. The Shatila refugee camp, in the southern suburbs of Lebanon's capital Beirut, offers a similar example (Sukarieh & Tannock, 2013), where Palestinian community representatives and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) generally gatekeep the area and with whom external researchers—often implicitly—need to negotiate their presence.

Importantly, the issue of over-research in refugee communities may generate faulty methodologies, both scientifically and ethically. The same individuals or groups are accessed and sampled, and data are collected from the same social strata, regions, neighborhoods, cities, and political groups. Researchers routinely need to consider issues of sample representativeness, partiality of data, and over-focus on specific communities or themes. While these are unavoidable difficulties with any methodology, over-research can amplify them. As investigated (Sukarieh & Tannock, 2013), over-researched communities are generally viewed as advantaged by local people who are based in other areas, as they ensure their spot on the agenda of policy-makers; but they are also vulnerable, as over-research turns community members into commodities of international "consumption" and whose performance informs academic studies (Bouris, 2007; Sukarieh & Tannock, 2013) also point out that over-researched areas can become objects of international development research but not necessarily objects of concrete improvement. The case of Shatila is again emblematic. In this vein, as scholars have discussed (e.g., Ali, 2013; Sukarieh & Tannock, 2013), visits by international researchers, who rarely carry

out long-term fieldwork or repeated field revisits over time, often create expectations and promises of social change among politically and economically vulnerable communities when, in fact, these populations have frequently voiced their alienation from research questions and outcomes (Ali, 2013; Sukarieh & Tannock, 2013).

Similarly, in the wake of the Syrian refugee crisis in 2011, researchers shifted their geographical focus from Beirut to the north of Lebanon (e.g., the Lebanese region of Akkar and the city of Tripoli), which seems to have become the new Shatila. In fact, unlike southern Lebanon, where political surveillance by the Amal Movement and Hezbollah political parties make research more uncomfortable and arduous, northern Lebanon is considered more accessible and less risky.¹ In today's refugee scholarship, other emerging research hot spots are the Syrian refugee camp Za'tari in northern Jordan and European cities of migration entry such as Athens, where researchers can explore transit strategies and migrants' decision-making. In a nutshell, these places are increasingly populated by international researchers, but their basic infrastructures, such as potable water, electricity, and housing conditions, are reported as unlikely to improve (Sukarieh & Tannock, 2013). In this sense, academic over-research becomes a synonym for exploitation.

In refugee studies, the tendency of researchers to be based in comfortable and relatively safe areas while studying the effects of crisis is common, giving rise to what have been called **zones de confort** (DiPeri & Carpi, 2011). Lebanon and Jordan emerged as comfort zones to look at displacement from Syria, just as Tunisia became a comfort zone to look at the crisis in Libya. In all of these contexts, international and local NGOs or associations are likely to act as gatekeepers and facilitators: their presence,

at times, becomes an encouraging factor for researchers who prefer scoping out all potential sources of information and networks before electing the field site, thus discarding improvisation. Some NGOs, in fact, can provide accommodation and support to researchers, and sometimes even temporary collaboration opportunities, which benefit the researchers' understanding of the field sites. Safety, indeed, is not the only pull factor for conducting research in such hot spots; ease and speed of access are also important, especially for those pursuing short-term research endeavors and facing pressure to produce output within unreasonable time frames. That said, I do not intend to suggest that we, as field-based researchers, need to venture in dangerous zones with no measures in place; but we should look beyond such research hot spots and, therefore, base our fieldwork considerations on premises able to counter over-research.

In order to avoid and battle against the creation of such research hot spots and against the "bunkerization" of academic research as a way of reducing risk (Duffield, 2012), I advocate for greater familiarization with the areas of research before working on them. Pilot periods, indeed, should not merely be aimed at testing interview questions and the suitability and empirical relevance of research tools. Rather, pilot periods should also familiarize researchers with the local literature on the area, the research priorities suggested by local inhabitants, and, of particular importance, the local ethics of research, which are largely ignored in global discussions. Indeed, in English-speaking academia, the way in which research is seen as ethical, most of the time, refers not to the context researched but, instead, to a standardized, bureaucratic practice of ethics clearance and an interdisciplinary practice (Krause, 2017). Develop-

ing methodologies that make room for our own learning of vernacular research ethics should become a priority. This does not necessarily imply the need to spend long periods in the field, which has been acknowledged to be extremely difficult (Gunel et al., 2009). Instead, it can imply that we should invest more time in understanding a place, even in a series of short visits. Ultimately, encouraging colleagues and students to look beyond these research hot spots—and obviously avoiding them ourselves—while also attributing greater importance to field revisits would constitute important steps towards the humanization of refugee research and the re-individualization of these efforts. However, in this respect, institutional constraints cannot go unheeded. A political economy in which an academic career needs to be strongly focused on publication records certainly requires researchers to publish quickly, preventing them from investing time and resources in field revisits. In other words, a larger struggle, which falls out the scope of this article, would need to take place before such choices are likely to be made.

ON DEFINING RESEARCH ENVIRONMENTS

In addition, we should rethink the institutional environment that can properly host, inform, and materially support our research. The choice of the environment, whether formal or informal, can either accommodate or challenge the very effort to humanize research. I here discuss the possibilities for an ideal environment by challenging the use of identity politics as a point of departure, further nuancing the efforts of previous scholars who enquired into the meaning of **migration studies** (e.g., Monsutti, 2010 who posits

migration as going beyond from-place-to-place trajectories). If we consider the genealogy of university departments and research institutes that have a “refugee section,” different knowledge disciplines have defined most of these environments, with the result, at times, of cementing perspectives and debates within their own boundaries. For example, in the field of religion-driven development, which I am personally concerned with, the debates mainly revolve around political concerns on providers’ neutrality and proselytism, thus primarily approaching religion as a potential bias (Carpi & Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2020): a theory to either endorse or discard. Such debates could instead be reoriented around the ways in which ethics, politics, or economics inform religion-driven development activities. The frequent compartmentalization of debates into disciplinary boxes has also happened in cases of informal groups of scholars focusing on refugee-related issues, such as anthropologists and sociologists. Moreover, as discussed in the workshop focused on interdisciplinarity, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)’s Partnership for Conflict, Crime & Security Research (PaCCS)¹, held at University College London in September 2017, refugee studies scholars are not necessarily trained in any specific discipline, or they are hastily placed under a broad and vague field labelled as sociology. Nonetheless, substantial efforts to build research networks and contents on interdisciplinary grounds have recently been made (e.g., Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2020; Triandafyllidou, 2016).

Where, then, should our research be located? Academic dissatisfaction with “area studies” is also on the rise, with the cri-

¹The partnership included 28 interdisciplinary research projects.

tique that grouping studies and scholars on the basis of specific regions risks making each of these regions exceptional rather than unique. For instance, the Middle East, producing the largest number of conflict-caused displacements worldwide (Tejel and Öztan, 2020, p. 6), has long been approached as an exceptional region for its conflictual “nature” and too often reduced to confessional understandings of society as well as conflict motivated by ethnicity or religion.

Similarly, identity-based departments (e.g., refugee studies, women’s studies, or Muslim studies), from my perspective, may fossilize around aprioristic categories of analysis, making research subjects instrumental. As researchers exploring refugeehood, looking at contexts of vulnerability means developing a holistic gaze on different subjects, such as migrants, chronic poor, children, the elderly, or other individualities that are not easily grouped into classically vulnerable categories. In my view, as researchers, we should always keep our eyes wide open to the subjects that come to our attention, rather than defining the scope of research subjects at the outset. In other words, studies revolving around identity categories such as **women, migrants, or Muslims**, by definition, discourage the researcher from delving into the multi-faceted significance of particular human processes and do not always work as a foundational basis upon which to investigate such significance.

In sum, departing from the mere normative definition of refugeehood and social categories in general to undertake research may turn into a theoretical trap, as mentioned above, as well as into conservative politics. In fact, while the initial purpose of the researcher whose work centers on refugees as a clear-cut category may be the acknowledgement of refugee rights and their difference from unforced migrant rights, an

overemphasis on a clear-cut categorization sometimes can contribute to crystallizing divisions between “undesirable” refugees and “desired” state subjects, such as economic migrants or citizens.

These mainstream narratives are often the result of the media’s influence and end up dominating the way in which we convey our refugee-focused research, insofar as approaches predefined by identity categories neglect the importance of “conceptual narrativity” (a notion introduced by Somers, 1992), that is, the importance of making our research base on “social concepts that can embrace historicity, time, and space” (p. 594). In light of these considerations, the contribution of the institutional environment in the humanization of research is fundamental. Indeed, the environment can accommodate, enrich, challenge, or bury knowledge and narratives. And academic and media narratives on refugeehood, on the one hand, and some commodified forms of refugee storytelling, where refugees themselves are asked to tell their own stories, on the other (see, e.g., Bouris, 2007), lie at the core of the formation of social identities within host societies, as well as of the establishment of a global parlance on refugees used by the media and a variety of political and social actors.

In similar ways, even though it tends to build on an interdisciplinary foundation, something like “refugee studies” tends to group research by a single, determinant, analytical category, such as “refugees.” Working within categories leads us to consider the research subjects as aprioristic, even in settings where, for example, human mobility and the forceful nature of flight may be less able to capture local forms of vulnerability or other human circumstances. Furthermore, working within categories, to some

extent, may contribute to the compartmentalization of refugees and refugee-related issues in receiving societies rather than help to build strong connections between crisis, refugeehood, normal welfare, and the functioning of societies outside of crisis. It is possible to notice this type of effort when, for instance, we use social class as a primary identity marker or for intersectional analysis on forced migrants (Maqul et al., 2021) rather than ethnicity and religion, which, instead, typically define conflict. The current securitization, medicalization, and criminalization of refugees—according to which, respectively, refugees are viewed as security threats, trauma-affected subjects to be healed, or criminals in host countries—are strong examples of research predefined by well-bounded identity categories. This is particularly the case when research is funded by political actors, who build on such categories to make policies.

In light of this, which sort of hybrid environments should we endeavor to build and support to encourage scholars from disparate settings to come together, bringing their peculiar approaches? Interdisciplinarity can seemingly pull together diverse human approaches to research and, indeed, is increasingly encouraged and funded. Can something like “migration departments” work? On the one hand, the thematic definition of research environments can limit the exploration of the theme itself, as it somehow polices its boundaries. On the other hand, it appears as a more viable option than identity-predefined environments, disciplines, or area studies, as it offers adequate means to address migration broadly and nuancedly, in a complex and intersectional way, placing it in conversation with other societal factors. By this token, in the specific case of migration-focused studies, establishing institutional environments by

theme helps us contextualize the peculiar condition of different arrays of migrants and even advocate for a more responsive (and articulated) rights’ regime. By the way of conclusion, while this intervention may far from provide straightforward solutions, with it, I suggest that reflecting on these issues as global research communities can generate concrete possibilities for transformational research and our own humanization.

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