

THE VALUE OF TRANSPARENCY, REPLICABILITY AND REPRESENTATIVENESS: A RESPONSE TO GRAEME RODGERS'S 'HANGING OUT' WITH FORCED MIGRANTS

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Graeme Rodgers's articleⁱⁱ is a welcome addition to ongoing discussion around appropriate methods for forced migration research and a valuable critique of issues raised in our earlier article.ⁱⁱⁱ There is much we agree with in Rodgers's article, but we are troubled by his antagonism towards what he calls positive social research, i.e., attempts to make 'value-free' descriptive and causal inferences about an existing reality. To remedy the faults he associates with such research, Rodgers advocates an approach he terms 'hanging out' which is a form of participatory research—familiar to many in the field of forced migration—that calls for qualitative studies based on intensive, informal interactions with small numbers of forced migrants.

Before addressing Rogers's critique directly, we would like to reiterate our position. Rodgers primary grouse is with a form of 'absurdly stylized analysis' that we explicitly warn against. We are not, moreover, advocating a single approach to data collection in forced migration research. Our concern is that whatever approach one adopts should abide by a set of general research standards. We are particularly concerned that data collected for the purpose of influencing policy should be representative of the affected population. Ideally, the data should also allow for comparisons across groups and sites. Doing otherwise heightens the risk that policy recommendations will result in strategies that are ineffective or, harmful either to the intended beneficiaries or to other affected groups. The use of non-representative data also limits our ability to raise generalized critiques or to integrate forced migration research throughout the academy. Our initial criticisms emerged from a frustration with researchers' penchant for making generalized statements based on limited evidence and unspecified data collection methods. In as much as 'hanging out' does not facilitate or legitimize such practices, it is a valuable tool. Nonetheless, we stand by our critique and welcome this opportunity to clarify our position

Setting Research Standards

The kinds of participatory techniques Rodgers advocates play an important part in the development of knowledge about the forced migration experience. Over time, multiple studies of this sort have built up a composite picture that allows us to begin identifying global patterns and problems. Our purpose is not, therefore, to dismiss qualitative or exploratory approaches, or to demand an unmitigated shift away from qualitative methods. Rather, we call on policy-oriented researchers to develop and refine a set of *standards* that apply equally to qualitative and quantitative methods. These include standards of *transparency*, *replicability*, and *representativeness*. *Transparency* allows other researchers to critique indicators, data collection techniques, and logics of inference (both causal and descriptive). *Replicability* enables others to replicate a study's methods and confirm or challenge its findings. Such an approach also allows for comparative analysis, theory building, and the search for generalized patterns of cause and effect. *Representativeness* not only improves the quality of one's description and analysis, but also helps ensure that recommendations will lead to policies that will be universally beneficial rather than exclusively benefiting a studied sub-group. In addition to transparency, replicability, and representativeness, research standards should include an expanded understanding of "ethical practice," one that promotes the security and dignity of both researchers and those with whom we engage.

The research community must work together to articulate these standards, and we call on others to join us in this endeavor. Such efforts must be informed by a recognition that what we can and should do *with* our research is fundamentally contingent on *how* we conduct that research. Along with increased policy relevance, methodologically sound work has the added advantage of being legible to the academic community; something that can promote both research on forced migration and researchers themselves. The remainder of this article engages with Rodgers arguments in order to clarify the potential advantages of conducting research—whether qualitative or quantitative—that adheres to the standards outlined above.

Rodgers argues that the positivism informing quantitative or macro-comparative research makes it more likely that (a) the questions and indicators used will favor the interests of governments, aid agencies, and western academics over those of forced migrants; and (b) researchers will become arrogant and subject to hubris. These are risks, but they can be avoided. There is no reason why, for example, using methods such as representative sampling techniques requires uncritically importing variables, questions, or interview techniques. Even large-scale surveys can, and often do, employ participatory approaches to generate hypotheses, questions, and analytic categories. The approach we advocate, and employ in our own research, calls for extensive review of existing ‘local knowledge’ (whether verbal or in print) and field-testing of concepts, questions and interview instruments. Using focus groups, key informants, and pilot studies to identify the communities’ concerns can lead to locally relevant instruments. Field and community testing of this sort also helps expose inappropriate concepts, untenable questions, and ineffective interview techniques without losing the benefits of a comparative, representative perspective. Working with local groups to help explain survey results further improves the findings’ validity. Many ‘positivist’ researchers do not do this, but there is nothing inherent in the approach that prevents them from doing so. Moreover, even self-reflective anthropologists have been known to import inappropriate concepts and analytical frameworks.

While Rodgers accuses positivist researchers, whoever they may be, of shrouding themselves in the mantle of ‘true science,’ we argue that the transparency associated with careful research design and (especially) quantitative data places limits on such arrogance. By creating easily accessible data sets—and by making those data available to others—researchers can query and independently analyze each others’ findings, robbing individual researchers of their ‘expert’ status. On the other hand, those who spend months or years ‘hanging out’ are effectively unassailable because they claim a ‘deep knowledge’ that is inaccessible to outsiders. A claim to having been adopted by a family, village, or other group is an extreme technique of promoting one’s exclusive right to speak on their behalf. Such deep, personal involvement may also encourage researchers to employ data collection practices that are themselves illegal, which expose networks and practices that heighten forced migrants’ existing vulnerabilities, or unduly value the experiences of one group over another. A standard demanding that we reveal our methods can help militate against such tendencies. We therefore advocate that forced migration research adopt a practice already common in the social sciences: making data sets public and making data collection methods explicit.

There is also no reason that ‘objective’ data need serve the need of the powerful. Our own work in Johannesburg, for example, critiques UNHCR assumptions, government policy, and service providers’ practice.^{iv} It also argues against the way in which academics have typically studied urban refugees. It is not clear what great power this analysis placates.

Rather than “unwittingly serving a highly polarizing social agenda” as Rodgers suggests, this approach makes visible forced migrants’ experiences in terms that are legible to both policy-makers and the academy. Doing so allows researchers “to speak out against the abuse of power” in more effective and policy-relevant ways.

Evidence-based research to support policy

When evidence is needed to support policy recommendation, representative studies have distinct advantages, especially when carried out in conjunction with other methods. First, policy interventions are almost universally premised on the ‘positivistic,’ consequentialist principle that when certain conditions are met, actions will have predictable outcomes. Such policies are often ineffective—the result of political calculations or poor analysis—but it is difficult to imagine another, ethically sound mode of policy-making. A focus on the subjective understandings of a highly delimited ‘local’ population (derived through ‘hanging out’) may provide a nuanced understanding of a single policy’s effects, but such an approach is ill-suited to revealing general causal mechanisms or identifying the conditions that make a policy more or less effective. Recommendations based on such research may, therefore, be popular among a particular sub-group, but practically ineffective or harmful when considering a broader population.

Three examples from our own research illustrate the value of identifying objective causal mechanisms. In Johannesburg, South Africans (in and out of Government) widely assume that foreigners are universally the perpetrators, and not the victims of crime.^v Such assumptions underlie extra-legal vigilantism, police abuse, and unconstitutional detention and deportation. Comparative survey research among forced migrants and a South African control group indicates, however, that forced migrants are more likely to be victims of crime than South Africans.^{vi} Similarly, many South Africans fervently believe that foreigners are stealing jobs, a ‘social fact’ used to promote immigration restrictions. Our survey reveals that foreigners are more likely than South Africans to *create* jobs for South Africans. Lastly, in Western Tanzania, government officials and the host population widely attribute inflation to the influx of refugees and humanitarian assistance. Comparative work using ‘objective’ indicators, however, reveals that the reported inflation was largely due to the macro-economic context and had little to do with the refugees or humanitarian aid.^{vii} Identifying local understandings of these processes is critical, if only because data alone cannot counter widespread xenophobia or make policy choices politically popular. Still, one cannot make effective or ethical research based exclusively on widely held presuppositions. Rather, we must work to uncover ‘objective’ causes and thereby encourage policy to move in directions that will improve the opportunities, tolerance, and livelihoods of migrants and local populations.

Second, although not everyone wishes to conduct comparative theory building research, there are certain critiques of the ‘global system’ that only comparative analysis can substantiate or refute. In this regard we echo Castles’s call, criticized by Rodgers, for a ‘Sociology of Forced Migration.’ Reliance on subjective and locally defined indicators, however, prevents us from comparisons between groups or across sites. For example, tracing the relationships among structural adjustment policies, ethnic conflict, and displacement requires data that are comparable across a number of countries. To generate data of this kind, one must largely rely on standardized sets of indicators and data collection techniques.

Lastly, it is worth noting that anthropologists or others conducting small-scale, qualitative research are not unique in their ability to reveal localized political struggles or the involvement of marginalized social groups in “processes of global significance.” Indeed, well-constructed instruments and samples allow analysts to reveal heterogeneity across a range of variables in both a local and global context; variations that would be lost in a single, micro-level study. Moreover, the ability to correlate varied experiences with a range of indicators (e.g., differences in income, legal status, language, and education) can reveal significant and unexpected associations in ways that can inform policy interventions and academic theorizing. Hanging out can help explain the causal links between these variables in localized environments, but is unlikely to identify these generalized patterns. The use of systematic, longitudinal comparison across a set of indicators—an approach advocated by none other than the esteemed anthropologist Elizabeth Colson—has additional power to reveal both the subjective understandings and the objective effects of policy interventions over time.^{viii}

In conclusion, it is worth noting that while Rodgers is rightfully concerned with the way data are generated, he fails to address what is perhaps a more significant critique: how data are consumed. Aid agencies, policy makers, and the academy all use knowledge in ways which provide strong incentives for presenting research as definitive and the researcher as ‘expert.’ Doing so is often a prerequisite for winning policy influence, research grants, consultancies, and professorships. There are also incentives for hiding faulty data or making claims that are relatively unsubstantiated. In order to ensure the field’s continued *academic* viability and ability to *ethically* influence policy, it behooves all those conducting policy-oriented research to insist on rigorous research methodologies, to reveal those methods and their weakness, and to be critically aware of how our research findings and methods affect those we hope to help. We must also work with practitioners, donors, and policy makers to raise their standards for knowledge production and consumption. At an individual level we can begin by holding ourselves to a standard that privileges humility over hubris. Ultimately, it will only be by recognizing the politics and processes of producing and consuming knowledge that we can conduct more effective and ethical policy-oriented research.

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ⁱⁱ Rodgers, Graeme. 2004 (forthcoming). “‘Hanging Out’ with Forced Migrants: Methodological and Ethical Challenges.” *Forced Migration Review*.

ⁱⁱⁱ See, for example, Jacobsen, Karen and Loren B. Landau. 2003. “The Dual Imperative in Refugee Research: Some Methodological and Ethical Considerations in Social Science Research on Forced Migration.” *Disasters*. Vol. 27(3): 95-116.

^{iv} See Landau, Loren B. (Ed.). 2004. *Forced Migrants in the New Johannesburg: Towards a Local Government Response*. Johannesburg: Forced Migration Studies Programme (<http://migration.wits.ac.za/FMNJ.html>).

^v Crush, J. & Williams V. 2003. “Criminal Tendencies: Immigrants and Illegality in South Africa.” *Migration Policy Brief No. 10*. Cape Town: SAMP.

^{vi} See Landau, Loren B. and Karen Jacobsen. 2004. ‘Refugees in the New Johannesburg.’ *Forced Migration Review*. 19: 44-46.

^{vii} Landau, Loren B. 2004 “Challenge without Transformation: Refugees, Aid, and Trade in Western Tanzania.” *Journal of Modern African Studies*. Vol. 42 (1): 31-59.

^{viii} Colson, Elizabeth and Thayer Scudder. 2002. “Long Term Research in Gwembe Valley, Zambia.” In Robert V. Kemper and Anya Peterson Royce (Eds.) *Chronicling Cultures: Long-Term Field Research in Anthropology*. Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press: 197-238.