

‘Hanging out’ with forced migrants: methodological and ethical challenges

by Graeme Rodgers

Despite recent suggestions to the contrary, small-scale qualitative research involving interpersonal ‘hanging out’ with forced migrants is relevant, important and ethically desirable.

Recent reflections on the study of forced migration urge researchers to take a step back from the forced migrants whose plight we seek to describe and analyse. Stephen Castles has outlined a ‘sociology of forced migration’ situated in a ‘context of global social transformation’ and cautions against an overemphasis on the ‘subjective and cultural aspects of forced migration [which] neglect its structural dimensions’.¹ For Castles, the global forced migration crisis is largely the result of an international failure to manage global relations of inequality. Understanding and solutions need to be sought at this global level, beyond the localised experiences of forced migrants themselves.

In line with this suggestion Karen Jacobsen and Loren Landau have expressed concern over a prevalence of small-scale, qualitative studies in the literature on forced migration.² Such research, they argue, is often produced on the basis of poor designs, conducted over short time periods and drawn from small, haphazard and unrepresentative samples. They urge researchers to produce data that strives to be more representative, more objectively scientific and collected in ways that can be analysed more quantitatively.

This article re-asserts the continued relevance and importance of modest and small-scale qualitative approaches, generated largely through intensive informal and interpersonal interactions between researchers and the forced migrants. I refer to this approach as ‘hanging out’, as a kind of shorthand for participatory approaches but also as a reminder of the informal and everyday nature of the interactions and processes that allow us to

generate information. Such research can be conducted in ways that are methodologically sound.

Some consequences of survey-based studies of forced migration

In targeting the inherently subjective and methodologically unsound basis of much of the existing research on forced migration Jacobsen and Landau suggest that this should be replaced by the authoritative voice of hard science. In essence they argue that researchers should strive to establish “data sets” that are drawn from statistically “representative” samples. These would ideally have “control groups” and a reliable degree of “construct validity”. This is essential, they contend, to “replicate” and “validate” findings. But such a shift, away from exploratory, descriptive and qualitative approaches and towards more quantitative approaches, relies on a number of assumptions holding true. These include the following:

- that we – the community of researchers working in the area of forced migration – already know what the relevant questions are
- that the lives of refugees and IDPs are a largely irrelevant concern to researchers and aid organisations beyond the extent to which selected aspects may be recognised, measured and controlled as important ‘variables’
- that knowledge generated through scientifically reliable quantitative techniques will necessarily lead to better and more ethical policy decisions than subjectively-informed and inductively-derived ‘guesses’ that are characteristic of more qualitative understandings

- that the considerable cost and effort of producing statistically representative data in difficult field contexts are justifiable in relation to the benefits that forced migrants get out of a more scientifically precise understanding of their predicament.

The above assumptions could probably hold true – if refugee camps, resettlement camps, inner city slums and other environments occupied by forced migrants exhibited laboratory-like conditions. But they don’t. These environments are typically defined by social chaos and subversive economies where affected populations experience a profound sense of confusion and disorientation. Attempts to make sense of their predicaments through the imposition of neatly – even perfectly – designed surveys may completely miss this defining aspect of the social experience of forced migration and systemic order that is beyond the experiences of the people most affected.

By emphasising the measurement of the problems of forced migrants, crude quantitative research may obscure the politically uncomfortable origins of these problems, and optimistically advance technical interventions that address symptoms rather than causes. This can end up reproducing a highly problematic distinction between the ‘us’ – western institutions that respond to the ‘problems’ of the developing world – and ‘them’, the affected populations. Caught up in the language of science, knowledge of forced migration remains within the domain of the powerful interest groups that respond to it. This scenario can be avoided to some extent by paying more attention to forms of knowledge about forced migration that are generated through informal, interpersonal and ‘everyday’ types of encounters – or ‘hanging out’.

The methodological benefits of 'hanging out' with forced migrants

Knowledge generated through 'hanging out' with forced migrants can:

- keep open the channel for voices of forced migrants, without claiming to definitively represent them
- foster an appreciation for the complexity of forced migration, by sustaining some perspective on the multi-dimensional nature of forced migration
- open up some space for the 'problem' of forced migration to be configured in more locally intelligible terms, by permitting the simultaneous presence of multiple and contradictory experiences and perspectives
- sustain a humanism in research that is arguably essential for informing ethical and accountable policy decisions.

Local-level studies conducted on the basis of 'hanging out' do not necessarily overemphasise local cultural life, as Castles, Jacobsen and Landau seem to think. Indeed, 'hanging out' may reveal, perhaps

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disturbingly, how political struggles of everyday life are linked to relationships and processes of global significance. Experiences of race and racism and debates over the meanings of globalised concepts such as human rights, gender and Islam, for example, are found in specific local contexts. Localised perspectives also facilitate important critical commentary on the politics of aid, which more scientific studies tend to exclude from the objects of their analysis.

However, there are also practical and institutional challenges to conducting and applying such research. These include:

- rendering research in a form that packages knowledge in ways palatable to policy makers and humanitarian workers
- the time factor: 'hanging out' may seem like a luxury when a humanitarian emergency

- demands a rapid response
- an institutionalised culture of 'parachute' research within academic centres on forced migration, where breadth is often valued over depth, as a marker of research expertise
- security dangers and discomforts of doing research in refugee settings.

Hardened humanitarian workers may recognise aspects of what I have described above as an elaboration of the more mundane aspects of their work that they take for granted. Indeed, whilst such personal 'intersubjective' experiences between humanitarian workers and forced migrants certainly feed into policy and practice to varying degrees, these are often in informal and unconscious ways. There is therefore considerable room for such information to be collected more systematically and used more authoritatively – both by professional researchers and others who spend their time 'hanging out' with forced migrants. Rigorously-generated qualitative perspectives are vital to informing our understanding of forced migration and cannot be improved by making them more quantitative.

The qualitative/quantitative distinction remains a valuable one and quantitative research remains crucial, depending on the question being pursued.

But if it is the task of social research (and I believe it is) to reveal something about the lived experience of forced migration, then 'hanging out' with refugees remains an indispensable research 'tool' that is essential to the formulation of informed, creative and self-critical responses.

Social distance and the ethics of 'hanging out'

Jacobsen and Landau correctly consider an ethical commitment to improving the lives of the people among whom we conduct our research as the second leg of a dual imperative on the part of social researchers – the first being a professional commitment to our craft. Contrary to many of the discussions on ethics that highlight limits on the more intrusive aspects of social research, my concern is to emphasise an ethical imperative to

conduct that research on the basis of 'hanging out'.

For Landau and Jacobsen, ethical practice demands the objectivity and neutrality of a true scientist. They do not, however, consider the broader potential ethical shortfalls of studying refugee camps as though they were scientific laboratories. This approach maintains a problematic critical distance (both social and physical) between 'us' and 'them'. It also fosters the illusion that the social worlds that we write about are socially and politically distinct from the institutions and political environments within which we produce our research. Far from simply being 'ethical', a positivistic approach to social research amongst forced migrants may unwittingly serve a highly polarising social agenda. By ignoring the link between knowledge and power, Jacobsen and Landau's suggestions limit the potential for researchers to speak out against the abuse of power that underpins major forms of displacement in the current global order.

In the wake of the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and resultant unprecedented levels of hatred and mistrust of the West, the role of the 'researcher as expert' is not only increasingly inefficient but also arguably deeply offensive and even threatening. This issue cannot be addressed by stepping back, by making our sample larger, more representative or more reliable. In the post-11 September world, 'hanging out' – with patience, time and personal interest in the lives of people among whom we conduct our research – encapsulates an important ethical imperative in its own right.

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¹ Stephen Castles 'Towards a Sociology of Forced Migration and Social Transformation', *Sociology*, 37 (1): 13-34, 2003.

² Karen Jacobsen & Loren B Landau 'The Dual Imperative in Refugee Research: Some Methodological and Ethical Considerations in Social Science Research on Forced Migration', *Disasters*, Vol. 27(3): 95-111, 2003 http://web.mit.edu/cis/www/migration/pubs/rrwp/19_dual.doc; Karen Jacobsen & Loren B Landau 'Researching refugees: some methodological and ethical considerations in social science and forced migration', New Issues in Refugee Research, working paper no 90, UNHCR, Geneva, 2003. See www.unhcr.ch/epau.