

## MOBILIZING GLOBAL KNOWLEDGE: REFUGEE RESEARCH IN AN AGE OF DISPLACEMENT

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# Partnering on Research Methodologies in Forced Migration: Challenges, Opportunities, and Lessons Learned

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## Introduction

In this chapter I explore lessons learned in developing an international network on research methodologies and knowledge production in forced migration. I describe both the successes and challenges of this network, with a view to contributing to more sustainable partnerships in the future. In particular, I highlight the importance of developing specific, concrete initiatives around which network members can rally, and of taking advantage of opportunities that present themselves. This includes adding methodology activities to existing initiatives and events. We also learned about the challenges of funding projects on methodology, in contrast to more traditional, empirically driven research collaborations. Moreover, despite an explicit focus on power and attempts to decolonize forced migration, the network still reflected and reproduced knowledge asymmetries that privileged participation from those in the global north. After these general reflections, the chapter focuses on a specific initiative that had particular success: the development of ethical considerations for

research in forced migration contexts. This example provides important insights into community-university partnerships and is analyzed using the interactive and contextual model that Suarez-Balcazar, Harper, and Lewis developed (2005).

## The Need for Partnership on Research Methodologies in Forced Migration

The partnerships described in this chapter have been mobilized in the context of several methodological gaps in the field of forced migration studies. Researchers in forced migration contexts face particular methodological opportunities and challenges (Bakewell 2007; Berriane and de Haas 2012; Temple and Moran 2006). Research with mobile populations, some of whom may not have formal legal status, requires the adaptation of standard sampling methods (Bloch 1999, 2007; Macchiavello 2003; Misago and Landau 2013; Polzer 2013; Singh and Clark 2013). Sampling and data collection are particularly difficult on topics involving clandestine or prohibited activities, such as human trafficking (Brennan 2004; Clawson 2006; Tyldum and Brunovskis 2005; Johnson 2014). Forced migration research has also been prominent in the development of particular methodologies, such as narratives (Bertrand 2000; Clark-Kazak 2009; De Haene, Grietens, and Verschueren 2010; Eastmond 2007; Ghorashi 2008; Powles 2004; Johnson 2012) and participatory action research (Cooper 2005; Doná 2006; Ellis et al. 2007; Guerin and Guerin 2007; Moran, Mohamed, and Lovel 2011; Rodgers 2005; Tang 2008).

While an emerging literature has thus begun to document specific methodological issues in particular cases (Ghelani 2013), important gaps remain. First, the current literature underexplores the methodological implications of disciplinary differences within the field of forced migration and the challenges of interdisciplinary approaches. While scholars in related fields such as international studies have advocated for an “anti-disciplinary” approach that transcends disciplines (Rosow 2003), few similar discussions have occurred within forced migration studies.

On a related second point, there has been little attention to the question of an overarching methodological approach in forced migration studies. Does our field need specific research approaches and methods, or can we piggyback on analogous contexts in the more established fields

of international development studies and conflict studies? Are the same methods and theories applicable to the study of both forced and voluntary migration? Our field is only beginning to have serious discussions about what “counts” as data and the appropriateness of certain methods for forced migration research (Bakewell 2008; Jacobsen and Landau 2003; Rodgers 2005; see also chapter 2).

A final area in which there is only an emerging literature relates to particular ethical dilemmas in contexts of forced migration due to vulnerabilities occasioned by structural constraints and unequal power relations (Block, Riggs, and Haslam 2013; Lammers 2007; Samaddar 2001; see also chapter 1). These power inequities require forced migration researchers to pay greater attention to reflexivity (Johnson 2014; Lenette and Boddy 2013), as well as standard ethical principles like voluntary informed consent (Clark-Kazak 2012; Hugman, Bartolomei, and Pittaway 2011) and “do no harm” (Hugman, Pittaway, and Bartolomei 2011; Mackenzie, McDowell, and Pittaway 2007). We should pay more attention (Bradley 2017) to these and related ethical issues, and consider a potential expansion of institution-specific ethical guidelines (Refugee Studies Centre 2007) on research in forced migration situations (Lenning 2001).

## Overview and Description of Activities

The idea for a network on knowledge production and methodologies in forced migration came from a meeting of the Refugee Research Network in 2010 in Toronto. Galya Ben-Arieh (Northwestern University) and Christina Clark-Kazak (York University) agreed to initially co-lead the group, established in 2012. The RRN provided seed money for an annotated bibliography, researched and written by Chizuru Nobe Ghelani (2013). The bibliography provided an important starting point from which to identify the existing literature, as well as the gaps. In particular, Ghelani’s analysis revealed specific shortcomings of the literature in relation to: power relations in knowledge production; epistemological differences in what constitutes knowledge and the value attached to knowledge; disciplinary specificities and the opportunities and challenges of interdisciplinary research; as well as the particular methodological and ethical issues related to forced migration studies, in comparison to similar fields like conflict and development studies.

To partially address some of these gaps, in 2014 Clark-Kazak led the development of a Partnership Development Grant (PDG) from SSHRC for a three-year project entitled “Understanding Forced Migration: Methodology, Knowledge Production and Critical Pedagogy.” The project aimed to develop research tools, strategies, and approaches adapted to specific contexts of forced migration; to address power inequities in forced knowledge production and mobilization; and to engage in the critical reassessment and design of curriculum to advance teaching practices to respond to the needs and experiences of forced migrants. This initiative was approved by the peer review committee but did not rank high enough to be funded. Ironically, the proposal scored low on methodology.

Shortly after receiving the negative result from this competition Clark-Kazak secured funding for a conference—marking the official end of the RRN grant—that would showcase the many research results of the clusters. A session on methodology was originally slated for this conference but did not materialize due to lack of sufficient papers. However, Anita Fábos (Clark University) and Dianna Shandy (Macalester College) proposed a pre-workshop on narratives, which was added to the two-day RRN conference. Subsequently, Fábos and Shandy received seed money from the International Association for the Study of Forced Migration (IASFM) to host a series of webinars on narrative methodologies (Shandy, Fábos, and Belbas 2016). They also organized linked panels at the IASFM conference in July 2016 in Poland and a panel for the American Anthropological Association conference in 2016 in Minneapolis.

In June 2016, Clark-Kazak responded to a specific call from the Canadian government for research proposals relating to Syrian refugee arrivals. She partnered with the Canadian Council for Refugees (CCR), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the Canadian Association for Refugee and Forced Migration Studies (CARFMS), and York’s Centre for Refugee Studies (CRS) to propose the development of ethical principles for research in contexts of forced migration. As noted above, ethics had been identified as a gap in the literature in the 2013 annotated bibliography, and this had become apparent in practice. For example, while all academic research in Canada is subject to university Ethics Review Board approval, community-based researchers may not require nor benefit from similar reviews. Moreover, established guidelines including the Tri-Council guidelines are general, while the specific realities of

refugee research pose particular ethical issues. This ethics initiative was funded, resulting in the development of these guidelines (Clark-Kazak et al. 2017), as well as tools for practitioners and infographics for refugees (Canadian Council for Refugees, n.d.).

## What Worked

Despite modest resources, the network was able to achieve some important results. This section will list some of the strategies that helped to mobilize people and produce tangible results.

First, concrete, realistic activities were important in generating and maintaining momentum. Starting with the annotated bibliography not only provided us with a good sense of the lay of the land and the existing literature; it also produced a clear deliverable that could be shared with network members within the first few months of the creation of the cluster. Disseminating the bibliography also allowed us to attract new members and ideas.

Similarly, the narratives working group organized a series of events and webinars. One of the simple, but effective and sustainable, elements of this work is a Facebook group that emerged from the original pre-conference workshop. The Facebook group now has a membership of more than 700 people that continues to grow (see also chapter 9).

The ethical guidelines are another example of a concrete activity that mobilized new actors around a specific project with clear objectives. As we made progress towards drafting the guidelines within a fairly short timeline, this created positive energy within the group and sparked the interest of others who were not part of the original proposal. Also, while the group was originally conceived in a Canadian context, there is growing interest among international colleagues. This initiative will be the subject of a more detailed analysis below.

A second successful strategy was to move quickly to seize opportunities that presented themselves. For example, hosting the narratives working group on the margins of an already funded event allowed the organizers to capitalize on the knowledge of participants, with very few additional resources. Similarly, responding quickly to the Syria-specific rapid research call with a proposal for ethical guidelines for all contexts of forced migration allowed us to leverage earmarked funds in a creative way.

## Challenges and Lessons Learned

Despite these successes, the network encountered some challenges in mobilizing sustained financial resources and meaningful participation from members in the global south. As mentioned above, the major funding proposal for the network was not successful, and the rejection was based on the evaluators' perception that the proposal lacked a solid methodology. Given that the whole project was about methodology, this was puzzling at first. However, upon reflection it became clear that the project was being evaluated in the same way as a collaborative empirical research project would be assessed. However, the proposal was not framed in this traditional way—with a conceptual framework, data collection methods, etc. We learned that our “methodology” does not resonate with colleagues in the same way as an empirical study on refugees would.

The lessons we drew from this experience were threefold. First, we have oriented our fundraising efforts towards more pedagogically inclined grant opportunities. In other words, it is easier to “sell” the project as a way of learning about forced migration, rather than as a research project *per se*. Second, for non-academic partners, we present what we are doing in terms of “research and evaluation” instead of “methods.” The former frames the issue in more policy-oriented terms, especially in the context of evidence-based policymaking and results-based management. Third, breaking the overarching notion of methodology into more specific methods (e.g., narratives) or issues (e.g., ethics) has tended to resonate more with colleagues and funders.

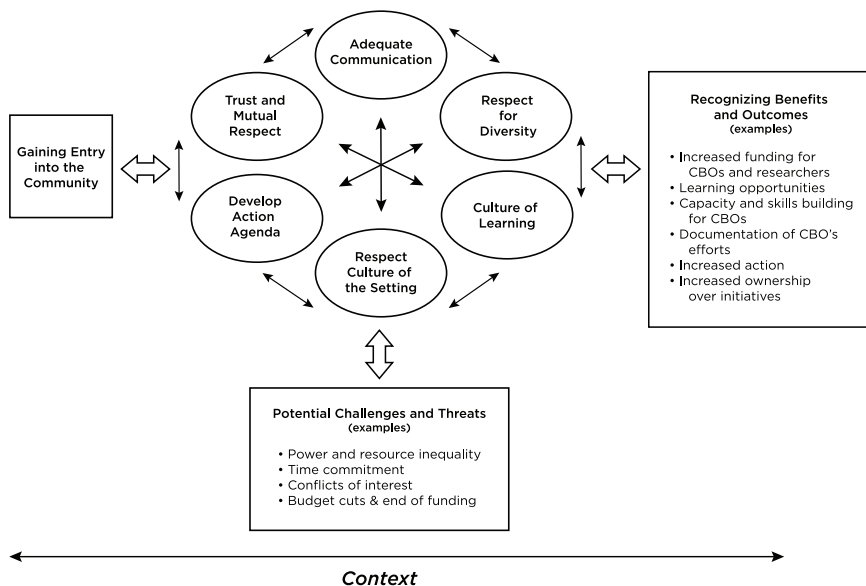
A second challenge we have encountered relates to the difficulties of engaging in meaningful partnerships with colleagues from the global south and from outside academia who face more severe time and resource pressures (see also chapter 1). Despite the explicit focus on inequalities in knowledge production and the initial enthusiasm from RRN members based in the global south, the PDG proposal, for example, was dominated by co-applicants from universities in the global north. The ethics initiative was focused explicitly on Canada, but on the other hand it did mobilize key contributions from non-governmental organizations and civil society. The next section will examine in more detail the community-university partnerships involved in the ethics project, through the interactive and contextual model developed by Suarez-Balcazar, Harper, and Lewis (2005).

## Ethical Considerations of Research with People in Situations of Forced Migration: A Case Study of Community-University Partnerships

In this section of the chapter, I would like to focus particularly on the development of ethical considerations for research with people in situations of forced migration (Clark-Kazak et al. 2017) to analyze lessons learned from community-university partnerships. Here I draw on the interactive and contextual model developed by Suarez-Balcazar, Harper, and Lewis (2005). As per their definition, this paper will define community-university partnership as “an explicit written or verbal agreement between a community setting . . . and an academic unit to engage in a common project or common goal, which is mutually beneficial for an extended period” (Suarez-Balcazar et al. 2005, 85). In the case of the ethics project, the four partners—York’s Centre for Refugee Studies, the Canadian Council for Refugees, the Canadian Association for Refugee and Forced Migration Studies, and the Canadian office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees—first made a written agreement to participate in the project proposal to the funder, on which all had the opportunity to comment. After we received the funding, this formal written agreement was also reinforced by verbal commitments to participate articulated during our first team meetings. The partners agreed that developing ethical guidelines was mutually beneficial to advance a common goal, namely to protect the rights and dignity of refugees and other people in situations of forced migration. This goal was particularly timely given the recent public, media, and research attention to refugees, especially Syrians arriving in Canada through the Canadian government’s resettlement plan. While we welcomed the increased profile of forced migration issues, we were collectively concerned with minimizing any potential negative impacts this increased attention could have for individuals in contexts of forced migration. The project was specific—to develop a set of common principles to guide research—and envisaged concrete activities over the timespan of one year. The specificity and practicality of the project facilitated the initial partnership building.

Suarez-Balcazar, Harper, and Lewis (2005, 86) summarize their interactive and contextual model in the following diagram. I will first analyze





**FIGURE 13.1**

Interactive and Contextual Model of Collaboration: Process of Developing and Sustaining Community-University Partnerships. Source: Suarez-Balcazar, Harper, and Lewis (2005, 86), reproduced with permission.

our experiences in relation to each of the elements of the model, and then turn to the benefits and outcomes, as well as the challenges we encountered.

In this model, “developing and establishing trust and mutual respect involves taking time to get to know the setting and the different stakeholders” (Suarez-Balcazar et al 2005, 88). In the ethics project this process was facilitated by pre-existing relationships amongst the partners. It was then solidified at a workshop on the draft guidelines held at the CCR Fall Consultation in November 2016, at which CCR members had the opportunity to review the guidelines and make suggestions to edit and improve them. This workshop was co-facilitated by John Dubé of MOSAIC, a CCR member organization, and Clark-Kazak, who had drafted the guidelines, with input from the other members of the project. Other members of the project served as small group facilitators at the consultations. This activity

allowed us to solidify trust and respect not only amongst the partners involved in the project, but also with other CCR members, who were proactively engaged in the drafting of the guidelines in the early stages of the project. This session yielded concrete suggestions for improvement, such as the addition of more tools, checklists, and practical ways to implement the proposed guidelines. We subsequently reproduced this model of co-facilitation at workshops at the CARFMS conference in May 2017 (co-facilitated by Dubé, Clark-Kazak, and Michaela Hynie) and the North American Refugee Health Conference in June 2017 (co-facilitated by Clark-Kazak and Hynie). Indeed, elements of trust and respect were integrated into the ethical guidelines themselves.

Suarez-Balcazar and colleagues also suggest that adequate communication is an important part of their model. In the ethics project, team meetings were set up at regular intervals. Because of the geographic distance between participants, we relied on GoToMeeting technology, provided by the Canadian Council for Refugees. In between meetings, we used email communications, especially when commenting on the text of the guidelines. Most of these communications involved all members of the project team. However, in cases of specific concerns raised by a particular partner, a telephone conversation involving only those immediately involved was first initiated, followed by reporting back to the team.

The Suarez-Balcazar et al. (2005) model also underscores the importance of respect for differences and a culture of learning as an interactive and reciprocal process. In the ethics project, this was particularly important given the diversity of experiences with research, which was explicitly defined broadly. We were deliberately conscious of the fact that non-academics both engage in research themselves, but also have particular views of research processes (see also chapter 10). The project steering committee included people who served on ethics boards in different capacities, which increased opportunities for sharing knowledge from different real-life perspectives.

Developing an action agenda is also an important part of the Suarez-Balcazar et al. model. In the ethics project, as described above, we had a series of concrete deliverables, to which all members of the team contributed. This included the guidelines, the additional tools available on the CCR website, and the dissemination mechanisms, like workshops and webinars. These collective action items helped to galvanize and mobilize interest.

Indeed, we had many positive outcomes from the community-university partnership on ethics. The project provided specific resources for the project activities that no one partner could have secured. We also all benefited from learning more about ethics and the ways in which our research can be more ethical. In this way, there was also capacity building of the different project leads and for their institutions.

Despite the successes of the ethics project, it was not without its challenges, many of which are identified in the Suarez-Balcazar et al. model. First, there was some inequality in resources and in decision-making processes. As the project was funded by SSHRC and Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) with an academic lead, the academic partner controlled the financial resources of the project and ultimately made decisions. While efforts were made to acknowledge and compensate the contributions of other, non-academic partners, the latter still contributed more than they financially gained from the project.

Second, time commitment to the project was sometimes a challenge during peak activities of the various partners. Because the ethics project had a short funding timeframe, as well as an expectation of delivery of preliminary results within a twelve-month period, the principal applicant had to take the lead in drafting the documents, with input from the rest of the team. Had we had more time, this could have been a more collaborative process.

Finally, a challenge for the future will be the ability to sustain activities, especially dissemination of the guidelines, once the funding stops. While some of the resources developed can continue to be used with little cost—such as the checklists, handouts, and the guidelines themselves, which will all be available electronically on the partners' websites—other dissemination activities like workshops and webinars need continuous resources to be viable (see also chapters 7 and 10).

## Concluding Thoughts

Partnerships on research methodologies in forced migration contexts have produced some notable successes, and we can build on these to broaden and strengthen our field of study. We have made some modest steps forward on producing an annotated bibliography, developing a working group on narratives, and producing ethical guidelines for research with

people in situations of forced migration. However, much more remains to be done to do justice to the diverse epistemological and methodological specificities of our field. This chapter has provided some lessons learned. I would like to conclude with some potential next steps.

First, the ethical guidelines, which have been developed within the Canadian context, should be scaled up to include the International Association for the Study of Forced Migration (IASFM) and more awareness of the complexities of research in international contexts of displacement. We have taken a preliminary step towards this through the adoption of an IASFM code of ethics (IASFM 2018). However, the tools that have been developed to date should be translated into more languages and more tools and resources should be developed to reflect the diversity of international migration contexts. In particular, a toolkit could be developed to help community-academic partnerships develop their own tools in different contexts, since the process of tool development in and of itself contributes to the outcome of more ethical, rigorous, and useful research processes.<sup>1</sup>

Second, literature addressing the gaps identified in the annotated bibliography should be compiled into an edited volume and/or special journal issue. This could become an important pedagogical resource in the growing number of courses in forced migration studies. Indeed, more thought should be devoted to the ways in which we teach methodology in our field.

Third, a comprehensive research and evaluation training program should be developed for researchers—university-, community-, and government-based—who undertake research on forced migration. This would be an iterative and collaborative effort to provide researchers with the knowledge and skills they need to advance our understandings of the complexity of forced migration issues.

## Notes

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- 1 I am grateful to Michaela Hynie for contributing this point.

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