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Social Research Methods: Migration in Perspective

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Abstract

Migration specific methodologies for research have not yet emerged in a unified manner; hence, a void in scholarship persists which has resulted in the growing dilemmas in conducting research on migrant populations. The growing attention given to the research that involves migration has not yet been passably translated into corresponding research on the methodological challenges researchers generally handle. Quantitative methods have come under criticism for not providing an in-depth description of a phenomenon. Hence many researchers employ the mixed-method approach. This allows numerical data to be supplemented by qualitative findings and contextual explanations of both researchers and researched. We argue that no way is researching in a normal condition similar to the precarious conditions migrants go through. Due to the vulnerable positions of migrants who are the main population of migration research, it demands special attention in selecting and implementing appropriate methods.

Keywords: quantitative; qualitative; refugee; migration research; ethics.

Introduction

Migration research is newer than the phenomenon itself owing to the fact that the phenomenon per se received delayed attention from researchers, academia, policymakers and international communities. This resulted in deficiencies in unified-but-suitable migration research methods for various socioeconomic settings and geopolitical locales. As migration connects both developed and developing worlds and the recent proliferation of migrants all over the world suggests the importance of migration research at multidisciplinary level (Vargas-Silva, 2012). The striking fact is that scholarly interest in migration studies unprecedentedly increased over the last two decades. Two decades ago, migration research had a negligible presence in social scientific inquiry. Today, however, growing scholarly interest in migration is undisputable (Yalaz & Zapata-Barrero, 2017). ‘While half a century ago, migration research was a peripheral area of study within traditional academic disciplines, today it has become a firmly established interdisciplinary field (Yalaz & Zapata-Barrero, 2017:3).’

Quantitative oriented researchers tend to place boundary from those who are qualitatively oriented and vice-versa. Quantitative method was leading in social science research until the 1980s when qualitative research approach arrived resulting in the emergence of mixed method approach (Creswell, 2014; Grove & Zwi, 2006) with an argument that the blend of the both yields a better

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outcome. Quantitatively garnered information is painlessly analyzable statistically and fairly reliable but it goes with criticism for not providing an in-depth description. Qualitative methods, however, provide a more in-depth and rich description of a phenomenon. Middle range theorist Robert Merton (1949) considers quantitative data as precise and systematic while qualitative data is less scientific, too imprecise, flexible and open-ended. Most studies had positivist approach than post-positivist. Anselm L. Strauss (1967) criticizes quantitative data that are typically forced to fit into the pre-formulated categories and concepts. They emphasize on rapport building and empathetic relationship with the subjects to better understand the social reality, which is possible in qualitative data (Layder, 2011; Ullah, 2016). Quantitative approaches—numerical measurements, which are the preferred methodologies of empirical, hypothetico-deductive and experimental migration research with aims to test hypotheses, and identifies numerical differences between the groups under study. Qualitative approaches, by contrast, associate with a broader theoretical critique of quantitative models.

We argue that no way is researching in normal condition similar to the precarious conditions [forced] migrants go through. The expansions of migration, demographic transformations, and its significant impact on social, political and economic life have brought unprecedented methodological challenges. Similarly, upholding an ethical standard at every stage of migration research is more relevant than other social research fields.

The obvious gap in migration research knowledge invites us to address the fact how differently migration research should be designed depending on geopolitical and socioeconomic settings. This paper deals with the ethical issues in any scientific research process and argues for special attention in migration research due to its complex nature of investigation with comparatively vulnerable group of people. This paper brings in knowledge garnered experientially from a number of researches conducted on migration in the South, South-East Asia, East Asia, North America, Europe and the MENA region.

What is special about migration research?

Methodologies for conducting migration research are never static as opposed to subject to modification with pattern of migration. Research methods that are generally applied in migration studies include quantitative such as inferential statistics, and qualitative methods such as ethnography and case study. Hoerder (2012) explains migration research as a translocal, transregional, and transcultural and transnational that requires an interdisciplinary approach. Due to the multidisciplinary and cross-country nature of migration research, it places extra demands on research methods, analysis, and rigorous attention to maintain ethical standard (Schweitzer, Melville, Steel, & Lacherez, 2006).

What makes migration a subject of investigation are processes like Europeanization, globalization, and economic polarization often problematizing the free movement of people (Tholen, 2005). Researchers attempt to address the challenges in migration research through employing multidisciplinary approaches, collecting data at cross-country level with the help of appropriate tools and techniques in order to have clear understanding about the processes, directions, volumes and patterns of migration (Phillips & Burbules, 2000).

Any research can be categorized into three groups: first, quantitative that adopts objective surveys and statistical analyses; second, qualitative that emphasizes on contextual analysis of human behaviour; and finally, mixed-method that combines the both. Experiences, however, bear



out that each approach has affirmative attributes as well as limitations. This paper, therefore, emphasizes that depending on objectives of the research, types of migration, research questions and contexts and the logistical convenience researcher may go for either quantitative or qualitative or for both. It is a widely accepted fact that migrants cannot be moulded into a single category. While European migration research had its origin in studying guest workers in the 1950s and the 60s (Castles & Kosack, 1973), today, the category of the class has been largely in shadow. This is probably one of the first consequences of migration-related analytical frameworks such as transnationalism (Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007) and super-diversity (Vertovec, 2007; 2015). Feminization of migration was documented a long time ago (Castles & Miller, 1993). As female migration is increasing, scholars expected to see gender becoming a prominent category in migration studies (Lee et al. 2014). We have not, however, observed an increase in the number of research that categorized migrants with respect to gender categories.

As the migration research requires ensuring objectivity, generalizability and reliability, researchers need to select the subjects through an unbiased manner. This paradigm produces quantifiable and reliable data that is usually generalizable to some larger population (Phillips & Burbules, 2000). However, Massey (1987; 2014) offered another approach to migration research, which is the Ethnosurvey. This is, however, explicitly designed to provide quantitative data for multi-level analysis by compiling data at the individual, household, and community levels (Massey, 1987). But, in this case, a representative sample survey is not required. The ethnosurvey, because of its costs and professional demands, is hard to implement within a representative sampling framework. Promising results obtained in applying the ethnosurvey to study immigration suggest that it may profitably be applied to investigate other longitudinal social processes as well, such as status attainment, occupational mobility, and residential mobility (Massey, 2014). We often use ethnographic studies but usually are time intensive. However, using Phenomenology to gain descriptions of the experiences would take less time if that is what the research is interested in describing.

When a particular research requires deeper perspectives about the subjects through immersion, researchers have to choose a qualitative approach. Here, the presence of researchers in data collection is crucial, and the results are highly contingent upon who conducts the research (Creswell, 2014; Leech, 2008).

With the continuous changes in the dynamics of migration, diverse methodological challenges are defining the landscape of migration research. Migrants could be irregular and undocumented and psychologically disturbed. They may be mourning the bereavement of their family members. They might be in search of their close ones who got lost at point of the transits; they might be looking for any opportunity for their mere survival. They might have escaped wars, persecution or gross human rights violations. All the migrant populations have a cultural context in whatever society is researchers need to be appreciative of the cultural context they come from. Wimmer and Schiller (2003) examine the 'problem' of methodological nationalism. Methodological nationalism is the naturalization of the nation-state by the social sciences.

Research methodology

Scholars identify elements of research in different ways, as Creswell (2014) defines it as the intersection or combination of three elements- philosophical ideas, strategies of inquiry, and specific methods to be used for data collection, analysis and interpretation. Yin (2009) terms it as logic of

sequence that makes a bridge of the initial research questions to the best possible answers (p. 26). King et al. (1994) focus on four components of research design: research question, theory, data collection and analysis. Similarly, Yin (2009) mentions about five components of research design. The first three components; research questions, propositions and units of analysis, indicate what data to be collected whereas the rest two components are data linked with the propositions and the data analysis.

Researchers make a number of decisions during the research design process. The implementation strategies of those decisions are quite different across the methodological approaches- qualitative, quantitative or mixed-method. Depending on the research design, a researcher employs pertinent techniques for data collection and analysis. For example, quantitative design includes survey and experiment methods; ethnographies and case studies under qualitative approach; while mixed-method brings both together in different forms, e.g. explanatory (starts with quantitative then qualitative), exploratory (qualitative to quantitative), and convergent (both at the same time) etc.

When researchers get to do research in an unconventional situation, some non-traditional methods are recommended to apply for example, rapid research assessment (RRA). This is a combination of RRA and Qualitative Research (QLR). This may make these methodologies more cost-effective and closer to local conditions, but they produced complementary and systematic outputs, and not holistic ones (Schonhuth & Kielvelitz, 1994:51-71).

Debates on methods: The most common notion about the difference is that qualitative method uses words, meanings, narratives, open-ended questions in interviews while quantitative method deals with numbers, uses closed-ended questions in surveys and experiments. Cresswell (2014) explains the gradations of differences between the two approaches from three perspectives: philosophical assumptions, research strategies, methods employed for data collection and analysis. Here, researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). It involves a variety of empirical case study, personal experience, introspective, life story, interview, observational, historical, interactions, and visual texts the described routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals' lives (Strauss, 2007; Kerlinger, 1964; Cresswell, 2014).

The common argument is that in quantitative research generalization is widely accepted where inferences are made from sample to population, but is more difficult and challenging for the results derived from qualitative research (Polit & Beck, 2010). Therefore, qualitative research findings, however, are not aimed at generalizing a wider population.

The debates on generalizability revolve around different sampling techniques and the representativeness. Quantitative method follows the principle of probability (e.g. random, stratified, cluster techniques etc.) whereas qualitative research uses non-probability techniques (convenience, quota, purposive, snowball etc.). Probability sample ensures that everyone in the population has an equal chance to be selected in the sample hence it is unbiased (Daniel, 2012). The representativeness of samples is the main issue of contention among the research methodologists. Scholars arrived at a consensus that representative samples could hardly be achieved due to constraints like complex nature of society and culture, non-availability of sample frame and the possibility of non-responses (Gobo, 2004). However, if inferences are not a precondition for the research, representativeness is not obligatory (Gomm, Hammersley & Foster, 2000; Bailey, 1978; Sandelowski, 1997; Ullah, 2015).



If the objectives of the particular research are to go deep into the phenomenon then there is no point to take a large sample. Large samples do not necessarily provide in-depth information, and a qualitative study concerns with the quality of information rather than quantity of data. Therefore, the number of cases is not relevant in qualitative study. Nevertheless, scholars from qualitative research challenge this particular debate and provide strong arguments in favour of generalizability of findings from few cases (even a single case), even though the samples are non-representative (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Yin, 2009; Layder, 2011; Weis & Willems, 2017).

Mixed method approach: The above demonstrates evidences of dichotomous relationship between qualitative and quantitative research methods. Researchers in both domains are found quite 'antagonistic' to each other where one group of researchers presents arguments to relegate others. We think the necessity should determine the kind of approach to be adopted. Creswell (2014), in this context, argues that instead of being polar opposites or dichotomies, qualitative and quantitative researchers should work together representing different ends on a continuum. In the mixed method, qualitative methods are often treated as starting points or foundational strategies that are followed by quantitative methodologies (Newman & Benz, 1998). Similarly, Creswell (2014) states that the qualitative phase may contribute to building an appropriate instrument or specify variables to be used in the follow-up quantitative phase. Qualitative researchers think that this support undermines the role of qualitative research. Supportive role, however, can be performed by both methods to improve the quality of research through an integrated effort (Bazeley, 2003). In fact, we noticed from numerous major researches conducted on migration and refugees, qualitative and quantitative approaches play a complementary role to each other and thus strengthen research findings. A researcher needs to make a decision about particular method to be employed depending on the research questions, arguments and objectives to be addressed. Newman and Benz (1998) state that research question guides the research methods not vice versa. Similarly, McMahon (1999) suggests that the method should not dictate whether the research is qualitative or quantitative.

Therefore, a fundamental question arises that what approach best fits in migration research given the fact that migration takes place under a range of circumstances such as a sample frame might be notoriously difficult to locate, and a migrant under stress (for a range of reasons) may not be in a position to talk to a researcher. Does this imply that quantitative research is not possible to conduct on migrants? We believe in such circumstance, the mixed-method is a good approach to go about. Mixed method research resides in the middle of the qualitative-quantitative continuum that incorporates the elements of both qualitative and quantitative approaches (Newman & Benz, 1998). There are rooms for flexibilities.

Migration researchers need to be reflexive about their own positions in social settings, our own thought categories, beliefs, emotions, points of view and conceptual schemes. Matters of relations between the researcher(s) and research participants, reflexivity and positionality are of great importance, as they are part of or influence significantly the theoretical and conceptual frameworks at hand, the ways that data are collected and produced and the approaches within which findings are interpreted and presented (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Iosifides, 2008). Mystifying reality is vital in researching migration processes and phenomena. Racism, for example, of any form and type, either every day, institutional, collective or political, is one such set of interpretations and discourses, which tend to mystify reality and obscure real relations of domination and exploitation.

Methods in migration research

Migration research field might be notoriously complex due to the diverse cultural background of the subjects. They might be from multi-ethnic and vulnerable groups, and difficult to reach out. As a result, investigators undergo several challenges (i.e. locating data sources, access to data, analyzing the garnered evidences with appropriate contextual understanding). Scholars identify several challenges (lack of a clear sampling frame; constrained access to migrants due to their situation, hidden communities, security problems, issues of disclosure and lack of trust) that hinder adopting representative sampling in migration research (Birman, 2006; Jacobsen & Landau, 2003; Ullah, 2010; 2014; 2015). For example, it will be naïve to expect a sample frame from war-ravaged Syria or in Arakan in Myanmar due to lack of access to that area (Ullah, 2014; Ullah & Diotima, 2018). This implies that migration researchers in certain circumstance are left with no choice but to employ non-probability sampling techniques, like snowball or convenience sampling, though that increases the potential risk of bias and omission of large number of migrants (Jacobsen & Landau, 2003) who could provide different perspective to the findings. Due to the absence of adequate sampling frame respondent-driven sampling (RDS) and quota sampling are two common strategies in migration research (Gorny & Napierała, 2016). But, if a research is conducted on a refugee camp run under the UNHCR, there is highly likely that a sample frame is available. This means that quantitative approach could be applied and that a representative sample would be possible to draw.

If research is undertaken on the experiences of children and women, there are several approaches one can take. Then that is an interpretive question that would necessitate that researchers speak to directly and try to understand their individual experience of the of migration. The fact that the researcher is interested in vulnerable populations and women and children in particular might indicate that we are positioning ourselves within critical theories. The most appropriate methodologies are developed out of the specific theoretical understandings that undergird them. Without situation yourself theoretically and knowing what it is, exactly, it is impossible to determine which data collection method will help you achieve that aim.

Borkert et al. (2006) reiterate that research question in migration research should dictate what methodological approach to be adopted. This is not to ignore the fact that logistical convenience is something researchers have to take into account while designing the research. A researcher considers certain methods depending on some elements of philosophical reasoning. Ontological and epistemological positions have implications for the decision of a researcher about different methodological approaches.

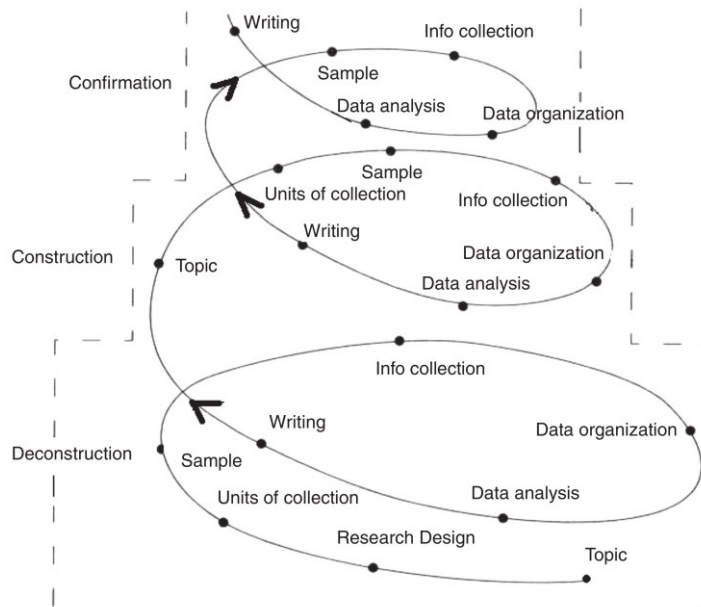
A researcher considers certain methods depending on some elements of philosophical reasoning. Ontological and epistemological positions have implications for the decision of a researcher about different methodological approaches. The varying categorizations of such philosophical positions are anti-foundationalism/interpretivism/constructivism/ relativism (qualitative approach); foundationalism/positivism/objectivism (quantitative) and realism or pragmatism (mixed-method) (Cresswell, 2014; Iosifides, 2012). The mingling of the researcher's own orientation, philosophical worldview, consideration of potential risks, convenience and comfort with any particular approach can yield a better decision on which approach to apply. Hence, Vargas-Silva (2012) favours both qualitative, quantitative mixed-method approaches in migration research.

The research on migration can also accomplish in a sequential process following theoretical underpinnings. The concepts and their relationships are cumulative in nature that accumulates



through the interplay of data collection and analysis. Employing theoretical sampling plan, the research can be conducted in a cumulative process until theoretical saturation is reached for the concepts and when no new data is available and the concepts are clearly explained (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Gobo (2018) explains this process as ‘the reflexive and spiralling nature of ethnographic research’ where a concept requires re-specification or reconceptualization with new data, indicators and hypotheses until the researcher reaches conclusion. He presents (in Figure 1) the whole process in three stages (deconstruction, construction and confirmation), and each stage includes different sampling techniques and new data.

Figure 1. Cumulative research design (Gobo 2018:76). (Permission obtained)



Ethics in migration Research

Without research, the world would not have seen so many advances in societies. Research has contributed to modifications in policies and plans made for human improvement. Therefore, the basis of research should be grounded by a sound and ethical standard (Resnik, 2015; American Psychological Association, 2002). Ethical issues have occupied significant space in the discourse of migration research primarily because migrants (forced or voluntary) are one of the most vulnerable groups in the world. Research studies conducted on this group require ensuring that their rights are protected and privacies are maintained. Evidently, conventional techniques in social sciences including migration research were not concerned much about ethical issues. Power relations often create insider-outsider dilemmas for the researcher, problems of representation and how ‘race’ of researcher affects trust in field research and other ethical considerations. The recent endeavour is the introduction of the approval from the ethics committee⁵ (in

⁵ Different countries introduce the research ethics committee with various names such as International Review Board – IRB; National Ethics Committee (NEC); Independent Ethics Committee (IEC), Research Ethics Board (REB), etc.

organizations/institutions, if any) to protect the rights of the participants and obstruct the researchers from playing dominance over the respondents.

Historically, the context for ethical regulation was created for the first time during the Doctors Trial of 1946-1947, which was a part of the Nuremberg Trials for Nazi war criminals (University of Minnesota, 2003). There were serious allegations against Nazi physicians in the Doctors Trial that they conducted torturous experiments with concentration camp inmates as some of the experiments involved exposing victims to extreme temperatures and altitudes (University of Minnesota, 2003:1). Just a decade ago, in the 'researcher-researched' power hierarchy, researchers were considered more powerful than the researched. Researched were placed in a position that they felt obliged to provide information for research (Sales & Folkman, 2000; Angell et al., 2006). However, some changes happen over the last few years and scholars are discussing openly about ethical dilemmas in research (Ullah, 2010). We concur with Castles & Miller (1993) and contend that research ethics shift power from researchers to the researched.

The situation, as if, has been like whatever questions a researcher has could be asked of the respondents. Privacy, potential harm, vulnerability and related consequences were not taken into consideration. The researched invests time and energy, and provides information without any benefit. Yet, they have been considered as someone subjected to provide information no matter how harmful or risky was this for them. This is proven unethical.

Evidently that research ethics and methodologies are intertwined as the principle of ethics reinforces methodological soundness at different steps of research process because many methodological problems lead to ethical lapses (Jacobsen & Landau, 2003). This section is meant to expound the essence of research ethics and the processes involved in the ethical application process. Research challenge is primarily an issue related to the interest of researchers and research ethics are related to the interests of researched. Researchers tended to conflate research challenges with research ethics at the time when ethics were considered trivial.

Hammersley (2015:433) describes the formulation of ethical codes and frameworks that "principles are useful, so long as they are treated as reminders of what ought to be taken into account, rather than as premises from which specific ethical judgments can be derived. At the same time, any move towards formulating codes in terms of principles is likely to make little difference in practice for researchers under the present regime of ethical regulation."

Why research has to follow ethical standard? The primary objective of ethics in research is to protect human and animal participants from risks and vulnerabilities emanating from the research they are involved in. A researcher, for instance, who fabricates data, either deliberately or carelessly, may harm or even kill the subject, and similarly, if a researcher is not careful enough about some regulations (e.g. relating to radiation or biological safety), it may jeopardize the safety of the subjects (Resnik, 2015). This indicates that in any critical cases like migrant (forced or else) research subjects are even more vulnerable to harm if the safety is not protected. Therefore, the elements of research ethics such as risk management, confidentiality, informed consent, etc. are required to examine during the approval process of any research activities and projects.

Researches on migrants and refugees are conducted inevitably in complex and risky conditions. The precarious situation, along with the vulnerable and marginalized position of the participants, can cause violation of ethical principles (Hugman, Pittaway & Bartolomei, 2011). Unlike many other typical research setting, migration research, therefore, requires researchers to be more careful



about methodological and ethical soundness in order to produce valid data without placing them at risks. Jacobsen and Landau (2003) identify some challenges related to both research methodology and ethics in refugee field which include: construct validity, objectivity and reactivity, bias, translation and the ethics of using local researchers, problems of confidentiality, missing control groups, and problems of representativeness (Nowak, 2006; Gajjar, 2013; Stair, 2001; Colt & Mulnard, 2006). In researching migration (forced or voluntary, regular or irregular), it is crucial that researchers internalize the notions of sensitivity and vulnerability to better address the ethical questions.

Conclusions

Researching hard-to-reach people is not easy. Migrants and refugees are, of course, not like the other research participants. They might be traumatized, wounded physically or mentally, suffering from separation anxiety, disturbed with future, and broke. If the participants are visible minority or women, they are more vulnerable than anyone (Martha et al., 2017). In such circumstances, being interviewed by a researcher is not something they hope for.

When it comes to individual interviewing, how sensitive an interviewer should be in different settings (cultural, religious, gender and geographical) is important to consider. Once the respondents open up and get to speak candidly, they may undergo a process of release. Although the best interview plans may go awry, it is essential to permit the commentary to unfold even though some of the 'information that emerge may be upsetting to the researcher, when graphic stories of abuse emerge concerning violence or brutality, in detailed descriptions of war atrocities, or in stories of abuse during flight to asylum' (Vargas, 1998:42).

Recently migration research has significantly developed with the advent of different academic programs integrated in many disciplines and with the emergence of migration-specific journals (Vargas-Silva, 2012). However, migration friendly and migration sensitive research techniques do not seem to appear until recently (Singleton, 1999; DeTona, Frisina, & Ganga, 2010). The precarious situation migrants, in general, live in is not conducive to bringing under research initiative. Given the importance of ethics for conducting research, it should come as no surprise that many different professional associations, government agencies, and universities have adopted specific codes, rules, and policies relating to research ethics (Resnik, 2015).

Methods to be applied in particular research should be region or country specific too because cultural and religious norms, political systems and socio-economic condition may vary widely across region. These conditions have got crucial bearing on the methods to be applied for migration research. For instance, the methods applied in traditional migration research derived from the Western countries have manifested challenges in applying them elsewhere. This implies that research setting often dictates the types of methods to be better fit in certain setting. Therefore, adopting a qualitative, quantitative or mixed method for a research on migrant population may depend on the context, volume, directions, political system and culture.

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368 *Social Research Methods: Migration in Perspective*

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