

Reflections

Revisiting the 'dual imperative' of forced-migration studies – commentary to Refstie

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From the perspective of forced-migration studies, the reflections article elaborates on the question Hilde Refstie posed in her keynote speech at Geography Days in 2021 – “what doing our part means in a progressive world of fast policymaking”. Discussing the nature of forced-migration studies as a both policy-relevant and policy-critical field, then deliberating the issue of what ‘action’ may look like in action-oriented refugee research, this presentation of self-critical reflection on these issues is grounded in the Academy-of-Finland-funded research project Action-oriented Research on Asylum Seekers’ Deportability (ARADE, 2018–2022). The author concludes that, while research should be conducted in solidarity with refugees and those collaborating with them, such as activists, scholars must maintain reflexive criticism considering which actions and approaches are suitable and desired in particular contexts. There are no simple solutions for designing and implementing action-oriented research for and with refugees.

Keywords: policy relevance, action research, self-reflection, forced migration, asylum seekers, deportation

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In this reflections article, I elaborate on the concise but quite difficult question that Hilde Refstie (2022) posed in her keynote speech at 2021’s Geography Days: “what doing our part means in a progressive world of fast policymaking”. I reflect on this from the perspective of forced-migration studies, the field of research in which I and Dr Refstie are engaged.

My argument is structured around two main points. Firstly, the study of forced migration is by nature both policy-relevant and policy-critical field. The second point emerges from my deliberation of the issue of what ‘action’ might look like in forced-migration research. Here, I aim to present self-critical reflection on these issues against the backdrop of experiences from my recently completed Academy-of-Finland-funded research project with the Migration Institute of Finland, titled ‘Action-oriented Research on Asylum Seekers’ Deportability’ (ARADE, 2018–2022).

The twofold nature of forced-migration studies

Let me begin with a few words about the nature of forced-migration studies as a simultaneously policy-relevant and policy-critical field.

Ever since the emergence of the academic field of refugee studies – or forced-migration studies (I use the two terms interchangeably in this piece despite acknowledging differences that are important in other contexts) – there has been on-going discussion of the need for its research to be, as Jacobsen and Landau (2003, 185) put it in their seminal paper on the ‘dual imperative’, at the same time “both academically sound and policy relevant”. However, I would like to suggest that we need to discern another ‘dual imperative’, that of forced-migration research having to be simultaneously policy-relevant and, perhaps even more importantly, policy-critical. This proposition is very much in line with the argument in Bakewell’s (2008, 432) ground-breaking article on the need to push refugee research “beyond the categories” and highlighting “the importance of policy irrelevant research into forced migration”.

With this short reflective piece, then, I would like to turn my attention to this dual imperative in conjunction with openly exploring the kinds of challenges I have faced whilst aiming to conduct refugee research that is at the same time relevant for policy and policy critical.

It is crucial that, even though we collaborate with policy- and law-makers, we do not necessarily take their concepts and categories for granted (in the context of deportations, see Pirkkalainen *et al.* forthcoming). This is exactly the vital point that Bakewell (2008, 432) made many years ago already:

[T]he search for policy relevance has encouraged researchers to take the categories, concepts and priorities of policy makers and practitioners as their initial frame of reference for identifying their areas of study and formulating research questions. This privileges the worldview of the policy makers in constructing the research, constraining the questions asked, the objects of study and the methodologies and analysis adopted. In particular, it leaves large groups of forced migrants invisible in both research and policy.

Hence, the essential task of critical scholarship examining (forced) migration is to precisely question and problematise these policy categories and modes of governing. Yet our funding bodies or collaborators may not agree on this point, and then it becomes also an ethics issue related to the terms on which we are conducting our research, and for whom. In one of our seminars, our excellent keynote speaker Anna Lundberg reminded of this with the ethics checklist that she had developed in the context of refugee research, upon which we expanded in a blog piece on research ethics (Leinonen *et al.* 2020). In that entry, we argued that it is important to reflect on the following issues, among others:

Who defined your research problem? What motivated you to conduct this research? For whom is your study worthy and relevant, and who says so? How do you plan your project so that it promotes the maximum benefits for the participants?

Furthermore, in that piece on research ethics in forced-migration studies, we posed the question of accountability: to whom do we answer? I would argue that, as refugees and other forced migrants often live in precarious situations and may be vulnerable, it is essential that we not just conduct research about them but also aim to make sure our findings can contribute to more humane policy approaches in order to enhance refugees’ protection. Therefore, I strongly align myself with the key principle of not conducting academic research **on** refugees unless it is inherently **for** and, when they desire this, also **with** refugees. That said, participatory approaches involving refugees are not suited to all research contexts or topics, so their use should always include caution and critical self-reflection. I return to this point at the end of the article.

What action can look like: examples from a research project on asylum seekers’ deportability

Moving on, I would like to ponder what ‘action’ in an action-oriented research approach may look like – another issue Dr Refstie reflected on in her excellently critical keynote address. I will briefly look at three examples of challenges and possible solutions that I faced in my recently completed research project: 1) the attempt to collaborate with authorities, 2) the challenge of trying to pursue participatory

research in the midst of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, and 3) considerations related to how I have been rethinking research impact. I frame this critical self-reflection thus: I find that, if one is to learn and develop as a researcher, these are precisely the moments and issues we ought to discuss more openly.

Firstly, one attempt to collaborate with authorities during this project had to do with our institute organising a public lecture series on voluntary return migration to Afghanistan, Iraq, and Somalia jointly with the Finnish Immigration Service (Migri) and the Finnish unit of the International Organization for Migration (IOM). While I was in charge of chairing the seminar on return to Afghanistan, the authorities told me, in essence, not to speak about **forced** deportations, only about **voluntary** return – a phenomenon that was not and still is not taking place from Finland. Rather, in autumn 2019, Finland was continuing to send people back to Afghanistan, mostly via charter flights. I ended up ignoring the authorities' instructions, for precisely that reason: in 2019, we had only **forced** removals from Finland to Afghanistan; no one was returning to a conflict-stricken state on a voluntary basis. I, my colleagues and our international keynote speakers, and the Afghan and Finnish activists in the audience strongly agreed that we must be able to address the issue of forced deportation. We attempted to negotiate this approach several times, from the very beginning of these events' planning and the choosing of international keynote speakers. We based our arguments on both research findings and the actual on-going situation in Afghanistan.

All in all, whereas this collaboration allowed me to engage with the authorities in the attempt to address policy-relevant issues, it was also an absurd experience. This was particularly striking when the audience asked the authorities several questions regarding forced deportations and not one of them, except the IOM representative, were ready to answer. Instead the audience, both in the lecture hall and online, were advised to email their questions to Migri after the event. It became clear that we did not share similar understandings of what the focus of this event should have been and what terminology should have been used for discussing return to Afghanistan from Finland. To my surprise, on the very next day after the streamed event, I received a phone call from a politically active Afghan man living in Finland, previously unknown to me, who wanted to thank me for speaking about the situation with the right terms – a reassurance that I very much appreciated. I should conclude my related reflections, however, by recognising my stand-out collaboration with Migri in other situations. Earlier in 2019, I had the absolute pleasure of the former head of the organisation acting as a commentator in a book launch, and she showed exemplary willingness to answer a keen audience's questions. Moreover, I engaged with Migri with regard to my data collection, and I am truly thankful for their time and willingness to explain to me how they run detention centres in Finland.

The second example is illustrated by the participatory art and creative-writing workshops that I was supposed to organise in spring 2020 as part of my research project with poet-journalist Ahmed Zaidan and photographer Rewan Kakil, excellent collaborators both originally from Iraq. As we were planning these workshops, which would have engaged both people with a forced-migration background and activists, the pandemic hit Finland. For me, cancelling them was first and foremost an ethics decision related to the 'do no harm' principle: I did not want to risk participants' (or our teams') health for the sake of obtaining interesting data and pursuing the original research plan. Early in the pandemic's spread especially, asylum seekers and undocumented migrants had straightforward access to neither health care related to the pandemic nor preventive equipment, and the power imbalance connected with access to health care influenced my decision not to hold these workshops. It is truly disappointing that we did not manage to arrange them, but we were able to conduct a smaller project, and Ahmed's deportation-related poems and Rewan's photographs are going to feature in an anthology that my colleagues and I have edited (Pirkkalainen *et al.* forthcoming).

Lastly, what 'action' has meant for me in this action-oriented project has been the freedom to engage in assisting asylum seekers and undocumented migrants in their legal struggles to gain residence permits. I have been able to assist some of them in finding reliable lawyers, aid in the preparation of their new asylum applications, and support a few of them in their asylum interviews. As my actions have focused primarily on a handful of people, not on larger political campaigns, it is necessary that we also reconsider what impact means with regard to this kind of research. I had the pleasure of taking part in a meeting called in 2019 by my funding body, the Academy of Finland, where we discussed the research's relevance and impact. During this meeting, I ultimately argued that in

action research into asylum seekers' deportability, we should rethink societal impact and revisit whether in this context it may also include issues such as these: did we manage to put legal force behind someone's right to stay in Finland? Did we enable stopping an illegal deportation? Have we fought for access to services that people might otherwise not have received? The funding body's representative responded well to this proposition of rethinking societal impact, and I hope to continue the discussions to push the boundaries between academia and activism, which need not always be clearly separated. After all, they cannot and perhaps even should not be (Marucco 2021).

Conclusions

As I conclude this reflection, I wish to reiterate my main message here: refugee research should be conducted **in solidarity with refugees** and people who collaborate with them (activists and others), but as scholars, or scholar-activists, we need to be self-critical, looking at which actions and approaches are suitable and desired in particular contexts. Accordingly, there are no simple solutions in designing and implementing action-oriented research for and with refugees. As Dr Refstie warned in her insightful address, our self-critical approach must extend to how we conduct action or participatory research. I would like to finish, therefore, with a rather thought-provoking quote from a peer-group interview among activists that I conducted as part of my project. One activist with a forced-migration background raised a critical point in mentioning how some activists or volunteers engaged in politics – and this could be equally true in the research domain – have misused collaboration with refugees for their own agendas and purposes. I quote this activist:

We have been speaking about how some lawyers have been using this [refugee] situation for their own benefit. But I have seen also that there are others. In their title there may be the word 'volunteer'. It can be with a good purpose, but then they may use the immigration agenda in a selfish way for their own purposes. They will say what they've done to help immigrants, and they bring this to [campaigning for] elections. Some just use the term 'immigrant' for their own purposes. I have seen people who use volunteering for their own agenda. Of course, it is good that you can use your expertise for others' good, but those who have experience of forced migration and the processes should be involved too and speak for themselves. ('Heimo' in a peer-group interview on 16.10.2019, translation by the author)

With my ARADE project having now come to an end, it is time to reflect self-critically on what has worked well and what has not. This is essential for researcher-activists like me, who strive to improve their ways of conducting collaborative research in line with ethically sound methods and to critically engage with policy-makers for better, more human asylum policies.

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