

Methodological good fit; Limitations of quantitative methods in Forced Migration Studies

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Module D

Sociological research uses quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods. Each methodology has its own strengths and weaknesses and is used depending on the nature of the research questions and nature of problems/people that we study. In the available literature qualitative methods are dominantly used in forced migration studies. Using quantitative methods is considered a rare practice and several scholars think that it is inappropriate to use quantitative techniques to study forced migration scenarios. Certain terminology used in quantitative research such as representativeness, control group, replicability, validity, data sets (Rodgers, 2004; Jacobsen and Landau, 2003) may not be applicable in all forms of research in sociology. In forced migration research or data collection, achieving these standards may not be possible due to various reasons. Losifides (2003) indicates that it is difficult to obtain data from undocumented migrants in a rigorous way because of the inability to use a reliable sampling framework. Rodgers (2004) indicates that refugees/forced migrants are living in a completely different environment to "laboratory conditions" where certain quantitative techniques such as control groups are used. Assumptions in the quantitative techniques may exclude the fact that the immigrants are living in fragile, extremely vulnerable and changing conditions.

Apart from the conditions of the migrants, it is also important to decide on the type of methodology depending on the nature of research questions. For instance, it is difficult to use quantitative methods for exploratory research questions such as investigating social processes and characteristics of immigrants. Focusing on one particular group for the purpose of an exploratory research make application of quantitative methods difficult because of purposive exclusion of certain groups. (Losifides, 2003) Purposive exclusion of certain groups is linked to representative sampling. Representative sampling means that we are using the data from the existing data sources and is anchored to a sampling framework. Existing data sources in terms of forced migration research would translate into registries of migrants for example. This, in turn means we are excluding certain groups in the research.

These groups may be living under cover, more vulnerable, they may face different situations/challenges to the ones who are registered and there is a possibility that these groups have different status in the new environment. The representative sampling procedures could be further made complex and inappropriate given the challenges in identifying the different strata or clusters within forced migrants. They are not a homogenous group at all and their differences may translate into research gaps and policy gaps. There are safety and ethical considerations for both researcher as well as the informant in conducting large scale data collection in a forced migration environment. Along with the achievement in research quality, "Doing no harm" is equally important in refugee research. (Jacobsen and Landau, 2003).

All these concerns point towards the fact that that qualitative methods are more appropriate for forced migration research as opposed to quantitative methods. But it is necessary to look at the available literature in order to generate a meaningful discourse on this subject. In this paper I attempt to analyse the limitations in adopting quantitative methods in forced migration studies. The first section of this paper will unpack the key terms such as research methods, qualitative methods, quantitative methods, migration and forced migration. Other sections will look at the methodological aspects of available literature on forced migration and support the arguments I make on the in/appropriateness of quantitative methods to study forced migration through a case study.