

**Working Paper #19**

**The Dual Imperative in Refugee Research: Some Methodological and Ethical  
Considerations in Social Science Research on Forced Migration**

**Karen Jacobsen  
Loren B. Landau**

**July 2003**

## **Abstract**

Social scientists doing fieldwork in humanitarian situations often face a dual imperative: research should be both academically sound and policy relevant. We argue that much of the current research on forced migration is based on unsound methodology, and that the data and subsequent policy conclusions are often flawed or ethically suspect. The paper identifies some key methodological and ethical problems confronting social scientists studying forced migrants or their hosts. These problems include non-representativeness and bias, issues arising from working in unfamiliar contexts including translation and the use of local researchers, and ethical dilemmas including security and confidentiality issues and whether researchers are doing enough to 'do no harm'. The second part of the paper reviews the authors' own efforts to conduct research on urban refugees in Johannesburg. It concludes that while there is no single 'best practice' for refugee research, refugee studies would advance their academic and policy relevance by more seriously considering methodological and ethical concerns.

*Key Words:* methodology; refugees; migration; ethics; research

## Table of Contents

I. Refugee Research and the Dual Imperative.....	1
II. How Do We Study Forced Migration? A Content Analysis of the Methods Section of Volume 15 of the <i>Journal of Refugee Studies</i> .....	5
A. Sampling .....	5
B. Interviewing Technique .....	6
C. Translation and Use of Local Researchers.....	6
III. Methodological Weaknesses and Ethical Problems .....	7
A. Construct Validity.....	8
B. Objectivity and Reactivity .....	9
C. Bias, Translation, and the Ethics of Using Local Researchers .....	9
D. Missing Control Groups.....	11
E. Problems of Representativeness .....	11
IV. The Johannesburg Project: Putting Principles into Practice .....	13
A. Sampling .....	15
B. Interview Techniques and Strategies .....	16
C. Problems Faced in Conducting the Johannesburg Survey .....	16
D. Adaptation.....	17
E. Options Not Followed.....	18
F. The Findings: Imperfect but Valuable .....	18
V. Conclusion .....	19
Appendix A: Articles in JRS Vol. 15 (2002) that focus on refugees or IDPs .....	24

### List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

CFA	Countries of First Asylum
EA	Enumerator Area
EU	European Union
IDP	Internally Displaced People
IDF	Israel Defense Forces
JRS	<i>Journal of Refugee Studies</i>
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
PRA	Participatory Rural Appraisal
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
USA	United States of America
WFP	World Food Programme (UN)
WHO	World Health Organization

# The Dual Imperative in Refugee Research: Some Methodological and Ethical Considerations in Social Science Research on Forced Migration<sup>1</sup>

Karen Jacobsen<sup>2</sup> and Loren B. Landau<sup>3</sup>

## I. Refugee Research and the Dual Imperative

Social scientists whose research focuses on humanitarian or forced migration issues, are both plagued by and attracted to the idea that our work be *relevant*. Many of us want to believe that our research and teaching will contribute to our theoretical understanding of the world while actually helping the millions of people caught up in humanitarian disasters and complex emergencies. Most forced migration research therefore seeks to explain the behavior, impact, and problems of the displaced with the intention of influencing agencies and governments to develop more effective responses.<sup>4</sup> Compared with non-humanitarian fields, there are relatively few studies that do not conclude with policy recommendations for non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the UN, or national governments (Castles 2003; Black 2001).

This policy orientation stems in part from our subjects, whose experience of violent conflict, displacement and human rights violations inhibits us from treating them simply as objects for research. Many of us take seriously David Turton's admonishment that research into others' suffering can only be justified if alleviating that suffering is an explicit objective (Turton 1996: 96). A large subset of the refugee research literature consists of reports by human rights organizations like Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch, which document and expose human rights abuses with the intention of pressuring governments to protect refugees and promote their well being (e.g., Lawyers Committee for Human Rights 2002, Human Rights Watch 2002).

At the same time that our work seeks to reduce suffering, refugee-related social science aspires to satisfy high academic standards, both to justify its place in the academy and to attract scarce funding for social research. But as our work becomes more academically sophisticated, many of us have the nagging suspicion that it becomes ever more *irrelevant* to practitioners and policy makers. We fear that our

---

<sup>1</sup> The author wishes to thank the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and The Mellon-MIT Program on NGOs and Forced Migration for financial support of the research on which this study is based. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the Conference on the State of the Art of IDP Research, NTNU, Trondheim, Norway, 7-8 February 2003 (Jacobsen), at the MIT-Mellon Colloquium on Forced Migration, March 11, 2003 (Jacobsen), and at the Workshop on Research on Refugees in Urban Settings, American University in Cairo, Egypt, 11-13 April 2003 (Landau).

<sup>2</sup> Visiting Associate Professor, Fletcher School of Law & Diplomacy, and Feinstein International Famine Center, Tufts University, Medford, Massachusetts. Professor Jacobsen may be contacted at: karen.jacobsen@tufts.edu.

<sup>3</sup> Research Coordinator, Forced Migration Studies Program, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. Professor Landau may be contacted at: LandauL@gsh.wits.ac.za.

<sup>4</sup> This article does not address the refugee research conducted in more technical areas like public health, public nutrition, and refugee legal protection, where the express purpose is to influence program improvement in such organizations as WHO, WFP, UNHCR and related NGOs.

analyses may not address current crises, that the language and concepts we use are too arcane or jargonistic, or that the questions we ask (and purport to answer) are interesting only to other academics, not to the those who work in the field, or to those refugees and IDPs and war-affected people who live the situations we study.

The tensions described above create a *dual imperative*: to satisfy the demands of our academic peers and to ensure that the knowledge and understanding our work generates are used to protect refugees and influence institutions like governments and the United Nations. How, then, do we address the dual imperative so that our work can be both academically rigorous and relevant to policy? While many see these demands as mutually exclusive, as social scientists trained in logical argument and methodological rigor, we believe our work can provide a solid empirical basis for policy and advocacy efforts. Indeed, this is the kind of research on which policy should be based. Effective and ethical research requires that our methodologies be sound and that we explicitly recognize and criticize the limits and strengths of our approaches to generating both our data and the conclusions we draw from them.

In this paper, we discuss several—but by no means all—of the methodological problems that commonly arise in refugee and forced migration studies. We then offer some broad guidelines for how one might address such concerns without lapsing into the kind of academic abstraction that currently characterizes much recent scholarship in political science, sociology, and anthropology (economics might be a candidate too, but almost no economics research has been published in refugee studies). The article concludes with a discussion of efforts to put these principles into practice in our current research on urban refugees and migrants living in Johannesburg.

Social scientists' desire to influence refugee policy through their research gives rise to two questions. First, *are the analysis and conclusions based on sound principles of descriptive and causal inference and robust data collection practices?* Refugee research employs a wide range of quantitative and qualitative techniques, from personal case histories to large-scale surveys. Regardless of the methodology employed, good scholarship demands that researchers reveal and explain their methods (King 1995; Ragin 1994). Being able to follow the researchers' approach enables us judge for ourselves whether their findings are valid or not. We can recognize the quality and limitations of the data, replicate the study if need be, or compare the data with those of similar studies (King 1995). Much of the work on forced migration is weakened by the fact that key components of the research design and methodology are never revealed to us. We are seldom told how many people were interviewed, who did the interviews, where the interviews took place, how the subjects were identified and selected, and how translation or local security issues were handled. Unless such information is revealed, authors run the risk of being even less accountable in their policy prescriptions than the oft-vilified UNHCR and international aid agencies. Although there are almost always considerable logistical challenges facing researchers working with forced migrants, in no instance can these difficulties be allowed to justify *ad hoc* research design, obfuscation, or exaggerated claims.

Second, *is field research conducted in an ethical way?* Research into vulnerable populations like refugees, some of whom might be engaged in illegal or semi-legal activities, raises many ethical problems. The political and legal

marginality of refugees and IDPs means that they have few rights and are vulnerable to arbitrary action on the part of state authorities, and sometimes even the international relief community. In conflict zones, or in situations of state collapse, few authorities are willing to protect refugees from those who may do them harm, including researchers whose actions may have less than ideal outcomes (see, for example, UNGA 2002). One largely unacknowledged problem is the issue of security breaches arising from researchers' confidentiality lapses; other problems relate to the impact of the researchers' presence on the people and communities being studied.

Questions relating to sound methodology and ethical problems occupy much of the remainder of this paper. We argue that refugee studies, and humanitarian studies in general, reveal a paucity of good social science, rooted in a lack of rigorous conceptualization and research design, weak methods, and a general failure to address the ethical problems of researching vulnerable communities. One reason for the lack of rigor is the strong tendency towards what Myron Weiner used to call 'advocacy research', where a researcher already knows what she wants to see and say, and comes away from the research having 'proved' it. Although those falling into this trap are often well meaning, this kind of research risks doing refugees a disservice and potentially discredits other academics working in the field. It also encourages widespread acceptance of unsubstantiated facts that bolster a sense of permanent crisis and disaster. For example, in the western media, but also in policy circles, we often hear reference to the 'growing number' of refugees.<sup>5</sup> Yet according to the most recent UNHCR figures (UNHCR Statistical Yearbook 2001:19), the global refugee population in 2001 remained virtually unchanged at an estimated 12 million, and there were 40% fewer newly displaced refugees (less than 500,000) than in the year 2000 (820,000).

This is not to diminish the problems of forced migrants, but merely to point out that while inaccurate and embellished numbers might sometimes help those advocating for refugees, imprecision and inaccuracy also provide fodder for those whose interests may be opposed to favorable refugee policies. Many myths about refugees propagated by host governments and xenophobes have a weak empirical basis. In counteracting these myths we want to ensure that our work is not similarly undercut by shoddy arguments and contradictory evidence.

The tendencies discussed above point to the need for greater conceptual clarity, especially regarding definitions. As a start, it is helpful and necessary to specify whether a study uses a technical or legal definition of 'refugee,' or, as we do in the project described below, a definition that is more broadly based. The need for definitional clarity also applies to other terms borrowed from the social sciences and

---

<sup>5</sup> In a recent Boston Globe editorial (January 18, 2003, p.A19), the author states: "the number of refugees and internal exiles worldwide [has swelled to] more than 45 million." Of these, he said, nearly 20 million refugees worldwide "have fled their homes out of a well-founded fear of persecution." According to UNHCR, of the 12.0 million refugees in 2002, only 2.9m (24%) were granted refugee status on the basis of having fled fear of persecution (i.e. Convention refugees). Most of the world's refugees and IDPs are people displaced by war and conflict-destroyed livelihoods, not by persecution. Even if we include the 3.7m Palestinian refugees (not included in UNHCR counts) the number would add up to 15.7m. The widely cited number of 25 million IDPs is almost entirely unsubstantiated, based on little rigorous research and really amounts to an educated guess.

freely employed in refugee studies: ‘human security,’ ‘social or human capital,’ ‘empowerment,’ ‘gender,’ ‘grass-roots,’ ‘participation,’ even ‘violence’. These terms remain widely used but ill defined in advocacy and policy circles, perhaps as a way to build consensus or increase chances for funding. As social scientists, however, we must be clear about our concepts, variables and hypotheses, and how these will be evaluated and measured.

Clear conceptualization is an important first step, but only does a little to correct the prevalence of inaccurate and unsubstantiated assertions and inferences. This unfortunate tendency reflects the methods we use to conduct empirical research on forced migration. Unlike more established social science research, which is confronted with vigorous disagreements about normative assumptions, data collection techniques, conclusions, and recommendations, most refugee-centered research faces little criticism of its methods. Much of the published research, including human rights reports and journal articles, are based on researchers going to source countries where they produce a “composite drawn from dozens of documents, interviews, conversations, and observations culled by the author” (Cusano 2001: 138).<sup>6</sup> This kind of statement is often all that is said about the study’s methods. Conclusions are challenged, but usually on normative or pragmatic principles (is the proposed solution politically feasible? Or does it go far enough in protecting refugees?), rather than the study’s methods. When methodological challenges are raised, those few researchers who actually spend time in remote refugee camps, or the crime-ridden urban ghettos of refugee-hosting countries in Africa and Asia, are often able to justify their conclusions by claiming ‘ground truth.’ Field experience, no matter how extended or challenging, is not a guarantee against poor methods and must not be accepted as such.

The remainder of the paper discusses some methodological concerns about representativeness, bias, causal inference, and the shortage of statistically analyzable data. We also explore some ethical problems relating to the dilemma surrounding the imperative to ‘do no harm’, issues of security breaches (for subjects and researchers), and the potential uses and misuses of data. Our intention is not to promote a single research approach or best practice, but rather to encourage further discussion and attention to the ways we collect and use field data.

---

<sup>6</sup> For example, a recent collection of case studies on IDPs, to which Jacobsen contributed a chapter, sought to show, in the words of the book reviewer (JRS (Vol.15(1), p.123), “that IDPs are actors in their own right wherever they are—in isolated areas or in large camps.” The reviewer found that – no surprise – the findings do confirm that IDPs are actors in their own right! But the methods involved in these case studies left much to be desired. For one, none of the case studies presented alternative hypotheses. We all set out to show that IDPs actively respond to their displacement by pursuing a variety of survival strategies, and lo, we found this to be the case. Every case study had only the briefest section on methodology, which generally referred to the use of “semi-structured and open-ended” interviews, or the widespread use of PRA (Participatory Rural Appraisal). We were seldom told how many people were interviewed and by whom, how the subjects were identified and selected, what variables and hypotheses were being examined, and so on.



## II. How Do We Study Forced Migration? A Content Analysis of the Methods Sections of Volume 15 of the Journal of Refugee Studies

In order to explore the methods used in the study of forced migration, we conducted a content analysis (summarized in Appendix A) of the latest complete Volume (15, 2002) of the *Journal of Refugee Studies* (JRS), a multidisciplinary journal that explores all kinds of displacement. Although this is by no means representative of all work falling under the ‘refugee studies’ banner, we chose this journal because, inasmuch as ‘refugee studies’ is a delimited area of study with its own accepted standards of knowledge production, this publication defines the parameters and standards of the field. We chose to review a volume of a journal, rather than a set of books both for the sake of convenience, and because we wanted to illustrate a set of concerns, rather than make claims about all refugee research. While it would be interesting and valuable to conduct a content analysis of refugee research based on a broader sample of books and other journals, such a study goes well beyond the ambitions of this article. Although it might be argued that the word limit of journal articles does not permit detailed discussion of methods, we would counter that in ‘mainstream’ social science journals, in which methodology is given more weight, discussions of such matters are regularly included. There is no *a priori* reason why they should not be in the JRS.

In the four issues of Volume 15 (2002), there were fifteen articles and five Field Reports,<sup>7</sup> of which all but two focused specifically on refugees or IDPs (as opposed to institutions, policy, or refugee law). Of the eighteen studies with displaced people as their subject, eight carried out their research in countries of first asylum (CFA) or internal displacement. The research sites were in South Africa, Mozambique, Ethiopia, Palestine, Azerbaijan, Tanzania, Mexico, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan. The remaining ten were conducted on resettled refugees in the USA, UK, EU, Israel, and Australia. In each of these eighteen articles we looked for:

- (1) Data collection methods (e.g., surveys, unstructured interviews, archival materials);
- (2) How the sample or subjects were selected (including data collection period and number of subjects);
- (3) The use of local researchers in the field and whether translation was involved.

### A. Sampling

It was notable that only four of the studies were explicit about how they identified and selected the people they interviewed. Fully half of the studies (nine) said nothing about their subject selection. In almost no cases were subjects randomly selected, the technique best suited for broader generalization. One study referred to the use of “snowball” techniques (i.e., where a first subject is asked to refer the researcher to others she could approach, and a sample is built up through this networking of the community) but with no details of how this was done. In one rather startling case, the selection of respondents was based on refugee interviewers being nominated by an NGO, and then each interviewer choosing and interviewing ten

---

<sup>7</sup> There was also one Editorial Introduction summarizing the Special Issue on Religion, one “Refugee Voices” essay, one Conference Report, and the usual Book Reviews, none of which was included in our analysis.

refugees over a two-month period. To foreshadow arguments raised below, this violates a number of research principles about bias and confidentiality. On the positive side, in all but one case, the number of research subjects interviewed was clearly stated, ranging from N=15 to N=950. The period of data collection ranged from six months to two years, with an average of about a year.

## **B. Interviewing Technique**

In all the articles, data collection relied on interviews of some kind. These were described as: “focus groups”, “open-ended,” or “semi-structured” interviews, and “in-depth life history interviews”. The interviews were generally carried out by the author, usually as part of a team including local research assistance. These interviews were sometimes combined with other methods such as participant observation, archival research, and Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) techniques.<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, none of the studies was carried out in a refugee camp.<sup>9</sup>

## **C. Translation and Use of Local Researchers**

The issue of language use and translation of interviews was rarely addressed. Only one study stated that the interview guide or questionnaire used had been translated from English into the local language and then back-translated to English to ensure linguistic equivalency. In some of the studies where it was clear that translation was required, no reference was made to the potential problems raised by the use of a local translator. Other issues related to the use of local researchers, including confidentiality problems and compromised security, were never addressed.

The content analysis presented above is not representative of all social science studies of refugees and IDPs. Conducting such an analysis would be a worthwhile endeavor, but is not the main goal of this article. Our non-representative content analysis reveals some methodological weaknesses and ethical problems that, we think, characterize much of the work in the field. In the next section, we discuss some problems associated with the predominance of small-scale, interview-based studies. The concluding section discusses our attempts to address these concerns in our own ongoing research project.

---

<sup>8</sup> PRA refers to a range of techniques designed to enable the community to participate in defining variables and measures. Usually focus groups are assembled and participants are requested to engage in a variety of exercises. For example, they may be asked to draw a timeline beginning with their first displacement and including major developments, which then leads to a group discussion observed by the researcher, who does not direct the discussion beyond “questions for clarification” (Vincent & Sorensen 2001: 177). Other PRA techniques include individual narratives, social mapping, time-use, and resource mapping exercises (Whitaker 2002).

<sup>9</sup> This absence of the camp frame is in contrast to other non-social science kinds of research on refugees and IDPs, such as that carried out by epidemiologists, nutritionists, and others in more technical fields. A casual perusal of refugee public health studies in *The Lancet*, for example, revealed that most of the research on refugees occurred in camps.

### III. Methodological Weaknesses and Ethical Problems

Much of the published research on refugees and IDPs is based on data that have been collected in the ways described above: through a relatively small number of interviews conducted without apparent reference to accepted, systematic sampling techniques. In-depth interviews are essentially exploratory conversations between subject and researcher, and they have pluses and minuses associated with them. On the plus side, they can give us a rich store of descriptive and anecdotal data, which suggest patterns, variables and hypotheses for further study. In areas or circumstances about which we know very little, these descriptive data reveal much about how forced migrants live, the problems they encounter, their coping or survival strategies, and the shaping of their identities and attitudes. For some research questions and purposes, including those of organizations seeking to address specific, narrowly defined problems or country-based issues, this kind of data will be sufficient and useful. Similarly, for individuals who do not wish to make representative claims, such narrow studies can provide rich and issue-specific accounts. However, such data are often assumed by the media or policy makers to represent the totality of a refugee population's experience. Researchers must, consequently, make a concerted effort to ensure that the limits of their data and analyses do not create the wrong impression and become highly problematic.

Studies based on small samples and in-depth interviews often have problems that limit their ability to satisfy the demands of academic credibility and responsible advocacy. Unless very carefully selected, non-representative studies, especially those with small samples, seldom yield enough cases or the right kind of cases to allow us to test competing hypotheses and causal relationships (Ragin 1992; Savolainen 1994). Nor do they allow us to conduct comparative studies across different groups in a single location, or across time and space (i.e., longitudinal and geographic comparison). To illustrate the difficulty of testing hypotheses without a large data set, consider the following example: diasporic networks are widely considered to be a key resource providing money, information, and contacts that enable people to flee conflict zones and seek asylum in safe countries. But without an adequately expansive data set, we cannot test the significance of networks compared with other factors like government policies, household resources, or socioeconomic background, all of which influence a person's ability to seek asylum. The only way to weigh the strength of a particular variable (like networks) or hypothesis (like the role of networks in asylum seeking or migration) is to generate a comprehensive data set that will allow a range of competing variables and hypotheses to be tested. This satisfies the most fundamental prerequisite of good social science: allowing for the possibility that one's hypothesis, however dearly held, could be proven wrong.

A common way to generate data sets that permit statistical and comparative analysis is through surveys based on representative samples of the target population. The inclusion of a 'control group'—members of the host population living amongst the refugees, or similar people remaining behind in a country of origin—further improves our ability to test competing hypotheses and causal claims. Unfortunately, there are currently very few large-scale survey data sets of refugee or IDP populations, especially of those who are self-settled (i.e., those living outside of camps). The survey data we do have tend to focus on public health or nutritional issues, usually in camp settings and often during the emergency phase of

displacement.<sup>10</sup> The following paragraphs outline some general challenges for refugee-related research. We then focus on challenges related to collecting representative data.

### **A. Construct Validity**

Construct validity refers to the strength and soundness of the measures used to operationalize the variables under investigation. When we ask questions (or try to measure something), are the responses an accurate indication of what we are exploring? For example, when we try to understand how refugees reconstruct their livelihoods, how do we operationalize the complex idea of a ‘livelihood’? We have to ask specific questions that explore the range of variables constructing a livelihood. But how can we be sure that our questions really capture everything that makes up a refugee’s livelihood? We might be missing key parts, because we do not know to ask about them. For example, if we do not know about the role of remittances in a refugee’s livelihood, we are unlikely to include this question in our interview schedule. Under these conditions, the findings lack validity. Discussions of ‘marginalization’, ‘discrimination’, or ‘networks’ must be similarly precise. If we do not define and construct our variables carefully, we run the risk of examining something different from what others exploring similar concepts have been researching. This is not necessarily to be avoided but it will mean that the results are not fully comparable.

Anthropologists and others relying on qualitative research conducted over extended periods of time (e.g., in-depth interviews, participant observation, or PRA) often respond to ‘validity’ questions by claiming to better understand the nuances of local speech and custom. Such insights are recognized as one of the strengths of qualitative research. Researchers who are able to spend long periods of time (more than six months) gain the trust and familiarity of their informants and their community. Their conclusions are less likely to be based on (potentially mistaken) preliminary impressions or swayed by politically loaded statements presented to the researcher as fact. While there are potential problems with reliability of the data, including whether refugees are telling the researcher what they think she or he expects or wants to hear, it is likely that, over time, inconsistencies will be revealed.

However, qualitative methods also raise both validity and ethical problems, some of which are aggravated by the extended periods of time researchers spend in the field (Wedekind 1997; Jarvie 1969). Open-ended interviews, for example, give much discretion both to the person doing the interview and to the respondent. Their conversational tone may prompt particular responses, or inadvertently direct the answers, an unconscious process often difficult to avoid even by trained researchers. Refugees and IDPs might (consciously or unconsciously) be reluctant or afraid to tell researchers their true views, or they might wish to promote a particular vision of their suffering. Their responses could be part of their survival strategy. Refugees are unlikely to tell researchers anything that might jeopardize their (the refugees’)

---

<sup>10</sup> UNICEF in Colombia has collaborated with PROFAMILIA ([www.profamilia.org.co](http://www.profamilia.org.co)) on household surveys among IDPs in Bogotá, focused on health oriented issues. Macro International (<http://www.measuredhs.com>), which carries out demographic and health household surveys around the world, has no surveys aimed specifically at displaced people

position in the community. After all, why should a refugee tell a researcher anything that is not in the refugee's interests?

## **B. Objectivity and Reactivity**

One problem related to participant observation and other kinds of qualitative studies of communities arises when researchers become deeply involved and familiar with their informants (Kloos 1969). Researchers living or working amongst refugees may be more likely to accept a particular 'imagined' history, or become incorporated into refugees' survival strategies. Anecdotal reports from the field describe situations where the researcher has given refugees sustained use of his car to transport goods for sale, lent or given money and other goods, and offered advice and information about livelihood strategies, rights, and so on. While it is difficult to condemn such charitable acts, they create a methodological problem known as reactivity—where the active presence of the researcher potentially influences the behavior and responses of informants, thereby compromising the research findings. While it can be argued that all research affects subjects, clearly there are matters of degree, and the greater the researcher's involvement, the greater the effect is likely to be. While reactivity problems occur in all field research, when informants are like refugees—marginalized, poor and powerless—the methodological problems fade into ethical ones.

The researcher's involvement with the community can lead to the kinds of ethical dilemmas and difficulties linked to the idea of doing no harm. One problem many of us have faced is how to *exit* from the research site after being befriended by refugees. Other problems concern implicitly or explicitly condoning or enabling illegal behavior, or taking sides in armed conflicts. Most social scientists who have worked in the humanitarian field know of researchers who have helped people commit illegal acts, such as smuggling goods or people across borders. Academics have also been known to engage in quasi-military activities, taking sides with rebel groups and aiding them with information. (In one troubling case we heard of, an academic involved with Burmese Karen rebels on the Thai border invited graduate students doing research in the refugee camps to accompany him—"as an adventure"—when he passed information to the rebels.) Even if the researcher does not actively promote illegal activities (however innocuous), his tacit approval—especially when the researcher is seen as an authoritative outsider—raises ethical concerns that need to be considered. Of course, one must also recognize the possibility that active protest against a certain activity may simply drive it underground, making it invisible to the researcher while doing nothing to stop it.

## **C. Bias, Translation, and the Ethics of Using Local Researchers**

Hiring local assistants and working with partner organizations in the field to help with interviews, translation, identifying subjects, and the like, is so widespread and seems to be such an obviously win-win situation it rarely warrants discussion. Western researchers work with local researchers because it is widely believed that teaming up with local researchers yields better results. Local assistants are believed to "be in a better position to recognize and understand culturally biased strategies and provide appropriate analysis"; and "do their research less obtrusively" (Vincent & Sorensen 2001: 13). In addition, working with local organizations and universities

builds academic and research capacity, while, perhaps, assuaging researchers' guilty concerns that they are the only ones profiting from the research.

While the use of local researchers can potentially increase the reliability and validity of our data, some ethical and methodological problems are worth considering. The first, and potentially most significant from an academic standpoint, is the risk of biased response resulting from the use of translators or local research assistants. Conducting an interview or survey in the refugee's language when the researcher is not fluent in that language can result in translation problems and inaccuracies. (Translated questionnaires should be back-translated into English (or the original language of the questionnaire) to test for linguistic equivalency.)

Second, using research assistants from the same country or area as the respondent risks transgressing political, social, or economic fault-lines of which the researcher may not be aware. In highly sectarian countries, like Congo or Burundi, it is quite possible that a research assistant may be associated—by name, appearance, accent, style of dress—with a group the respondent either fears or despises. This will undoubtedly influence the quality of the data collected. If the research assistant is affiliated with a group at odds with the refugees being interviewed, this raises the possibility that information will be used against a particular sub-group.

The problem of “doing no harm” in refugee research is particularly difficult to anticipate or control (Leaning 2001; Anderson 1999). When refugees are interviewed, the information they reveal can be used against them either in the camp or in their areas of origin. Refugees and IDPs can become stigmatized or targeted if certain information is known about them, for example, that a woman has been raped, or that a refugee has access to particular resources. In focus group discussions there can be no confidentiality, and what is inadvertently revealed—even when questions are carefully designed—cannot fully be controlled even by diligent researchers. Problems of confidentiality also arise when local researchers, especially those who are also refugees, know the subjects. The risks associated with local researchers and the potential for placing them and the research subjects in compromised positions should be carefully assessed. Consider the following:

*December 1998: Bethlehem, West Bank:*

I sat surrounded by students. My Jewish Israeli friend, who had served in the Israeli Defense Forces, stood a little distance away, unnoticed, as I talked with twelve Bethlehem University students, while conducting research for my thesis (on Israeli and Palestinian student perceptions of final status issues). After conversing for some time, a few of them divulged their Hamas identity in order to put their responses in context, not knowing that a former IDF person stood nearby. I immediately recognized my mistake. (Samdami 2002)

Many researchers do not adequately consider how their inquiries put their subjects at risk, particularly in conflict zones or hosting areas where the displaced are highly vulnerable. The following are just a few additional concerns:

- Warlords, or other figures of authority may disapprove of information being given out and may impose a ‘culture of silence’, and enforce it with

the threat of harsh punishments. The simple act of asking questions becomes loaded in the political pressure cookers that are conflict zones.

- As westerners engaging with or seeking permission of non-state actors and authorities like warlords or rebel leaders, we may be legitimizing their presence and granting them a source of power and influence, especially if resources like cash or access to transportation are involved.
- Unanticipated consequences of researchers' actions may only be revealed over quite long periods of time—after the researcher has left. The presence of Westerners is always associated with resources of some sort, and contact with researchers can put refugees at risk for future targeting, in the form of either benign family pressure, or by more malignant actors who view them having access to resources.

#### **D. Missing Control Groups**

In order to link variables causally (e.g., a camp-based relief strategy and health status), one must either identify a 'smoking gun'—where a specific event has been directly observed (such as a cholera outbreak in a refugee camp) that cannot be explained equally persuasively another way (cholera is endemic to the region and frequent outbreaks occur at that time of year)—or draw casual inferences from limited data. As it is almost impossible to witness personally indicators of all relevant variables, or to find documentation linking them, many social scientists rely on comparative studies to help eliminate competing hypotheses and isolate those factors that might account for what is being observed (Ragin 1994; Przeworski and Teune 1970). One of the simplest—although not always the most practicable—ways of doing this is through comparison of two groups, one of which serves as 'control' (see King, Keohane, and Verba 1994; Lieberman 1994; Landau 2003).

Much social science research on refugees, however, lacks any kind of control group, making it difficult to assess the extent to which refugee-related variables *cause* the particular problem being discussed or whether other social, political, or economic factors common to everyone living in the research area account for the variance. For example, a common research topic is the study of security problems in refugee camps, yet few studies are designed in such a way as to compare the security problems of refugees in camps with those living *outside* the camps. Nor are the security problems of refugees compared with those of the non-displaced (the host community) or with people in parts of a country unlikely to be affected by refugees' presence. If the goal is to do more than simply *describe* how refugees are living, but to *explain* why they are living in a particular way, a study should include both refugees and non-refugees (such as nationals) in its sample.

#### **E. Problems of Representativeness**

One of the most significant problems of small-scale studies is that while they yield in-depth and *valid* information, they are seldom representative of the target population about which the researcher wishes to make claims. As such, they do not allow us to make accurate descriptive inferences about the groups in which we are interested. For example, interviews with urban refugees belonging to a particular

church or welfare organization, or those living in a particular part of a city, are not representative of all the urban refugees in that city. We must recognize that policy recommendations aimed at helping a particular group can have different consequences for the majority who were excluded from the study, or negatively affect the surrounding host population, potentially furthering xenophobia or anti-refugee sentiment.

For a group of refugees to be a representative sample, they must have been randomly selected from the target population, i.e., every person (or household) in the target population must have had an equal chance of being selected to be interviewed. For a variety of reasons, this is very difficult to accomplish in refugee research.

### 1. Lack of a Clear Sampling Frame

Except in camp situations, the *size and distribution* of the forced migrant population is almost never known. In the case of urban refugees and IDPs in African cities, there are no studies, census-based or otherwise, that have yielded an accurate count. Research into self-settled refugees in rural settings, and all IDP populations, faces similar problems. At best there are rough estimates, often based on the number of officially registered refugees, although not all refugees (even in camp settings) are formally registered by refugee agencies like UNHCR and NGOs or by the relevant host government department. Counts like the government census omit many urban migrants and refugees whose ambiguous legal status means they choose not to reveal their presence to government bureaucracies and thus do not appear in official statistics. In other instances, governments (or aid agencies) may actively suppress the presence of certain refugee groups or exaggerate the numbers of others for political or economic reasons (Crisp 1999). Many urban refugees and IDPs live in shanty towns that are recently constructed and often lie beyond city limits, further reducing the chance that they will be included in census surveys or urban plans.

### 2. Problems of Access

In humanitarian situations, access to forced migrants who do not live in camps is a major problem, both for researchers and practitioners, and large numbers of the displaced are often omitted from studies. The difficulties of exploring the range of views held by the women in a community is well known, as is that of other more “hidden” social groups, including the poor and those living in remote areas. Access difficulties stem from logistics (remote areas, bad roads, hidden communities), security problems, and lack of trust. . Researchers tend to concentrate their activities in camps (or in resettlement countries) where refugees are more easily accessible, and where they can be identified by officials or aid organizations. In any refugee community, there are also groups of people who are particularly difficult to reach, due to norms of public display and voice, or simply their work and living conditions. Even when working with local organizations that are known and presumably trusted by the refugees, many researchers find it difficult to gain full access to the refugee community we wish to study. There is also an issue of self-selection bias: in many studies we are told that the interviewers met with a number of “representatives” from the community. But those who come forward or agree to be interviewed may not be representative at all.



### 3. Snowball Sampling

Access problems mean that most refugee researchers rely on “snowball” sampling approaches. Although the specifics vary, the researcher almost always begins by contacting a local body, such as a religious or refugee organization or an aid agency that is familiar with the refugee community, and requests their assistance in identifying and approaching potential research subjects in the community. This initial ‘core’ group of subjects is then interviewed and asked to name others who might be willing to be interviewed, and thus the “snowball” sample is built.

There are at least two problems with this approach, one methodological and one ethical. Unless done very carefully, a snowball selection approach runs a high risk of producing a biased sample. Unlike a random sample, where everyone in the target population has an equal chance of being selected, a snowball sample draws subjects from a particular segment of the community, and they are likely to be similar in certain ways—sharing a social network, for example, or belonging to same religious group, or interacting with a particular NGO (see for example, Sommers 2001). The sample will, almost by definition, exclude those who are not linked to the organization or individual who is at the center of the snowball.

Ethically, ‘snowballing’ increases the risk of revealing critical and potentially damaging information to members of a network or subgroup. Simply informing a respondent how you obtained a name or contact information demonstrates a particular kind of link. The dangers of this are aggravated by many researchers’ tendency to ‘test’ the validity of their findings by reporting them to their respondents and asking for their opinions. These findings can, for example, include sensitive information about political, religious, or personal affiliations, which can create problems amongst the group. Levels of wealth (or poverty) or access to opportunities can also be revealed in ways that will negatively affect respondents’ relationships with each other.

\*

While the problems of refugee research often make it very difficult to meet desired standards of randomness, tested and accepted techniques enable researchers to avoid many of the worst pitfalls associated with ‘convenience’ sampling. Through the use of these techniques it may also be possible to produce a sample that is ‘random enough’ for the data to be statistically analyzed. Where it is impossible (or not desirable) to use such techniques, researchers must be very explicit in recognizing the limits of their claims. Doing otherwise can mean that policies recommended for one group can, on the assumption of representativeness, end up harming other refugees (and hosts) not included in the sample.

### **IV. The Johannesburg Project: Putting Principles into Practice**

One particularly understudied population is urban refugees and IDPs, a large and seemingly growing population of forced migrants. Urban growth rates across much of Africa are high, averaging nearly 5% in cities like Nairobi and Cairo. Two capital cities, Maputo and Dar es Salaam, have had growth rates of more than 7% over the past five years (Simone 2003). Although there are few hard data, it is likely that the influx of both refugees and economic migrants constitutes a significant part of this urban growth. Existing research on urban migrants has been sparse and unsystematic in design, much of it carried out with relatively few informants participating in

informal interviews (Sommers 2001; SAMP 2000; Crush 2000). Our own research has, with mixed success, tried to remedy these shortcomings.<sup>11</sup> The remainder of this paper discusses some of the data collection problems we encountered in the course of conducting a survey of urban refugees and migrants in Johannesburg in February-March, 2003, and the ways in which we have sought to address them. Among other things, the Johannesburg Project sought to produce data that would be comparable with other data sets over space and time. We wanted to understand not only how forced migrants come to and live in Johannesburg, but how they interact with South Africans and how South Africans perceive or value those interactions. The project seeks to address gaps in our understanding of Africa's urban refugees and migrants from conflict-affected countries, an increasingly important issue throughout the continent (see Human Rights Watch 2002). The survey will be followed by a second round of more focused qualitative and quantitative projects. A similar survey and follow up studies will eventually be replicated in Maputo and Dar es Salaam. Apart from providing general insights into the experience of urban refugees, the project addresses three primary questions:

- (1) *What are the factors that structure migrants' journeys from source country to capital city?* In particular, how do urban refugees mobilize transnational networks during their flight?
- (2) *What is the nature of urban refugees' linkages with their countries of origin and how do these ties affect their livelihoods?* Do continuing obligations to families and communities in source countries lead to the remittance of money and goods?
- (3) *How does the frequency and nature of contact between urban refugees and the local population affect group loyalties and affiliations?* Do overlapping economic and social interests lead to increased trust among groups and the declining importance of ethnic or national loyalties?

The project began with a survey, conducted in February-March 2003, of six migrant communities from conflict-affected countries (Angolans, Burundians, Congolese (both Republic of Congo and Democratic Republic of Congo), Ethiopians, and Somalians) and a control group of South Africans, (N=737), living in seven central Johannesburg suburbs (Berea, Bertrams, Bezuidenhout Valley, Fordsburg, Mayfair, Rosettenville, Yeoville). Our target groups were people from countries in Africa affected by conflict (and giving rise to refugee outflows), who were living in Johannesburg neighborhoods with high concentrations of African migrants, including officially designated refugees and asylum seekers.

In designing our inquiry we consciously tried to address three primary concerns identified earlier in this essay:

- in order to make both descriptive and causal inferences we used a representative sampling strategy and include a control group of South Africans;
- we used interview techniques that collect comparable data and allow for replication;

---

<sup>11</sup> Wits University (Johannesburg) and Tufts University are currently collaborating on a survey of urban refugees in Johannesburg, and we hope to extend the survey to three other African cities, Maputo, Dar es Salaam, and Khartoum (urban IDPs):

- in using local researchers, we sought to address problems of bias and confidentiality.

Given the lack of precedents, our efforts were both a methodological experiment and an empirical inquiry. We now describe our initial research strategy, how we modified it to meet unexpected problems, and briefly discuss how these modifications affect the study's methodological, theoretical and political relevance.

## **A. Sampling**

Good census data would have allowed us to make population estimates and develop a precise sampling frame. Unfortunately, the most recent South African census results (2001) had not been released when we were planning our research. The previous census, conducted in 1996, provided a benchmark of sorts; however, our target areas have experienced massive demographic changes since 1996, making that census much less useful to us. Even if the 2001 census data were available, they would be unlikely to reflect the true composition of the population living in our target areas. While the census asked questions about nationality, it is unlikely that all immigrants would reveal their status to a representative of the South African government, and census officers were not allowed to ask for identity papers. The poor quality of available population estimates and the bureaucratic invisibility of our target groups made it impossible to develop the sampling frame needed to obtain a highly randomized sample.

In order to work around this problem and to ensure a reasonably representative and random sample, we intended to use a combination of multi-stage cluster and interval sampling. We began with discussions with key informants (UN, city, and refugee community representatives and aid organizations) who helped us identify those neighborhoods with high densities of our target populations. The City of Johannesburg's existing administrative demarcations divide these neighborhoods into smaller areas, called 'enumerator areas' (EAs). Within each of the targeted neighborhoods, we randomly selected 100 EAs (30%). In neighborhoods with fewer than six EAs, we randomly selected two to ensure that these areas would be represented in the sample. Within each of the EAs, we then intended to randomly select six migrants from our target populations and four South Africans, for a total of 1,000 respondents.

We included this relatively large 'control group' of South Africans in order to make claims about the effects of flight, legal status, xenophobia, and remittances on the lives and attitudes of forced migrants. Were we to have focused exclusively on forced migrants' communities, it would have been very difficult to infer these factors' effects on the lives, attitudes, and experiences of our target populations. Gathering data on citizens living in refugee-populated areas also allowed us to explore the economic and social interactions between South Africans and non-nationals and to probe into the sociological foundations of the antagonism that often exists between locals and migrants.

## **B. Interview Techniques and Strategies**

The survey used a questionnaire containing some 300 coded questions covering basic demographic, experiential, and attitudinal variables relating to our three main questions. The questionnaire was initially written in English and pilot tested in Johannesburg and Boston with more than 50 refugees, immigrants, and ‘locals’. It was then revised, re-tested in English, and translated into Amharic, Somali, Swahili, Portuguese, and French by native speakers who had participated in the pilot testing. It was then back-translated into English by native speakers who had not previously been involved with the project. We then met with the translators to identify differences among the translations and to reach suitable compromises.

To conduct the interviews, we began with a two-phase plan. In the first phase, an experienced South African ‘supervisor’ was to randomly choose households in the selected enumerator areas and record the nationalities of all of those who were approached. This would allow us both to make relatively accurate demographic estimates and to select randomly from within the household. In order to accomplish the latter task, the supervisors were to ask the person answering the door who in the household met our selection criteria and then, having selected randomly from those who did, to ask that individual for an interview. If that person was not present, the interviewer was to return at a later time. Once a potential respondent agreed to participate, an interview appointment would be scheduled within a few days, in the respondent’s language of choice. In order to limit the influence of unforeseen political divisions or personal affiliations, these interviews were to be done by Wits University students who were fluent in the appropriate language but neither refugees themselves nor the respondents’ co-nationals. Mozambicans, for example, were slated to interview Angolans, Congolese to interview Burundians, and so on. The only exception to this was in the case of Somalis because it proved impossible to identify suitable (i.e., non-refugee) interviewers who could speak Somali but were not themselves Somalis. In this instance we ensured that our field-workers were not working in their areas of residence.

## **C. Problems Faced in Conducting the Johannesburg Survey**

For a variety of reasons, it proved impossible to stick to our strictly defined sampling and interview strategy. Some difficulties could have been avoided or predicted through more elaborate preparation, while others were surprises to all of those involved in conducting the research. While some problems (especially those involving security) may be unique to Johannesburg, we expect they will confront any researcher exploring the often hidden lives of urban refugees.

The first problem occurred when, for security reasons, building managers denied our interviewers access to the large apartment blocks that make up much of Johannesburg’s inner city. This meant hundreds of people were effectively excluded from our sample, spoiling the idea of randomly selecting respondents. In the buildings and residences we were able to access, we also faced considerable challenges. For one, the multiplicity of languages used by Johannesburg residents (both South African and foreign) made it next to impossible for a single field-worker to approach all households and make interview appointments. In many instances, when we were able to communicate with potential respondents, they simply ‘changed’ their nationality to

make themselves ineligible for our survey.<sup>12</sup> In one notable instance, an audibly francophone respondent with a Congolese flag on his wall insisted, in heavily accented English, that he was in fact a Nigerian. Others simply would not agree to be interviewed, fearing perhaps that our field-workers would return with a gang of thieves or, worse, representatives from South Africa's Department of Home Affairs (the department responsible for immigration matters). Others suspected that we were attempting to mobilize support for the African National Congress and wanted nothing to do with us. Still others demanded payment or immediate benefit for their participation. Even agreement to be interviewed was not a guarantee, as many potential respondents simply did not show up at the appointed time.

We were also severely constrained by Johannesburg's security situation. Although the city rarely lives up to its reputation as a crime capital, our field-workers could not safely work past dusk, meaning we were unlikely to select those people who had full-time, day-time employment. Even working during the day did not ensure our fieldworkers' security. In one incident, a field worker was greeted at an apartment door by a man wielding a pistol and chased into the street. Another field-worker was chased out of a building and then surrounded by a group of young Congolese convinced she was working for the Department of Home Affairs. In an ironic twist, a young Nigerian man threatened one of our fieldworkers when he was told he did not fit our selection criteria.

#### **D. Adaptation**

Faced with these challenges, we set about revising and compromising our sampling strategy. We decided that each interviewer would set up 10 interviews in each of the enumerator areas (EAs), trying to maintain the balance of 40% South Africans and 60% migrants. We replaced our interval strategy with a snowball technique: interviewers were told to select people wherever they could be found as long as the respondent's residential address was contained within the specified EA. In order to limit bias as much as possible, we used multiple entry points (nodes) for our snowball sample within each of the approximately 100 EAs. In each EA, interviewers selected six foreigners and four South Africans. In some EAs, more foreigners were interviewed if adjacent EAs did not yield enough.

Using this strategy, we were ultimately able to conduct almost 750 interviews, half of which were with South Africans. Our revised strategy forced us to abandon our effort to make population estimates and we were unable to ensure that we met our quotas for each of the target groups living in these areas. As a result, we had much larger than expected numbers of Congolese and Angolan respondents and many fewer Ethiopians and Burundians than originally intended. Whereas our original sampling strategy would have created a data set skewed in numbers to meet our purposes, the nationalities represented in our current sample reflect the relative population sizes in the UNHCR's refugee statistics for South Africa.

---

<sup>12</sup> This is a challenge we have not faced alone. Brehm's (1993) work highlights the almost universal problem of low response rates in survey research and the potential bias this introduces.

In addressing some logistical problems, we created others. For one, the sample probably over-represents men, as they were more visible and willing to participate. It also probably over-represents ‘short-timers’ and the poor, as people who have lived in Johannesburg for extended periods or have succeeded economically are likely to have moved on or to more desirable neighborhoods. Because we were not able to meet our nationality quotas, we are also not able to make statistically sound comparisons between all the immigrant groups (although we can between the Angolans, Congolese, and Somalis and between South Africans and Non-South Africans).

#### **E. Options Not Followed**

Given different restrictions and resources, it may have been possible to avoid many of the problems we encountered. With more time, we could have negotiated access to buildings in advance. We might also have conducted a preliminary survey to develop a more accurate and representative sampling strategy. However, apart from being expensive and time intensive, the problems we faced in getting people to identify their national origins would have greatly diminished the utility of such an exercise. As it is, we will have to rely on questionable South African census data to determine the representativeness of our sample.

We might also have traveled in teams comprising various language speakers so we could have done interviews ‘on the spot’. This would have been expensive (we would have had to pay people for full days’ work rather than per interview) and highly visible, drawing additional attention to people who would often prefer to remain hidden. We might also have relied, as many previous studies have done, on refugees or co-nationals to conduct the interviews. While this might have improved access and the response rate, the possibility of bias and even more politicized responses was a risk we were unwilling to take.

#### **F. The Findings: Imperfect but Valuable**

Although we do not have accurate estimates of the number of forced migrants in Johannesburg, and although our sample is not perfectly representative, our study has yielded useful, challenging, and comparative demographic data. Our comparison with a South African ‘control’ group allows us to make causal inferences—linking citizenship with various experiences—that would have remained only speculative had we focused exclusively on migrants. Our inclusion of South Africans also allows us to explore both sides of interactive phenomena: economic and social exchange, processes of integration and assimilation, and xenophobia.

The data are replicable and comparable. We are planning a similar exercise in Maputo and Dar es Salaam, which will allow us to compare the experience of refugee groups in those two cities. In addition to this geographic comparison, we are in a position to conduct longitudinal studies by replicating the survey in all three cities at a later time.

We also believe that ‘reactivity’ has been minimized by our use of non-refugee/non-national interviewers, although there is still likely to be bias in our sample. However, whereas ethnographic research often hides (*de facto*) the ways in which data are collected and analyzed, a careful reader or critic can review our

questions or challenge our descriptive and causal inference based on collected data. This transparency is important not only for scientific reasons, but to ensure that any policy recommendations coming from the study can be empirically substantiated. Indeed, the data we have collected provide us solid information that will enable us to develop strong advocacy strategies. Not only are our data more reliable than the government's, but because they cover multiple groups we can try to ensure that policies intended to help one refugee group will not hurt another. Perhaps more importantly—especially in a highly politicized and xenophobic climate—our inclusion of South Africans allows us to advocate policies that are beneficial to both refugees and hosts.

Apart from its methodological strengths, preliminary analysis of the data has already yielded several surprises. For example, expectations about the transnational links between migrants and their source countries seem not to be what other studies suggest. By revealing unexpected contours of the migrant community, the data raise new questions about migrants' motivations for coming to South Africa, their plans for integration and future movement, and the role of religion and religious organizations in their lives in the city. The final results of this survey will be available late in 2003 and a version of our data will be made public via a web-site in 2004.

## **V. Conclusion**

From an academic and advocacy perspective, the benefits of rigorous methods in refugee research outweigh the costs. Data that are scientifically and ethically collected create a powerful tool for policy makers, and better methods will enable the still marginalized field of refugee studies to enter into productive and critical debates with the social sciences, which have so far remained at a remove from the field. The social sciences hold a wealth of methodological and theoretical traditions that will enrich and strengthen refugee studies. We believe it is time to move in their direction, not least because 'mainstreaming' could increase the chances of refugee research being funded, which in turn will help individual academics committed to refugee-centered research.

In closing, we wish to reiterate that there is no single, 'best' way to ensure that refugee-centered research is ethically and scientifically sound and policy oriented. We have outlined a number of concerns, but every academic discipline requires that particular procedures be followed and standards met in the production of knowledge. Every approach has its strengths and weaknesses depending on the research questions and the conditions under which they will be explored. However, we believe some of the following principles are common to all research and will help meet the demands of the dual imperative:

First is a willingness to be proven wrong. Only by accepting that one's assumptions or pet hypotheses might be incorrect will we be able to learn what refugees are doing, who they are, and what they need.

Second, in order to allow others to evaluate our conclusions, we must be explicit about how we have collected our data—drawing particular attention to issues of sampling, translation, and use of local assistants—and the techniques we have used to draw conclusions. Even in qualitative research, such revelations are important if

others are to replicate a study and try to build a more general understanding of a specific phenomenon.

Lastly, as researchers we must be critical of each other's methods and logics of inference, even when we agree with their substantive conclusions. Doing this will require a change in the refugee studies *ethos*. Rather than simply highlighting the new and different ways refugees have become victims of politics and politicians, we must dedicate more time to research methods. Refugee journals should demand more explication of the methods used in the research they publish. Although some will see these requirements as unnecessarily academic, we believe they will ultimately strengthen the ability to advocate on behalf of the world's displaced.

END



## Bibliography

- Anderson, M. B. 1999.** *Do No Harm: How Aid Can Support Peace—Or War*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Black, R. 2001.** ‘Fifty years of refugee studies: from theory to policy.’ *International Migration Review* 35:1, 57-78.
- Brehm, J. 1993.** *The Phantom Respondents*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Castles, S. 2003.** “Towards a Sociology of Forced Migration and Social Transformation,” *Sociology*, Vol. 77, no. 1, pp. 13-34.
- Cole, S. 1976.** *The Sociological Method* (Chicago: Rand MacNally).
- Crisp, J. 1999.** “Who Has Counted the Refugees?” UNHCR and the Politics of Numbers.” *New Issues in Refugee Research*. Working Paper No. 12 (June 1999).
- Cusano, C. 2001.** “Burma: Displaced Karens. Like Water on the Khu Leaf,” in *Caught Between Borders: Response Strategies of the Internally Displaced*. Edited by Marc Vincent and Birgitte Sorensen. Pluto Press, pp. 138-171.
- Drake, H. M. 1973.** “Research Method of Culture-bound Technique?” Pp. 58-69 in *Survey Research in Africa: Its Applications and Limits*, edited by W. M. O’Barr, D. H. Spain, and M. A. Tessler. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Fischer, D. H. 1970.** *Historians’ Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought*. London: Routledge.
- Frerks, G. and Hilhorst, D. 2002.** ‘Evaluation of Humanitarian Assistance in Emergency Situations,’ UNHCR/EPAU: *New Issues in Refugee Research Working Paper No. 56*.
- Goodhand, J. 2000.** ‘Research in Conflict Zones: Ethics and Accountability,’ *Forced Migration Review* 8.
- Hines, D. and Balletto, R.** Assessment Needs of IDPs in Colombia.
- Human Rights Watch 2002.** *Hidden in Plain View: Refugees Living Without Protection in Nairobi and Kampala*. New York: Human Rights Watch.
- Jarvie, I. C. 1969.** “The Problem of Ethical Integrity in Participant Observation.” *Current Anthropology* 10:505-508.
- King, G. 1995.** “Replication, Replication.” *PS: Political Science and Politics*. (September 1995: 444-451).
- King, G., Keohane, R., and Verba, S. 1994.** *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

- Kloos, P. 1969.** "Role Conflicts in Social Fieldwork." *Current Anthropology* 10:509-512.
- Landau, L. 2003.** 'Beyond the Losers: Transforming Governmental Practice in Refugee-Affected Tanzania'. *Journal of Refugee Studies*. Vol. 16(1): 19-43.
- Leaning, J. 2001.** "Ethics of research in refugee populations," *The Lancet*, Volume 357, Number 9266(05 May 2001).
- Lieberson, S. 1994.** "More on the Uneasy Case for Using Mill-Type Methods in Small-N Comparative Studies." *Social Forces* 72:1225-1237.
- Przeworski, A. and Teune, H. 1970.** *The Logic of Comparative Social Inquiry*. New York: Wiley: 17-30 and 31-46.
- Ragin, C. 1994.** *Constructing Social Research*. Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press.
- Ragin, C. 1992.** "'Casing' and the Process of Social Inquiry." in *What Is A Case: Exploring the Foundations of Social Inquiry*. Edited by C. C. Ragin and H. Becker. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 217-226.
- Samdami, M. 2002.** "Research Ethics in Complex Emergencies", Fletcher School of Law & Diplomacy, Fall 2002.
- Savolainen, J. 1994.** "The Rationality of Drawing Big Conclusions Based on Small Samples: In Defense of Mill's Methods." *Social Forces* 72:1217-1223.
- Sperl, S. 2001.** "Evaluation of UNHCR's policy on refugees in urban areas: A case study review of Cairo," UNHCR/EPAU/2001/07.
- Turton, D. 1996.** "Migrants and Refugees" in *In Search of Cool Ground: War, Flight, and Homecoming in Northeast Africa*. Edited by Tim Allen. Trenton: Africa World Press: 96-110.
- United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) 2002.** "Investigation into Sexual Exploitation of Refugees by Aid Workers in West Africa." *Report of the Secretary-General on the Activities of the Office of Internal Oversight Services*. Fifty-Seventh Session, Agenda Item 122. UNGA Document A/57/465.
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) 2002.** *Statistical Yearbook 2001*. Geneva: UNHCR.
- van den Berghe, P. L. 1973.** "Social Science in Africa: Epistemological Problems." Pp. 25-35 in *Survey Research in Africa: Its Applications and Limits*, edited by W. M. O'Barr, D. H. Spain, and M. A. Tessler. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Vincent, M. Sorensen, B. 2001.** *Caught Between Borders: Response Strategies of the Internally Displaced*. Norwegian Refugee Council and Pluto Press.

**Weber, M. 1946 [1918].** “Science as a Vocation” in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. New York: Oxford University Press: 129-158.

**Wedekind, V. 1997.** “Obscuring Power: A Critique of Action Research.” Pp. 331-353 in *Knowledge, Method, and the Public Good*, edited by J. Mouton and J. Muller. Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council.

**Whitaker, B.E. 2002.** “Refugees in Western Tanzania: the Distribution of Burdens and benefits Among Local Hosts,” *JRS* Vol. 15(4). Pp. 339-358.

## Appendix A

### Articles in *JRS* Vol. 15 (2002) that focus on refugees or IDPs

Authors	Research in CFA or Conflict zone?	Policy Recommendations?	Data collection (DC) method	Translators used?	DC period/sample size (n)	Subject/Sample selection criteria?
MI	No (South Africans in London)		Semi-structured interviews	Not required	1990/N=15	A group identified within an organization
CR et al	No (Canada)	yes	Case studies	Nor required	June 99-May 00/N=32	Clearly described
AA et al	No (Scotland)	yes	“Interviews .. using structured instruments, questionnaires and an open-ended interview schedule”	Interviews-- in English with translator support in some instances	??/N=26	Clearly described
Vol. 15(2)						
EMG	No (Kosovars resettled in NJ, US)		Single case study	Not stated	May-July 99 /N=??	No criteria described
MDE	No (Ethiopians in Israel)		“Fieldwork”	Not stated	98-99/??	No criteria described
CM	No (Somalis resettled in Australia)		“interviews and group discussions” and PO	Yes	Apr00-Aug01/N=42	snowball
SL	Yes (displaced Mozambicans in Mozambique and S. Africa)		“Informal interviews, PO, over 90 extensive oral life history interviews, .. surveys, review of district level reports.”	Not stated	96-99/N=??	No criteria described
DJS	No (Resettled Sudanese in US)		“interviews”	Not stated	Aug96-?/N=150	No criteria described
CRM	No (Resettled Cambodians in US)		“open-ended interviews”	No, researcher is Cambodian	Two summers (96, 99) and Dec01/N=15	No criteria described
PAD	No (Resettled Somalis in USA)		Not stated	Not stated	Not stated	No criteria described
Vol. 15(3)						
YDG	Yes (people involved in government resettlement program in Ethiopia)		“interviews, sample surveys and observations”	Not required	93-94 and 98-99/ interviews N=35, surveys N=368	Interviewee selection not described; surveys = “systematic random sampling technique”
AHA et al	Yes (displaced n Palestine)		Part of epidemiological study of PTSD, self-reported checklist given to subjects	Not required – but assistance in explaining questionnaire from field researcher	Jun-Dec98/N=661	Clearly described (random selection)
SFP et al	Yes (IDPs in Azerbaijan)		Survey - part of epidemiological study of reproduction. Health. Administered by trained female Azerb. Interviewers who did not live in the community	Survey translated into Azerbaijani then back translated to English.	May-Aug99/N=601	Clearly described (clinic based sampling design)

EM & EO	No (resettled refugees in EU)		In-depth interviews and some semi-structured questions. NGO identified refugees to be interviewers	16 interviewers most themselves refugees in refugee language	"two months"/ N=143	Each of the 16 interviewers selected ten refugees (!)
Vol. 15(4)						
BEW	Yes (locals and refugees in Tanzania)		Semi-structured interviews and PRA	?? Four Tanzanian assistants. Interviews conducted in Swahili	96-98/N=950	snowball
EFKM	Yes (Guatemalan refugees in Mexico)		"interviews with leaders"	No – researcher is Spanish-speaking	Sep97-Mar98/N=181	No criteria described
GU	Yes (Crimean Tatars in Ukraine and Uzbekistan)		Semi-structured and life history interviews, PO, archival research	?? Not stated	97-98/N=53	No criteria described
AT	Yes (South Africa)		"interviews"	Not stated	Aug99-Jan00/N=??	No criteria described