

Producing knowledge on migration: Methodology, epistemology, ethics

International workshop, University of Paris 13, 28-29 May 2015

Call for papers

In the last twenty years, social and political interest in international migration has grown considerably. As a consequence of this interest a growing number of actors and institutions have become involved in the production of knowledge and analysis on migration issues. Beyond states and the academic community, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), international actors (such as international and intergovernmental organisations), as well as ‘experts’ or *think tanks*, are fuelling research and debates on migration today.

This workshop will analyse the methodological, epistemological and ethical issues raised by this growing interest in migration issues.

1. Methodology

Carrying out research (field access, obtaining data, conducting interviews, observation, etc.) is often difficult without the cooperation of institutions involved in the ‘management’ of migrants and related populations. This is the case in, for example, refugee camps, detention centres, and in other contexts characterised by different forms of restricted movement for migrants, asylum seekers and refugees. Fairly often researchers become closely involved with NGOs or international organisations in order to gain access to the field. Moreover, a number of recent scholarly works have drawn attention to a need to analyse how these institutions think and function in order to understand migration realities. This entails having access to policy-makers, civil servants, NGO staff, representatives from international organisations (such as the UNHCR or IOM) or aid workers. Difficulties in securing access may hold back research investigations and cause biases. This raises a number of questions: How to conduct research in such a field setting? What kind of relations and dialogue to develop with these institutions? What is the likely impact of these relations on the activities of the researcher and on what is possible (or impossible) to research? How to share or circulate the information obtained?

2. Epistemology

The involvement of different kinds of institutions in the production of knowledge on migration raises a number of epistemological questions, which relate in particular to the concepts and categories we use to interpret and make sense of migration. For example, ‘refugee’ is a legal and administrative category, which often serves as a ‘natural’ concept framing research in much scholarly work. Over the last few decades, numerous other categories have emerged at the crossroads of research and policy, raising similar questions. We could mention ‘trafficking’ of human beings, ‘environmental migrants’, ‘transit’ or ‘forced’ migrants, ‘displaced persons’, etc. In addition, current debates on migration are dominated by specific paradigmatic questions; it is difficult to determine if this situation is due to their analytical pertinence or their political popularity. This applies for example to the link between ‘migration and development’, as well as the ‘management’ or the ‘global governance’ of migration. The study of these categories and paradigms is indispensable, if only in order to understand the way in which institutional actors think about migration and act accordingly. However, these categories have

normative and cognitive influence that may orient the kinds of questions researchers ask, thus rendering necessary critical and reflexive analysis.

Further questions are raised: How do we use concepts and labels without being intellectually imprisoned by them? How can we analyse categories and institutional agendas whilst maintaining a critical distance? How to craft an autonomous research approach in this context, and to develop independent analyses whilst contributing to social and political debates on migration? How do concepts travel from one milieu to another? What transformations take place during this process?

3. Ethics

The necessary cooperation with institutional actors raises a number of ethical questions. In certain cases, through their research or role as expert, the researcher may become a spokesperson for a given institution. International organisations, for example, routinely work with academics, through the organisation of conferences or the publication of their work. While this type of cooperation enables the circulation of knowledge and promotes debate, it also entails more complex situations: researchers may orient their work in line with certain opportunities, or legitimate the political position of an institution by their status as independent academics. Junior researchers are often particularly concerned: cooperation with institutions is a possible means of funding, as well as a pathway towards professional insertion.

How do we reconcile the engagement and independence of the researcher? What is the potential influence of these institutions, and through what strategies can the researcher benefit from this influence or resist it? What about research funding? What are the ethical stakes of ‘wearing two hats’? How to reconcile loyalty to the academic and professional world and the need to maintain reflexivity?

All contributions that explore one of the three above mentioned themes, as well as interactions between them, will be examined, whatever the discipline (sociology, anthropology, political science, geography, history, communication studies, etc.). Young researchers (PhD candidates and post-docs) are particularly encouraged to apply.

Abstracts of a maximum length of 500 words must be sent before the **15th April 2015** to the following address: **migrationknowledgeconference@gmail.com**. Please specify your full name, institutional affiliation and contact information. Selected authors will be informed during April 2015. Papers must be sent before the **15th May** to allow for the organisation of the sessions.

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